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Philodemus and the New Testament World

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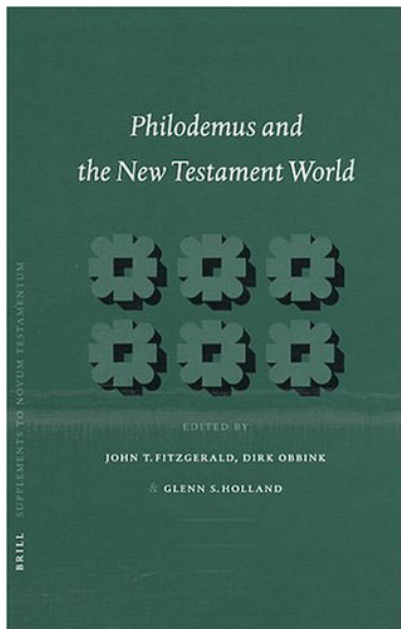
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Fitzgerald, John T., Dirk Obbink, and Glenn S. Holland, eds.

Philodemus and the New Testament World

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While Hellenistic culture in general, and Hellenistic philosophy in particular, have been shown time and again to shed indispensable light on early Christianity, the writings of the Epicurean philosopher and epigrammatist Philodemus have, for a variety of reasons, figured only minimally into New Testament research. A native of Gadara, Philodemus studied in Athens with the preeminent Epicurean philosopher Zeno before becoming an important part of a vibrant Roman intellectual community that also included the likes of Horace and Virgil (see further on this community L. Michael White's contribution in the present volume, esp. 104–8). In the eighteenth century, a number of Philodemus's writings were found among the ruins of Herculaneum's aptly named Villa of the Papyri, which was apparently owned by Philodemus's patron (and Cicero's nemesis), L. Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus. Of these writings, the one that has thus far garnered the most attention from New Testament scholars is the treatise *Περὶ παρρησίας*, whose extensive treatment of "frank speech" as a form of moralistic, psychagogic discourse has been used to illuminate the Pauline literature in particular (see Abraham Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], and esp. Clarence Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy* [NovTSup 81; Leiden: Brill, 1995]). The SBL's Hellenistic Moral Philosophy and Early Christianity section produced an English

translation of this work in 1998 (David Konstan et al., eds., *Philodemus: On Frank Criticism. Introduction, Translation and Notes* [SBLTT 43, Greco-Roman 13; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998]), and the present volume, produced by the same SBL section, is intended as “something of a companion” to it (viii).

As its title suggests, however, this collection of studies goes well beyond the specific theme of frank speech. The book presents a wide-ranging series of essays by classicists and New Testament scholars on a variety of Philodemus’s writings (Section 1: “Philodemus’ Ethical, Theological, Rhetorical, Aesthetic and Historical Works”), their broader cultural contexts (Section 2: “Philodemus’ Thought within the Context of the Greco-Roman World”), and their relevance to early Christianity in particular, especially the Pauline literature (Section 3: “Philodemus and the New Testament World”). The essays are preceded by a general introduction to Philodemus and the Herculaneum papyri by John T. Fitzgerald, and followed by indexes of ancient authors and modern scholars.

Most of the fourteen essays treat one of three broad themes: frank criticism, rhetoric, or economics. As it happens, these three themes are also those emphasized by the contributors, who attempt to bring Philodemus’s works directly to bear on the early Christian literature.

Six essays deal specifically with Philodemus’s treatise *On Frank Criticism*. Half of these, located in the first section of the volume, are concerned specifically with the Philodemian corpus itself, while the other half use this treatise to illuminate works outside that corpus. L. Michael White’s “A Measure of Frank Speech: The State of the Manuscript of PHerc. 1471” provides an illuminating look at the social processes that lie behind this text, tracing from the original composition through its restoration by contemporary scholars. The contributions by Diskin Clay (“Philodemus on the Plain Speaking of Other Philosophers”) and David Sider (“How to Commit Philosophy Obliquely: Philodemus’ Epigrams in Light of his *Peri Parrhesias*”) use this treatise to illuminate problems in the interpretation of other works by Philodemus: his disparate treatment of the Stoics in *The Ordering of the Philosophers* and *On the Stoics*, and the relation of his epigrams to his philosophical writings, respectively. Glen Holland’s “Call Me Frank: Lucian’s (Self-)Defense of Frank Speaking and Philodemus’ Περὶ Πάρρησιός,” on the other hand, uses the treatise to contextualize, and thus highlight, Lucian’s innovative appropriation of the philosophical valuation of frank speech to validate his own satiric attacks on philosophers.

