

Epictetus' Views on Christians: A Closed Case Revisited

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The earliest Roman sources on Christians are dated to the beginning of the second century. Tacitus (*Annales* 15:44), Suetonius (*Nero* 16.2), and Pliny the Younger (*Epistulae ad Trajanum* 10.96) are the sources that are quoted time and again. Their contemporary, the Stoic Epictetus, has won less consideration. He never unambiguously speaks of Christians, but I am going to show that two passages actually refer to them (*Discourses* 2.9.19–21 and 4.7.6). Both instances are easily confused with Judaism, which has led some scholars astray. There are also philological difficulties that require profound consideration. I will show that Epictetus gives us quite a moderate assessment of Christians, in contrast to Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger. I suggest that this is due to the philosophical elements in Christian teachings.

Epictetus lived around 50–130 CE. He was born as a slave and was brought early on to serve in Rome in close contact with Nero's court.¹ Later he was freed, then banished from Rome during the reign of Domitian. Thereafter Epictetus founded a school in Nicopolis, today in Northern Greece, close to the Albanian border. As he became famous for his teaching, the school attracted students from the Roman well-to-do families. Among those students was Arrian of Nicomedia, who attended Epictetus' lectures for some years in the first decades of the second century. His notes are our primary source of Epictetus' teaching. Nicopolis is mentioned in the Epistle to

¹ For these contacts, see F. Millar, "Epictetus and the Imperial Court," *JRS* 55 (1965):141–48. The following presentation of Epictetus' career and his *Discourses* is based on N. Huttunen, *Paul and Epictetus on Law: A Comparison* (LNTS 405; London: T&T Clark, 2009), 4–5.

Titus (3:12), though it is not clear whether there was a Christian community in Epictetus' lifetime. The city, however, was an important harbour on the route to Rome, and it surely did not avoid Christian influences.² We also know that Epictetus was in Rome during Nero's persecution of Christians.

Epictetus' neutral or even moderately positive view of Christians is quite interesting in comparison to Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny, who counted Christianity as being among the criminal superstitions. Scholars have often taken these three sources as representatives of the Roman view of Christians. For example, John Granger Cook analyses these three and some other Roman texts on Christians in his book *Roman Attitudes Toward the Christians: From Claudius to Hadrian*. The result is that the Roman picture of Christianity is nothing but negative:

Probably the Roman intellectuals and governors like Tacitus and Pliny were so disgusted at the phenomenon of Christianity that they lacked the inclination to make any profound explorations into the nature of early Christian faith, morality, and ritual practice. What I have sought to do during this project is develop a sympathy for the Romans' shock when they had to deal with this 'other' – these Christians who were so difficult to conceive using the categories they were familiar with.³

Cook's profound study on the texts of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny adds considerably to our understanding. However, it is an overestimation to understand their shock as an overall Roman view. One would get another picture when reading two of Epictetus' texts, *Discourses* 2.9.19–21 and 4.7.6. Cook passes over the latter briefly,⁴ while he does not mention the former at all. His procedure is indicative of a more general tendency in scholarship on the subject. This scholarly negligence is surely due to

² For Nicopolis' character as a city, see for example J.D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary and an Introduction to Titus, I and II Timothy, the Pastoral Epistles* (AB 35; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 255.

³ J.G. Cook, *Roman Attitudes Toward the Christians: From Claudius to Hadrian* (WUNT 261; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 2.

⁴ Cook, *Roman Attitudes Toward the Christians*, 173.

Adolf Bonhöffer's classic *Epiktet und das Neue Testament*, which deals with parallel texts in depth but delivers only a short discussion on *Discourses* 4.7.6; furthermore, it passes over the other passage with superficial references.⁵ Scholars routinely refer to Bonhöffer's classic text.⁶

A recent example of Bonhöffer's authority is A.A. Long's magnificent monograph on Epictetus. Long's subject is not Epictetus' relationship towards Christians, and it is understandable that he passes over the theme with brief remarks. Long supposes that Epictetus mentions Christians,⁷ but he shares Bonhöffer's view of the very remote relationship between Epictetus' thinking and the New Testament: "Notwithstanding striking verbal parallels, there is no strong reason to think that one has directly influenced the other."⁸ As we see here, the discussion on Epictetus' view of Christians is strongly steered by Bonhöffer even today.

Without questioning Bonhöffer's great merits, one should be more careful with his works. In a response to Rudolf Bultmann's article, in which he has questioned Epictetus' Stoic orthodoxy, Bonhöffer claims in an offended tone that his own scholarly life's work was dedicated to proving that Epictetus presents "the pure, the genuine and the coherent theory of the old Stoicism."⁹ Here we see a tendency in Bonhöffer which is later questioned. Long points out that, despite the fact that

⁵ A. Bonhöffer, *Epiktet und das Neue Testament* (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 10; Gießen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann (vormals J. Ricker), 1911), 41–44, 72, 273.

⁶ For the significance of Bonhöffer's view on the subsequent study, see J. Hershbell, "The Stoicism of Epictetus: Twentieth Century Perspectives," in *ANRW* II.36.3 (ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 2150–63, 2161.

⁷ A.A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 17, 110.

⁸ Long, *Epictetus*, 35.

