

Landefeld (K.M.) *Die Gebetslehre Epiktets. Form, Inhalt und Funktionen der Gebete Epiktets im Kontext der antiken Gebetstradition.* (Orbis Antiquus 54.) Pp. viii + 224. Münster: Aschendorff, 2020. Paper, €36. ISBN: 978-3-402-14463-3.

[1,261 words]

The program pursued here is to present a descriptive account of prayer in Epictetus from a sympathetic theological perspective after methodically comparing prayer in other Stoics, Platonists, and early Christians. The author is so rigorous and circumspect in examining comparisons with other ancient thinkers' uses of prayer that considerably less space is devoted to analysing Epictetus. Nonetheless, Epictetus' doctrine of prayer is thoughtfully classified and convincingly situated in its historical context. Discussions of prayer in Plato, Cleanthes, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Maximus of Tyre, Porphyry, Proclus, Iamblichus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Lord's Prayer, and the Gospels set the stage nicely. Landefeld mentions Epicurus but Lucretius' hymn to Venus (*DRN* i. 1–43) is not examined. While attention to valuable scholarship in English is skimpy, this study is otherwise diligently researched and soundly structured.

Prayer is defined as a salutation (3) or one-sided address to God (5), with hymn being a special form (4). Landefeld finds no discernible difference in meaning when Epictetus mentions gods, the god, Zeus, and the divine (114–115). Yet Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*, quoted approvingly several times by Epictetus, entreats that God *and* Destiny lead. This implies two distinct referents. Does Epictetus identify God with Destiny or Nature? This is not addressed. So, perhaps Epictetus is a muddled henotheist. In *Diss.* i. 1. 17 he says that Boreas and Zephyrus blow when it or Aeolus pleases, because God made Aeolus steward of the winds. Is this henotheism or allegory in the tradition of Lucius Annaeus Cornutus? Landefeld is silent about this text. She claims that Epictetus equates God with the world only once, at *Diss.* i. 14. 10,

where he says that ὁ θεός created the sun as a small portion of himself, makes it revolve, and can perceive all things, but could not possibly have made human bodies, which are only ‘artfully moulded clay’, free and unhindered (*Diss.* i. 1. 10–12). So, is this pantheism, panentheism, or something else? Panentheism is nowhere discussed, so this issue is left unresolved.

In examining petitionary prayers Landefeld notes that Epictetus urges the true athlete, who seeks to win freedom and peace of mind by training not to be carried away by mental impressions, to remember God and call upon his aid and support, ‘as sailors call upon the Dioscuri in a storm’ (*Diss.* ii. 18. 27–29). She interprets Epictetus to permit asking God for help, but only in dealing with one’s own impressions (162). Yet are these sailors asking Castor and Pollux, the benefactors of the Argonauts, to help them dispel their fears of injury, shipwreck, and drowning, and help them save other crewmen’s lives, or are these sailors pleading for the Dioscuri to make the storm dissipate? Stoic sailors recognize that all storms are willed by God and so must be embraced as a young man welcomes being matched with a tough wrestling partner (*Diss.* i. 24. 1–2). The latter sailors, in contrast, are sorry non-Stoics. Landefeld thinks God’s care consists only in the fact that he has created and structured the world as it is and has gifted us *logos* as a tool to handle all we face, and so God’s care is no kind of intervention (120). Yet pleas to God for help managing our impressions, help attaining the proper attitude of life, and help teaching this attitude to students (164), are all requests for intervention.

Epictetus insists that positive and negative impulse, desire and aversion, the use of impressions, volition (*prohairesis*), and assent (*sunkatathesis*) are all entirely up to us. Adults wield godlike sovereignty in this mental realm. Not even God can interfere with it, having gifted this part of himself to us (*Diss.* iv. 1. 100; cf. i. 17. 20–24; i. 29. 12–13; ii. 15. 1; ii. 23. 19; iii. 6. 7;

iii. 19. 2; iv. 5. 23–34; iv. 12. 7–12). To will to happen only what does happen lifts a person beyond the possibility of hindrance or compulsion by another, just as Zeus cannot be hindered or compelled (*Diss.* iv. 1. 89–90). This is attaching one’s own will to God’s (*Diss.* i. 12. 8–9; i. 17. 25–28; iv. 1. 99). Consequently, to petition any divinity for help thinking correctly reveals a failure to grasp Epictetus’ teaching that our mentality is up to us alone. Given his psychology, petitionary prayer makes no more sense than entreating the west wind or sunshine to help you get your head straight. Petitionary prayer conflicts with Epictetus’ philosophy of mind.

Making a plea to God resembles making a plea before a human judge in a law court. Regarding the latter Epictetus says that if you want to preserve your *prohairesis* in accord with nature, you’ll be completely safe, all will go swimmingly, and you’ll have no trouble or worries. This is because no one holds power over your *prohairesis* (and thus your attitude of life) and no one can take away the freedom of your secure *prohairesis*, no one can prevent you from being self-respecting or trustworthy, no one can constrain your desires or aversions (*Diss.* ii. 2. 1–4). There is simply no point in asking any judge, whether human or divine, for help. *Diss.* i. 29. 4 reads εἴ τι ἀγαθὸν θέλεις, παρὰ σεαυτοῦ λάβε. Epictetus imagines Zeus telling him not to look for what is good for him outside of himself, but rather to seek it within or he’ll never find it (*Diss.* iii. 24. 112).

The same Stoic who sings hymns praising Zeus reasons with his interlocutor thus:

Now isn’t the future outside the *prohairesis*?—‘Yes.’—And isn’t the essence of the good and bad in things pertaining to the *prohairesis*?—‘Yes.’—So, isn’t it possible for you to make use of every outcome according to nature? Can anyone prevent you from doing

so?—‘No one.’—Then no longer say to me, ‘How will it happen?’, because whatever happens, you’ll be able to put it to good use, and the outcome will be fortunate for you.

(*Diss.* iv. 10. 8–9; trans. mine)

This outlook makes petitionary prayer and divination look equally pointless.

Landefeld is strenuously charitable in her interpretations of Epictetus’ remarks about prayer. But her unswervingly descriptive, relentlessly sympathetic exegesis excludes probing, critical analysis in the philosophy of religion. She writes that for Epictetus a prayer is not just adoration of the deity but can have a meditative dimension or involve a justification vis-a-vis God constituting self-assurance and self-commitment. By adding a didactic aspect to prayer Epictetus goes beyond Cleanthes. Prayers, she concludes, are an important part of identity formation in Epictetus (190). But given the multiplicity of named divine beings Epictetus mentions and his disinterest in specifying their precise interrelationships, his god-talk remains referentially indeterminate. Obscurity persists in how these deities, fate, and destiny causally interconnect. Moreover, incompatibility is evident among his philosophy of mind, cosmological determinism, and the intelligibility of petitionary prayer.

Prayers praising divine providence must be sharply distinguished, then, from introspective, meditative, and self-admonitory prayers. A theory of one need not encompass a theory of the other but if it did, it would usefully ascertain how well (or poorly) petitionary prayer coheres with the rest of the Stoic system. Landefeld need not be faulted for not cobbling together a unified doctrine of prayer compatible with Stoic physics and logic where none exists in Epictetus. Perhaps this ex-slave fervently needed to unseat contempt for and defiance in the

faces of his cruel, abusive human masters with praise of and obedient devotion to a maximally
beneficent and providential divine master.

William O. Stephens
Creighton University
stoic@creighton.edu