
Stoicism

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

Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, was a native of the same part of the Levant with St. Paul himself. He came from Cyprus to Athens at a time when patriotism was decayed and political liberty lost, and when a system, which promised the power of brave and self-sustaining endurance amid the general degradation, found a willing acceptance among the nobler minds. Thus in the Painted Porch, which, as we have said, had once been the meeting place of the poets, those who, instead of yielding to the prevailing evil of the times, thought they were able to resist it, formed themselves into a school of philosophers. In the high tone of this school, and in some of its ethical language, Stoicism was an apparent approximation to Christianity; but on the whole, it was a hostile system, in its physics, its morals, and its theology.

The Stoics condemned the worship of images and the use of temples, regarding them as nothing better than the ornaments of art. But they justified the popular polytheism, and, in fact, considered the gods of mythology as minor developments of the Great World God, which summed up their belief concerning the origin and existence of the world.

The Stoics were Pantheists; and much of their language is a curious anticipation of the phraseology of modern Pantheism. In their view, God was merely the Spirit or Reason of the Universe. The world was itself a rational soul, producing all things out of itself, and resuming it all to itself again. Matter was inseparable from the Deity. He did not create: He only organized. He merely impressed law and order on the substance, which was, in fact, Himself. The manifestation of the Universe was only a period in the development of God.

In conformity with these notions of the world, which substitute a sublime destiny for the belief in a personal Creator and Preserver, were the notions which were held concerning the soul and its relation to the body. The soul was, in fact, corporeal. The Stoics said that at death it would be burnt, or return to be absorbed in

God. Thus, a resurrection from the dead, in the sense in which the Gospel has revealed it, must have appeared to the Stoics irrational. Nor was their moral system less hostile to "the truth as it is in Jesus." The proud ideal which was set before the disciple of Zeno was, a magnanimous self-denial, an austere apathy, untouched by human passion, unmoved by change of circumstance. To the Wise man all outward things were alike. Pleasure was no good. Pain was no evil. All actions conformable to Reason were equally good; all actions contrary to Reason were equally evil.

The Wise man lives according to Reason: and living thus, he is perfect and self-sufficing. He reigns supreme as a king, he is justified in boasting as a god. Nothing can well be imagined more contrary to the spirit of Christianity. Nothing could be more repugnant to the Stoic than the news of a "Savior," who has atoned for our sin, and is ready to aid our weakness. Christianity is the School of Humility; Stoicism was the Education of Pride. Christianity is a discipline of life: stoicism was nothing better than an apprenticeship for death. And fearfully were the fruits of its principle illustrated both in its earlier and later disciples. Its first two leaders died by their own hands; like the two Romans whose names first rise to the memory, when the school of the Stoics is mentioned.

But Christianity turns the desperate resolution, that seeks to escape disgrace by death, into the anxious question, "What must I do to be saved?" "It softens the pride of stern indifference into the consolation of mutual sympathy. How great is the contrast between the Stoic ideal and the character of Jesus Christ! How different is the acquiescence in an iron destiny from the trust in a merciful and watchful Providence! How infinitely inferior is that sublime egotism, which looks down with contempt on human weakness, to the religion which tells us that 'they who mourn are blessed,' and which commands us to 'rejoice with them that rejoice. and to weep with them that weep!'

from **The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia**

Stoics in the NT

The only direct reference to the Stoics in the Bible occurs in Acts 17:18, where Paul is reported to have addressed Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens. During this speech the apostle, perhaps following his own principle of being “all things to all men” (1 Cor. 9:22), introduced a quotation from “some of your poets,” including the Stoic Aratus, who in the introductory dedication to Zeus of his poem *Phaenomena* said: “For we are indeed his offspring” (cf. Acts 17:28). At the end of the address some of the philosophers mocked Paul, but others wanted to hear more (v 32).

There is no real support for the theory that the division ran along party lines, the Epicureans being the mockers and the Stoics the ones who showed more interest. But Stoicism undoubtedly has a greater affinity to biblical teaching than Epicureanism. Parallels may be found between Stoic thought and the wisdom literature, and especially the Apocrypha. He. 4:12 recalls the hymn of the Stoic Cleanthes, and NT lists of virtues are similar to Stoic lists. Paul’s contentment in Phil. 4:11f may be compared to Stoic “ataraxy” (see III below), and the concept of the Logos offers a point of contact in a formal sense. Even stylistically Paul perhaps shows the influence of the Stoic diatribe.