⁹ "Ich darf wohlhinweisen, daß meine wissenschaftliche Lebensarbeit hauptsächlich dem Nachweis gewidmet ist, daß wir dem kostbaren Vermächtnis, das uns Arrian von seinem Lehrer hinterlassen hat, im wesentlichen die reine, unverfälschte und konsequente Lehre der alten Stoa, deren ursprüngliche Zeugnisse uns fast ganz verloren gegangen sind, vor uns haben" (Bonhöffer, "Epiktet und das Neue Testament," *ZNW* 13 (1912): 281–92, 282; my English translation).

Bonhöffer's works are "indispensable for close study of Epictetus relation to the Stoic tradition," "they tend to overemphasize his doctrinal orthodoxy."¹⁰

I claim that Bonhöffer's tendency also affects his assessment of the passages on Christians. The most eye-catching example is the word *πάθος* in its positive meaning (*Discourses* 2.9.20). I will return to this term below. At this moment, it is enough to note that the Stoics usually understood it in the negative sense. Bonhöffer generally claims that "Epictetus' conception of the essence and the origin of the *πάθη* is completely similar to the old and the genuine Stoicism."¹¹ Surprisingly, he does not discuss *Discourses* 2.9.20 in his lengthy chapter on the passions. I cannot avoid the impression that a profound discussion on Epictetus' references to the Christians would have contributed to ruining this rigid view of Stoic orthodoxy. As this view is relativised today, one can be open to a more relaxed assessment of Epictetus' relationship to early Christianity.

In his *Epiktet und das Neue Testament*, Bonhöffer shot down all attempts to find Christian influences in Epictetus' texts. His main object of attack was Theodor Zahn's inaugural speech as a vice-principal of the University of Erlangen.¹² In this speech, Zahn proposed that Epictetus had known the New Testament writings and embraced ideas from it "as long as they are not in contrast to his dogma."¹³ Thus Zahn did not question Epictetus' philosophical orthodoxy. He emphasises that Epictetus

¹⁰ Long, *Epictetus*, 36.

¹¹ "Epictets Ansicht über das Wesen und den Ursprung der *πάθη* entspricht vollständig den Anschauungen der Alten, echten Stoa" (Bonhöffer, *Epiktet und die Stoa. Untersuchungen zur stoischen Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1890), 278; my English translation).

¹² T. Zahn, *Der Stoiker Epiktet und sein Verhältnis zum Christentum. Rede beim Eintritt des Prorektorats der Königlich Bayerischen Friedrich-Alexanders-Universität Erlangen am 3. November 1894 gehalten* (Erlangen: Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Nachf, 1895). Since the king of Bavaria was the honorary principal, whom Zahn blesses at the end of this speech, the office of the vice-principal meant in practice that he handled the tasks of the principal.

¹³ "Aber auch religiöse Ideen und Lebensregeln des Neuen Testaments konnten den Epiktet ansprechen und, soweit sie seinem Dogma nicht geradezu widersprachen, von ihm angeeignet werden" (Zahn, *Der Stoiker Epiktet*, 29; my English translation).

differed from Christians on many points and that “he did not become a Christian, because he was a Stoic and wished to die as a Stoic.” He was not even a friend of Christianity or Christians.¹⁴ This was a moderate statement, but it was too much for Bonhöffer. Zahn claimed that Epictetus’ views were not fully coherent, which is basically due to inconsistencies in old Stoic theory but is strengthened by non-Stoic influences.¹⁵ Bonhöffer defends Epictetus’ consistency and in a detailed analysis – partly based on an article by Franz Mörth,¹⁶ who had already criticised Zahn – shoots down every sporadic parallel Zahn presented as proof of Christian influence on Epictetus.¹⁷

A few years after Bonhöffer’s *Epiktet und das Neue Testament*, Douglas S. Sharp published his *Epictetus and the New Testament*. Sharp concluded that “it is doubtful whether Epictetus was acquainted with the New Testament.” The linguistic similarities are mostly due to the fact that both are written in the *koine* of their time.¹⁸ The case was closed, and Bonhöffer has become the main authority on the consensus since then. However, there is one caveat in Bonhöffer’s profound work, which has yet to be investigated in detail: the two passages, *Discourses* 2.9.19–21 and 4.7.6, which

¹⁴ Zahn *Der Stoiker Epiktet*, 33–34.

¹⁵ Zahn *Der Stoiker Epiktet*, 10.

¹⁶ F. Mörth, “Epiktet und sein Verhältnis zum Christentum,” in *Jahresbericht des mit hohem Ministerial-Erlaß vom 20. Jänner 1895, Z 29,755, mit dem Öffentlichkeitsrecht beliehenen fürstbischöflichen Gymnasiums am Seckauer Diözesan-Knabenseminar Carolinum-Augustineum in Graz am Schlusse des Schuljahres 1908/1909* (Graz: Selbstverlag des f.-b. Knabenseminars, 1909), 1–22.

¹⁷ Zahn, *Der Stoiker Epiktet*, 29–34; Mörth “Epiktet;” Bonhöffer, *Epiktet*, 30–42.

