

Epicurean Similarities With Early Christianity

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 27, 2022 at 2:56 PM

Epicurean Similarities With Early Christianity

- Personalized letters (Epistles) were the primary form of literary dissemination.
- "FAITH" (as ΠΙΣΤΙΣ or *pístis*) served a key role (*also "confidence", "conviction", "guarantee", "pledge", "assurance"*)
- The founder was called "SAVIOR" (as ΣΩΤΗΡ or *sōtēr*) and honored as a universal "Savior of Humanity".
- Followers venerated the founder as a deity.
- A core set of beliefs was prescribed by the founder as dogma (ΔΟΓΜΑ).
- Uniquely included women as equals and leaders of the early community.
- General cautioning against participating in State politics
- Suspicion of wealth and fame as reliable sources of happiness.
- Recognition that a simple life is all that is required to enjoy the fullness of a good life.
- Acknowledgement that a beloved friend is worth sacrificing oneself for.
- Prayer was employed as an effective practice
- Jesus is called "*kathegetes*" in Matthew 23:10, the same noun used to describe Epicurus' brothers' roles
- *Epicurus, St. Paul, and Noah* are described as ΚΗΡΥΞ, a “herald” (or “preacher” in the King James Version)
- Incorrectly represented as “atheists” by philosophical and political opponents

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 27, 2022 at 4:22 PM

Regarding Epicurus as the *sōtēr of humanity*:

“It is interesting that a man like Epicurus—who later was so much attacked by the Christians that only some of his fragments remain—was called *soter* by his pupils. This is the Greek word which the New Testament uses and which we translate as “savior”. Epicurus the philosopher was called a savior. [...] He was called *soter* because he did the greatest thing anyone could do for his followers: he liberated them from anxiety.” (Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought, from Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism* 5 [1972])

“The similarity of god and sage reaches out of the paradisiacal realms of the Garden and *intermundia* into the world inhabited by common men, for it is in the world of the common man that the effects of divinity and deosimilitude are most visible. Both the sage and the gods are called *sōtēres* in Epicurean writings, for both effect acts of salvation for the benefit of the common man still in the world.” (Frischer, *The Sculpted Word: Epicureanism and Philosophical Recruitment in Ancient Greece* 79)

“**[T]he Lord Jesus Christ . . . our Savior.** In the Greco-Roman world, it was common for the Caesars to call themselves “Lord” (*kurios* [...]) and “Savior” (*sōtēr* [...]) [...] For example, Epicurus is called *sōtēr* by his followers.” (Hoehner and Davids, *Ephesians; Philippians, 1-2 Thessalonians; Colossians, Philemon* 209)

“Epicurus is occasionally described as a savior (*sōtēr*) or messenger (*kēryx*), terms which are also used by Epicureans themselves and are reminiscent of Old Testament expressions. Perhaps such a choice of words was intended as a kind of ‘competitive offer’ to the blossoming of Christianity. Lucian’s *Alexander* seeks to put up a monument to Epicurus the ‘saviour’, ‘for this in the truest sense holy and divine man, the only one actually to recognize that which is true and good and, through its dissemination, to become a liberator and benefactor of his disciples’.” (*The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* 53)

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 28, 2022 at 8:08 AM

Regarding the usefulness of *prayer*:

“[P]etitionary prayer to the gods is obviously, for an Epicurean, of no avail; and, indeed, as Epicurus says in his Vatican sayings 65, it is pointless to pray for happiness which a man can provide for himself. If the gods paid attention to human prayers the human race would long since have become extinct since men are continually praying for calamities to fall upon their enemies [...] Yet Epicurus recommend prayer, on the grounds that it is a natural act and that one should also participate in the religious life of one’s country, and it seems that he himself, led the way by taking part, and urging his followers to take part, in the sacrifices of the gods, without worrying too much about popular superstitious beliefs.” (Thrower, *The Alternative*)

Tradition: Religion and the Rejection of Religion in the Ancient World 184)

“...already been pointed out by the Epicurean Hermocrates — does one have to pray to be able to pray properly? — by using Epicurean ideas of prayer as meditation, when the good is not a result generated from outside, but consists in the act of the prayer itself and, consequently, in looking after the self.” (The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism, 60)

