

EPICURUS AND THE PREACHER:
A CONTRAST OF EPICUREANISM AND THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

by

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Both Solomon and Epicurus lived east of Eden; both coped with a fallen world; both thought deeply and appreciated simple pleasures. Solomon feared Jehovah; Epicurus did not. Because they rested on different foundations, their thoughts went in different directions, and they loved the simple for entirely different reasons. Epicurus shunned both gods and the dread of death, and he handled human desires and the *summum bonum* accordingly. On the other hand, Solomon trusted the self-revealing, eternal God of Hebrew Scriptures, and used death's long shadow as an apologetic for a biblical understanding of desires and a satisfyingly God-ward *summum bonum*.

Epicurus was not a philosophical atheist, but a practical one. Adopting Democritean atomism as his cosmology, Epicurus believed that gods are out there, but they are far away in aloof "blessedness and indestructibility."¹ They are by very definition hermetically sealed off from human concourse.² These gods are not ultimate; like human souls and consciousness, their consciousness arises from randomly swerving atoms.³ In such a world there is neither providence nor authoritative revelation. Epicurus must settle for "indeterminacy."⁴ Hence he did "not need a theodicy" to justify indeterminate atoms.⁵

¹ Jaap Mansfield, "Theology," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra and others (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 455.

² Wallace I. Matson, *A New History of Philosophy: Ancient and Medieval*, A New History of Philosophy, ed. Robert J. Fogelin (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1987), 163.

³ See Stephen Everson, "Epicurean Psychology," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra and others (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 554.

⁴ Matson, 165.

Without revelation, He had to limit his epistemology to some form of autonomous human reason: he opted for absolute empiricism.⁶ Furthermore, Epicurus was *antagonistic* toward the traditional and superstitious religions around him because they aroused unnecessary, dispiriting fear. The second target of Epicurus' scorn was the fear of death. He argued, "Death...is nothing to us, seeing that when we are, death is not yet, and when death comes, then we are not."⁷ The soul, being atoms, simply dissipates when a man dies.⁸ Someone has summarized his reasoning, "Physics tells us that matter which is dispersed has no feeling."⁹ The truly penetrating mind will discover that at the bottom of it all, there is no cause for fear.¹⁰ Problem solved. Or rather denied, glossed over.

Despite the dubious possibility of true free will consistent with indeterminate atomism, Epicurus felt he could prove and harmonize both.¹¹ Without (in theory) any revelation from any objective authority to whom he was accountable, Epicurus was free (in theory) to select his own *summum bonum*, and he did: *ataraxia*, roughly translated "un-stirred-up-ness."¹² To achieve this mental quietude, first one should calculate his ethics to achieve maximum pleasure and minimum pain in this lifetime. Individual

⁵ Mansfield, 466.

⁶ James N. Jordan, *Western Philosophy from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 179–81.

⁷ William De Witt Hyde, *The Five Great Philosophies of Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 8.

⁸ Everson, 543–45.

⁹ Michael Erler and Malcolm Schofield, "Epicurean Ethics" in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra and others (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 644.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 657.

¹¹ R. J. Hankinson, "Determinism and Indeterminism," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra and others (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 522–26.

¹² Matson, 160.

pleasure is “the simplifying principle” for ethics.¹³ For instance, the four virtues are defined in terms of pleasure.¹⁴ (Incidentally, Epicurus was confident that virtue was the surer bet en route to pleasure.¹⁵) Even politics and altruism are explained in terms of self-interest.¹⁶ Second to achieve mental quietude, one should curb his desires to reasonable prospects, which desires Epicurus classified into a hierarchy of necessity.¹⁷ To curb one’s desires, instead of pursuing extravagant pleasures, leads to a higher attainment of good *relative to one’s desires*. Start by disciplining the stomach.¹⁸ Eliminate the unnatural desire for affection and settle for sex: what’s love got to do with it?¹⁹ Forget the arts, sciences, politics, for in them one risks trouble. There is a problem here: Epicurus has been criticized from several quarters because he “conflates two conditions—pleasure and absence of pain.”²⁰ Indeed, the very word *ataraxia* is a negative concept. Epicurus’s ethic is not a positive pursuit; in fact, it requires a man to squelch his own humanity. Animals have sex without affection, but people? “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” (Ecc. 3:21 ESV).