¹⁸ D.S. Sharp, *Epictetus and the New Testament* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1914), 135, 137. One may also note that even a larger common background produces parallels, which at first sight are striking. A good example is Ζῆται καὶ εὐρήσεις (*Discourses* 4.1.51), which closely resembles ζητεῖτε καὶ εὐρήσετε (Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9). Mörth (“Epiktet,” 22) already notes that even Plato uses a similar phrase. L. Willms (*Epiktets Diatribe Über die Freiheit* [4.1]. *Einleitung, Übersetzung, Kommentar*. Band 1–2 [Wissenschaftliche Kommentare zu Griechischen und lateinischen Schriftstellern; Heidelberg: Universitätverlag Winter, 2011], 263–65) sees numerous parallels for this saying in philosophical texts. Thus, on closer analysis this striking parallel does not provide any ground for the theory that Epictetus was influenced by the New Testament.

more or less clearly speak of Christians. Quite surprisingly, they have been left without further consideration.

A close reading of these two passages will show against all doubt that they speak of Christians and that Epictetus knew something about Christians and their teachings. He even borrowed some expressions from them, which is the most interesting result for further study. As Epictetus cited Christian expressions, there may be more of them in the *Discourses*. This reopens a discussion that Bonhöffer and some others had closed a hundred years ago. Moreover, a close reading of these passages also shows that the Roman attitude towards Christians was not only hostile, but that there was room for a more relaxed assessments than what Tacitus, Suetonius, or Pliny had provided. It is possibly no coincidence that it is a philosopher in the end who loosens the discussion. This situation is certainly due to the philosophical components in Christian teachings. In what follows I analyse first *Discourses* 4.7.6, as it is the clearer case; then I proceed to *Discourses* 2.9.19–21, before arriving at a conclusion with suggestions for further study.

1. Galileans (*Discourses* 4.7.6)

In the beginning of *Discourses* 4.7, Epictetus speaks of children and lunatics who do not fear the tyrant, his guards, and their swords. Because of their lack of understanding, children and lunatics can be fearless before such threats (sections 1–5). From lunatics Epictetus proceeds to the Galileans, who are also fearless: “Therefore, if madness can produce this attitude of mind toward the things which have just been mentioned, and also habit, as with the Galileans, cannot reason and demonstration teach a man that God has made all things in the universe?” (εἶτα ὑπὸ μανίας μὲν δύναται τις οὕτως διατεθῆναι πρὸς ταῦτα καὶ ὑπὸ ἔθους οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι· ὑπὸ λόγου δὲ

καὶ ἀποδείξεως οὐδεὶς δύναται μαθεῖν ὅτι ὁ θεὸς πάντα πεποιήκεν τὰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, *Discourses* 4.7.6; trans. W. A. Oldfather, LCL). The reference to God as a creator is the beginning of an extensive argumentation that one can attain fearlessness through philosophical demonstration (sections 6–11). Children, lunatics, and Galileans are just a starting point for this argumentation; as they do not fear the tyrant, the guards, and the swords, the fear does not automatically follow from certain outer circumstances. Fear or fearlessness is rather up to the person who feels or does not feel the fear. Epictetus concludes that this fact makes it meaningful to seek philosophical reasons for fearlessness.

Thus Epictetus uses children, lunatics, and Galileans to introduce the audience to the philosophical discussion. They are not the center of his focus; therefore the reference to them is just a passing one. Does Epictetus really mean ‘Christians’ when he speaks of Galileans? Most scholars have held this identification as a self-evident fact. Bonhöffer is among them.¹⁹ Martin Hengel, however, presented an alternative interpretation: the Galileans are Zealots. He referred to the fact that during the Jewish War Epictetus lived in Rome, where it was possible to learn the details of the war in Palestine. Hengel also notes that, according to Josephus, the Jewish resistance movement *sicarii* – which he lumps together with the Zealots – became very famous (*Jewish War* 7.409–421, 433–450).²⁰

¹⁹ Bonhöffer *Epiktet*, 41–43. Similarly, for example, Zahn *Der Stoiker Epiktet*, 26–27; K. Hartmann, “Arrian und Epiktet,” *Njahrb* 8 (1905): 248–75, 267; Mörrh “Epiktet,” 21; W.A. Oldfather, See sources: Epictetus (1928a), xxvi; (1928b), 363 note 1; H.W.F. Stellwag, See sources: Epictetus (1933), 173; H. Karpp, “Christennamen,” in *RAC* 2 (ed. T. Klauser et al.; Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1954), 1114–38, 1131; M. Spanneut, “Epiktet,” in *RAC* V (ed. T. Klauser et al.; Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1962), 599–681, 628; J.N. Sevenster, “Education or Conversion: Epictetus and the Gospels,” *NovT* 8 (1966): 247–62, 254–55; S. Benko, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries A.D.,” in *ANRW* II.23.2 (ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 1055–118, 1077; Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1985), 40; Hershbell “The Stoicism of Epictetus,” 2161; T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul. The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 132–33.

²⁰ M. Hengel, *Die Zeloten. Untersuchungen zur Jüdischen Freiheitsbewegung in der Zeit von Herodes I bis 70 n. Chr.* 2. (2d rev. ed.; AGJU 1; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 60–61. Hengel, however, makes a

The German historian Eduard Meyer already tackled the hypothesis of the Galileans as Zealots in the beginning of the twentieth century. He denied it, as one cannot reliably explain how Epictetus could incidentally refer to a group that had been defeated several decades earlier. Meyer suggested that “Galileans” must refer to the Christians.²¹ This is a reasonable suggestion, as the group must be known to the students being lectured to without further explication. Christians are the clearest candidate for such a group.