“[T]he Epicurean school encouraged prayer representing a disinterested, high-minded admiration and adoration of an ideal. Pray (in its genesis and in its employment, doubtless representing, at once, for some an individual, emotional need, and for others a social habit) became through the Epicurean rationalization of religion, theoretically at least, an intellectual matter, conducted, according to the Epicurean conception, truly *pie* and *sancte*. The higher aspiration of the Epicureans for an ideal that might be worshiped because of its perfection, found expression in prayer, that necessarily involved the religion of poetry, of mythology, of cultus, and of dogma, while at the same time, it gave to gods and goddesses a new function and character. It is inconceivable that prayer among the Epicureans was wholly or even in large part the result of a concessionary or cowardly spirit; it was rather a psychological necessity and at the same time, as conceived by Epicureans, not inconsistent with the entire Epicurean philosophy of religion. Sincerity in the matter of prayer would necessarily among the Epicureans be a variable matter, as also the degree of attachment to the old religion of which the Epicurean theology was an out-growth, a purification, and a reconstruction.” (Classical Philology: Volume 2 188)

“It is true that Epicurus saw little value in prayer but he did declare that continuous happiness was possible and he exalted the virtue of gratitude to first rank as a factor of happiness. Verse 16 is therefore partly Epicurean, partly exclusively Pauline: ‘Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks under all circumstances.’” (St. Paul and Epicurus 51)

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 28, 2022 at 6:40 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

“[P]etitionary prayer to the gods is obviously, for an Epicurean, of no avail; and, indeed, as Epicurus says in his Vatican sayings 65, it is pointless to pray for happiness which a man can provide for himself. If the gods paid attention to human prayers the human race would long since have become extinct since men are continually praying for calamities to fall upon their enemies [...] Yet Epicurus recommend prayer, on the grounds that it is a natural act and that one should also participate in the religious life of one’s country,

Thanks for sharing this about prayer. Now in modern times Christian people are praying for things that they want (and not against enemies). Since I am currently living with and near family, I am often in a "strange situation" in which I have to "pretend" to pray out of kindness and respect to my family. I do feel that there is something about the situation that is parallel to what Epicureans must have encountered. There is something comforting in being clear about my own thoughts on God and death. So I can "pretend pray" without feeling uncomfortable.

Post by "Eikadistes" of May 29, 2022 at 8:56 AM

On Epicurus being a *herald*:

"Epicurus is occasionally described as as a saviour (*sōtér*) or messenger (*kéryx*), terms which are also used by Epicureans themselves and are reminiscent of Old Testament expressions. Perhaps such a choice of words was intended as a kind of 'competitive offer' to the blossoming Christianity." (*The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* 53)

"Diogenes employs similar language to describe Epicurus to his fellow Epicureans in Rhodes, calling him 'the herald who saved you' (NF 7 III.12f [see Smith (1971) 365-71]) = fr. 73 Casanova [= fr. 72.III.12-14 Smith]). The conception of Epicurus as a savior is of course not unique to Diogenes; we find it in Pompeia Plotina's letter to the Epicureans of Athens, and elsewhere among Epicureans both Greek and Roman. But the term *kéryx* is neither common nor orthodox. Epicurus had, it seems, used the verb *Kῆρῆναι* in his enthusiastic description of friendship 'dancing about all of the inhabited world, heralding the call to us all: Awake to proclaim blessedness!' Diogenes speaks of 'salvation' when he states his motives for displaying on the wall of his stoa the gospel of Epicurean philosophy. The philosophy as a soter is not a commonplace in the philosophical literature of the second century. And Diogenes' description of Epicurus as a herald (*kéryx*) is even less common. Both terms, 'savior' and 'herald,' remind us rather of the language of the New Testament. The language of I Timothy 2.7 combines the terms 'herald' and 'apostle,' and 'savior' is the word for Christ in II Timothy 1.10. The *kérygma* of the New Testament is of course the coming of Christ as the Messiah and savior." (Clay, *Paradosis and Survival* 243-244)

"For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all--this was attested at the right time. For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth." (1 *Timothy* 2:5-7)

"This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has not been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and

immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do." (2 Timothy 1:9-12)

"For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of the deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment; and if he did not spare the ancient world, even though he saved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on a world of the ungodly" (2 Peter 2:4-5)

Post by "Don" of May 29, 2022 at 10:30 AM

Thanks for these references, @Nate .

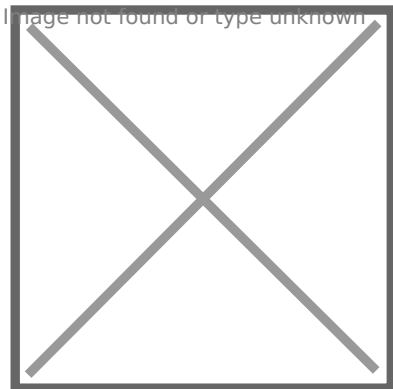
For anyone who's interested...

52. **Friendship** dances around the world, announcing to each of us that we must awaken to happiness.