The remaining two works concerned with this theme have an explicit interest in the Pauline literature. In “The Pastoral Epistles in the Light of Philodemus’ ‘On Frank Criticism,’ ” Benjamin Fiore identifies a series of parallels between this treatise and the

Pastorals in order to show that the latter “provide examples of the aim and practice of [παρηγορία] as it is elaborated by Philodemus” (281). (That these similarities are best explained in terms of the Pastorals’ direct engagement with Epicureanism, as Fiore suggests, is less obvious.) J. Paul Sampley, in turn, shows in “Paul’s Frank Speech with the Galatians and the Corinthians” that Paul’s own use of criticism is consistent with the conventions elaborated in Philodemus’s (and Plutarch’s) treatment of the topic. On the basis of Sampley’s reading of Philodemus and Plutarch, he emphasizes two general points: (1) the proportion of praise and blame in a work provides an index of the harshness of its criticism, and thus of the extremity of its situation; and (2) harshness of speech requires a proportional enhancement of ethos. With this analysis, Sampley furnishes an interesting lens through which to view the development—and the deterioration—of the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian community in particular. The interpretation is limited only by a certain one-sidedness: Sampley analyzes Paul’s *deployment* of frank criticism against reluctant recipients in Corinth without studying Paul’s *reaction* to what arguably amounted to analogous criticism, leveled by those same Corinthians, at an equally resistant Paul. If the Corinthians, typical of those who “think themselves wise,” only become irritated by frank criticism (314), one might well say the same of Paul! The escalating tensions in Corinth, in this case, would not be the result simply of the Corinthians’ refusal of Paul’s critique; they would reflect a struggle for power and authority between two parties, each of which claimed a spirit-inspired wisdom.

Two of the essays deal with Philodemus’s often overlooked *On Rhetoric*. Robert N. Gaines shows that Philodemus “was an active participant in the developments that shaped late Hellenistic rhetorical theory” and that his work is, for this reason if no other, an important document for understanding the state of that theory in the late first century B.C.E. This study is complemented well by Bruce W. Winter’s “Philodemus and Paul on Rhetorical Delivery (ὑπόκρισις).” Winter argues that both writers react negatively to the increased emphasis on oratorical performance in the late Hellenistic period, suggesting specifically that “Philodemus’ comments help us to understand” the trenchant attacks leveled by both Paul and his Corinthian opponents over the issue of oratorical ability (324). The Corinthian issue is read in light of differing Christian responses to the Second Sophistic—the essential characteristics of which, Winter argues, were in place already in the first century B.C.E., as Philodemus’s treatise shows. Paul, like Philodemus, had pointedly rejected the notion that delivery was crucial, and his Corinthian opponents, who apparently embraced it, replied by derisively highlighting Paul’s lack of ability in this area.

The articles by Elizabeth Asmis (“Epicurean Economics”) and David L. Balch (“Philodemus, ‘On Wealth’ and ‘On Household Management’: Naturally Wealthy