This being the case, some scholars have seen the words οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι as a later addition, since Epictetus must have seen the Christian grounds for fearlessness as being negative rather than as just a habit. Alternatively, the word “habit” is emended to some more negative term.²² However, all the emendations of the text are highly hypothetical and unnecessary. The manuscript reading is understandable, and it does not appreciate Christians in such a way that one should doubt its non-Christian origin.²³ Syntactically (μέν – δέ) Christians are on the side of the lunatics against

distinction between the *sicarii* and the Zealots in another place (*Die Zeloten*, 49). S. Applebaum (“The Zealots: the Case for Revaluation,” *JRS* 61 [1971]: 155–70, 164) had identified Galileans with Zealots before Hengel. It is also unreliable to think that Galileans refer to some other resistance movement during the Jewish war (for such a hypothesis, see S. Zeitlin, “Who were the Galileans? New Light on Josephus' Activities in Galilee,” *JQR* 64 [1974]:189–203).

²¹ E. Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums in drei Bänden* III: Die Apostelgeschichte und die Anfänge des Christentums (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1923), 530 n. 1. There was also a quite unknown Jewish group called Galileans in the second century (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 80; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.22.7). Though this group seems to be somewhat critical towards the state authorities (*mishnah Yadayim* 4:8), as Epictetus' fearless Galileans before the tyrant, it is still unreliable to assume that Epictetus would incidentally refer to this kind of minor group.

²² I. Schweighäuser (See sources: Epictetus [1799a–d/1800], 1799c, 913–915) and J. Barnes (*Logic and the Imperial Stoa* [Philosophia Antiqua: A Series of Studies on Ancient Philosophy 75; Leiden: Brill, 1997], 63 n. 157) have seen οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι as an emendation. Several scholars have been inclined to change the word ἔθους to a more negative one. See the textual apparatus in Schenkl's edition; K. Meiser, “Zu Epiktet IV 7,6,” *Hermes* 45 (1910): 160; P. Corsen, “Zu Epiktet, Διατριβαί IV 7,6,” *BphWS* 30 (1910): 832; A.J. Kronenberg, “Zu Epiktet IV 7,6,” *BphWS* 30 (1910):1623.

²³ Cf. the account of Christ in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*, which is surely a Christian addition or – if Josephus himself wrote something about Jesus – fully rewritten by some Christian. The tone is unmistakably that of a Christian: “About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us had condemned him to be crucified, those who had at first come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third

those whose fearlessness is based on reason and demonstration. Thus, Christians are as unphilosophical as lunatics. There is, however, a difference between the lunatics and the Christians: the latter are not mad, but rather habit is the apparent reason for their fearlessness.²⁴

What, then, is the ἔθος, the habit? According to Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Epictetus perhaps “means that the Christians were brought up more or less blindly, that is, without ‘reason and demonstration’, to have their strange beliefs.”²⁵ This is true, but one can be more precise. Zahn saw this clearly when he noted that “the habit to good – and the question is about this here – is something which Epictetus holds in no little reverence.”²⁶ The word ἔθος and its cognate ἐθίζω are technical terms in Epictetus’ philosophy.²⁷ Habit emerges in thinking and acting without elaborated consideration. Habits are developed from birth, and as they are strongly rooted, it is difficult to change them. Epictetus says, “In the course of years we have acquired the habit (εἰθίσμεθα) of doing the opposite of what we learn and have in use opinions which are the opposite of the correct ones” (*Discourses* 2.9.14; trans. W. A. Oldfather, LCL. Cf. 3.19.4–6).

To fight bad habits one can use contrary habits (*Discourses* 1.27.4–6; trans. W. A. Oldfather, LCL), which are activated with short sentences or “canons”

day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared” (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63–64; trans. L. H. Feldman, LCL.). Ulrich Victor (“Das *Testimonium Flavianum*. Ein authentischer Text des Josephus,” *NovT* 52 (2010): 72–82) has recently defended the authenticity of this passage. While he argues with certain success that the words “if indeed one ought to call him a man” are a fixed *topos* in antiquity and that “the Messiah” should be understood as a proper name “Christ,” he does not explain how a Jew would admit that prophets were speaking of Christ. This idea sounds too Christian to have come from Josephus’ pen.

²⁴ Zahn, *Der Stoiker Epiktet*, 27.

²⁵ Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self*, 133.

²⁶ “Die Gewöhnung zum Guten – und um ein solches handelt es sich hier – schätzt Epiktet nicht gering” (Zahn, *Der Stoiker Epiktet*, 41 n. 27; my English translation).

²⁷ It may be added that Epictetus also uses the word ἔξις as an equivalent of ἔθος. For habit in Epictetus, see B.L. Hijmans, Jr., *ἈΣΚΗΣΙΣ. Notes on Epictetus’ Educational System* (WTS 2; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959), 64–65; and Huttunen, *Paul and Epictetus*, 127–28.

(κανόνες).²⁸ One should memorise them in order to have them at hand in practical situations; for example, “When death appears to be an evil, we must have ready at hand [the canons] ‘It is a duty to avoid evils’ and ‘Death is an inevitable thing’” (*Discourses* 1.27.7; trans. W. A. Oldfather, LCL, revised). The short canons recall the deeper philosophical truths and thus help the person to maintain his or her philosophical character.

