The Philosophy of Epictetus
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The Philosopher as God's Messenger

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Abstract and Keywords

The philosopher, according to Epictetus, is God's messenger (angelos), witness (martys), servant (diakonos/hypēretēs), and kinsman (syngenēs). By making full use of their logical reasoning, philosophers are meant to interpret the rational order of the universe and to explain to others what is good and what is evil. Moreover, by applying in everyday life their acquired knowledge, philosophers become for human beings the example which all should be following in order to gain salvation. Thus, Socrates and Diogenes are viewed by Epictetus as the paradigmatic philosophers; for their doctrines and actions were in perfect harmony with the rational order of nature, that is with God's will. It is noteworthy that the portrait of the philosopher which Epictetus presents has a lot in common with that advocated by other philosophers at the time, such as Dio of Prusa, Apollonius of Tyana, and Maximus of Tyre, who also are concerned with the salvation of mankind.

Keywords: Apollonius, Dio, Diogenes, example, God, interpreter, Maximus, messenger, salvation, scout

Not only do Epictetus' Discourses provide us with invaluable information about Stoic philosophy and its development in Imperial times; they also contain a great number of interesting remarks about how Epictetus conceives of the role of the philosopher. These remarks are quite diverse, ranging from comments about the philosopher's garb and his everyday routine to more general views about the philosopher's tasks and aims. In this
paper I want to focus on Epictetus' conception of the role of the philosopher as someone who has been assigned by God a divine mission, namely the mission of being his messenger (*angelos*).

There are two passages in Epictetus' *Discourses* which explicitly present the philosopher as God's messenger. There is first a passage in which Epictetus, after giving advice to a young man about his effeminate appearance, says:

> But once you have heard these words go away and say to yourself, ‘It was not Epictetus who said these things to me—how could he?—but some kindly God speaking through him. For it would not have occurred to Epictetus to say these things, because he is not in the habit of speaking in this way to anyone. Come then, let us obey God, that we rest not under His wrath.’ But is it that if a raven gives you a sign by his croaking, it is not the raven that gives the sign, but God through the raven, whereas if He gives you a sign through a human voice, you will pretend that it is the man who is saying these things to you, so that you may remain ignorant of the power of the divine spirit, because He gives signs to some men in this way, and to others in that, but in the greatest and most decisive matters He gives His sign through a most noble messenger (*dia kallistou angelou*)? (3.1.36–7)

The second passage in which Epictetus specifically talks about the philosopher as a messenger sent by God is a passage portraying the true Cynic as the true philosopher:

> In the next place, the true Cynic, when he is thus prepared, cannot rest content with this, but he must know that he has been sent by Zeus (*apo tou Dios apestaltai*) to men, partly as a messenger (*angelos*), in order to show them that in questions of good and evil they have gone astray, and are seeking the true nature of the good and the evil where it is not, but where it is they do not come to think of; and partly, in the words of Diogenes, when he was taken off to Philip, after the battle of Chaeroneia, as a scout (*kataskopos*). For the Cynic is truly a scout, to find out what things are friendly to men and what hostile; and he must first do his scouting accurately, and on returning must tell (*apangeilai*) the truth, not driven by fear to designate as enemies those who are not such, nor in any other fashion be distraught or confused by his impressions. (3.22.23-5; cf. also, 3.22.38; 69)
The view that philosophers have a divine mission can also be found in other passages in Epictetus' *Discourses*, in which the philosopher is presented as a witness (*martus*) summoned by God, or as a man who has a divine vocation (*klēsis*), or has been assigned by God a certain post. For instance, when Epictetus describes the role of the man who has been educated in philosophy, he says:

