

## JESUS AMONG THE PHILOSOPHERS: ANCIENT CONCEPTIONS OF HAPPINESS

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There are at least four ways in which the Jesus of the Gospels might be engaged by philosophy, that is, be the occasion for serious and sustained thought about existence.<sup>1</sup> The first is to treat Jesus as an ancient sage, whose sayings can be evaluated side-by-side with other ancient sages for their insight into human life.<sup>2</sup> The second is to engage the narrative depiction of Jesus in the Gospels as a contribution to character ethics.<sup>3</sup> The third is to take the lead of the Gospels' more mythic language as a pointer to ontology.<sup>4</sup> The fourth is to reflect on the ontological implications of the public reading of the Gospels --- how does Jesus "come into being" through such performance?<sup>5</sup> In this presentation, I choose the first mode of engagement. I take sayings attributed to Jesus by the Gospel of Matthew as Jesus' own --- much in the way we might take Xenophon's report of Socrates table-talk (in the *Memorabilia*) as Socrates' own --- in order to consider, not what the words tell us about Jesus, but what they say about a most important subject on which Jesus was by no means the first to declare.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See L.T. Johnson, "The Jesus of the Gospels and Philosophy," *Jesus and Philosophy: New Essays*, ed. P.K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 163-183.

<sup>2</sup> The practice extends from the ancient Manichee Faustus (see Augustine, *Reply to Faustus* II, 1) through Thomas Jefferson (*The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*) to Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See H. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), and L.T. Johnson, *Living Jesus Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> For a sense of the interaction of biblical and philosophical impulses in Patristic thought, see L. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and R.L. Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> As in P. Ricoeur, *Temps et Recit*, 3 volumes; Paris: Seuil, 1983-1985.

<sup>6</sup> Our Yale Consultation showed me how difficult it is for those outside the guild of scholarly discourse on the Gospels to grasp the distinction between "the historical Jesus" and "the human Jesus constructed by each

Indeed, when Matthew's Gospel has Jesus begin the teaching of his students with eight statements concerning human happiness, it places him within a lively conversation on that topic among Greek philosophers.<sup>7</sup> Here is my translation of Jesus' words: "Those who are poor in spirit are happy, because heaven's rule is theirs. Those who grieve are happy, because they will themselves be comforted. Those who are meek are happy, because they will inherit the earth. Those who hunger and thirst for justice are happy, because they will be satisfied. Those who show mercy are happy, because they will themselves be shown mercy. Those who are pure in heart are happy, because they will see God. Those who are makers of peace are happy, because they will be called God's children. Those who have been persecuted for the sake of justice are happy, because heaven's rule is theirs" (Matt 5:3-10).

My translation can be challenged on a number of ways: the term "blessed." For example, is a far more familiar translation of *makarios* than "happy;"<sup>8</sup> putting the term "happy" at the end of each first phrase, moreover, spoils the balance of the statements; the term "righteousness" renders *diakaisyne* better than "justice" does; "those who show pity" might be more precise than "those who show mercy;" the "Kingdom of heaven" is more familiar than "heaven's rule," just as "sons of God" is more traditional than "God's children." I made my translation as unfamiliar as possible precisely to enable a fresh hearing of the words that are among the most familiar in English literature, and among the least likely to stimulate crisp thought rather than vague comfort.

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evangelist." I mean in this paper "Jesus as constructed by Matthew," as my analogy to "Socrates as constructed by Xenophon" suggests. Despite the desire of the colloquy to read Matthew's beatitudes in terms of "the historical Jesus'" context (whatever that might have been), then, I hold to the legitimacy and necessity of reading the happiness statements of Matthew's Jesus in the social and symbolic context of Matthew's Gospel, concerning which we have at least some genuine controls.

<sup>7</sup> For a massively learned but not always helpful orientation to the beatitudes in context, see H.D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon of the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> In contemporary usage, alas, "blessed" carries in inevitable religious connotation of receiving divine blessings, without any necessary nuance of pleasure or delight; thus, the more common translation obscures the fact that Jesus' words connect directly to other thinkers who speak of being "happy" (*makarios*).

Before putting Jesus into conversation with Greek philosophers, I need to consider several preliminary questions. The first is simply the legitimacy of regarding Matthew's Jesus as a Greco-Roman moral teacher, or philosopher. In fact, Matthew virtually invites us so to consider him. In no other Gospel is Jesus' identity as teacher more emphasized; he is a teacher, moreover, who gathers around himself a group of students ("disciples" [*mathetai*]), and spends considerable time instructing them on how they should live.<sup>9</sup> Such practical wisdom was the very stuff of philosophy in the early empire, when theory seemed less important than therapy.<sup>10</sup>

The form of Matthew's words also invites a philosophical reading. His statements are in koine Greek, and although they clearly echo the Jewish Scripture,<sup>11</sup> the Scripture they echo was also written in Greek,<sup>12</sup> and had entered into philosophical discourse through Hellenistic Jewish interpreters such as Aristobolos and Philo of Alexandria.<sup>13</sup> Matthew wants readers to see Jesus as a new Moses, to be sure,<sup>14</sup> but Jewish interpreters of the Greek Bible had already construed Moses as the best of philosophers and the study of the law of Moses as the most perfect path to happiness.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Jesus' statements in Matthew are easily recognized as the sort of aphorism or maxim that was the staple of the teaching of practical wisdom among Greco-Roman philosophers.<sup>16</sup> The first and second part of each statement are

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<sup>9</sup> For support of these assertions, see the short treatment of Matthew's Gospel in L.T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, third edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 165-186, and *Living Jesus*, 145-158, as well as the commentaries by D.J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Sacra Pagina 1; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), and U. Luz, *Matthew*, three volumes, translated by W.C. Linss (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989-2005).