As Epictetus speaks about the habit of the Galileans, he possibly presupposes that Christians had canons of their own. And they really had.²⁹ For example, the sentence “[n]either circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!” is called a canon by Paul (Galatians 6:15–16; NRSV; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:19).³⁰ Epictetus acknowledged that Christian canons are not pure madness, though they were surely strange beliefs to him. In Epictetus’ ranking, Christian fearlessness is an admirable result derived from the wrong reasons. His words do not reflect the prejudices Tacitus or Suetonius expressed.

There is no reason to think that Epictetus would have known Christians or Christianity very deeply. However, he seems to know more than he says and to expect the same knowledge from his audience. Otherwise a passing reference could not be understandable. Zahn has rightly noted this point.³¹ It becomes very clear that Epictetus and his audience had some contacts with Christianity when we turn our attention to the passage in *Discourses* 2.9.

²⁸ For the canons in Epictetus, see R.J. Newman, “Cotidie Meditare: Theory and Practice of the Meditatio in Imperial Stoicism,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung* II.36.3 (ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 1473–1517, esp. 1496–1502.

²⁹ For the use of the word κανών in Christian writings, see for example H.W. Beyer, “Κανών,” in *TDNT* 3 (ed. Gerhard Kittel; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), 596–602.

³⁰ Fourth Maccabees says, in the good Stoic way, that vicious emotions (πάθη) are ruled by those, who “philosophise the whole canon of the philosophy” (πρός ὅλον τὸν τῆς φιλοσοφίας κανόνα φιλοσοφῶν) (4 Maccabees 7:21–22; my translation).

³¹ Zahn, *Der Stoiker Epiktet*, 27.

2. Christians as Baptised Jews

In *Discourses* 2.9 Epictetus claims that a Stoic philosopher should not only speak of philosophy, but also do according to its doctrines.³² He compares a Stoic to a Jew:

(19) Why, then, do you call yourself a Stoic, why do you deceive the multitude, why do you being a Jew act the parts of Greeks? (20) Do you not see in what sense men are severally called Jew, Syrian, or Egyptian? For example, whenever we see a man halting between two faiths, we are in the habit of saying, “He is not Jew, he is only acting the part.” But when he adopts the *pathos*³³ of the man who has been baptized and has made his choice, then he both is a Jew in fact and is also called one. (21) So we are also counterfeit “baptists,” Jews in words, but in deeds something else, not in sympathy with our own words,³⁴ far from applying the principles which we profess, yet priding ourselves upon them as being men who know them.

(19) τί οὖν Στωικὸν λέγεις σεαυτὸν, τί ἐξαπατᾷς τοὺς πολλοὺς, τί ὑποκρίνη Ἰουδαῖος ὢν Ἕλληνας; (20) οὐχ ὁρᾷς, πῶς ἕκαστος λέγεται Ἰουδαῖος, πῶς Σύρος, πῶς Αἰγύπτιος; καὶ ὅταν τινὰ ἐπαμφοτερίζοντα ἴδωμεν, εἰώθαμεν λέγειν οὐκ ἔστιν Ἰουδαῖος, ἀλλ’ ὑποκρίνεται. ὅταν δ’ ἀναλάβῃ τὸ πάθος τὸ τοῦ βεβαμμένου καὶ ἡρημένου, τότε καὶ ἔστι τῷ ὄντι καὶ καλεῖται Ἰουδαῖος. (21) οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς παραβαπτισταί, λόγῳ μὲν Ἰουδαῖοι, ἔργῳ δ’ ἄλλο τι, ἀσυμπαθεῖς πρὸς τὸν λόγον, μακρὰν ἀπὸ τοῦ χρῆσθαι τούτοις ἃ λέγομεν, ἐφ’ οἷς ὡς εἰδότες αὐτὰ ἐπαιρόμεθα. (*Discourses* 2.9.19–21; trans. W. A. Oldfather, LCL, slightly revised)

Epictetus speaks of two kinds of Jews. First, there are Jews whose deeds do not follow their words. Second, there are real Jews whose deeds follow their words after baptism and choice. I claim that the latter group actually refers to Christians. In order to demonstrate this, I first go through some text-critical problems and then proceed to a close the reading of the text.

The text-critical problems are not due to the manuscript, but rather to the emendations. The metaphoric use of the Jews is somewhat confusing in the

³² See also Bonhöffer, *Epictet und die Stoa*, 11–13; Long, *Epictetus*, 107–12.

³³ Possible translations of this Greek word are discussed below.

³⁴ An alternative translation for the ‘words’ is ‘reason’, but the context prefers the former.

manuscript text. In section 19 the basic identity is that of a Jew who does not practice. In section 20, however, there is a non-Jew who is playing the part of a Jew. Finally, in section 21 Epictetus speaks of persons who are Jews with respect to their words while they are non-Jews with respect to their deeds. So the question is: Did Epictetus deliver a metaphor in which the basic identity is that of a Jew or that of a non-Jew?

Section 21 can be seen in either way. Thus the real tension is between sections 19 and 20. An editor of Epictetus' *Discourses*, Heinrich Schenkl, solved this tension with an emendation in section 19.³⁵ Instead of reading with the manuscript that "you" are a Jew acting the part of Greeks (Ἰουδαῖος ὢν Ἑλληνας), he emended the text to say that "you" are a Greek acting the part of a Jew (Ἰουδαῖον ὢν Ἕλληνα). Schenkl's emendation was then accepted by W. A. Oldfather in his edition, published in the Loeb Classical Library (1925–1928, with several reprints).