‘In what role are you now mounting the stage?’ As a witness (*martus*) summoned by God (*hypo tou theou keklēmenos*) who says: ‘Go and bear witness for me; for you are worthy to be produced as a witness by me. Is any of those things which lie outside the range of the moral purpose either good or evil? Do I injure any man? Have I put each man’s advantage under the control of any but himself?’ What kind of testimony (*marturian*) do you bear for God? ‘I am in sore straits, O Lord, and in misfortune; no one regards me, no one gives me anything, all blame me and speak ill of me.’ Is this the witness that you are going to bear, and is this the way in which you are going to disgrace the calling which He gave you (*ten klēsin hēn keklēken*), in that He bestowed this honour upon you and deemed you worthy to be brought forward in order to bear testimony (*marturian*) so important? (1.29.46–9; cf. also, 3.24.112–13; 3.26.28; 4.8.32)

Also, being God's messenger and witness, the philosopher is said to be wholly devoted to the service of God, and is thus portrayed by Epictetus as God's servant (*diakonos/hupēretēs*):

But in such an order of things as the present, which is like that of a battle-field, it is a question, perhaps, if the Cynic ought not to be free from distraction, wholly devoted to the service of God (*tē diakonia tou theou*), free to go about among men, not tied down by the private duties of men, nor involved in relationships which he cannot violate and still maintain his role as a good and excellent man, whereas, on the other hand, if he observes them, he will destroy the messenger, the scout, the herald (*kēryx*) of the gods, that he is. (3.22.69; cf. also, 3.24.65; 3.26.28; 4.7.20)

And again:

These are the terms upon which now He brings me here, and again He sends me there; to mankind He exhibits me in poverty, without office, in sickness; He sends me away

(p. 58)
to Gyara, brings me into prison. Not because He hates me —perish the thought! Who hates the best of his servants (*hupēretōn*)? Nor because He neglects me, for He does not neglect any of even the least of his creatures; but because He is training me, and making use of me as a witness to the rest of men. When I have been appointed to such a service (*hupēresian*), am I any longer to take thought as to where I am, or with whom, or what men say about me? Am I not wholly intent upon God, and His commands and ordinances? (3.24.113–14; cf. also, 3.22.82; 95; 3.24.98; 4.8.32)

But what exactly is the mission of philosophers as God's messengers, witnesses, and servants? Which divine message are philosophers supposed to convey and what are their credentials that make Epictetus think they can in principle achieve this divine task? Moreover, is it the first time in the history of philosophy that such a role is ascribed to philosophers? And why is it so important for philosophers in Epictetus' time to think of themselves as God's messengers? These are the questions which I want to address in what follows.

II

To start with, let me first inquire into the nature of the philosopher's divine mission and the qualifications which the philosopher should ideally possess in order to carry it out. In the second passage mentioned above (3.22.23–5), Epictetus claims that the philosopher has been given by God the task of showing human beings what is truly good and what is evil, since they have gone astray and seek the good in all the wrong places. However, in order to show human beings what is truly good and what is evil, the philosopher first needs to find out for himself the truth and to acquire a solid grasp of the divine administration of the world. As Epictetus says, using a military metaphor, the philosopher should be like a scout (*kataskopos*: 3.22.24; 38; 69) who is sent out to inquire where the enemies are situated, i.e. which things actually harm human beings. Indeed, Epictetus uses this metaphor again, when he portrays Diogenes as a scout sent to find out for men what is truly good and what is evil:

Diogenes, who before you was sent forth as a scout (*kataskopos*) has brought us back a different report. He says, 'Death is not an evil, since it is not dishonourable'; he says, 'Ill repute is noise made by madmen.' And what a report this scout (*kataskopos*) has given us about toil and about pleasure
and about poverty! He says, ‘To be naked is better than any scarlet robe; and to sleep on the bare ground,’ he says, ‘is the softest couch.’ (1.24.6–7)

In particular, Epictetus refers to Chrysippus as a philosopher who has a firm grasp of what precisely the divine or natural order of the universe is, what place therein human beings have, and how to distinguish between things good and evil (1.10.10). For this reason Chrysippus is often called ‘an interpreter (ἐξήγητης) of nature’, in the sense that he comprehends and explains to others the truth about nature, or for that matter about God’s will (1.17.13–19; Ench. 49).