<sup>10</sup> See M.C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Thus, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the way of the wicked" (Psalm 1:1); "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Psalm 33:12); "Blessed is the man who trusts in you" (Psalm 84:12).

<sup>12</sup> The Septuagint (LXX) had been the bible for Hellenistic Jews for more than 250 years when Matthew wrote: Thus, Psalm 1:1 reads, *makarios aner hos ouk eporeuthe en boule asebon*.

<sup>13</sup> See Aristobolos, *Fragment 1.2-4*, in C.R. Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors*, volume 3: *Aristobolos* (Texts and Translations 39; Pseudepigrapha 13; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 137. A still useful introduction to Philo of Alexandria is E.R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus*, second revised edition (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963).

<sup>14</sup> The argument is most forcefully made by B.W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Henry Holt, 1930).

<sup>15</sup> *On the Contemplative Life* 11 and 90.

<sup>16</sup> See Seneca, *Letter* 33.

intimately and internally connected: thus, it is because people are pure of heart that they can see God, and it is because people can see God that they are happy; again, it is because people are meek that they are able to inherit the earth, and it is because they inherit the earth that they are happy. Ancient philosophers would recognize in Jesus' statements a form of gnomic wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

A second preliminary issue involves identifying the available conversation partners. Happiness is a common theme among Greco-Roman philosophers, and my earlier comment on Philo of Alexandria indicates that it was taken up by Hellenistic Jewish thinkers as well. My interest, however, is in placing Jesus within the rich variety of views among philosophers commonly designated as pagan. Three figures convincingly propose themselves. Plato's student Aristotle (384-322 BCE), whose vast learning and meticulous moral analysis remained a powerful influence well into the period of the early empire,<sup>18</sup> began and concluded his important treatise, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with the topic of human happiness.<sup>19</sup> He is an obvious and necessary part of the conversation. Quite a different perspective is offered by Epicurus, another fourth century BCE philosopher (341-270), whose views as expressed in his *Sovereign Maxims* were excoriated by many,<sup>20</sup> but whose impact remained real among those dedicated to the school he founded, and whose vision was given new and powerful expression by Lucretius' first-

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<sup>17</sup> A substantial part of the response to this paper at the Yale Consultation argued that the beatitudes of Jesus ought to be read apocalyptically rather than sapientially. The constraints of a short presentation did allow only assertion on my part rather than demonstration, so I can understand the objection. Nevertheless, these points need to be made: 1) there is no absolute distinction between the sapiential and apocalyptic either in Jewish prophecy or second-temple literature; 2) My observations in this place have to do with form and internal logic; the affect of an eschatological contextualization through the Gospel narrative is taken up briefly at the end of this paper; 3) It is important not to conflate Matthew's beatitudes (which display precisely the qualities I describe) and Luke's four blessings and woes, which have a much more obviously prophetic coloration; all who have worked on the two versions agree that Matthew's is the more individual, internal, and sapiential in form.

<sup>18</sup> The subtle analyses of specific vices (e.g. anger, envy, garrulousness) and virtues (e.g. on brotherly love) in Plutarch's *Moralia* and *Parallel Lives*, for example, show the influence of Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Rhetoric* more than that of any other predecessor.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle devotes all of Book One and Much of Book Ten to the topic; I use the translation of H. Rackham, *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, revised edition (Loeb Classical Library; Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1934).

<sup>20</sup> I use the translation of C. Bailey, *Epicurus, the Extant Remains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).

century BCE poem, "On the Nature of Things" (*de Rerum Natura*).<sup>21</sup> Finally, there is "that marvelous old man," Epictetus (55-135 CE), a contemporary of the evangelist Matthew.<sup>22</sup> Epictetus was a crippled slave of the cynic-stoic tradition who taught future diplomats the stoic vision of the good life. His remarkably vivid oral *Discourses* were transcribed and published by Arrian, one of his students.<sup>23</sup> So, then: the conversation is among Aristotle, Epicurus, Epictetus, and Jesus.

Finally, I must acknowledge from the start the fictive and constructed character of this conversation. There is no evidence that Matthew knew any of the Greek philosophers, or even that the philosophers necessarily knew much first-hand about each other --- although Epictetus has nothing but contempt for what he thinks he knows about the Epicureans.<sup>24</sup> The conversation I construct, furthermore, requires pulling opinions out of their original contexts --- a practice that makes the exegete in me uncomfortable --- and the willingness to bracket the incommensurability of the sources: Aristotle's treatise is massive compared to Epicurus' maxims; Epictetus' four books of discourses are far more extensive than Jesus' eight gnomic statements. Most of all, it means isolating Matthew's beatitudes without reference either to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, the rest of Matthew's narrative, or --- most importantly --- the Gospel of Luke's strikingly different set of statements involving happiness and woe (Luke 6:20-26).<sup>25</sup> In short, the conversation is one I construct out of the bits and pieces of ancient literature, and is considerably neater than the sort of living exchange in which people talk past and over each other without a conductor instructing them on when and how to talk on topic.

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<sup>21</sup> I use the translation of H.A.J. Munro, *On the Nature of Things* (New York: Doubleday, 1963).

<sup>22</sup> The phrase is used by Lucian of Samosata, *The Ignorant Book Collector* 13.

<sup>23</sup> I have chosen Epictetus rather than Seneca's *On the Happy Life* for two reasons: his language is always most vivid, and he is more consistent than the Roman Stoic, who was frequently attracted to the Epicurean tradition. The vividness of the language, to be sure, owes something to the brilliance of the translation by W.A. Oldfather, *Epictetus*, two volumes (Loeb Classical Library; Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1925).