According to the emended text, Epictetus is speaking of Greeks who in some respect play the part of Jews, but who should become Jews in every respect. Scholars reading the emended text have usually presented it as a reference to the Gentile God-fearers who are assumed to become proselytes.³⁶ This had created the odd feature that the conversion to Judaism was based on proselyte baptism, without a word about circumcision. Scholars have been at pains to explain this, either by finding a covert reference to circumcision or claiming that there were uncircumcised proselytes.³⁷ The problem, however, is not in the manuscript text, but rather in Schenkl's and Oldfather's editions.

³⁵ For the earlier emendations, see Schenkl's text critical notes.

³⁶ See, for example J.G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 77.

³⁷ J. Ysebaert (*Greek Baptismal Terminology: Its Origins and Early Development* [Græcitas Christianorum Primæva 1; Nijmegen: Dekker & van de Vegt N.V., 1962], 20 n. 2) proposes that *pathos* denotes the circumcision and Sharp (*Epictetus*, 134–35) that the participle ἡρημένον means that. Conversion without circumcision is proposed by N. McEleney ("Conversion, Circumcision and the Law," *NTS* 20 (1974): 319–41, 332) but rejected by J. Nolland ("Uncircumcised Proselytes?" *JSJ* 12 (1981): 173–94; 179–82).

The manuscript reading is admittedly difficult but nevertheless understandable. It is clear that the Jew is a metaphor for the Stoic. As Epictetus assumes that his audience consists of Stoics, the basic identity in the metaphor is that of “being a Jew” (section 19). This is Epictetus’ own understanding. As these “Jews” are non-practicing ones, they deceive the multitude (οἱ πολλοί). In section 20 Epictetus presents the understanding of the multitude: when words and deeds are in tension with each other, the common people base their understanding on deeds and, consequently, see the basic identity as that of a non-Jew (section 20). In section 21, Epictetus admits that a Jew becomes a real Jew when his or her deeds are concomitant with Jewish words.

The manuscript text does not speak of non-Jews becoming Jews. Therefore the common view that Epictetus is speaking of proselytes is wrong. Epictetus is speaking of two kinds of Jews. The manuscript provides a situation where Jews who are not following their faith are supposed to make a change in their conduct after baptism and choice. I claim that the baptised Jews are actually Christians. The word βεβαμμένου is in the perfect tense, denoting “a completed action the effects of which still continue in the present.”³⁸ The perfect tense rules out renewed purification rites and indicates a single baptism which has an ongoing effect.³⁹ As Epictetus is not speaking of non-Jews becoming Jews, there is no question of a proselyte baptism. One cannot avoid the thought that he is referring to Christian baptism.

However, there is not only one baptism. In section 21 Epictetus says, “we are also counterfeit ‘baptists (παραβαπτισταί)’ , Jews in words, but in deeds something

³⁸ H.W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984), 434 (§ 1945). This is the basic meaning of the perfect tense. Smyth also lists other meanings, but the context of Epictetus’ passage does not indicate any of them. It is safest and most natural to keep the basic meaning here.

³⁹ On the purification rites, see for example J. Thomas, “Baptistes,” in *RAC I* (ed. T. Klauser et al.; Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1950), 1167–1172; E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 222–30.

else” (trans. Oldfather, LCL). As there is no mention of baptists earlier, we should assume that the counterfeit baptists are negative counterparts for the Jews who have adopted the πάθος of the baptised person. This comparison also presumes that the word βαπτιστής means a baptised person. Although we usually tend to think that this word denotes the person who baptises in contrast to the baptised one, this kind of differentiation is not necessary. The word can also denote persons who practice self-immersion.⁴⁰ In theory, it could denote both the one who takes the proselyte baptism and the one who practices the repeated ablutions of mainstream Judaism (see, e.g., Leviticus 15; Numbers 19). The latter is the probable alternative, as the passage by no means refers to the proselyte baptism.

The prefix παρα- denotes that there is something wrong in these baptisms. The counterfeit baptists, so to say, “misbaptise” and, thus, their baptism is somehow invalid.⁴¹ This seems to reflect disputes over baptism: all the Jews have invalid baptisms (section 21), while real Jews have a valid baptism (section 20). As the valid baptism is the Christian baptism, Epictetus reproduces the Christian and anti-Jewish view. Justin Martyr makes plain that Christians do not accept Jewish ablutions but prefer the Christian baptism (*Dialogue with Trypho* 14.1; 19.2). There is something similar going on in Epictetus’ metaphorical contrast between the counterfeit Jews and the real Jews.⁴² Epictetus’ words for Christians, who are the real Jews, undoubtedly reflect a Christian self-understanding. This self-understanding is seen in the New Testament (Romans 9:6–8), not to speak of later Christian literature.⁴³

⁴⁰ See the names of certain Jewish sects; K. Rudolph, “The Baptist Sects,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism* 3 (ed. W. Horbury, W.D. Davies, and J. Sturdy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 471–500).

⁴¹ This is the earliest occurrence of the word παραβαπτιστής. Later we encounter it in the church fathers, who use it to refer to the persons who commit schismatic baptisms; G.H.W. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961): παραβαπτιστής.

⁴² Rudolph (“The Baptist Sects,” 482) speaks of a rivalry between Christian and proselyte baptism.

⁴³ L.H. Feldman, **Virhe. Vain pääasiakirja.** *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions From Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 196–200; S.G.