But if the divine message concerns the understanding of the cosmic order, and hence of what is truly good and evil, in what sense is the philosopher more equipped than anyone else to deliver it? There are many passages in the Discourses in which Epictetus stresses that, though all human beings have been endowed by God with reason, it is only the philosopher who undertakes to discover the truth by making correct use of this faculty to understand the good and the evil:

A man has received from nature measures and standards for discovering the truth (ἐπιγνώσις τῆς ἀλήθειας), and then does not go on and take the pains to add to these and to work out additional principles to supply the deficiencies, (p. 60) but does exactly the opposite, endeavouring to take away and destroy whatever faculty he does possess for discovering the truth. What do you say, philosopher? What is your opinion of piety and sanctity? ‘If you wish, I shall prove that it is good.’ By all means, prove it, that our citizens may be converted (ἐπιστράφητες) and may honour the divine and at last cease to be indifferent about the things that are of supreme importance. ‘Do you, then, possess the proofs?’ I do, thank heaven. (2.20.21–2; cf. also, 1.6.19–22; 1.16.18–21)

Hence, although humans differ from other animals exactly in that they possess reason, which in principle helps them not just to survive but to live a life worth living, most remain ignorant of the truth, knowledge of which is required for living well, because they do not attend to or follow the divine spirit (daemonion/daimon: 3.1.37; cf. also, 2.8.11–14) which God has given each one of them as their share of divine reason:

But who tells you that your capacities are the equal of Zeus’s?
Yet, for all that, He has presented to each person each
person's own divine spirit (*daimona*), as a guardian, and committed the person's safekeeping to this trustee, who does not sleep and who cannot be misled. To what better and more caring guardian could He have entrusted us? So when you close your doors and make it dark inside, remember never to say you are alone, because you are not; God is inside and your own divine spirit (*daimōn*) too. (1.14.12; trans. Long)

But the philosopher does listen to his reason, and having thus discovered the truth, assumes as his task ‘to follow God’ (1.12.5; 1.30.4; 4.7.20) as well as to convert the others (cf. *epistraphentes*: 2.20.22). It is, therefore, for this reason that Epictetus presents the philosopher as someone who has been providentially sent by God to bring His message to ordinary human beings, and it is in this sense that the philosopher is God's most noble messenger.

In his conception of God, the cosmic order, and the position of humans in it, Epictetus seems to follow standard doctrines in Stoic theology: God is one of the two principles, the other being matter, in terms of which the Stoics account for the world we live in; as the active principle, God has providentially organized the world in a rational way; since humans share in reason and are in principle capable of understanding the natural order, they can flourish by living their lives in accordance with nature. Modern scholars, however, have indicated that in some respects Epictetus goes beyond standard Stoic orthodoxy. For instance, Epictetus' theology is clearly characterized by a warm personalistic tone which has no parallel in the writings of early Stoic philosophers. Also, Epictetus uses a doctrine of God as the basis for presenting and justifying his moral theories, whereas the notion of (p. 61) 'appropriation' (*oikeiōsis*), which is the traditional starting point of early Stoic ethics, plays almost no role in his thought. Finally, Epictetus' references and allusions to each person's divine spirit can be interpreted as talking not about a guardian spirit looking after us, which perhaps is Chrysippus' understanding of it, but about the voice of correct reason in us, our normative self. ³

Concerning the role of the philosopher, in particular, what is a striking difference between Epictetus and the early Stoics is his emphasis on the fact that the philosopher is not someone who merely understands God's message and conveys it to others; rather, he is someone who tries to explain God's will by himself actually following it in his everyday life, not only in theory (*logōi*) but also in practice (*ergōi*):
But what is it I want? To learn from nature and to follow her. I seek, therefore, someone to interpret her; and having heard that Chrysippus does so, I go to him. But I do not understand what he has written; I seek, therefore, the person who interprets Chrysippus. And down to this point there is nothing to justify pride. But when I find the interpreter, what remains is to put his precepts into practice; this is the only thing to be proud about. If, however, I admire the mere act of interpretation, what have I done but turned into a grammarian instead of a philosopher? The only difference, indeed, is that I interpret Chrysippus instead of Homer. Far from being proud, therefore, when somebody says to me, ‘Read me Chrysippus,’ I blush rather, when I am unable to show him such deeds (erga) as match and harmonize with his words (logoi). (Ench. 49; cf. also, 1.17.13–19; 3.22.45–6; 3.24.110)

