

# Epicureans

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Epicureans were members of a philosophical movement initiated by Epicurus (341–270 b.c.) on Lesbos off the western coast of Asia Minor (311 b.c.) and taken to Athens (306 b.c.). The movement, which maintained the unaltered teachings of its founder, spread to Rome after 146 b.c. and during the 1st cent b.c. became identified with hedonism. Its decline coincided with the decline of Rome, and it was no match for Christianity once the latter became an acceptable Roman religion (after a.d. 323).

### Teachings

**Individuality:** Epicurus and his followers devoted themselves primarily to the pursuit of personal, individual happiness. In contrast to classical Greek thought, Hellenistic thought gave ethics great importance. After the death of Alexander the Great (323 b.c.) many Greeks were unable to accept his notion of a “cosmopolitan culture” in which Greeks and non-Greeks would live together. When many Greeks were forced to abandon their secure existence within the city-state, they withdrew from active participation in a supranational culture and began to search inwardly for happiness. Though Epicurus advocated little involvement in social and political life and stressed individual happiness, he did not promote individualism. For the acquisition of friends was “the most important” means toward the securing of “happiness throughout the whole of life” (Diogenes x.148, LCL), and happiness included justice and other virtues (cf. DeWitt, Epicurus, ch 14).

**Pleasure:** It is well known (even today) that Epi-

curus believed that human happiness consisted in pleasure (Gk *hēdonē*). But to him pleasure was a substitute for the experience of pain, not an invitation to indulge in the “pleasures of the flesh.” According to his own testimony, Epicurus did not teach “the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, ... [but] the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul” (Diogenes x.131f).

Although Epicurus warned against indulgence in physical things because pain will be increased, he did not deny moderate use of physical enjoyment. He even constructed a hierarchy of physical pleasures. Some are natural and necessary, such as food; some are natural but not necessary, such as sexual union. Some are neither natural nor necessary, such as fame; some are short-lived, and these are inferior to those that are long-lived (Diogenes x.149).

The bodily pleasures were not deemed evil in themselves, but the mental pleasures were preferred. The happy person was one who attained mental peace (Gk *ataraxia*, “lack of disturbance”). Besides having peace of mind, the happy person would be just, wise, and temperate. If one “is not able to live wisely, though he lives well and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life” (Diogenes x.140). Clearly, then, the good life for Epicurus included the virtues of mental peace, justice, wisdom, and temperance, through which the individual achieved a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain.

**Present Happiness:** Epicurus aimed at a lifestyle in which the present was given more prominence than the future. For many of his contempo-

varies the future held the fears of death and divine punishment, but Epicurus taught that (1) there is no life after (physical) death, for death is the dissolution of the atoms of our bodily existence; (2) even if man were to live on, there would be no divine retribution, for the gods are not concerned with human life. This deliverance from fears of the future contributed to present human happiness.

**Materialism:** Epicurus's ethical teachings must be related to his thoughts on physics. He conceived of reality materialistically, with atoms as the basic components of the universe. Assuming that all of reality is material, Epicurus concluded that human souls and the deities likewise are material. Moreover, as life is the integration of atoms, so death is their disintegration. When death occurs, the person no longer perceives and ceases to be. Future life is nonexistent.

As Epicurus sought to avoid individualism in his social philosophy, so he tried to escape a thoroughgoing determinism in his natural philosophy. On the one hand, all atoms "act" according to natural laws, i.e., according to cause and effect. On the other hand, human actions are done in freedom: "necessity destroys responsibility ...; whereas our actions are free, and it is to them that praise and blame naturally attach" (Diogenes x.133f). (For a sympathetic treatment of Epicurus's attempt to reconcile human ethical freedom and physical determinism, see DeWitt, *Epicurus*, pp. 169, 171.)

**Role of the Gods:** Epicurus's materialism did not result in atheism (Diogenes x.123). For him deities were material beings who certainly did exist. For practical reasons, however, they did not play a crucial role in human life. The gods were eternal and felicitous and did not interfere with human actions because doing so would have detracted from their own blessedness. Thus they did not punish people for unethical deeds either in this life or in an afterlife (should there be one).