Stoic Thinkers

Stoicism was founded in Athens by Zeno (332–260 B.C.) and acquired its name from the painted porch (Stoa) in the Agora where its proponents taught. Zeno himself came from Cyprus and was possibly of Semitic origin. The development and influence of his school were due to a succession of able thinkers, especially Chrysippus (d ca 205 B.C.), who gave the philosophy a more systematic form. Panaetius brought Stoicism to the Roman world, where it mingled to some extent with Platonism, e.g., in Posidonius’s works, and took a more practical bent. It influenced Cicero and found able expositors in Paul’s contemporary Seneca (A.D. 4–65), Epictetus (55–138), and the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180). Knowledge of the earlier Stoics is limited to the accounts of Diogenes and fragments. In contrast, the works of the Roman Stoics provide rich documentation and show why Stoicism

could enjoy such popularity in the educated circles of antiquity.

Stoic Teaching

Fundamental to the Stoic view of reality was the postulate of an all-determinative cosmic force which could be popularly identified as Zeus. This force embraced all things; the things themselves were composed of material atoms, souls being made of finer atoms than bodies. Stoicism could hardly be classified as materialistic, however, for it saw dynamic reason (*lógos*) as everywhere present, and within it were the seminal *lógoi*, through which individual things came into being. Human souls were thus regarded as emanations from the cosmic *lógos*. The destiny which controlled all things, therefore, was neither blind nor hostile, but wise and good, as might be seen in the harmonious operation of the universe. Virtue consisted of finding the thrust of destiny (or nature) and adjusting life to it. Individual passions and emotional reactions represented a disruptive force which could only cause conflict and a losing battle with nature; they were thus to be suppressed.

Mastery of emotions and indifference to changing circumstances constituted the summit of virtue. Those who achieved this entered into a relation to the cosmos that identified them with universal reason, lifted them above human conflicts and distinctions, and thus fashioned them into a cosmopolitan society.

Stoic Influence

For all the obvious parallels to Christian doctrine, Stoicism differs from the gospel at essential points. It has no concept of a personal God, no radical view of sin, no place for historical divine acts culminating in the incarnation, no idea of ethical renewal through the ministry of the Word and Spirit, and no hope of the resurrection and eternal fellowship with God in His kingdom. Nevertheless, Stoicism had a considerable impact on early Christian theology. 1 Clement echoes Stoicism in its presentation of the divine order (20; 33). Justin Martyr reflected Stoicism and Platonism in his description of God’s role in creation (*Apology*. i.20, 44, 59). Theophilus of Antioch made use of such technical Stoic words as

“immanent” (*Ad Autolyicum* i.2). The parallel between the Johannine and the Stoic *lógos* appealed to Justin Martyr, possibly for apologetic reasons in the first instance, but with implications for his general understanding of Christian truth (*Apol.* i.32, 46). Tatian, too, equated the preexistent *lógos* with the rationality of the Father (*Oratio ad Graecos* v; cf. Justin Martyr *Dial* 61.2). Origen would later find in the seminal *lógos* the principle which enables human beings to maintain identity in the resurrection from the dead (*De prin.* ii.10.3). Even Athanasius in the 4th cent could use the Stoic idea of the *lógos* as the soul of the universe, although for him the *lógos* was, of course, personal. His animation of His human nature makes sense as a special instance of His animation of the cosmos in its totality.

Justin Martyr found another useful parallel in the Stoic idea of the world’s destruction by fire (*Apol.* i.45). Tertullian, for all his distinction between Athens and Jerusalem, not only could invoke the ideas of *lógos* and spirit in Zeno and Cleanthes (*Apol.* i.21) but also could accept the concept of the materiality of the soul (*De anima* ix) and even use materialistic language when speaking of the divine Trinity.

Stoicism also exerted a considerable influence in the ethical sphere, as may be seen in Clement of Alexandria’s equation of sinlessness with freedom from passion (*Paedagogus* i.2) and also in many of the detailed discussions of Latin fathers, especially Ambrose and Augustine. But the overall impact of Stoic philosophy should not be exaggerated. Christian theology drew its main substance from the gospel, developed to a large extent independently of Stoic teaching, and even directly opposed it at such important points as its pantheism and fatalism. For the most part, Christian thinkers simply appropriated what seemed to be useful Stoic terms and concepts — not without some risk — in their attempt to offer either an apologetical presentation or a contemporary intellectual formulation of the biblical message.

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