In fact, the role of the philosopher as God's messenger demands foremost that he show complete devotion to his mission to such a degree that even the most mundane of his actions come to be regulated in accordance with the philosopher's divine role:

Do you think you can practice philosophy and act as you do now? Do you think you can eat and drink and get angry and irritated in just the same way? You have to stay up at night, work hard, overcome certain desires, leave your family, be despised by a little slave, be jeered at by everyone, come off worst in everything, in office, in rank, and at court. Review all this, and then come forward, if you make that decision—if you want to give up those things in exchange for serenity, freedom, and tranquility. Otherwise, don't approach; don't be like a child, now a philosopher, next a tax-collector, then a rhetorician, then one of Caesar's bureaucrats. These things are not consistent. You have to (p. 62) be one person, either good or bad. You have either to work on your governing faculty or on externals, toil either over your inside or your outside. That is, you must take up the stance of a philosopher or of a layman. (3.15.10–13: trans. Long)

Thus, the life of the philosopher is a life of contemplation and tranquility, but also a life of discipline and hardship. Nevertheless, the philosopher does not complain; for, according to Epictetus, he knows that it is God himself who sends him such hardships in order to exercise him (gymnazei) (1.24.2;
3.22.56; 3.24.113). 4 And if someone who claims to be a philosopher does not manage to live the hard life of a messenger of God, Epictetus claims that there is nothing wrong with philosophy itself, or for that matter with God's message, but only with this particular person's understanding of what the philosopher's role is (4.8.4–9). On the other hand, the true philosopher knows well that if he achieves his divine mission, it is not him, that is the messenger or the interpreter, whom we should admire, but what he interprets, namely God's will (1.17.29). Thus, there really is no reason to boast of being a philosopher, since it is not the philosopher as a person who counts, but the role he performs, his deeds, which actually deliver God's message.

This is the reason why, according to Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher Euphrates of Tyre did not introduce himself as a philosopher; in fact, people began to wonder why he was always consorting and living with philosophers, if he himself was not a philosopher. Euphrates, Epictetus claims, did not want to be recognized as a philosopher by what he said or by how he appeared, for instance by wearing the philosopher's garb and beard, but by the way he behaved in everyday life. That is to say, he wanted to be recognized as a philosopher by the way he did ordinary things like eating, drinking, or walking. For what obviously mattered to him as a true philosopher, at least the way Epictetus portrays him, was the understanding and the spirit from which he performed even ordinary things like that (4.8.17–20). 5 And Epictetus has a similar story about Socrates, to whom he refers more than to any other as the ideal model of a philosopher; 6 when people asked him to introduce them to philosophers, he used to take them and introduce them to philosophers without being irritated, but on the contrary being pleased, for not being (p. 63 ) himself taken for one. For it was clear to him that it is much more important to be and act as a philosopher than to claim to be one (4.8.22–24; Ench. 46).

Still, the true philosopher who actually acted as God's messenger, whether he were to be perceived as such or not, would have a special position among humans. For instance, Epictetus portrays Socrates as having said the following in the course of his trial:

> Man, in every species nature produces some superior individual, among cattle, dogs, bees, horses. Pray do not say to the superior individual, ‘Well, then, who are you?’ or if you do, it will get a voice from somewhere and reply to you, ‘I am the same sort of thing as red in a mantle; do not expect me to resemble the rest, and do not blame my nature because it has made me different from the rest.’ (3.1.22–3)
The philosopher, therefore, is a superior human being who is clearly distinguished from ordinary humans, just as the red stripe on a mantle distinguishes a Roman senator from other Roman citizens. For the philosopher lives a life which exhibits his understanding of the divine order of things in everyday matters, even when faced by difficulties. And it is this way of life, a philosophical life, which is supposed to convey the divine message to ordinary human beings who, for whatever reasons, are unable to devote themselves to philosophy.