<sup>24</sup> See Epictetus, *Discourse* I, 5, 9; I, 23, 1-10; II, 23, 21-22; III, 7, 7-29; III, 24, 38.

<sup>25</sup> For a crisp consideration of the distinctive versions, see C.R. Holladay, "The Beatitudes: Jesus' Recipe for Happiness?" in *Between Experience and Interpretation: Engaging the Writings of the New Testament*, edited by M.F. Foskett and O.W. Allen, Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008) 83-102

## POINTS OF AGREEMENT

For there to be a conversation on any topic, the participants must share certain fundamental understandings; there must be a ground of agreement among them on which smaller points of agreement and disagreement can be displayed; otherwise, they could not get started at all. Thus, all our ancient authors regard happiness as something desirable, rather than as something to be avoided. “For what is it that every man is seeking?” asks Epictetus, and answers, “to live securely, to be happy, to do everything as he wishes to do, not to be hindered, not to be subject to compulsion” (*Discourses* IV, 1, 46).<sup>26</sup> As we might expect among those professionally dedicated to moral instruction, moreover, none of our participants locate happiness in something merely external, momentary, or accidental. Happiness is not for them a warm puppy, a family reunion, or winning the lottery. Rather, they all agree that happiness is an enduring condition that is intrinsic --- and, they thought, distinctive --- to the construction of the human self. And being moralists, they all regard happiness as a corollary or consequence of human choice and disposition. Not simply human choice between this thing and that --- as between flavors of ice cream --- but the habitual human disposition for good (virtue) rather than bad (vice).

Among all these ancient figures, therefore, happiness is connected to what we would call character ethics, as well as, perhaps, psychology; ancient philosophy was as much about human emotions and their proper control as it was about ideas and their proper alignment.<sup>27</sup> Matthew shares the moralist’s perspective: he has the robust optimism of antiquity, which recognized no deeply

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<sup>26</sup> *Discourses* IV, 1, 46.

<sup>27</sup> For the philosopher as the “physician of the soul” and other medical metaphors, see Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, and A.J. Malherbe, “Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Roemischen Welt* II, 26.1 (1992) 267-333.

ingrained resistance to freedom of choice.<sup>28</sup> When Matthew has Jesus speak of meekness and mercy, of purity of heart and peace-making, he is, no less than Aristotle, using the language of character ethics.<sup>29</sup>

Within this broad area of agreement, that happiness is a quality of human character properly disposed, there are also, to be sure, specific and sometimes strong points of disagreement among the discussants. The topic is too important to lack controversy altogether. As the Christian philosopher Origen reminded the Epicurean philosopher Celsus in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, the fact that a subject invites strong and opposing views is an indication of its significance.<sup>30</sup> Such is the case for the subject of happiness. On three aspects of happiness, the Greco-Roman philosophers have recognizably distinct views: the connection between happiness and social engagement, the connection between happiness and pleasure, and the connection between happiness and circumstances, or to put it another way, the security of happiness in times of trouble.

#### DISPUTED QUESTIONS

On these three aspects of happiness, Matthew's Jesus has little to offer. The readers of this Gospel, after all, are members of a small Jewish sect whose preoccupations involve rivalry with the synagogue of Formative Judaism down the street rather than citizenship within the wider political

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<sup>28</sup> In this respect, Matthew is closer both to Paul and to James, than any of them is to the "introspective conscience" that Augustine read into Paul, thereby fundamentally shaping western (above all Luther's) theology; see the classic essay by K. Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963) 78-96.

<sup>29</sup> At the Yale Consultation, it was suggested that this essay --- insofar as it deals with "virtue ethics" --- might be construed as an "exercise in nostalgia." But that would be the case only if there were the lightest element of the prescriptive in my remarks, and there are not: my aim is to present a conversation in the past, and it happens that all the participants share the conviction that happiness is linked to character. It was also observed that my statement concerning the "robust optimism of antiquity" concerning the human capacity for moral choice would not apply to Aristotle, who considered the majority of people as so constrained as to be incapable of true excellence. While this point is legitimate, it would apply to Epictetus and Epicurus as well, who also thought in terms of elite humans as the subjects of moral disposition. My point of contrast to Augustine nevertheless still holds, because for him the inhibiting effect of original sin or concupiscence applied as much to the elite as to the ordinary.

<sup>30</sup> *Contra Celsum* 3.12-13 and 6.26.

world;<sup>31</sup> the statements about peace-making and being persecuted are directed internally and to the immediate sibling rival;<sup>32</sup> those who are being persecuted for justice, moreover, tend not to give much thought to options concerning pleasure; as for the security of happiness in circumstances of affliction, Matthew has Jesus connects them in a manner that Aristotle, for one, could only consider “paradoxical.” He states, “No one would pronounce a man living a life of misery to be happy, unless for the sake of maintaining a paradox.”<sup>33</sup>

The three Greek philosophers, in contrast, have sharp and distinct opinions on each point. Thus, if we ask whether happiness is correlated to political involvement, Aristotle’s view is entirely positive. He considers happiness a supreme good, and since “the good of man (sic) is the active exercise of his soul’s faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue,”<sup>34</sup> it follows that happiness involves active participation in the life of the *polis*, even though the highest expression of happiness is found not in the active but in the contemplative life.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, he declares that the self-sufficiency characteristic of happiness applies not “to oneself alone, living a life of isolation” but also to family, friends and fellow-citizens, “since man is by nature a social being [or “political thing”].”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Aristotle’s discussion of happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* serves as propaedeutic for *The Politics*.<sup>37</sup>

Despite living within an increasingly autocratic empire rather than the democratic *polis* of the classical period, Epictetus agrees completely with Aristotle on the matter of social engagement. The Stoic ideal of following nature implicates humans in the natural order of society; political engagement, then, falls within the duties (*ta kathekonta*) required of the virtuous person: “I want to know,” he says,

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<sup>31</sup> See A.J. Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and J.A. Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Matt 5:10, 44; 10:16-42; 12:9; 13:21; 14:1-12; 16:21; 17:22; 20:17; 23:29-39; 24:9-14.

