

BOOK REVIEW

Thorsteinsson, Runar M., *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism: A Comparative Study of Ancient Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). xiii + 248 pp. Hbk. \$125 USD, Pbk. \$44.95 USD.

Lund University continues to prompt compelling research like Runar Thorsteinsson's *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism*. This accessible volume contradicts the prevailing opinion concerning the ethics of Christians and Stoics in Rome. Thorsteinsson's method and conclusions avoid the polemic and politics endemic to much English Christian scholarship. Thoroughly readable in methodology, organization and logical progression, this book elucidates parallels between Roman Christianity and Stoicism citing not comprehensive, but representative primary texts (secondary sources are relegated to the footnotes).

Thorsteinsson begins by showing historically assumed connections between Stoicism and Christianity, citing Origen, Tertullian and Jerome. He problematizes traditional methods that cite late, secondary (non-Stoic) sources to understand Stoic morality. ('Morality' herein is pragmatic, 'ethics' systematic.) He prefers late first- or early second-century CE sources, namely Seneca, Musonius and Epictetus; he compares the work of these Stoics to Romans, 1 Peter and *1 Clement*. Thorsteinsson uses sources that have a tie to the city of Rome and an early date. He omits Philippians, although a letter to a Roman colony engaging moral philosophy (1.27–2.14; 3.16-17; 4.2, 5, 9, 12, 15-18) would have been an appropriate inclusion (see p. 88 n. 66). Overall, his methodology is balanced and recognizes important caveats to such a study, such as the necessary contextual diversity of the texts examined, the arbitrary nature of such a study's scope and the tension of similarity and dissimilarity between the Stoic and Christian sources (one rough distinction he makes between the two is seeing Stoicism practicing ethics, but Christianity practicing morality).

The monograph introduces each 'philosophical school', then treats the representatives of Stoicism first before turning to the Christians.

The Stoics treated are those active in Rome subsequent to Cicero, roughly ‘from Seneca to Marcus Aurelius’ (p. 20). Thorsteinsson introduces Seneca first, preferring earlier sources in which he figures (Juvenal, Martial and Tacitus) to later (Dio Cassius). He notes the body metaphor in Seneca’s egalitarian ethics, which appears disingenuous given Seneca’s aristocratic rank, a modern charge against which Thorsteinsson frequently defends. Regardless of Seneca’s sincerity, Thorsteinsson admits that Stoicism was a favorite school of aristocrats. But he argues that wealth is no decisive marker of morality, and tentatively even credits Nero’s temperate years to his Stoic teacher. The overall portrait of Seneca here is contained in his *Ep.* 102.18: *natura me amantem omnium genuit* (‘Nature begot me loving all people’). His idea of love universally expressed is grounded in nature as God designed it. Here again Thorsteinsson defends Seneca’s earnestness, citing Seneca’s correspondence with Lucilius, where he avers that doing good to another is good to oneself *de facto* (*nemo non, cum alteri prodest, sibi profuit. Ep.* 81.19). (This idea plays a central role in John Piper’s more recent construction of what he terms ‘Christian hedonism’, so it is unsurprising, if unusual, that Thorsteinsson engages John Piper, a vocational pastor [pp. 3, 4, 25, 173, 174].) Seneca, for Thorsteinsson, is a caring philanthropist who emphasizes the individual (*Ira* 2.31.7) and has a gentle, altruistic manner (*Clem.* 2.5.2-3). One potential weakness in Thorsteinsson’s argument here is that he relies overwhelmingly upon Seneca’s own writing and neglects certain biographical notes from antiquity, such as Pliny the Elder’s opinion that it was ‘excessive power’ that finally ‘crashed down upon him’ (*Nat.* 14.51). Nevertheless, the picture here painted of Seneca seems valid.

Thorsteinsson next treats Musonius, who adheres more rigidly to the fourfold Stoic cardinal virtues (*prudentia, temperantia, iustitia* and *fortitudo*) than did his teacher. Noting the scarcity and ambiguity of sources on Musonius (we have only fragments of his writing), Thorsteinsson still manages to describe him from the records we have from his students and historians. Musonius’s distinctives included an ‘idealization of material poverty’ (p. 46), marital/sexual conservatism and moral praxis (characteristics not uncommon among late antique Christians). Like Seneca, Musonius emphasizes social ethical responsibility, stating that ‘philosophy is training in nobility and nothing else’ (Musonius, *frag.* 4.48.25-26 = Stobaeus 2.32.123). Unlike most early Christians, Musonius ‘is optimistic about human capacity to live virtuously’

and ‘believes that human beings are born with an inclination towards virtue, and that they are good by nature’ (p. 44; see Stobaeus 2.38.1-3). This traditional Stoic belief contrasts so sharply with early Christian ‘negative’ views of human nature that one wonders it is not given lengthy treatment here. Like early Christians, however, Musonius sees the family as society’s cornerstone and in line with God’s will, unlike homosexuality (Musonius, *frag.* 12.86.10; 14.92.9-17). His view of women’s social roles is also unusually liberal, something some would attribute to early Christianity as well. Musonius appears as a paragon of virtue, and it should be noted that Origen likewise called him a ‘model of excellence of life’ (*Cels.* 3.66).