III

Having discussed the nature of the philosopher's divine mission as well as the requirements which, according to Epictetus, are necessary for its achievement, it is time to turn to the question concerning the history of the idea of the philosopher's role as God's messenger. There is a particular passage in the Discourses which throws some light on the subject; Epictetus here talks about how one should engage in philosophical discussion with the young, drawing his evidence from what earlier philosophers have done:

Nay, it may be that not even wisdom is all that is needed for the care of the young; one ought also to have a certain readiness and special fitness for this task, by Zeus, and a particular physique, and above all the counsel of God advising him to occupy this office, as God advised Socrates to take the office of examining and confuting men, Diogenes the office of kingship and castigation, and Zeno that of instructing men and laying down doctrines. (3.21.18–19)

(p. 64) It thus seems that all the philosophers whom Epictetus admires were, according to him, given by God a specific task in philosophy. And it is Socrates, in particular, that Epictetus refers to again and again in connection with the philosopher's divine mission. For instance, in the following passage Epictetus presents Socrates' speech towards the judges in his trial in this way:

‘If you tell me now,’ says he, ‘ “We will acquit you on these conditions, namely, that you will no longer engage in these discussions which you have conducted hitherto, nor trouble either the young or the old among us,” I will answer, “You make yourselves ridiculous by thinking that, if your general had stationed me at any post, I ought to hold and maintain it and choose rather to die ten thousand times than to desert it, but if God has stationed us in some place and in some manner
of life we ought to desert that.” ‘ This is what it means for a man to be in very truth a kinsman (sungenēs) of the gods. (1.9.23-6)

Reading these passages what of course comes to one's mind is Plato's reference to Socrates' divine mission in the Apology (20e8–21a8; 23b4-c1; 33c4-7). The story is well-known: Socrates says that his friend Chaerephon asked the Delphic oracle if there is any man wiser than Socrates, and the oracle responded that no one is. Socrates interprets the oracle as indicating that God wanted him to continue in his search for knowledge and to examine other persons' claim to wisdom. Modern scholars, however, have been puzzled about Socrates' divine mission. They wonder, for instance, whether this is another example of Socrates' notorious irony, and whether Plato ever intended what is said about the oracle to be taken seriously. They also wonder whether Socrates' philosophical activity can be adequately explained simply as a matter of accepting the oracle's simple statement that no one is wiser than Socrates; for, although this is naturally understood as endorsing Socrates' own quest for wisdom, Socrates presents his divine mission as one of converting others to the pursuit of truth and the perfection of their souls, rather than their material well-being. 7

However, it is not my aim here to examine whether Socrates actually thought of his philosophical activity as a mission assigned to him by God. Rather, what I am interested in is that Epictetus, probably under the influence of Plato's Apology, interprets Socrates in this way, and decides to generalize and talk about the divine vocation of all philosophers. 8 But is it only Socrates' example which influenced Epictetus in his belief that true philosophers are God's messengers? For philosophers after Plato, even though they tend to see in Socrates the paradigmatic philosopher, do not take up the suggestion that Socrates was following a divine vocation. Hence, if it is not a certain philosophical tradition, what other tradition could have influenced Epictetus in his understanding of Socrates' role and that of the true philosopher in general?