## Epicurus and Scripture

**Ecclesiastes:** The earlier scholarly attempts to show Epicurean influences on Qoheleth in the long run "could not prove convincing, and it transpired that the decisive parallels were to be sought less in Greece than in the Old Testament itself, in Egypt and in Babylonia" (M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* [Engtr 1974], I, 115). There are striking similarities between the teachings of Epicurus and Qoheleth (cf. DeWitt, *Epicurus*, pp. 230, 182, 319,

199, etc.), but Qoheleth concluded his messages with "religious wisdom" (2:26; 12:13). He affirmed that keeping the law gives meaning to the life of the righteous (12:1, 13f), and thus work and learning take on new significance. Life does not terminate in death (12:7). Without speculating about the nature of the immortal soul, Qoheleth affirmed a future life and a future divine judgment (3:17; 11:9b; 12:14), which the righteous need not fear (8:12).

**Paul:** In Luke's summary of Paul's address on the Areopagus in Athens, Paul did not criticize the Epicureans for their stress on pleasure but for their denial of the Resurrection (Acts 17:31). Nowhere in his letters does Paul mention the Epicureans, not even in Col. 2:8 (though Colossae was "the sort of town where Epicureanism flourished" [DeWitt, *St. Paul*, p. 75]). But he was very much aware of their presence in many of the cities of his missionary journeys.

Paul used phrases similar to Epicurus's (e.g., "peace and safety," 1 Thess. 5:3) and possibly employed similar words (e.g., the uncommon NT words "eternal" [Rom. 1:20, Gk *aídios*] and "atom" [1 Cor. 15:52, Gk *atómos*; cf. DeWitt, *St. Paul*, pp. 13, 117]). Paul also voiced Epicurus's warning not to revel in physical pleasures (Gal. 5:13; 1 Cor. 5:1, 11).

But Paul's teachings differed from the teachings of Epicurus. Paul used the word "pleasure" sparingly (Tit. 3:3), for "no compromise with pleasure was conceivable" to him (DeWitt, *St. Paul*, p. 172). Personal pleasure became a rejoicing in the Lord (Phil. 4:4); "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in God (1 Cor. 2:7) and not in nature; freedom is not merely a deliverance from fear, pain, and death but a positive putting into practice of divine love (Gal. 5:1, 13); the atoms are not eternal but God's power is (Rom. 1:20); mental peace is replaced by divine peace (1 Thess. 5:3).

The central thrust of Paul's theology contrasts with Epicureanism. (1) The universe is basically spiritual and not material (though the material realm is not negated), and man's spirit is a reflection of the divine Spirit. (2) God is blessed (Gk *makários*, 1 Tim. 1:11) and eternal but does become actively involved in human affairs — notably in the Incarnation. (3) God's final judgment will be just — a warning to unbelievers and a comfort to believers. (4) Christ's death overcomes the "sting" of death, and a future life is affirmed. (5) True peace is found in the present life within the Christian

community.<sup>[1]</sup>

**from Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul***

If Stoicism, in its full development, was utterly opposed to Christianity, the same may be said of the very primary principles of the Epicurean [2] school. If the Stoics were Pantheists, the Epicureans were virtually Atheists. Their philosophy was a system of materialism, in the strictest sense of the word. In their view, the world was formed by an accidental concourse of atoms, and was not in any sense created, or even modified, by the Divinity. They did indeed profess a certain belief in what were called gods; but these equivocal divinities were merely phantoms, impressions on the popular mind, dreams, which had no objective reality, or at least exercised no active influence on the physical world, or the business of life.

The Epicurean deity, if self-existent at all, dwelt apart, in serene indifference to all the affairs of the universe. The universe was a great accident, and sufficiently explained itself without any reference to a higher power. The popular mythology was derided, but the Epicureans had no positive faith in anything better. As there was no creator, so there was no moral governor. All notions of retribution and of judgment to come were of course forbidden by such a creed. The principles of the atomic theory, when applied to the constitution of man, must have caused the resurrection to appear an absurdity. The soul was nothing without the body; or rather, the soul was itself a body, composed of finer atoms, or at best an unmeaning compromise between the material and the immaterial. Both body and soul were dissolved together and dissipated into the elements; and when this occurred, all the life of man was ended.

The moral result of such a creed was necessarily that which the Apostle Paul described (1 Cor. 15:32): "If the dead rise not, let us eat and drink: for tomorrow we die." The essential principle of the Epicurean philosopher was that there was nothing to alarm him, nothing to disturb him. His furthest reach was to do deliberately what the animals do instinctively. His highest aim was to gratify himself. With the coarser and more energetic minds, this principle inevitably led to the grossest sensuality and crime; in the case of others, whose temperament was more common place, or whose taste was more pure, the system took the form of a selfishness more refined.

