Ilaria Ramelli’s commentary on the transmitted writings by Hierocles the Stoic (around 125 C.E.) is a monument to two developments in scholarship that have hitherto not been combined in this way. The first is represented by Ramelli herself, who since 2000 has published more than 43 longer and shorter works—almost all in Italian—in the fields of Hellenistic philosophy (particularly Stoicism) and early Christianity. In the present book she constantly draws on and introduces the reader to the views of other established Italian scholars in the field of Stoic studies, such as Roberto Radice (e.g., his 2000 Italian book on Stoic oikeiōsis) and Margherita Isnardi Parente (primarily her ANRW article, also in Italian, on Hierocles himself). What the reader gets here is an extensive introduction to the admirable tradition in Italian scholarship of the study of Hellenistic philosophy.

The other recent development is the turn in American New Testament scholarship inaugurated some decades ago by Abraham Malherbe to consider the relationship of Hellenistic moral philosophy and the New Testament. The series in which the present book is published had as its founding general editor one of Malherbe’s pupils, John T. Fitzgerald, and Ramelli’s book itself has been translated and edited by David Konstan, one of the current general editors of the series and also a member of the steering committee of the SBL “Hellenistic Moral Philosophy and the New Testament Group,”
originally set up by Malherbe and Fitzgerald. What we have here, then, is a happy meeting of two relatively long-standing and distinguished scholarly traditions that have never been combined in this way.

Two sets of texts have been transmitted to us by Hierocles the Stoic (not to be confused with a fifth-century Neoplatonic philosopher of the same name). The Elements of Ethics were preserved on papyrus and edited and published for the first time by Hans von Arnim in 1906. They have since been re-edited by Guido Bastianini and Anthony A. Long in 1992. This is the text that Ramelli prints and uses. The present translation of this work—a work that has intrigued students of the central, Stoic theory of oikeiosis since its publication—is the first one ever into English (even though some portions were translated by Long and Sedley in The Hellenistic Philosophers in 1987). The other work by Hierocles consists of substantial excerpts from his work On Appropriate Acts that have been preserved for us by Stobaeus. These have been translated into English before, for example, by Abraham Malherbe in 1986. The Greek text employed by Ramelli is basically the one that was also included by von Arnim in his 1906 edition of the Elements.

What we get in the present book is first a very substantial introductory essay (71 pages) by Ramelli on all issues raised by the two texts, then the full Greek text and translation of each work (16 + 16 pages and 16 + 16 pages), and, finally, a commentary on each text (28 and 39 pages, respectively). In addition, there is very informative bibliography of 31 pages.

Hierocles the Stoic was one of the so-called “Neo-Stoics” or “Roman Stoics.” In addition to Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius (from around 1 C.E. to 180 C.E.), the same period also saw a number of “minor” Roman Stoics such as Musonius Rufus, Cornutus, Persius, Chaeremon, Thrasea Paetus, and Hierocles, on whom Ramelli has herself published a book in 2008: Stoici romani minori. In fact, Ramelli does a very good job in the present commentary of referring to and quoting from these co-Stoics of Hierocles (in particular, Musonius Rufus). In this way, she manages to situate Hierocles squarely within Roman Neo-Stoicism, even though she also acknowledges that in many respects Hierocles remained a pupil of the Old Stoics, in particular Chrysippus. The careful sifting of what may or may not be (Roman and) new in Hierocles vis-à-vis Old Stoicism is one of the best features of the book.

This issue is far from unimportant, for the two main topics treated by Hierocles in both works are these: the Stoic theory of oikeiosis (which Ramelli and Konstan render “appropriation” or “familiarization”; xxx, but see below) and the Stoic theory of kathekonta (“appropriate acts”). Both topics are central to Stoic ethics probably from the very beginning, the first one by providing the logical basis for the Stoic theory of the good
(and “indifferents” and “preferables”), the second by outlining the Stoic theory of “acts-to-be-done.” Is it then the “official” (that is, probably Chrysippean) Stoic account that we also find in Hierocles, or is it a somewhat changed one? For oikeiosis, Ramelli decides for a more or less “official” line, whereas she thinks that Hierocles’ account of kathekonta is to a certain degree influenced by the Middle Stoics, including Panaitius, who famously wrote on the topic (as we know from Cicero’s On Duties). She may or may not be right here, but her understanding of a “‘softening’ of the rigorous, Stoic line, which begins to be visible in Middle Stoicism” (xliv and elsewhere) is one of the least persuasive aspects of her overall view of Stoicism. A change of focus there probably was, but the theory of kathekonta was part and parcel of Old Stoic ethics, and there is really nothing in Hierocles himself that speaks for any “softening.”