It is of course tempting to associate the image of the philosopher—as God's messenger (angelos), an ‘angel’, as God's witness (martus), a ‘martyr’, as God's servant (diakonos), a ‘deacon’, as someone sent (apostellein) by God, an ‘apostle’, as someone who has been converted, tries to convert others and is constantly tested by God—with Judaism or Christianity. But we should be hesitant to make hasty inferences about the influence of the Old or the New Testament on Epictetus. Scholars have long noticed that the Discourses
share common words and phrases with the Scriptures, which are relevant to the issue of the philosopher's role, especially with the New Testament and here in particular with St Paul, for example: the words 'κλησις' (vocation: 1.29.49/Eph. 4: 1; I Cor. 7: 20) and 'σωτηρία' (salvation: 3.23.11; 26/Rom. 1: 16); the verb 'ἐπιστρέφειν' (to convert: 2.20.22/Luke 22: 32; Acts 3: 19); the phrases 'κυρίε ἐλέησον' (Lord have mercy on us: 2.7.12/Matthew 20: 30; 31; 17: 15); 'χαρίς τοῦ θεοῦ' (thank God: 4.4.7/Rom. 7: 25; 6: 17; I Cor. 15: 51; II Cor. 2: 14; 8: 16; 9: 15); and 'ἐπιγνώσις τῆς ἀληθείας' (knowledge of the truth: 2.20.21/Heb. 10: 26; I Tim. 2: 4; II Tim. 2: 25; 3: 7; Titus 1: 1). Nevertheless, such striking similarities in the vocabulary have been convincingly explained by the fact that both Epictetus and the authors of the Scriptural texts use the common conversational language of the day, which reflects a common way of thinking about things in this period.  

Epictetus is not the only pagan philosopher in late antiquity who attributes to philosophers the role of the mediator between human beings and the divine. Dio of Prusa, a contemporary of Epictetus and a Stoic philosopher, says that his life, too, was guided by an oracle; when (p. 66) he was banished by Domitian from Italy and Bithynia, he claims to have decided to consult Apollo who advised him to continue his honourable wandering until he came to the end of the earth. Encouraged by this advice, he put on a humble garb and began to wander everywhere. Many thought he was a tramp or a beggar, but some took him for a philosopher; and so he acquired this title. Moreover, since people came to him for advice and asked his opinion about what is good and what is evil, he was forced to think about such questions and to talk about them in public (Or. 13.9–12). In addition to this story, there are more passages in Dio's Orations in which he repeats his belief in his divine mission as a philosopher (e.g. 1.55; 12.5–8; 32.12–13; 21; 34.4–5; 45.1).

Furthermore, the Neopythagorean Apollonius of Tyana, another contemporary of Epictetus, is portrayed by Philostratus in his Life of Apollonius (5.37) as someone who believed that philosophical understanding requires divine inspiration; and this can be attained, according to Apollonius, both by an ascetic life and by certain ritual practices which were sometimes regarded as magic. For being able to get in touch with the divine and to acquire some understanding of its workings was supposed to endow one with extraordinary powers, which Apollonius was thought to have. For instance, he is said to have foreseen the future, to have cured patients in miraculous ways, to have appeared in distant places at the same time, to have brought a dead man back to life, and to have been resurrected. Though he understandably was sometimes accused of being a charlatan, Philostratus
tries to defend him and present him as a true philosopher and divine man, not different from Socrates and Anaxagoras (1.2). Finally, in the second half of the second century the Platonist Maximus of Tyre firmly believes that the philosopher's body is inhabited by a divine spirit (daimôn/daimonion) which reveals to him what is hidden (Or. 8.8; 10.10), so that he can become a messenger (angelos: Or. 11.9) and spokesman of God (hupophêtēs: Or. 11.6). Maximus discusses, in particular, Socrates' daimonion (Orations 8 & 9), following the Platonist tradition in Epictetus' times of works like Plutarch's On Socrates' Daimonion and Apuleius' On Socrates' God. 12

(p. 67) Hence, in spite of the clear dogmatic and stylistic differences between these philosophers and Epictetus, it seems that there is a common motif in the thought of various philosophers of Imperial times, all of whom present the true philosopher as someone who has been sent by God to carry out a divine mission. It may be that Plato's Socrates provided the example, but it is also important that, for reasons which obviously are related to the particular time in which Epictetus lives, the idea of Socrates' divine mission comes to be taken up again, having been of hardly any interest or use to Epictetus' predecessors. 13

IV

How, at this time, does the need arise for the philosopher to conceive of his position as assigned to him by God? This brings us to our final question about what it concretely means for a philosopher in Epictetus' time to think of his role as that of God's messenger. So, let us look once more closely at what Epictetus himself has to say concerning the role of the philosopher, picking up some of the themes already discussed.