Epicureans against Poor Cynics”) provide similarly complementary studies of Philodemus’s two economic treatises. The former aims to clarify “how a person combines the need to earn a living with the choice to be an Epicurean” (133), and the result is a wide-ranging study of both the theoretical principles behind, and the social realities attending, the Epicurean approach to economics. In the last third of this lengthy study, Asmis examines the distinctive contribution of Philodemus in light of this general background, showing how he tailored Epicurean economic theory to suit his aristocratic Roman environment. While remaining within the bounds of Epicurus’s moderate concept of “natural wealth,” Philodemus nonetheless “comes close in effect to meeting the Stoics in their preference for wealth” (176), ranking the life of the “gentleman farmer”—and particularly that landowner who uses his resources to support a philosophical community—second only to philosophy itself as the best source of income. Balch provides translations of significant portions of the relevant Philodemian texts in order to outline the basic contours of the Epicurean–Cynic debate regarding the nature and value of wealth and poverty. He is particularly interested to show how this debate sheds light on the blessings pronounced for “the poor” and “the poor in spirit” in Luke 6:20b and Matt 5:3, respectively. Balch argues that “Jesus’ blessing of mendicants belongs within a centuries-old mutual polemic between Epicureans and Cynics” (193). He is less interested in tying this point into the larger question of a “Cynic Jesus,” however, than illuminating the social significance of early Christian reflection on wealth by comparison with a contemporary analogue. “With regard to this ancient dispute, Jesus blesses Cynic mendicancy and lives that life style . . . with or without knowing that the alternatives had philosophical labels and arguments” (194). That is to say, whether “Cynic” or not himself, Jesus’ blessing on the poor was not merely metaphorical of the human condition; it represented a radical advocacy of the type of concrete socio-economic condition that was characteristic of the Cynics.

A variety of topics relating to Philodemus in particular and Epicureanism in general are dealt with in the four remaining essays, none of which attempts to tie its theme explicitly to the early Christian literature. David Armstrong’s “All Things to All Men: Philodemus’ Model of Therapy and the Audience of *De Morte*” advances two theses as a result of a close reading of Philodemus’ *On Death*. Armstrong argues, first, that the rhetorical and stylistic peculiarities of this work relative to the rest of the Philodemian corpus are due to the fact that it is not intended primarily for Epicurean but for a philosophically diverse audience. It is cast, that is, “into protreptic rhetorical form” to convince such an audience that “Epicureanism offered the best therapy for the fear of death” (53). More broadly, Armstrong shows that Philodemus’s acknowledgment of the “natural pains” that can accompany death, and which can be effectively consoled, requires a serious reconsideration of the Epicurean treatment of death, particularly the typical criticism of it

as being unrealistic and unduly callous. Dirk Obbink's contribution, "Craft, Cult and Canon in the Books from Herculaneum," examines the Epicurean works found in the library of the Villa of the Papyri in order to dispute the notion that Epicureanism was in effect a Hellenistic religion (contrast esp. David Sedley, "Philosophical Allegiance in the Greco-Roman World," in Miriam Griffin, *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society* [ed. Jonathan Barnes; Oxford: Clarendon, 1989], 97–119). His focus on the key issue of authority in this context is quite illuminating and his argument largely compelling; Epicureanism in any event emerges as a potentially interesting *exemplum* for theoretical study of the nature of religion. Pamela Gordon's "Remembering the Garden: The Trouble with Women in the School of Epicurus" presents a sophisticated and clear analysis of the problems inherent in attempts at historical reconstruction of the earliest Epicurean community. Gordon focuses on the role of women in that community in particular, showing how the significance of gender within the discourse of later writers—both polemical and apologetic—shaped their accounts of women in Epicurus's Garden, and how this, in turn, leaves intractable problems for contemporary historians. John T. Fitzgerald, finally, provides an extensive historical survey of Gadara in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, with special attention to its political and cultural aspects, in "Gadara: Philodemus' Native City."

This is an excellent collection of essays. In the spirit of "frank speech," however, it is perhaps not inappropriate to point out two small editorial matters. First, the organization of the volume as a whole is not entirely transparent. It is unclear why Fitzgerald's lengthy essay on Gadara, which deals with Christianity tangentially at best (344–46), is included in the section dealing with the New Testament, while Balch's essay, whose interest in the Jesus movement is quite explicit, is not. More generally, while Gordon's contribution is undoubtedly one of the brightest gems of the volume, its marginal interest in Philodemus (let alone the New Testament) leaves one wondering why it was published in this particular collection. Second, more than a third of the essays are devoid of any section breaks signaling transitions in their train of thought. Some editorial intervention in these pieces would have been very helpful to the reader, particularly in the case of those exceeding twenty pages, or at the very least in the case of those that are forty and fifty-five pages in length.

These are obviously minor points, however, and they scarcely detract from the value of the collection. This series of solid contributions to the study of Philodemus and the New Testament will benefit scholars of both Epicureanism and early Christianity, and indeed all those interested in the Hellenistic world.