Now for a few general, critical remarks on the book. We may reasonably begin with the translation, both of Ramelli’s book from the Italian and also of the Greek and Latin texts by Hierocles, Musonius, and others. The person who is responsible for all this is David Konstan. He has been working closely together with Ramelli on it, but for the Greek and Latin sources also “directly from the original texts” (vii). This is all superbly done, and it is a pleasure to read a work where such care has been taken over the rendering. However, let it just be noted that Konstan’s translation of Hierocles’ use of the central term of oikeiosis itself as “becoming one’s own and familiar” (e.g., 25) seems less than persuasive. Saying that when an animal has received the first perception of itself, it immediately “becomes its own and familiar to itself and to its constitution” (19), appears even more opaque than the Greek itself.

Ramelli’s introduction and commentary are both sensible and highly informative. In fact, the book is a veritable mine of information on relevant literature, both ancient (which is often extensively quoted) and not least that of modern scholarship from the last hundred years. (Ramelli’s command of the secondary literature is amazing.) The analysis of Hierocles’ argument is also always clear and persuasive. What one misses, however, are more attempts by Ramelli herself to solve interpretive issues. Very often she is happy to refer to and more or less implicitly accept the interpretations given by the best among her predecessors, such as Bastianini and Long, whom she follows quite a lot in the Elements. She does put forward her own views, as in a good defense on pages 126–27 of an alternative understanding of the Greek on page 91. Further, a (single) huge footnote on pages l–liv on the proper understanding of mesa (intermediate things “between” good and evil) as “indifferents” shows that she is quite capable of arguing a point independently. It remains the case, however, that the strength of the book lies more in documentation than in incisive questioning and interpretation.
Is it worth for readers of this journal to study the texts by Hierocles? Most certainly. For one thing, I have myself argued (in Paul and the Stoics, 2000, but see also “The Relationship with Others: Similarities and Differences Between Paul and Stoicism,” ZNW 96 [2005]: 35–60) that the Stoic theory of oikeiosis may be employed as a key to understanding the inner connection in Paul between “religious” conversion (the Christ experience) and “ethics” (although these two things should precisely not be separated). Since both texts by Hierocles address key elements in that Stoic theory, they should be pondered by anyone who wishes to gain a deeper understanding of Paul.

But there is much more of value here. For instance, in On Appropriate Acts, Hierocles at one point articulates a general principle of action:

For pretty much every role [e.g., master and slave, parent and child], this argument is sound: that the treatment of anyone is clear from supposing that one is oneself that person and that that person is oneself. For, in fact, a person would treat a slave well, if he considered how he would think the other should behave toward himself, if the other were the master and he himself the slave. And the argument is similar for parents in respect to children and children in respect to parents and, in a word, for all in respect to all. (87, emphasis added)

No wonder that Ramelli is ready with a long note (pp. 123–24 n. 33) on “parallels between the New Testament and Hierocles and Hellenistic moral philosophy generally.”

Another example: Just after he has articulated his principle of reciprocity, Hierocles considers how one should treat one’s brother. Suppose someone feels that he is himself a balanced and decent person but his brother is crude and unsociable. Then

even if your brother really should be such, … at all events you, I would say, must show yourself to be better and to conquer his cruelty with your good deeds. For it is no great grace to behave decently toward those who are well-disposed, but it is the task of a man and worthy of great approbation to make a crude and stupid person gentle by what you do toward him. (87–89)

One might go on like this on the look-out for what are in fact very close similarities with New Testament sentiments. Here, however, we should leave the chase to readers of Hierocles themselves. Due to the dedicated efforts of both Ramelli and Konstan, that task has now become immeasurably easier.