Epictetus claims that the theories of previous philosophers are a dead letter, if there is no one to show how they can be put into practice. Indeed, it seems that the discussions and disagreements among philosophers at the end of the Hellenistic period left the pessimistic impression that philosophical disputes do not lead anywhere, in the sense that they do not lead in a convincing way to guidance and concrete advice on how to attain a good life. Epictetus suggests that, in order to remedy this problem, philosophers should, in their theories and especially with their lives, live up to their divine mission and deliver by their practice God's message to human beings. It is then up to the ordinary man to grasp the philosophers' interpretation of God's will and to follow their example. In fact, Epictetus explicitly says in the
Discourses that philosophers are sent by God as examples (*paradeigmata*) to the uninstructed: (p. 68)

Does God so neglect his own creatures, his servants, his witnesses, whom alone he uses as examples (*paradeigmasin*) to the uninstructed, to prove that he both is, and governs the universe well, and does not neglect the affairs of men, and that no evil befalls a good man either in life or in death? (3.26.28)

This also is the reason why Epictetus himself makes frequent use in his lectures of particular episodes taken from the lives of paradigmatic philosophers, like for instance Socrates or Diogenes; and he repeatedly stresses that they should be treated as examples for other men to follow (e.g. 4.1.152; 159; 170; 4.8.31; 4.5).

Hence, Epictetus' conception of the philosopher as God's messenger accommodates the need of his time to look to philosophy for a realistic alternative to the life of ordinary human beings in their attempt to pursue happiness. For the philosopher, according to this view, understands the natural order of things and tries to live in accordance with it, so that by his example he shows the layman how not to be distracted by irrelevant trivialities and how to free himself of his failings. Epictetus uses the medical analogy according to which the philosopher's lecture room is a doctor's surgery (*iatreion*), where humans seek to be cured from their misguided desires and false beliefs. But the cure is feasible only when the doctor knows how to apply his medical knowledge, i.e. when the philosopher actually knows how to deliver God's message:

*But you are opening up a doctor's surgery although you possess no equipment other than drugs, but when or how these drugs are applied you neither know nor have ever taken the trouble to learn.* (3.21.20; cf. also, 2.21.15; 3.23.30)

The central feature, therefore, of the role of the philosopher as God's messenger is to cure human beings from their weaknesses and help them to attain a good life; in other words, the role of the philosopher turns out to be the salvation of human beings (*sôteria*):

*Does a man, then, differ in no way from a stork?—Far from it; but in these matters he does not differ.—In what way, then, does he differ? Seek and you will find that he differs in some other respect. See whether it be not in his understanding what he does, see whether it be not in his capacity for social action, in his faithfulness, his self‐respect, his steadfastness,
his security from error, his intelligence. Where, then, is the
great evil and the great good among men? Just where the
difference is; and if that element wherein the difference lies
be saved (sōzetai) and stands firm and well fortified on every
side, and neither his self‐respect, nor his faithfulness, nor his
intelligence be destroyed, then the man also is saved (sōzetai);
but if any of these qualities be destroyed or taken by storm,
then the man also is destroyed. (1.28.19–21; cf. also, 2.9.8–11;
4.1.161–5)

(p. 69) It is important to stress that the notion of salvation here used refers
to a person's salvation through understanding and appropriate attitude
and behaviour, rather than to salvation as a matter of purely intellectual
conviction.