3. Loan Words

I have already mentioned that the word πάθος is one that instantly catches the eye of the one who knows Epictetus' philosophy or Stoic philosophy in general. In Stoic philosophy it denotes the morally questionable passions. Epictetus also uses it in this negative sense – except here.⁴⁴ Keeping this general background in mind, it is odd that Epictetus makes a moral example of a Jew with the πάθος. One can suppose that πάθος is a loan word from some source.

Epictetus' use of a loan word is visible in the fact that it creates tensions in the passage. The πάθος is qualified as the πάθος of the person who is baptised and who has made the choice. This expression assumes that the person has the πάθος after the baptism and the choice. Surprisingly, Epictetus adds that a person should also adopt the πάθος that he or she has already received as a baptised person and as a person who has made the choice. The baptism and the choice, which qualify the πάθος, do not fit with the requirement to adopt the πάθος.

The πάθος acquired through baptism and choice is certainly considered too ritualistic by Epictetus, who tends to prefer rational operations. For example, it is not enough to attend the Eleusinian mysteries. He says that one should also understand “that all these things were established by men of old time for the purpose of education and for the amendment of our life” (*Discourses* 3.21.15; trans. W. A. Oldfather,

Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70–170 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995): 295–96.

⁴⁴ Other occurrences include: *Discourses* 1.4.26; 1.27.10; 2.18.11; 3.1.8; 3.2.3 (two times); 4.1.57; 4.8.28; fr. 20. For the Stoic definition of πάθος, see M. Forschner, *Die stoische Ethik. Über den Zusammenhang von Natur-, Sprach- und Moralphilosophie im altstoischen System* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), 114–23; and T. Brennan, “The Old Stoic Theory of Emotions,” in *The Emotions in Hellenistic Philosophy* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen and J. Sihvola; The New Synthese Historical Library 46; Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 21–70, esp. 21–39. Bonhöffer (*Epictet und die Stoa*, 276–84) has analysed Epictetus' use of the Stoic philosophy on πάθος rather than the use of the word itself.

LCL).⁴⁵ A similar moral emphasis is visible when he speaks about baptism. One does not get the πάθος through the ritual of baptism, but through conscious adoption. Thus the baptism and the choice have lost their significance in Epictetus' thinking.

Therefore I am inclined to suppose that the Greek expression τὸ πάθος τὸ τοῦ βεβαμμένου καὶ ἡρημένου is best understood as a loan expression. The word πάθος has a deviant meaning here; βάπτω and the perfect tense of ἡρημένου are *hapax legomena* in the Epictetan corpus. The other expression related to the baptism, the substantive “counterfeit baptist” (παραβαπτιστής), is rare in Greek. It should also be counted among the loan expressions.

Unfortunately, we cannot show any exact source for these loan words.

Generally speaking, they fit well within the Christian usage. The word βαπτιστής and its derivatives are philologically a Christian phenomenon, as they occur only in Christian texts, with two exceptions. Those two are Epictetus and Josephus. In Epictetus it seems to be a Christian loan word, and Josephus uses it when speaking of “John called the Baptist” (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.116). Thus the word ‘baptist’ occurs even in Josephus’ usage in a theme closely related to the Christians.

When it comes to choice, one can note that Justin Martyr speaks of it in the context of baptism. It is possible that Justin is dependent on earlier tradition, which also influenced Epictetus, who was older than Justin. According to Justin, the converts are baptised so that they become children of free choice (προαιρέσεως) and knowledge. They have chosen (ἐλομένω) the rebirth (*First Apology* 61.10.). Justin speaks of Christ’s πάθος, meaning his suffering (e.g., *Dialogue with Trypho* 74.3;

⁴⁵ H.-J. Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 103–05.

97.3), but not in the context of a baptised Christian. In this respect, better analogies are found in the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch, a contemporary of Epictetus.

For Ignatius the πάθος is an important concept, and its root is in Christ's πάθος – that is, Christ's suffering.⁴⁶ Christ's πάθος is the constituent for the Christian communities (see, e.g., the introductory salutations in Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* and *To the Trallians*). It also ensures the effect of baptism, as Christ was baptised so that he could cleanse water through his suffering (Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 18.2).⁴⁷ Ignatius also speaks of choice and πάθος in the same context. He says that Christians should freely choose (αὐθαίρετως) death and thus join in Christ's suffering (Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 5.2). Ignatius presents no clear source for Epictetus' loan words. However, it helps us to reconstruct the enigmatic meaning of the πάθος in Epictetus' text. Epictetus may refer to Christians who are ready for suffering because of their beliefs. This interpretation fits in well with what Epictetus says of the Galileans' fearlessness in the face of violence.

4. Conclusions and Further Paths for Study

Discourses 4.7.6 shows quite clearly that Epictetus knew Christians and their use of canons in habituation. The passage on Jews and real Jews (*Discourses* 2.9.19–21) utilises Christian views. Epictetus even borrows expressions from some unknown Christian source, whether textual or not. What is interesting in these two passages is the fact that Epictetus mentions Christians in passing. Granted that these passages do not betray any interest in Christianity *per se*, but they do betray a self-evident

⁴⁶ W. Bauer and H. Paulsen, *Die Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochia und der Polykarpbrief* (Die Apostolischen Väter II; Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 18; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1985), 21; W.R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius Of Antioch* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 85–86.