ἡ **φιλία** περιχορεύει τὴν οἰκουμένην κηρύττουσα δὴ πᾶσιν ἡμῖν ἐγείρεσθαι ἐπὶ τὸν μακαρισμόν.

κηρύττω Attic form of κηρῦσσω

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, κηρῦσσω](#)



[G2784 - kēryssō - Strong's Greek Lexicon \(kjv\)](#)

G2784 - κηρῦσσω kēryssō, kay-roos'-so; of uncertain affinity; to herald (as a public crier), especially divine truth (the gospel):—preacher(-er), proclaim,...

www.blueletterbible.org

Also note:

ἐγείρεσθαι (middle/passive infinitive) "to wake, keep watch; to rouse oneself, be excited"

μακαρισμόν. Note that those is the exact word used to describe the gods. "Happiness" is a little underwhelming here. In fact, friendship dances round the known world ([http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...try=oi\)koume/nh](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...try=oi)koume/nh)) heralding to each and every one of us to awaken to the blessed life of the gods.

Post by “Kalosyni” of May 29, 2022 at 11:27 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

“Epicurus is occasionally described as as a saviour (sōtér) or messenger (kéryx), terms which are also used by Epicureans themselves and are reminiscent of Old Testament expressions. Perhaps such a choice of words was intended as a kind of ‘competitive offer’ to the blossoming Christianity.” (*The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* 53)

The current understanding of the word "saviour" comes to us by the Christian faith in Jesus being eternal/immortal and all powerful. I would doubt Epicureans felt that way about Epicurus. The word "messenger" implies that the message is coming from God (or the gods), but then maybe there was a different understanding of this word back then. Could it be that back in time there were groups of Christian Epicureans, or groups that converted from Christianity to Epicureanism?

Further thought on prayer (and regarding post # 1 of this thread) -- I have a hard time with the idea that Epicureans prayed to the gods "on purpose". And my understanding of the importance of birthdays in Epicureanism is that this could either take the place of sacrifice to the gods, or as a way to establish a ritual which would focus the minds of Epicureans on mortality and friendship -- hey, we are mortal and only live this one life, so let's honor human lives with birthday celebrations, and also friendship being a reason to celebrate birthdays. Can we really know one way or another?

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2022 at 1:13 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

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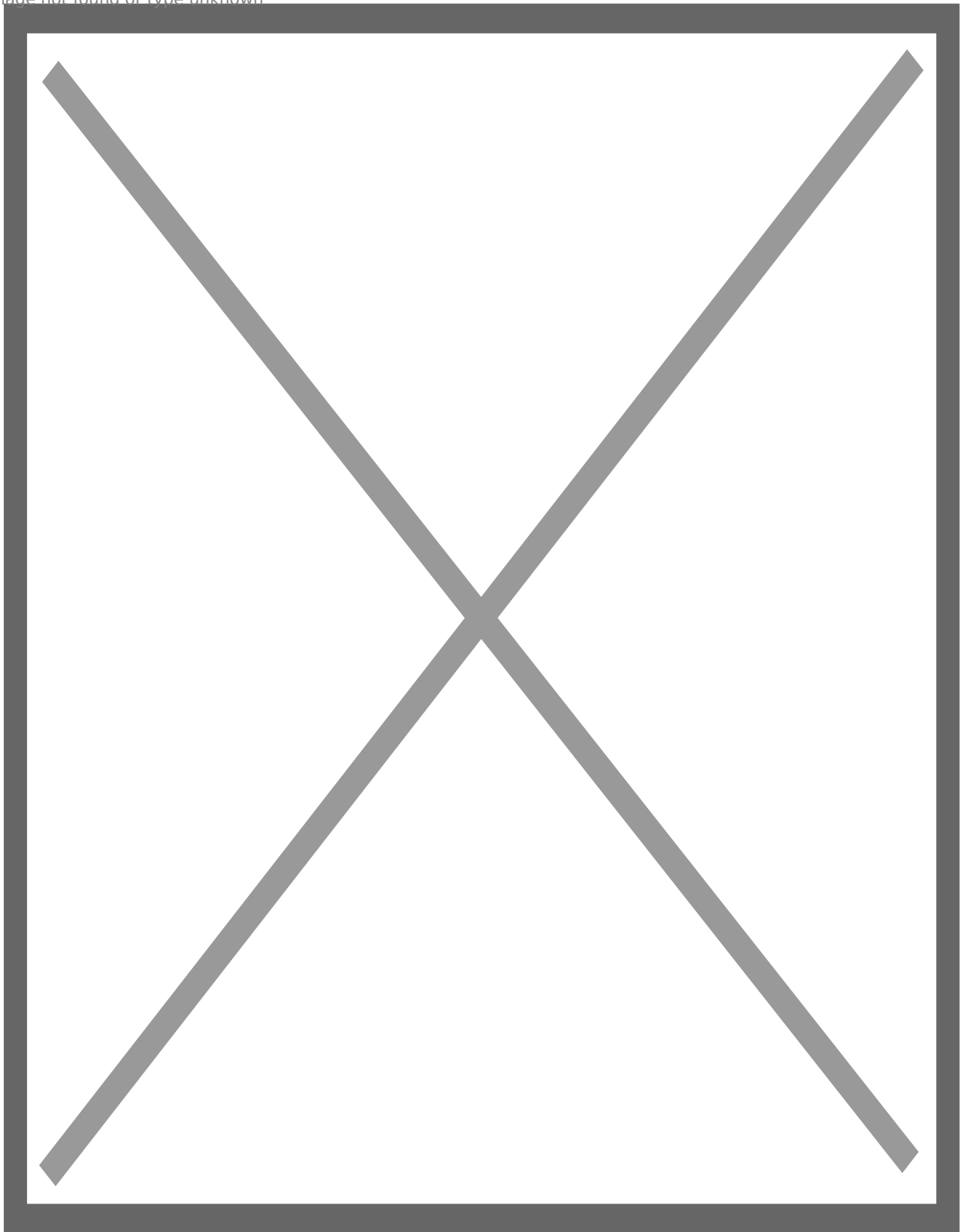
about Epicurus.