Yet this notion of salvation is a secular notion. For the conversion to
philosophy, or a life in accordance with the philosophical precepts, is
made possible by the example of the philosopher who, although he is
God's messenger, is not himself a divine power. For it may be that divine
providence makes the philosopher an intermediary between God and
human beings in the sense that he is someone whose choices, desires,
and wishes are the same as God's (sunormein/sunoregesthai/sunthelein:
2.17.23; 4.7.20), someone who is of one mind with God (homognomonein:
2.16.42; 2.19.26), someone who has communion with God (sunanastrophē:
1.9.5/koinōnia: 1.9.5; 2.19.27), someone who seeks to become like God and
is an imitator of God (eksomoiousthai/zēlōtēs: 2.14.12–13), someone who is
kinsman of God (sungenēs: 1.9.1; 22; 25), someone who is even God's son
(1.9.6), but he still is not God himself:

Let one of you show me the soul of a man who wishes to be
of one mind (homognōmonēsai) with God, and never again
to blame either God or man, to fail in nothing that he would
achieve, to fall into nothing that he would avoid, to be free
from anger, envy and jealousy—but why use circumlocutions?
—a man who has set his heart upon changing from a man into
a God, and though he is still in this little body, this corpse, has
communion (koinōnias) with Zeus as his purpose. Show him to
me! But you cannot. (2.19.26–7)

As this last passage makes clear, however, it is not at all easy to perform
the role of the true philosopher. But Epictetus does not lose heart; he often
talks about the progress (prokopē: 1.2.33–7; 1.4.1–32; 2.11.1–6; 4.12.19–21)
which humans can actually make and constantly encourages them to follow
the example of those philosophers who really are God's messengers:
   And even if you are not yet a Socrates, still you ought to live as
one who wishes to be a Socrates. (Ench. 51)

V

To conclude, there is no doubt that on Epictetus' view no divine revelation
or religious faith in our sense is needed to save one's soul or (p. 70) to help
other human beings save theirs. For Epictetus insists that, just by relying
on our ordinary cognitive abilities, we can attain the kind of understanding
of the world in the light of which we have the right attitude towards things.
When Epictetus presents the philosopher as God's messenger, he certainly
follows a tradition of philosophers from the first century bc onwards who
are more interested in questions about God and the soul; but this does not
mean that he diverges from the main dogmas of Stoic rationalism. For to
follow God, according to Epictetus, means that we should pay attention
to the God in us, i.e. to our reason, in order to determine what is the right
thing for us, namely how we are to live in accordance with nature. But
when salvation later becomes a matter of divine revelation and faith, the
well-being of human beings is not entrusted to philosophers any more.
Philosophers, therefore, lose their role as God's interpreters and messengers,
and philosophy becomes primarily an intellectual exercise in the service
of aims and ends not determined by philosophy itself, but for instance by
religion.

Notes:

(1) The translations of texts from Epictetus' Discourses are, unless otherwise
stated, by W. A. Oldfather from the Loeb edition with small changes. Long's
translations are from his (2002) book.

(2) As Long points out (2002: 120, 168–9), Epictetus often uses military
metaphors. In particular, there is an elaborate military metaphor in which
God is portrayed as the general, men whose judgements are out of line with
God's management of the world as military rebels, and dutiful world citizens
as obedient soldiers in God's army (3.24). There is a similar metaphor in
Aristotle (Met. 1075a13–15), comparing God to a general and the world in its
order to an army.


(8) It is quite interesting that both Diogenes and Zeno, the other two philosophers who are admired by Epictetus as paradigmatic philosophers, are also presented in the doxographic tradition as having been influenced by the oracle in their decision to become philosophers (cf. Diogenes Laertius 6.20–1; 7.2).

(9) cf. Bonhöffer (1911); Sharp (1914).


(13) There seems to be, however, a crucial difference between Socrates' conception of his divine mission and the way Epictetus sees the role of the philosopher as God's messenger. For Socrates was mainly concerned with the moral improvement of his own fellow citizens, the Athenians, whereas Epictetus' philosopher adheres to the Stoic cosmopolitanism of Imperial times and interprets his divine mission as encompassing the whole of mankind (e.g. 1.9.1; 2.10.3; 3.24.66). On Epictetus' cosmopolitanism, cf. Stanton (1968); Schofield (1991: 57–92; 141–5); Long (2002: 233–5).