

## VS29 - Interpreting VS29

Post by "Joshua" of September 14, 2023 at 9:40 PM

Quote

Wasn't Epicurus's mother a purveyor of charms and oracles?

That's the story--that his father was an itinerant teacher and his mother sold charms, both occupations suggesting low birth. Given that;

1. They were unwanted colonizers in disputed territory and
2. Metrodorus wrote a tract "On Noble Birth" defending Epicurus against the derision of his detractors,

The story is probably true enough so far as it goes. As for the VS, I suspect that there is a touch of irony in it. When Alexander the Great went to an oracle at the Oasis of Siwa, the prophets told him that he was not the son of Philip, but the son of a God. How convenient for both parties--it cost the Oracles nothing to say this, and earned them the patronage of the most powerful man on earth. If only the High Priestess at Delphi had thought of it first!

Oracles in the ancient world were flatterers; politically useful, they lent an air of pious gravitas to any worldly endeavor. DeWitt cited Demosthenes to this end;

Quote

It is just and right and important, men of Athens, that we too should exercise care, as you are accustomed, that our relations with the gods shall be piously maintained. Therefore our commission has been duly discharged for you, for we have sacrificed to Zeus the Saviour and to Athena and to Victory, and these sacrifices have been auspicious and salutary for you. We have also sacrificed to Persuasion and to the Mother of the Gods and to Apollo, and here also we had favorable omens. And the sacrifices made to the other gods portended for you security and stability and prosperity and safety. Do you, therefore, accept the blessings which the gods bestow.

In one of my favorite anecdotes, Heraclitus hid a scroll in a temple where it would be discovered and passed off as divine utterance.

For every ten thousand seers, there is but one Lucy Harris to steal the pages from the "prophet", in her case Joseph Smith, and challenge him to reproduce the results.

But now to the point. Whatever else he might be, Epicurus is not a prophet, an Oracle, or even (though he was given the title *Soter*) a Messiah or heavenly savior. But he was a voice, and he

cried out in the metaphorical wilderness of ancient superstition. And those who were 'well disposed', as the inscription in Oenanda puts it, to hear his words may have thought that not everything they were hearing was good news.

He offered pleasure, but it was pleasure only in this world; death, he said, was nothing to be feared, but neither was there hope for a life to come. The universe was infinite and eternal, and if that failed to cheer you up, there was more; neither our world nor our species was morally, physically, or theologically at the center of it. As for the gods, they do exist; and while they do not punish us, neither will they answer our prayers. Supplication is futile; there is no hope for intercession in times of need, and no justice for the victim of the evildoer in the judgment of the afterlife. Logic and dialectic, which had seemed the surest route to knowledge, truth, and virtue, in fact brought us no closer to the end that we sought for. And if divine friendship is the richest and deepest fountain of pleasure, what hope can we have that the fountain will not run dry tomorrow? Seeing that the utter finality of death will not only take our friends from us, but also poison our happiness with an impossible longing to be reunited.

Only a beast unfit to be called a philosopher could teach a way of thinking so unworthy of the human soul. But for the Epicureans themselves, it must have been Lucian of Samosata who best captured their feeling;

#### Quote

The fellow had no conception of the blessings conferred by that book upon its readers, of the peace, tranquillity, and independence of mind it produces, of the protection it gives against terrors, phantoms, and marvels, vain hopes and inordinate desires, of the judgement and candour that it fosters, or of its true purging of the spirit, not with torches and squills and such rubbish, but with right reason, truth, and frankness.

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But secondly I was still more concerned (a preference which you will be very far from resenting) to strike a blow for Epicurus, that great man whose holiness and divinity of nature were not shams, who alone had and imparted true insight into the good, and who brought deliverance to all that consorted with him.