The ‘Stoic section’ ends with Epictetus, whose original tripartite teaching formula of ‘desire, volition or action, and judgment’ (ὄρεξεις, ὁρμή, συγκατάθεσις) (p. 59) emphasizes responsibility, which might be expected, given the divine rationality imbued in human beings according to Epictetus (*Diatr.* 1.1.12; 1.3.1-3). In this Epictetus departs slightly from his teacher Musonius’s cardinal virtues. Perhaps this is due to Epictetus’s theology, which Thorsteinsson places ‘much closer to theism than pantheism’, following scholars like Bonhoeffer and Long. However, calling Epictetus’s theology ‘theism’ seems confusing when juxtaposed to Christian texts; the cosmological nature of Epictetus’s worldview is far removed from Paul, for example, despite Pauline theology’s comprehensive nature. Epictetus’s ideals find their consummation in the Stoic sage, ‘father’ to all humankind and ‘perfect human being’. He is a ‘divinely guided, universal philanthropist’ (p. 70).

Section Two tackles Romans, 1 Peter and *I Clement*, letters all. The introduction includes discussion of Stoicism’s ubiquity in Rome (p. 85), a point better suited to Part Three. Another introductory issue is Thorsteinsson’s preference for ‘Christ-movement’ in place of ‘Christianity’ due to the latter term’s late attestation (p. 86). Why not use ‘Jesus movement’ to avoid implicating other Messiah-based movements within Second Temple Judaism, such as those at Qumran, especially given Christianity’s noted Jewish character (pp. 76-77)? After wrestling with problems concerning the sources, dates and social make-up of early Christianity, Thorsteinsson concludes that early Christians would have been influenced, directly or indirectly and however substantially, by Roman society and Stoicism. He then moves on to the letters. What binds these letters is unifying terms, prominence of ἀγάπη, social obligation’s centrality and deference to civic authority

(p. 134). Thorsteinsson makes these connections philologically and thematically. He stresses the occasional nature of *1 Clement* more than Romans or 1 Peter, noting educated authorship in 1 Peter and *1 Clement*; the latter's viewpoint is pointedly aristocratic. *1 Clement*, moreover, represents 'a direct continuation of the moral teaching' of Paul (p. 134).

Thorsteinsson's treatment of Romans is straightforward. He dismisses a Jew/Gentile tension as undergirding the exhortations of Romans 14–15, which makes 2–15 easier to enlist in search of a general moral philosophy. He rightly concludes that Romans' 'very centre' (12.1-2) addresses recipients' thought *and* action, but the conceptual relationship between the two is undiscussed, except to say that Paul presumes a prominent role in guiding individuals' discernment of God's will (the thought component). One gets the sense that Paul's morality is more communal than Stoicism's universalism, and Thorsteinsson addresses Pauline body metaphors at length. Paul, in Romans, distinguishes himself from Stoic ethics in several ways, chief of which is his situating his 'school' in terms of 'good news', 'worship' and 'living sacrifice'.

Like Romans, 1 Peter is introduced as a tool for Christian identity formation. This, and not its emphasis on 'brotherly love', sets it apart from Stoic teaching. Thorsteinsson distills the letter's essence into 2.17: 'Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor.' Certainly a Stoic could subscribe to that! First Peter furthermore addresses marginal groups like women and slaves, groups not ignored by Stoics, and Musonius would perhaps not have objected to 1 Peter's instructions for marriage. And 1 Peter is similar, argues Thorsteinsson, to Romans as well. Regarding *1 Clement*, Thorsteinsson favours Hagner's description of it as 'an extended piece of ethical paraenesis' (p. 120). While the letter purports to move beyond the local church context to 'the Christ-movement as a whole' (p. 120), its context in writing (unity at Corinth) is telling. Thorsteinsson sees *1 Clement's* virtues (and vices) as tied to the local situation, and if these are submission and obedience and strife and schism respectively, his claim seems warranted. But 'love' is not absent in *1 Clement*, and its application to local particulars should not constrict its characterization of *1 Clement's* 'Christian morality' generally. Like the three Stoic authors, and 1 Peter, *1 Clement* is obsessed with social responsibility and hinges upon love.