<sup>33</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096A

<sup>34</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098A

<sup>35</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096A, 1178B

<sup>36</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097B

<sup>37</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1181B.



“what is my duty towards the gods, towards parents, towards brothers, towards my country, towards strangers.”<sup>38</sup> Even the Cynic who eschews marriage and children for the sake of challenging other humans to the path of proper perception and virtuous living, does so in service to society: “In the name of God, sir, who do mankind the greater service? Those who bring into the world two or three ugly-snouted children to take their place, or those who exercise oversight, to the best of their ability, over all mankind, observing what they are doing, how they are spending their lives, what they are careful about, and what they undutifully neglect?”<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, Epicurus rejected such political involvement --- with all its inevitable conflict ---- as inimical to the happiness that consisted in *ataxaria* (“freedom from disturbance”) available only to those few who live apart with friends in the secluded garden (*kepos*). He declared among his fundamental principles that “Protection from other men, secured to some extent by the power to expel and by material prosperity, in its purest form comes from a quiet life withdrawn from the multitude.”<sup>40</sup> Diogenes Laertius states that although Epicurus showed benevolence to all mankind (*pros pantas philanthropia*), he “did not touch politics” (*oude politeias hepsato*).<sup>41</sup> Much of the hostility shown toward Epicureans by the philosophers of other, more politically engaged, traditions was based on this deliberate withdrawal from political involvement. Plutarch castigates “those who withdraw themselves and their disciples from participation in the state.”<sup>42</sup>

A second area of disagreement concerned the role of pleasure (*hedone*) in happiness. As might be expected from so subtle an analyst of human emotions and dispositions, Aristotle rejects from the start the sort of fixation on pleasure that he identifies with the herd<sup>43</sup> --- they “show themselves to be

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<sup>38</sup> *Discourses* II, 17, 31.

<sup>39</sup> *Discourses* III, 22, 7.

<sup>40</sup> *Sovereign Maxims* 14

<sup>41</sup> *Lives of the Philosophers* X, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 31 [Mor 1125C].

<sup>43</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095B

utterly slavish, by preferring what is only a life for cattle" --- and he states, "we must pronounce the admittedly disgraceful pleasures not to be pleasures at all, except to the deprived"<sup>44</sup> --- yet he recognizes a positive if limited role for pleasure in the virtuous life.<sup>45</sup> Not every pleasure, after all, is of a base, sensory sort; the practice of virtue itself yields a distinctive pleasure, as does contemplation, for "pleasures correspond to the activities to which they belong."<sup>46</sup> For Aristotle, the measure must always be the good: "If the standard if everything is goodness, or the good man, *qua* good, then the things that seem to him to be pleasures are pleasures, and the things he enjoys are pleasant."<sup>47</sup>

Epicurus more straightforwardly embraces pleasure as an important, perhaps even essential component in happiness. "A Pleasant Life" free from turmoil is precisely the point of withdrawing with friends from political entanglement. He states that "It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly."<sup>48</sup> Epicurus is no crass hedonist. His personal life, according to Diogenes Laertius, was simple, even austere<sup>49</sup> He recognizes the limits of pleasure,<sup>50</sup> and doubts that profligate pleasures are worth the effort.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, he recognizes that the cessation of pain gives greater pleasure than any positive sensation: "the end of all our actions," Diogenes Laertius has him declare, "is to be free of pain and fear."<sup>52</sup> Diogenes also quotes him to this effect, "When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood by some to do through ignorance, prejudice or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the

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<sup>44</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1196B

<sup>45</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099A

<sup>46</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1176B

<sup>47</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1176A

<sup>48</sup> *Sovereign Maxims* 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Lives of Philosophers*, X, 11.

<sup>50</sup> *Sovereign Maxims* 18.

<sup>51</sup> *Sovereign Maxims* 10.

<sup>52</sup> *Lives of Philosophers*, X, 123.

absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul.”<sup>53</sup> Mental pleasure, furthermore, is better than physical pleasure.<sup>54</sup> But in the end, it is pleasure itself that measures the appropriateness of pleasure: “No pleasure is a bad thing in itself,” he states, “but the things which produce certain pleasures entail disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves.”<sup>55</sup>

For the Stoic Epictetus, in contrast, pleasure is a threat to true happiness. He refuses to “lay down pleasure as the good and end of life,”<sup>56</sup> and Epicurus’ enthusiastic embrace of pleasure as a dimension of happiness is among the reasons Epictetus scorns his philosophy: “your doctrines are bad, subversive of the state, destructive to the family, not even fit for women.”<sup>57</sup> Happiness for Epictetus is living according to nature --- but that does not come naturally! It involves a struggle to become virtuous, and this process of learning is like athletic training that demands pain rather than pleasure.<sup>58</sup> Pleasure is a distraction, a downward pull that resists the demands of duty.<sup>59</sup> The search for true happiness therefore requires that the philosopher work against the seductive power of pleasure.<sup>60</sup> In the epitome of his teaching called the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus offers his students advice concerning pleasure: “be careful not to allow its enticement, and sweetness, and attractiveness to overcome you; but set over against all this the thought, how much better is the consciousness of having won a victory over it.”<sup>61</sup>

The third issue at debate among our three Greco-Roman philosophers is the degree to which happiness depends on external circumstances and is therefore secure or insecure. Once more, Aristotle has a carefully nuanced appreciation both of the ideal --- that happiness should be the consequence of virtuous endeavor --- and the reality, that terrible circumstances can bring on misery. In the first part of

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<sup>53</sup> *Lives of the Philosophers*, X, 131.