Solomon, in contrast, trusted Jehovah, transcendent Creator and immanent Revealer (12:1, 11).²¹ We owe reverent fealty to *Him* (5:1–6). God is working with men

¹³ Hyde, 1.

¹⁴ Erler and Schofield, 667.

¹⁵ Jordan, 191.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192–92.

¹⁷ Erler and Schofield, 657–58.

¹⁸ Hyde, 21.

¹⁹ Erler and Schofield, 660.

²⁰ Erler and Schofield, 652; see also Hyde, 2.

²¹ All chapter and verse references are taken from Ecclesiastes.

that He “made...upright; but they have sought out many inventions” (7:29). God has worked providentially in general revelation to teach men the limitations of their own wisdom and resources (3:11–15). The answers to the really important questions are elusively out of reach (7:23–24). Man demands a God’s-eye view; Epicurean empiricism is insufficient; in fact, man cannot *really* understand even the things he is aware of (11:5). Solomon wisely recognized the pattern of God’s work and patterned Ecclesiastes after it, making explicit what God has confronted us with in nature (12:11). The most horrific confrontation God exploits is death (3:18–21). Whereas Epicurus saw death as an unnecessary fear, a mere cessation, Solomon, following the Jewish worldview, saw death’s shadow spread over all of life, an unnatural menace that brings feelings of alienation, impotence, and meaninglessness. But somehow, Solomon *wants* to think about it (7:1–6); there is benefit in thinking of it. Death makes relative all earthly values (2:13–14; 5:13–17), and *relative value is not enough*. Solomon, continuing to rub in what God has already rubbed in, constantly returns to a gnawing discontent with this life (cf. 3:16; 4:1, 4, 7–8, 13; 5:8; 7:20; 9:3). Oppression. Misfortune. Injustice. Age. Dissatisfaction with wisdom, folly, riches, pleasure. And after life, who can know what will be after him? Whereas Epicurus is not concerned with immortality, Solomon regards what comes after us in this world as a legitimate concern (3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 10:14). This is just one of Solomon’s tactics.

Solomon also exploits what Francis Schaeffer called the *mannishness* of man: some worldviews (e.g., Epicureanism) clash with man’s very nature. The first chapter of Ecclesiastes makes clear that Solomon feels the fallen human condition (1:3, 14). While Epicurus asserted that wisdom leads to peace, Solomon (the most qualified man to speak, cf. 1:12–15) finds that wisdom amplifies discontent (1:18). Solomon agreed with Epicurus that contentment with what one has is better than desiring too much (6:9a), but he pronounced even what one has—relative advantages—to be likewise “vanity” (6:9b).

Repeating the phrase “under the sun” some thirty times in his book,²² Solomon shows how death runs roughshod over everything under the sun. Commentator Derek Kidner writes, “To be outraged at what is universal and unavoidable suggests something of a *divine* discontent” (emphasis added).²³ While Epicurus tried to make what man has and what he desires meet, Solomon put human aspirations in heaven and the human condition in the pasture. Everything about man intuitively points beyond the sun: man is hardwired that way. Likewise, he is hardwired to be relational. Self-centered work or self-centered laziness are truly bad (4:4–6). So the moral altruism that Epicurus inconsistently incorporated into his thought witnesses to the conflict between who he really was and what he thought himself to be. He was a man in God’s image with “*eternity in [his] heart*” (3:11, perhaps the key phrase of the book). And so Solomon, instead of centering his values on his own subjective predilections, demanded something eternal in which truly to ground them. For Solomon, man’s *summum bonum* was two-fold: the fear of God in ethics, and contentment with things under the sun in light of what is beyond it (8:15; 2:24–26; 9:7–10; 10:7–10; 12:1, 13–14).

Epicurus would have seen Solomon as benighted and overly morbid. Solomon would have retorted that Epicurus missed the true joy of life. Whereas Solomon could boldly strike out as a man under God in a good creation (as the ethics of 10–11 describe), Epicurus missed out on God, who alone makes things worthwhile, who alone gives hope to the struggle of existence in a fallen world. Solomon knew of the impending judgment (3:17; 11:9; 12:14), but Epicurus reinterpreted the screaming data of his own desires and conscience to deny it.

²² Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, *The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. J. A. Motyer (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1976), 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

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