I would agree that the Epicurueans didn't see Epicurus as *that* kind of savior, but I have no problem thinking they saw him as a savior figure. He literally saved humanity from ignorance and fear. One doesn't have to be immortal or omnipotent to be a saviour. It was also a popular epithet for gods and heroes:

[Soter - Wikipedia](#)

PS:

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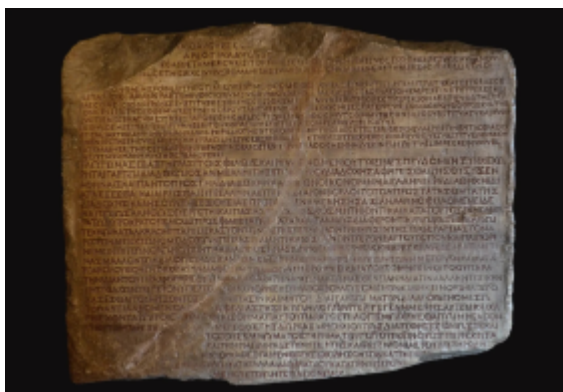
[Early AD 121 - Plotina writes to Hadrian on behalf of the Epicurean school in Athens \(#Hadrian1900\) FOLLOWING HADRIAN](#)

In the early year of AD 121, Pompeia Plotina, the greatly respected widow of the emperor Trajan, sent Hadrian a letter asking him to help the Epicurean school...

followinghadrian.com

both the preservation of the dignity of that place which contains the (...) will be firmly secured and equally the opinion concerning the successor of our saviour, which... when... became master of the school, since Epicurus...

Saviour in her letter is ΣΩΤΗΡ:



Fourth line from the bottom on the right.

PS: That word is in the phrase ΚΑΘΗΓΕΜΟΝΙΑΣ ΤΟΥ ΣΩΤΗΡ which is kathēgemonias which I'm assuming the translator gives as "successor" but it is similar (identical?) to the terms used in DeWitt and elsewhere to refer to the teachers of the Garden.

Post by “Joshua” of May 29, 2022 at 2:42 PM

What a lovely photograph!

Post by “Marco” of May 29, 2022 at 2:49 PM

And with the mosaic from the Roman villa at Autun France. Thanks!

Post by “Don” of May 29, 2022 at 10:27 PM

I wanted to note - even though we all know it, it bears repeating - that Epicureanism was over well over 300 years old when Christianity was just beginning to be established:

In around 311 BC, Epicurus, when he was around thirty years old, began teaching in Mytilene.
(Wikipedia)

Jesus' ministry ended around 30 CE. Paul's conversion is around the same time. Epicurus started teaching around 311 BCE... Over 340 prior to the beginnings of Christianity.

In light of that, I just want to say that - for me - it's only makes sense if the flow of similarities flows from Epicureanism to Christianity. Just like Christmas, Easter, building churches on ground holy to existing faiths. Just like one theory of mine that the church of St George in the Kerameikos district in Athens is built on top of the Garden. That's just a theory of mine, not currently backed up by anything other than a hunch. If there are similarities, it's because the Garden was seen as a threat, and the followers of Christ stole from it to make their religion more popular. *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.*