<sup>54</sup> *Sovereign Maxims* 20.

<sup>55</sup> *Sovereign Maxims* 7.

<sup>56</sup> Epictetus, *Fragment* 14.

<sup>57</sup> *Discourse* III, 7, 20.

<sup>58</sup> *Discourse* III, 23, 30.

<sup>59</sup> *Discourse* III, 24, 37-39.

<sup>60</sup> *Discourse* III, 12, 4-10.

<sup>61</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 34.

his discussion, he acknowledges that “happiness also requires external goods” and enumerates some of them: friends, wealth, political power, a good birth, satisfactory children, personal beauty. He is a keen observer: “a man of very ugly appearance or low birth, or childless and alone in the world, is not our idea of a happy man, and still less so, perhaps is one who has children or friends that are worthless, or who has had good ones but lost them by death.” He adds, “Happiness does seem to require the addition of external prosperity.”<sup>62</sup>

The more Aristotle locates happiness in virtue<sup>63</sup> --- as when he says that the good of man is the active exercise of his soul’s faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue<sup>64</sup> --- the more secure it would seem to be from the effects of Fortune or Chance, especially when he makes the highest excellence the practice of contemplation, which places one at a remove from life’s exigencies.<sup>65</sup> But he is forced to acknowledge at the end of his treatise that even such a virtuous character and such excellence in contemplation are sufficiently fragile as to depend in turn upon a process of education and a just system of politics --- they are, in short, conditional.<sup>66</sup>

Epicurus bases his teaching and his way of life on the elimination of fear and disturbance, and the creation of a pleasant life among like-minded friends in the garden. Yet his *Sovereign Maxims* reveal a very real anxiety concerning the threat posed by the larger society and its ways of thinking and acting. A happiness based on *ataraxia* is paradoxically always under threat, for reality is full of disturbances, not all of them mental. Take as a sample only these maxims: “If we had never been molested by alarms at celestial and atmospheric phenomena, nor by the misgiving that death somehow affects us, we should have had no need to study natural science.”<sup>67</sup> Again, “There would be no advantage in providing

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<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099B.

<sup>63</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098B.

<sup>64</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098A.

<sup>65</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177A.

<sup>66</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1130A-1131A.

<sup>67</sup> Epicurus, *Sovereign Maxims* 11.

security against our fellowmen so long as we are alarmed by occurrences over our heads or beneath the earth or in general by whatever happens in the boundless universe.”<sup>68</sup> Again: “The same conviction which inspires confidence that nothing we have to fear is eternal or even of long duration, also enables us to see that even in our limited conditions of life nothing enhances our security so much as friendship.”<sup>69</sup> And once more: “When tolerable security against our fellowmen is attained, then on a basis of power sufficient to afford support and of material prosperity arises in most genuine form the security of a quiet private life withdrawn from the multitude.”<sup>70</sup>

Here, happiness depends not only on pleasure but on the fragile alignment among friends concerning the fears that afflict humans. No wonder it is reported that Epicurus required of his comrades the memorization and constant repetition of his maxims;<sup>71</sup> such repetition preserved happiness by serving as a prophylactic against fear: “Exercise thyself in these and kindred precepts day and night, both with thyself and with him who is like unto thee; then neither in waking or in dreams wilt thou be disturbed, but will live as a god among men.”<sup>72</sup>

Epictetus is the most resolutely confident in the security of happiness because he ties it absolutely to virtue, and for the ancient Stoic, no circumstance can fundamentally alter one’s moral purpose. He says, “If it is virtue that holds out the promise thus to create happiness and calm and serenity, then assuredly progress toward virtue is progress toward each of these states of mind.”<sup>73</sup> To the student bemoaning the loss of an opportunity to travel to Athens and cries, “Athens is beautiful,” Epictetus declares, “But happiness is much more beautiful, tranquility, freedom from turmoil, having

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<sup>68</sup> *Sovereign Maxims* 13.

<sup>69</sup> *Sovereign Maxims* 28.

<sup>70</sup> *Sovereign Maxims* 14.

<sup>71</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* X, 12.

<sup>72</sup> *Lives of Philosophers* X, 135.

<sup>73</sup> Epictetus, *Discourse* I, 4, 3; III, 24, 51-52.

your own affairs under no man's control."<sup>74</sup> Adverse circumstances do not take away from the philosopher's happiness, but only provide the opportunity to demonstrate it through the exercise of moral virtue; whereas the person who locates happiness in external circumstances "must needs be hindered and restrained, be a slave to those who have control over these things," the one who sees his own good and advantage as residing only in the things under his own control --- that is his perceptions and his moral purpose --- is "free, serene, happy, unharmed, high-minded, reverent, giving thanks for all things to god, under no circumstances finding fault with anything that has happened nor blaming anyone."<sup>75</sup>

#### HAPPINESS AND THE DIVINE

My sketch of the disputed questions concerning happiness among the ancient philosophers has had the purpose of showing how the topic could generate distinct opinions on important points even among those who basically agreed on its fundamental character. The review has also left the voice of Matthew's Jesus silent, for his statements do not directly address the role of pleasure, political engagement and external circumstance that divide the philosophers. On the final aspect of happiness that I consider in this presentation, however, Jesus' voice is not only direct and emphatic, it is also distinctive; this is the question of how happiness relates to the divine.

