

BOOK REVIEW

Paul and Seneca in Dialogue. Ancient Philosophy & Religion, 2. By JOSEPH R. DODSON and DAVID E. BRIONES, eds. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017. Pp. xviii + 340. Hardcover, \$159.00. ISBN 978-90-04-34135-7.

As the editors of *Paul and Seneca in Dialogue* point out in its preface, “Arguably, no other first-century philosopher’s thoughts resemble Paul’s as closely as Seneca’s” (6). The book fulfills the aims of the editors to draw out “points of convergence *and* divergence” in order to “highlight and establish the exceptional qualities within each of their writings” (xii). *Paul and Seneca in Dialogue* provides an excellent foundation upon which future scholars may build as well as a fine introduction to either thinker.

Two contributions set the stage for the comparative essays that follow. Harry M. Hine (“Seneca and Paul: The First Two Thousand Years”), one of the relatively few Senecan scholars among the many Biblical experts in the list of contributors, analyzes the influence of the fictitious correspondence between Paul and Seneca in order to contextualize the early Christian reception of Seneca, in particular the encoding of his suicide as a baptism. Hine raises the possibility that Seneca might have known Paul given the familiarity of each with Burrus, the leader of the Praetorian Guard. E. Randolph Richards (“Some Observations on Paul and Seneca as Letter Writers”) usefully sounds a note of caution regarding the comparison of these two thinkers of different ethnicities, classes, and linguistic backgrounds. Among many important differences are the typical length of letters (Paul’s are significantly longer than Seneca’s), choice of addressee (communities vs. individuals) and polish or lack thereof (the grammatical errors in Paul testify to a lack of editing while Seneca’s *Letters* merely feign to be unedited). Most contributions provide a good introduction to facets of each thinker and an evenhanded assessment of similarities and differences between them. Brian J. Tabb (“Paul and Seneca on Suffering”) observes that both writers use lists of acts of suffering to commend the virtue of the sage in fulfilling his response to his divine vocation, though Seneca’s emphasis is on the here and now, while Paul looks

to life after death. David E. Briones (“Paul and Seneca on the Self-Gift”) observes that while both Seneca and Paul emphasize the spirit with which something is given over what was given, Paul locates the source of generosity in God while Seneca locates it within oneself. David A. deSilva (“‘We are Debtors’: Grace and Obligation in Paul and Seneca”) shows that both Seneca and Paul stand against a *do ut des* principle of gift exchange. Pauline Nigh Hogan (“Paul and Seneca on Women”) demonstrates that while both Paul and Seneca believed that women possessed as much courage and intelligence as men, they restricted women’s roles to the church and family, respectively. Michelle Lee-Barnewall (“Paul and Seneca on the Body”) observes that Seneca and Paul conceptualize the human community as a body. Joseph R. Dodson (“Paul and Seneca on the Cross: The Metaphor of Crucifixion in Galatians and *De Vita Beata*”) argues that for Seneca, the cross is a symbol of being fettered to the passions, while for Paul it is an emancipation from law and the flesh. James P. Ware (“The Salvation of Creation: Seneca and Paul on the Future of Humanity and of the Cosmos”) emphasizes the contrast between the Senecan notion of resurrection as a feature of cosmic recurrence and Paul’s understanding of resurrection as the consummation of a linear life.

Some essays surpass the stated aims of the collection by demonstrating how the shared cultural and historical context informed the thought of both thinkers. Runar M. Thorsteinsson (“Jesus Christ and The Wise Man: Paul and Seneca on Moral Sages”) observes the striking similarity that both writers, drawing upon the sage of the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, urged their followers to transform their lives into living sacrifices by undergoing a moral and intellectual transformation in order to discern what is good in God’s eyes. John M. G. Barclay (“Benefiting Others and Benefit to Oneself: Seneca and Paul on ‘Altruism’”) shows the way in which ancient notions of altruism inflect the thought of Paul and Seneca. He argues that neither Paul nor Seneca’s thought fits a modern template of altruism, which plots an antithesis between self-interested and disinterested behavior. Timothy Brookins (“(Dis)correspondence of Paul and Seneca on Slavery”) argues that while Paul and Seneca both condone slavery by treating it as morally indifferent, Seneca elevates the slave to the status of master by virtue of his ability to give and withhold assent, while Paul advocates for the master to abase himself to the slave as an emulation of Christ. Brookins intriguingly speculates that their shared failure to advocate for abolition might reflect their willingness to make accommodations to the world around them. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (“Paul in Philippians and Seneca in *Epistle 93* on Life after Death and

Its Present Implications”) shows that in spite of Paul and Seneca’s divergent views on the afterlife, the role of *pneuma* in connecting present and future in both authors suggests the influence of Stoicism on each. These essays implicitly make a good case for the enterprise of comparative analysis and call into question the validity of the disciplinary boundaries that typically keep these two thinkers apart. As for the volume’s limitations, though all the essays do map out points of convergence and divergence, one might not necessarily learn more about either thinker from some analyses than one would from any number of handbooks (the recent *Brill’s Companion to Seneca* comes to mind). While the notion of a dialogue between Seneca and Paul will intrigue many, some contributors arguably take this premise too literally by composing their own fictional dialogues, the scholarly value of which is disputable; Joshua Richards’ “Epilogue: The Stoic and the Saint” is a work of historical fiction. A comprehensive bibliography (or even bibliographies for individual contributions) would have been most welcome.

However, it is worth restating that the collection achieves its stated aims and some essays achieve significantly more. The book will serve as a very useful resource for anyone interested in these thinkers, either individually or in relation to one another. I look forward to consulting it regularly in the future.

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