‘ALL GODS ARE TRUE’ IN EPICURUS

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I. The Doctrine on Piety according to Epicurus

When he moved from Lampsacus to Athens and started a school of philosophy there in 306 B.C., Epicurus laid the foundations for modern materialism and physical psychology. He argued for the existence of the divine, but formulated his theology in a way that so shocked contemporaries that it earned him the name of atheist among later philosophers. The exact tenets of Epicurus’ theology have never been conclusively established, for his works on the subject do not survive. The contribution of this paper is to draw attention to its formulation in a neglected passage in Philodemus of Gadara’s treatise on the theological views of Epicurus, Περὶ εὐσεβείας (On Piety), preserved on a papyrus from the philosophical library recovered from the Villa of the Papyri on the Bay of Naples.¹ Philodemus describes this book in its conclusion as ‘the doctrine (λόγος) on piety according to Epicurus’.² Indeed, Philodemus could read the theological works of Epicurus (now lost to us) and often quotes directly from them.³ As a result, those who purport to interpret Epicurean theology while ignoring Philodemus’ testimony on the subject, do so at their peril.

In the summation of his treatise, Philodemus makes the remarkable claim that unlike the Stoics, who assert the existence of a single,
universal divinity, the Epicureans argue that there exist 'not only all the gods of the Greeks, but many more besides'. Given the strict orthodoxy of the Epicureans, Philodemus cannot be simply putting his own personal spin on the theology of Epicurus: the statement is offered in defence of Epicurus against the charge of atheism, and is intended to clarify Epicurus' position on the nature of the gods' existence. Thus Philodemus is explicit on this point: Epicurus had argued that virtually all gods must in some sense exist, i.e., 'be true'.

But in what sense could this be so? Is the claim not uneconomically odd? On what grounds should all or more conceivable divinities be a fortiori preferable to fewer or one? Is Philodemus' claim a serious one, or simply an act of diplomatic generosity toward the benighted masses, much as the Vatican is currently said to 'acknowledge all world religions'? In either case, it would be badly in need of defence, for it would compromise the very basis of Epicurean materialism.

I argue that Philodemus' account of Epicurus' view on piety coheres closely with one current, controversial view of Epicurean theology, and that it is only understandable within that view. Although it has received both cautious approbation and critical response since its powerful reformulation by A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley in The Hellenistic Philosophers (1987), this explanation of Epicurus' theology has not yet received the full hearing it deserves. I adduce below some new evidence in its favour, arguing that the testimony of the later Epicurean writers, especially Philodemus, has been overlooked, for the understanding of Epicurus' original formulation. This view of Epicurus' theology is certainly the one which Philodemus and Lucretius (who could read Epicurus' theological writings) know, and it is consistent with what they have to say elsewhere on this subject.

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4 Col. 362: ήμών οὐ μόνον ὄσοις φασίν οἱ Πανέλληνες ἄλλα καὶ πλείονας εἶναι λεγόντων (P.Herc. 1428 col. 10 lines 25-9). For the full context see Text 10a below; and cf. Mansfeld 1999, 456 where the titles of the works in question (On Gods and On Piety) are unfortunately missing from their quotations.

5 In Cicero's adaptation of Philodemus' treatise at De nat. deor. I 25-43, for example, the Epicurean spokesman Velleius is made to deny the existence not only of the gods of popular belief, of the Egyptians and other foreign peoples, but also those of the Stoics, Platonists and Peripatetics, and of the pre-Socratics from Thales to Diogenes of Apollonia.