As the Stoic sought to resist the evil which sur-

rounded him, the Epicurean endeavored to console himself by a tranquil and indifferent life. He avoided the more violent excitements of political and social engagements, to enjoy the seclusion of a calm contentment. But pleasure was still the end at which he aimed; and if we remove this end to its remotest distance, and understand it to mean an enjoyment which involves the most manifold self-denial, if we give Epicurus credit for taking the largest view of consequences, and if we believe that the life of his first disciples was purer than there is reason to suppose, the end remains the same. Pleasure, not duty, is the motive of moral exertion; expediency is the test to which actions are referred; and the self-denial itself, which an enlarged view of expediency requires, will probably be found impracticable without the grace of God. Thus, the Gospel met in the Garden an opposition not less determined, and more insidious, than the antagonism of the Porch. The two enemies it has ever had to contend with are the two ruling principles of the Epicureans and Stoics Pleasure and Pride.

Such, in their original and essential character, were the two schools of philosophy with which St. Paul was brought directly into contact. We ought, however, to consider how far these schools had been modified by the lapse of time, by the changes which succeeded Alexander and accompanied the formation of the Roman Empire, and by the natural tendencies of the Roman character. When Stoicism and Epicureanism were brought to Rome, they were such as we have described them. In as far as they were speculative systems, they found little favor: Greek philosophy was always regarded with some degree of distrust among the Romans. Their mind was alien from science and pure speculation. Philosophy, like art and literature, was of foreign introduction.

The cultivation of such pursuits was followed by private persons of wealth and taste, but was little extended among the community at large. There was no public school of philosophy at Rome. Where it was studied at all, it was studied, not for its own sake, but for the service of the state. Thus, the peculiarly practical character of the Stoic and Epicurean systems recommended them to the notice of many. What was wanted in the prevailing misery of the Roman world was a philosophy of life. There were some who weakly yielded, and some who offered a courageous resistance, to the evil of the times. The former, under the name of Epicureans, either spent their time in a serene tranquility, away from the distractions and disorders of politi-

cal life, or indulged in the grossest sensualism, and justified it on principle.

The Roman adherents of the school of Epicurus were never numerous, and few great names can be mentioned among them, though one monument remains, and will ever remain, of this phase of philosophy, in the poem of Lucretius. The Stoical school was more congenial to the endurance of the Roman character: and it educated the minds of some of the noblest men of the time, who scorned to be carried away by the stream of vice. Three great names can be mentioned, which divided the period between the preaching of St. Paul and the final establishment of Christianity, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.

But such men were few in a time of general depravity and unbelief. And this was really the character of the time. It was a period in the history of the world, when conquest and discovery, facilities of traveling, and the mixture of races, had produced a general fusion of opinions, resulting in an indifference to moral distinctions, and at the same time encouraging the most abject credulity. The Romans had been carrying on the work which Alexander and his successors begun. A certain degree of culture was very generally diffused. The opening of new countries excited curiosity. New religions were eagerly welcomed. Immoral rites found willing votaries. Vice and superstition went hand in hand through all parts of society, and, as the natural consequence, a scornful skepticism held possession of all the higher intellects.

But though the period of which we are speaking was one of general skepticism, for the space of three centuries the old dogmatic schools still lingered on, more especially in Greece. Athens was indeed no longer what she had once been, the centre from which scientific and poetic light radiated to the neighboring shores of Asia and Europe. Philosophy had found new homes in other cities, more especially in Tarsus and Alexandria. But Alexandria, though she was commercially great and possessed the trade of three continents, had not yet seen the rise of her greatest schools; and Tarsus could never be what Athens was, even in her decay, to those who traveled with cultivated tastes, and for the purposes of education. Thus Philosophy still maintained her seat in the city of Socrates.

The four great schools, the Lyceum and the Academy, the Garden and the Porch, were never destitute of exponents of their doctrines. When Cicero came, not long after Sulla's siege, he found the philosophers in residence. As the Empire grew, Athens assumed more and more the character of a university town. After Christianity was first preached there, this character was confirmed to the place by the embellishments and the benefactions of Hadrian. And before the schools were closed by the orders of Justinian, the city which had received Cicero and Atticus as students together, became the scene of the friendship of St. Basil and St. Gregory', one of the most beautiful episodes of primitive Christianity.