On this point as well, each of our three Greco-Roman philosophers has a view, for if happiness is a supreme good and supremely to be desired, it would be difficult to discuss happiness without in some fashion adverting to those supreme beings who could be referred to simply as "the happy ones" (*hoi makares*).<sup>76</sup> The phrase "some fashion" applies especially to Epicurus, antiquity's most famous atheist and detester of religion. Essential for establishing the "freedom from disturbance" (*ataraxia*) that

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<sup>74</sup> *Discourse IV*, 4, 30.

<sup>75</sup> *Discourse IV*, 7, 9-10.

<sup>76</sup> See Homer, *Iliad* 1. 399; *Odyssey* 10.299; Hesiod, *Works and Days* 136.

ensured the pleasant life, and therefore human happiness, was the dismissal of traditional notions about the gods --- above all that they were active in the world to reward and punish. The first fear that Epicurus banished was fear of the gods.

The entire system of religious observance, Epicurus held, needed to be replaced by the knowledge of natural causes. His disciple Lucretius speaks of humans “laying foully prostrate upon earth crushed under the weight of religion” until the man from Greece stood up to religion face-to face, and as a consequence of his liberating instruction, “religion is put under foot and trampled on in turn; us his victory brings level with heaven.” Lucretius provides a poetic version of the natural science Epicurus deployed to demonstrate that natural things --- above all the earthquakes, thunders and lightning that ordinary folk took as divine portents--- had completely natural causes,<sup>77</sup> and that providence was an empty notion.<sup>78</sup> He builds on the statement of Epicurus, quoted by Diogenes Laertius, that heavenly occurrences take place without any command of the gods, “who at the same time enjoy perfect bliss (“happiness”) along with immortality.”<sup>79</sup>

The corollary of the Epicurean withdrawal from politics to live “the quiet life” with friends, then, was withdrawal from the religious practices that supported the life of the Greek *polis*, and it was this dimension of Epicurean atheism that was most feared and detested by others. Plutarch says, “I think a city might rather be formed without the ground it stands on than a government, once you remove all religion, get itself established, or, once established, survive. Now it is this belief, the underpinning and base that holds all society and legislation together, that the Epicureans, not by encirclement or covertly

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<sup>77</sup> *De Rerum Natura* 5.181-199.

<sup>78</sup> *De Rerum Natura* 6. 379-422.

<sup>79</sup> *Lives of Philosophers* X, 77.

in riddles, but by launching against it the first of their most Cardinal Tenets, proceed directly to demolish.<sup>80</sup>

*Sovereign Maxims* 1 reads, “A Blessed ( *makarios*) and eternal Being has no trouble himself and brings no trouble on any other being; hence he is exempt from movements of anger and partiality, for every such movement implies weakness.” The gods are blessed, that is happy, precisely because of their withdrawal from turbulence and social interference. Happiness within the epicurean community, then, means in a real way sharing the bliss (happiness) of the gods, precisely because of a withdrawal from society and the practices of friendship that secure *ataraxia* (“freedom from disturbance”). This is why Epicurus can claim that if one maintains the precepts and lives without disturbance, then one “will live as a god among men. For man loses all semblance of mortality by living in the midst of immortal blessings.”<sup>81</sup> The sage was himself revered as divine by his immediate followers<sup>82</sup> --- because he realized in himself the happiness belonging to the immortals, and revealed that way of life to others.

Perhaps surprisingly in view of his exact opposite position concerning social engagement, Aristotle takes a position concerning happiness and the divine not far distant from Epicurus. It is not that Aristotle sets out to de-mystify the traditional gods; he simply ignores them. Rather, he regards the contemplative life as a participation in, or at least an imitation of, the highest expression of the divine: he declares, “If happiness consists in activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be activity in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be the virtue of the best part of us. Whether then this be the intellect, or whatever else it be that is thought to rule and lead us by nature, and to have cognizance of what is noble and divine, either as being itself also actually divine, or as being relatively the divinest part of us, it is the activity of this part of us in accordance with the virtue proper to it that will constitute perfect happiness; and it has been stated already that this activity is the activity

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<sup>80</sup> Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 31 [Mor 1125 E].

<sup>81</sup> *Lives of the Philosophers* X, 135.

<sup>82</sup> Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 17 [Mor 1117B].



of contemplation.”<sup>83</sup> He later states even more clearly, “Perfect happiness is some form of contemplative activity. The gods, as we conceive them, enjoy supreme felicity and happiness (*makarios kai eudaimonas*),” and notes that this happiness resides not in their actions but in their contemplation: “it follows that the activity of god, which is transcendent is blessedness, is the activity of contemplation; and therefore among human activities that which is most akin to the divine activity of contemplation will be the greatest source of happiness.”<sup>84</sup>

Epictetus had the most complex view of divinity. The Stoic side of him viewed the natural order as an expression of the divine spirit, so that in a very real way, “following nature” was at the same time “following God.”<sup>85</sup> Similarly the human reason that enabled the world to be rightly perceived and engaged was an expression of the divine spirit, so that following nature was also a form of human participation in divine activity.<sup>86</sup> But his personal piety was such that he also conceived of the divine in highly personal terms and as the supremely “other,”<sup>87</sup> whose will humans are to obey<sup>88</sup> The more the human will is aligned with the divine will --- the order of nature itself --- the happier humans are.