⁴⁷ Bauer and Paulsen, *Die Briefe des Ignatius*, 42.

knowledge of Christians, even among the audience. Epictetus does not explain who the Christians are or what their beliefs are. He seems to expect that his audience knows enough to understand his points. He even expects that the audience knows the Christian suprasessionist theology, which proclaims Christians as the real heirs of Judaism. Thus the passing references to Christians indicate a more profound knowledge of Christians.

This fact reopens the discussion of Epictetus' relationship to Christians, which Adolf Bonhöffer closed over a century ago. The discussion, however, should be framed anew. Bonhöffer is right when he supposes that Epictetus would not have supplemented his philosophical system with Christian thought.⁴⁸ His *Discourses*, however, shows that Epictetus used different motifs from everyday life to illustrate his Stoic philosophy. Christians were presented as examples of fearless people whose words and deeds were in harmony. As Epictetus even uses some expressions from Christian sources, one can legitimately ask whether there might be even more in the *Discourses*. The case closed by Bonhöffer should be opened again, but in a reframed version.

First, it is unnecessary to limit the study to Epictetus' relationship with the New Testament. There is much more early Christian literature, which is relevant for the comparison. Epictetus' πάθος has a good equivalent in Ignatius' epistles. Second, after Mörrh's, Bonhöffer's, and Sharp's evaluations, one should not simply pick up parallels and make claims of dependences in a parallelomantic way. This was Zahn's deficiency. In many cases the similarities can be explained with reference to a common cultural and linguistic background, without forgetting the philosophical elements in Christian literature. On the other hand, the fact that Epictetus cites

⁴⁸ Bonhöffer, *Epiktet*, 72–81.

Christian expressions increases the probability that some similarities are due to Epictetus' contact with Christians.

In order not to fall into the trap of parallelomania, one should concentrate on those Epictetan passages that include a special hint – for example, that of quietly waiting for the cross in *Discourses* 2.2.19–20. In that context, Epictetus blames those who incite the judges in court. This procedure will ruin the case. On the other hand, if one likes and wants to provoke the judges, why not keep quiet? “Why do you mount the platform at all, why answer the summons? For if you wish to be crucified, wait and the cross will come” (εἰ γὰρ σταυρωθῆναι θέλεις, ἔκδεξαι καὶ ἦξει ὁ σταυρός). There are two points here which attract interest. First, one should wait for the cross without answering the summons, like Jesus, who did not “answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed” (Matthew 27:14). Second, the students were from well-to-do families, presumably Roman citizens who were practically never punished with the cross.⁴⁹ To be sentenced to death on the cross is just a theoretical or symbolic idea for them. Does Epictetus hint to Jesus as an example, as he openly refers to Socrates' example just before the reference to the cross? A further analysis of this and possibly other passages may show whether or not one can find more contacts between Epictetus and early Christians, in addition to *Discourses* 2.9.19–21 and 4.7.6.

John Granger Cook tried to develop sympathy for the Romans' shock in the face of the otherness of Christianity. His profound and excellent book tells us how Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny beheld Christians with disgust. However, Epictetus shows that the Romans did not only feel pure disgust when observing Christians.

⁴⁹ On the rare exceptions, see M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (London: SCM Press, 1977):,39–45.

While Pliny thought that Christianity was madness (*amentia*, *Epistulae ad Trajanum* 10.96.4), Epictetus held a different view. Epictetus thought that Christians and madmen had similarly inadequate philosophical grounds for fearlessness, but he did not lump these groups together. He admits that the Galileans bravely attained virtuous conduct through habituation. In this respect, Christians are braver than the common people, who are not trained for a fearless encounter with threats. Thus Epictetus' statement is quite a laudable one.

This raises the question of the relationship between early Christian religion and ancient philosophy. In a way, Epictetus counted Christians as above-average people, close to the category of philosophy. Christians are not madmen, but they are not fully philosophers either. They do not belong to the multitude, but rather to the Jews who practice what they preach and who can be compared to real Stoics with their blameless conduct. That Epictetus sees Christians in proximity to philosophy may be a mirror effect of the philosophical elements in Christianity. Christians had been acquainted with philosophical themes since Paul,⁵⁰ and in the second century there are clear examples of Christian philosophers, Justin Martyr being the main one.⁵¹ There are also other examples of moderate accounts of Christians among the pagan philosophers during the late second century.⁵² It is possible that the

⁵⁰ For Paul and philosophy, see for example A.J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); and Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self*; G.H. van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 232; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); E. Wasserman, *The Death of the Soul in Romans 7. Sin, Death, and the Law in Light of Hellenistic Moral Psychology* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 256; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Huttunen, *Paul and Epictetus*; R.M. Thorsteinsson, *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism: A Comparative Study of Ancient Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵¹ On Justin's Christian philosophy, see Thorsteinsson, "By Philosophy Alone: Reassessing Justin's Christianity and His Turn from Platonism," *Early Christianity* 3 (2012): 492–517..

⁵² Huttunen, "In the Category of Philosophy? Christians in Early pagan Accounts," in *Others and the Construction of Early Christian Identities* (ed. Raimo Hakola, Nina Nikki, and Ulla Tervahauta; Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 106; Helsinki, 2013), 239–281.

philosophical elements in Christian teachings induced different philosophical assessments due to the shock of otherness, as experienced by Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny. Epictetus is the earliest representative of the moderate view.