

Episode Thirty-Eight: Start of Book Three - Epicurus Our Guide Who Dispels The Darkness of Error and Fear of Hell

Post by “Joshua” of September 29, 2020 at 2:12 AM

Cassius, I think you are right—this was a strong episode. Thanks to all who participated!

I particularly enjoyed the discussion of Epicurus as leader, teacher and so forth. I'm sure that I'm as guilty as anyone of investing too much attachment into the figure himself; you can see it in some of my poems. Elayne's cautions are well taken, and she is a valuable voice.

I might add a few points to flesh out my own thinking; and to redeem, in a way, Lucretius and Lucian and others who have covered him with honor.

The first thing I would say is that we are shielded by the philosophy itself against the worst forms of hagiography. It will never be asserted—it couldn't be taken seriously if it were—that Epicurus was set apart in significance from other mortals. We will not, cannot, fall into the demeaning trap of thinking him heralded, prophesied, chosen, or marked by signs and portents. He performed no miracles; he was born to no god; he ascended into no paradise.

He was a mammal—like other mammals, born of a natural sexual union (how absurd that we have to say that out loud!), and kin to the beasts of the field, and did not disgrace himself by claiming otherwise. What little there was of nobility in his painful, animalistic and ignoble death, was nobility of mind and philosophy. He claimed no other.

Nor did he claim to heal; but taught us only, perhaps, how we might find health ourselves. He could not make the deaf to hear or the blind see. He gave no voice to the mute—the voice he gave was to pleasure itself, in a world that did not want to hear it.

Of his temperament even some of his enemies could speak well. In his school, Diogenes Laertius tells us that he declined the perils of communal property—for he foresaw that greed and mistrust were bitter poison to wholesome fellowship. His easy grace, his mild manner and simple bearing showed how ill-fitted was the bacchanalian mask that his slanderers put upon him.

Elayne is right; what could be more obvious than that pleasure is the proper end of life? It was a pearl richer than all the rest of ancient philosophy—so much muck. And yet it took an Epicurus to pry out that pearl, and bring it up into sunlight.

If I believed that a job done once was done forever, and that so worthy a truth as this would stand *itself* apparent for all coming time, then we could leave off honoring him.

But the *agora* of ideas isn't getting less absurd and obscure; it's growing muckier by the day! And for as long as we are confronted with an endless parade of charlatans, we shall have need of Epicurus.