Thus, Epictetus speaks of Heracles: “It was no mere story which he had heard, that Zeus was the father of men, for he always thought of him as his own father, and called him so, and in all that he did, he looked to him. Wherefore, he had the power to live happily in every place.”<sup>89</sup> So he tells his students wanting, like Epicureans to “live in peace,” that they should “remember who is Giver is, and to whom he gives, and for what end. If you are brought up in reasonings such as these, can you any longer raise questions where you are going to be happy, and where you are to please God? Are not men everywhere

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<sup>83</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177A.

<sup>84</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1078B.

<sup>85</sup> For Epictetus’ distinctive religious sensibility, see L.T. Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (Anchor Bible Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 64-78.

<sup>86</sup> Epictetus, *Discourse II*, 8, 11-13.

<sup>87</sup> *Discourse I*, 1, 32.

<sup>88</sup> *Discourse IV*, 1, 89-90.

<sup>89</sup> *Discourse II*, 24, 16.

equally distant from God? Do they not everywhere have the same view of what is to pass?"<sup>90</sup> The Cynic, who shares "the scepter and diadem of Zeus" --- that is, shares in the divine rule --- shows other humans how such happiness is possible: "That you may see for yourselves, O Men, to be looking for happiness and serenity, not where it is, but where it is not, behold, God has sent me to you as an example; I have neither property, nor house, nor wife, nor children, no, not even so much as a bed, or a shirt, or a piece of furniture, and yet you see how healthy I am. Make trial of me, and if you see that I am free from turmoil, hear my remedies and the treatment which cured me."<sup>91</sup>

Now, if we put ourselves in the position of the three Greco-Roman philosophers as we listen to Jesus pronounce on human happiness in Matthew's Gospel, what would strike us, beyond the obvious points of similarity stated earlier in this presentation? Quite apart from the religious sensibility displayed by Jesus, we would --- as Greco-Roman moralists --- find at least three aspects of the beatitudes puzzling.

First, as I suggested earlier, Aristotle would not be alone in finding paradoxical Jesus' linking of human misery and happiness. When Jesus declares as happy those who are poor in spirit, grieving, meek, hungry and thirsty for justice and persecuted for justice's sake, he is making claims that would be simply incomprehensible to Epicurus, for it is impossible to associate "a pleasant life" with any of those conditions. Even Epictetus, who relished hardships as the opportunity to test virtue would not identify happiness with the conditions of hardship themselves, only with the triumph of human will over those circumstances. But Jesus does not say happy are those who conquer grief; he declares as happy those who grieve.

Second, I think that the Greco-Roman philosophers would find the beatitudes hopelessly vulgar rather than noble. Aristotle and Epicurus share the assumed values of the ancient aristocracy with

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<sup>90</sup> *Discourse IV, 4, 47-48.*

<sup>91</sup> *Discourse IV, 8, 30-31.*

regard to good birth, education, wealth, and above all position and honor. And although he recasts some of these values --- what counts as honorable is not the opinion of other people but the court of opinion of one's self-respect and the divine pleasure<sup>92</sup> --- Epictetus equally embraces the values of nobility. He and they alike would find poverty of spirit and meekness to be slavish rather than noble, would think meekness and mercy (pity) to be dispositions more fitting to women than men, and would regard grieving as a display of emotion inappropriate to the well-bred and honorable person.<sup>93</sup>

Third, and possibly connected to the previous point, the philosophers would have been struck by the other-related character of some of Matthew's blessings --- receiving mercy, being comforted (by whom?), making peace (by or for whom?); each of these elevates the circumstantial and vulnerable aspect of happiness. Similarly, they would have been put off by tone of neediness found in statement such as "poor in spirit" "hungering and thirsting for justice." The philosophers' disquiet would be linked to their conviction that happiness was a matter of *autarkeia* --- or control over one's self, contentment -- and ideally, at least, freedom from need.<sup>94</sup> Happiness is for them more a matter of resting than questing. Only Epictetus, I surmise, would recognize something of his own agonistic appreciation of happiness in Matthew's statements.

The philosophers would have puzzled most, though, over the religious language saturating Jesus' words. They were all, remember, thinkers who stood at some distance from the popular religiosity of the Greco-Roman world that celebrated the divine presence in various ways and conceived

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<sup>92</sup> See on this the superb analysis by D.A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, revised edition (SBL Studies in Biblical Literature 21; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), especially 86-155.

<sup>93</sup> Well-known is the contempt expressed for such slave-morality by F. Nietzsche, as in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, edited by K. Ansell Pearson, translated by C. Diethe (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 10-34.

<sup>94</sup> The *topos* on contentment or self-sufficiency is standard in Greco-Roman moral discourse; for a selection of passages, see A.J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Handbook* (Library of Early Christianity; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986) 112-114, 120, 145.

of the gods as intimately involved with human existence.<sup>95</sup> Aristotle stood aloof from such piety, Epicurus scorned it, and even Epictetus used it to clothe his fundamentally Stoic understanding of divine immanence.

If they stretched, the philosophers perhaps could read Matthew's statements about human happiness and "heaven's rule" in their own terms: the wise and happy man shares, as Epictetus put it, "Zeus' scepter and diadem," because the person of complete self control ruled all that mattered.<sup>96</sup> They might have read in this light as well Matthew's language about the happy being "children (literally, sons) of God," through such participation in the divine delight; that is the way Epictetus perceived Heracles,<sup>97</sup> and Epicurus views the one living a life of serenity as a "God among men."<sup>98</sup> But they would have balked, as I have suggested, at the connections Matthew has Jesus make: "heaven's rule" certainly should not be linked to poverty of spirit and persecution; being a child of God is not a consequence of seeking unity among other humans so much as finding peace within the soul.