Part Three juxtaposes Stoic and Christian morality via five themes: (1) 'A Particular Way of Life as Proper Worship'. The Christian letters cite a particular morality as '*the* proper response to the acts of God through Jesus' (p. 137; see n). Epictetus, Musonius and Seneca likewise establish theological foundations (pp. 139-49). The supposition that Christian morality is unique in '*religious* motivation...does not do full justice to our knowledge of Stoicism' (p. 140); (2) 'Clothing Oneself with Christ and Seeking to be a Socrates': Jesus for Christians and Socrates (i.e. 'wise men') for Stoics acted as paragons of virtue. (3) 'Mutual Love and Care': Love is crucial to the Christian letters, but *ἀγάπη* is 'virtually synonymous' with *φιλία*, more common in Stoic literature (pp. 159-60). Both groups revolve around mutual care, evidenced by their 'body' metaphor. (4) 'Non-Retaliatio and Love of Enemies'. Non-retaliation was common to Stoicism and Christianity. The Christian principle, however, is mitigated by divine vengeance (p. 170). (5) 'The Social Dimension'. Stoic *and* Christian moralities urged social justice. Neither condemned slavery. Thorsteinsson attempts to remove the grounds for accusing the Stoics of being unpracticing theoreticians (p. 178).

Thorsteinsson challenges traditional views in Chapter 10 (the conclusion). He argues that whereas one usually considers Stoics haughty egotists and Christians social activists, it was Stoic teachings that stressed universal social ethics while Christian morality was introverted. Traditional reading of the Christian letters mistakes pan-ecclesial language for universal. Universal humanitarianism is endemic to Stoicism and *not* Christianity. The latter retains a 'fundamental distinction between "us" and "them"' (p. 209). Thorsteinsson's approach is thus original in method and conclusion. However, a small sampling of sources makes small arguments; readers must remember that Paul does not completely embody early Christian morality, nor do the three Stoics chosen by Thorsteinsson totally represent Stoicism. In addition, that early Christianity's ethics applied inward first does not obviate their wider realization, nor do negative arguments immunize Stoics against the charge of hypocrisy. The central arguments are well represented, but the arguments may function better as heuristics than established conclusions.

Despite noting the social differences between Stoic and Christian sources, Thorsteinsson does not unfold important aspects of what might be called the early Christian worldview. One of these, the 'sin

nature', has already been noted. But the intimacy with which early Christians saw themselves as relating to a personal God must also fundamentally distinguish Christian morality from Stoic; indeed, perhaps that is why one appears more 'moral', and the other 'ethical'. Of less importance here is the fact that Christianity was a coherent movement in its agreement upon Jesus as its figurehead, but this solidarity might still loom large in a theory of comparison between Stoicism and Christianity. Specialists in social theory will note the omission of nuanced discussion about embodiment, the (social-?) construction of philosophy and morality and the relationship between the status and role of each thinker represented here and his teaching. However, such a discussion would admittedly have taken this work far afield.

Thorsteinsson's bibliographic terrain is wide. Engagement with John Piper, D.A. Carson and Martha Nussbaum surprises, but their enlistment is responsible and appropriate. Many works on Classics and Biblical Studies do not engage pastors (Piper), evangelical pastorscholars (Carson) or contemporary ethicists (Nussbaum). Conspicuously present is Thorsteinsson's advisor Troels Engberg-Pedersen. While there are no glaring omissions, Mark Strom's *Reframing Paul* is an example of scholarship that could elucidate Stoicism-and-Christianity's relationship vis-à-vis the Roman *Zeitgeist*. How Stoicism and Christianity mutually influenced and existed 'on the ground' is, in fact, noticeably missing. However, Thorsteinsson's goal was to compare Stoicism and Christianity as contemporaneous ethical systems, not to posit a relationship.

Overall, Thorsteinsson is balanced and incisive. Primary sources are assiduously cited. Conclusions are authentic and provocative. The manageable length of sections, chapters and subsections facilitates agreeable presentation. Refraining from positing affective relationships between Christianity and Stoicism, but rather reading them as parallel movements in a common medium betrays discretion. Moreover, Thorsteinsson's primary argument that Christianity was inwardly inclined and that Stoicism was not *necessarily* hypocritical are sound. He provides religionists and classicists accessible, reasonable arguments.

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