They would have been even further repulsed at the realization that for Matthew, "heaven's rule" did not mean the divine bliss shared by humans, but rather the sometimes violent and apocalyptic intrusion of God's mighty will into human affairs,<sup>99</sup> demonstrated through prophecy, exorcisms, and healings performed by the same teacher now speaking about human happiness.<sup>100</sup> Such an understanding of a personal, active, god would plunge humans back into the very superstition from which Epicurus sought to free them, a world of divine portents and terrors, of punishments and

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<sup>95</sup> For the characteristics of what I term "Religiousness A" --- the dominant expression of religious sensibility in the Greco-Roman world, and for that matter, in most religions, see Johnson, *Among the Gentiles* 32-63.

<sup>96</sup> See Epictetus, *Discourse* III, 22, 49 and 57; also Musonius Rufus, *Fragment 8: That kings should study philosophy also*," as well as Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 49. 8-11.

<sup>97</sup> See *Discourse* II, 16, 44-45; III, 24, 13-17; III, 26, 31.

<sup>98</sup> *Lives of Philosophers* X, 135.

<sup>99</sup> Matt 4:17; 11:7-28; 12:22-36; 16:13-20; 16:27; 24:1-25:46.

<sup>100</sup> Matt 4:23-25; 8:1-17, 28-32; 9:32-35; 12:9-14, 22-24.

rewards.<sup>101</sup>This reaction would grow more pronounced if our philosophers appreciated the force of Matthew's septuagintal Greek, which carried forward the "divine passive" found in the Hebrew Bible. The phrases, "will be comforted, will be satisfied, will receive mercy, will be called" all refer, in this usage, not to responses from fellow humans but to divine responses to humans. Jesus states that God calls them children, shows them mercy, comforts them, and satisfies their quest for justice.

Two statements by Jesus would have utterly escaped the grasp of our three Greco-Roman philosophers, because they not only suppose the same intimate and personal relationship between a living God who is "other," but are soaked in the specific imagery of the Jewish Scripture and its language about the God of Israel. The statement that the meek are happy because they will inherit the earth unmistakably alludes to the story of the Exodus and Conquest, where Moses is characterized as the meekest of all men (Num 12:2), and where God's promise to Abraham (Gen 12:2-3; 15:5, 18-20; 17:5-8) that his descendents would inherit the land (*ge* can mean both land and earth) is narratively realized. Here, the philosophers would stumble over the particularity of that promise, and the outrageous assumption that a barbarian people might be closer to the divine than the Greeks.<sup>102</sup>

No less challenging is the assertion that the pure of heart are happy because they will see God: "purity of heart" is a complex conception intelligible only within the symbolic world of Scripture,<sup>103</sup> and Philo of Alexandria made the capacity to "see God" the virtual definition of Israel: "Now this race is called in the Hebrew tongue Israel, but, expressed in our tongue, the word is 'He who sees God,' and to

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<sup>101</sup> Epicurus was not alone; in addition to the portrayal of the superstitious man in Theophrastus' *Characters*, see Plutarch's judgment that superstition is worse than atheism; for analysis, see Johnson, *Among the Gentiles*, 101-110.

<sup>102</sup> At the heart of Plutarch's critique of superstition is that, in contrast to the genuine *eusebeia* that binds together "the city of gods and men" that is Greek civilization, superstition is associated with barbarism; see *On Superstition* 12 [Mor 171B]. Thus he regards Jewish belief and practice as forms of superstition (*On Superstition* 8 [Mor 169D]).

<sup>103</sup> See especially Psalm 50:1-12, and James 4:8, with the discussion in L.T. Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 37A; new York: Doubleday, 1995) 268-289.

see Him seems to me of all possessions, public or private, the most precious.”<sup>104</sup> It is an experience available specifically to Israel through its worship of the true God.<sup>105</sup> The revelations given to the people by God through the prophets, “are absolutely and entirely signs of the divine excellences, graciousness and beneficence, by which he incites all men to noble conduct, and particularly the nation of his worshipers, for whom he opens up the road that leads to happiness (*eudaimonia*)”<sup>106</sup>

As in many conversations among people with genuinely different perspectives, then, Matthew’s Jesus and the Greek philosophers may well have talked past as much as to each other on the issue of human happiness. They certainly agreed that it was a matter of character more than chance; they were in accord that happiness touched on the divine in human existence. But while even among the philosophers themselves, the specific construction of character and the specific understanding of the divine were already in dispute, the addition of Jesus’ statements only made the conversation more complex, and difficult.<sup>107</sup> Yet imagining such a conversation enables us to imagine as well the beginnings of a long process that ultimately transformed philosophy itself for a long and lingering moment in the intellectual life of the West, when the living God of Israel came to be the measure of being and becoming, and when having a purity of heart that enabled the vision of the living God came to be the measure and the *telos* of human happiness.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 4.

<sup>105</sup> Philo, *Sacrifices of Abel and Cain* 120.

<sup>106</sup> Philo, *Life of Moses*, 189.

<sup>107</sup> As these things happen among Christian theologians, the conversation on my paper at the Yale Consultation tended to become, in my view, more “Jesus in contrast to the philosophers,” than, as I intended, “Jesus among the philosophers.” I believe it is as important for Christian theology and for genuine ecumenical conversation in the contemporary world, or perhaps even more important, to maintain the real contribution made by the quite distinct philosophical voices, as to affirm the unique value of Jesus’ voice.

<sup>108</sup> For the *Visio Beatifica* (“blessed” or “happy” vision), see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, II, 3. The merging of Greco-Roman moral philosophy and the beatitudes are evident, I think, both in Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, and in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II, 1, 1-114.