

ATHENIAN CURIOSITY (ACTS 17:21)

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Abstract

Whereas commentators regularly note that Luke, through Paul, employs ambiguous language at the beginning of his address before the Areopagus in Acts 17, the link between Paul's reference to his audience as *δεισιδαμονέστερος* in v 22 and Luke's mention of the Athenians' insatiable curiosity in the preceding verse has gone heretofore unnoticed. This study discusses the popular stereotype of the busybody in Greek and Roman literature and the ways in which it sheds new light on the opening and closing of the speech.

In the commentary tradition on the Areopagus address, it is *de rigueur* to note the polyvalence of Paul's *exordium*.¹ Although *δεισιδαμονέστερος* allows for such a reading in Acts 17:22, the KJV—"I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious"²—almost certainly gets it wrong, or so the majority of interpreters argue.³ To read the comparative adjective as a *captatio benevolentiae*,⁴ that is, as a currying of the audience's favor by commending them for being "exceptionally religious," perhaps errs by going too far in the opposite direction.⁵ The scholarly

¹ F F Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1951) 335; Luke T Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992) 314; Mark D Given, "Not Either/Or but Both/And in Paul's Areopagus Speech," *BibInt* 3 (1995) 364-5; Jacob Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (KEKNT 3, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 445.

² Cf. NKJV, NASB, ASV, RSV "very religious"; NRSV "extremely religious."

³ H Armin Moellerling, "Deisidamonia: A Footnote to Acts 17:22," *CTQ* 34 (1963) 471; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (trans. R. McL. Wilson, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 520 n. 7; Howard Clark Kee, *To Every Nation under Heaven: The Acts of the Apostles* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1997) 215.

⁴ Hans Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (HNT 7, Tübingen: Mohr, 1963) 97; Dean Zweck, "The *Exordium* of the Areopagus Speech, Acts 17:22, 23," *NTS* 35 (1989) 100-101; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997) 520.

⁵ Cf. Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Beginnings of Christianity: Part I, The Acts of the Apostles* (ed. F. J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake, 5 vols., London: Macmillan, 1920-33) 4:215; Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 335.

consensus now emphasizes Luke's artful use of ambiguous religious language that can be read in either way, for either rhetorical or ironical purposes.⁶

The link between Paul's reference to his audience as *δεισιδαίμωνέστερος* in v. 22 and Luke's mention of the Athenians' insatiable curiosity in the preceding verse has gone heretofore unnoticed. Luke's unusually direct authorial comment on this aspect of the Athenian character avoids the basic Greek terms for curiosity (e.g., *πολυπραγμοσύνη, περιεργία*).⁷ The Athenians nevertheless exhibit the behaviors typical of the busybody in ancient Greece and Rome. Their curiosity about the novel message concerning "Jesus and the resurrection" in vv. 18-19 leads them to question Paul on Mars Hill: "May we know what this new teaching is which you proclaim?" In a narrative aside, Luke explains in v. 21 that "the Athenians and the foreigners living there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing some new thing."

1. *Curiosity and the Greco-Roman Moralists*

The popular stereotype of the busybody provides a fresh clue to the opening and the closing of the speech. By no means is curiosity categorically denounced by ancient moralists.⁸ What separates acceptable from detestable curiosity is, above all, the object. Inquisitiveness that leads to genuine learning and wisdom is commendable (Seneca, *Nat. Praef.* 12). This kind of curiosity is unfortunately the exception and not the rule. Greek and Roman writers rue the fact that idle curiosity into worthless matters is all too common among the people (Cicero,

⁶ Bertil Gärtner; *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (trans. C. H. King; ASNU 21; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1955) 238; Mark D. Given, "The Unknown Paul: Philosophers and Sophists in Acts 17," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1996 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 35; ed. E. H. Lovering; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996) 343-51; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 606. For a nearly comprehensive survey of the extant occurrences of *δεισιδαιμονία* and its cognates, see P. J. Koets, *Δεισιδαιμονία: A Contribution to the Knowledge of the Religious Terminology in Greek* (Purmerend: Muusses, 1929). While the neutral or favorable sense is still attested, the pejorative usage comes to dominate by the first century.

⁷ For the negative connotations of *πολυπραγμοσύνη* and cognates, see Plato, *Resp.* 433A, 444B; Philo, *Abr.* 20-21; Aulus Gellius, *Noct. att.* 11.16.6-9; Aelian, *Var. hist.* 12.1. For *περιεργία*, see Sir. 3:23; Acts 19:19; 2 Thess. 3:11; 1 Tim. 5:13; Josephus, *Ant.* 12.112; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 3.1.21; Herm. *Sim.* 9.2.7.

⁸ For the contours of the ancient debate through the patristic period, see André Labhardt, "Curiositas: Notes sur l'histoire d'un mot et d'une notion," *MH* 17 (1960) 206-24; Robert Joly, "Curiositas," *L'Antiquité Classique* 30 (1961) 33-44.

Off. 1.18-19; Seneca, *Ep.* 88.36-38). So familiar was the stereotype that it appeared as a stock character in the titles of plays about the restless Athenians by Timocles, Diphilus, and Heniochus.⁹ And while Terence is celebrated for his humanism on account of his statement, “I am a man, and I consider nothing human to be foreign to me” (*Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto. Haut.* 1.1.25.77), it is usually overlooked that these lines are spoken by a comic character seeking to justify his habit of meddling in the affairs of others when told to mind his own business.¹⁰

Plutarch’s essay *De curiositate* is perhaps the most famous treatment of the *topos*. Aulus Gellius (*Noct. att.* 11.16.2) is able to identify Plutarch as the author as early as the middle of the second century, and Apuleius almost certainly knows of the essay even earlier.¹¹ For Plutarch, curiosity is an unhealthy state of mind too often coupled with envy and malice (*Curios.* 513D). Such busybodies accordingly neglect their own faults and focus instead on those of others (516D, 516A, D; cf. *Tranq. An.* 469B). They have no interest in that which is in plain view but are always prying into whatever is concealed (517B, 518C). Old stories hold little appeal for the curious, who have an appetite only for novelties (517F, 519A-B). Lest busybodies be accused of an unhealthy interest in all things new, Plutarch points out that they care only about bad news, not happy or edifying news (518C). Yet the curious have no desire to dwell upon their own troubles (518D-F). For this reason they cannot endure the quiet of the countryside and are forever visiting the agora—anything to divert their attention from their own faults (519A-B, 521D).

Self-control is necessary for curbing the appetite for curiosities according to Plutarch (*Curios.* 520D-522F). There are two practical strategies for cultivating this requisite virtue. First, Plutarch recommends shifting one’s attentions from external concerns to internal ones (515D-516C). The habitually curious man should follow the example of Aristippus and study philosophy, “the end of which is to recognize one’s own faults and so to be rid of them” (516C). If this will not work, then one’s inquisitiveness must be directed at more salutary objects: “Direct your curiosity to heavenly things and things on the

⁹ Cf. LSJ, s.v. *πολυπράγμων*; cf. Thucydides 3.38.5.

¹⁰ Labhardt, “Curiositas,” 207.

¹¹ P. G. Walsh, “The Rights and Wrongs of Curiosity (Plutarch to Augustine),” *GR* 35 (1988) 74-77.

earth, in the air, in the sea" (517D). The study of nature and history are safe outlets for those who must focus on matters external to the self.¹²

As Plutarch and others recognize, however, even these seemingly harmless areas of study can stoke immoderate intellectual passions. Here Plutarch treats πολυπραγμοσύνη as an obstacle on the road to human flourishing. Writing in Latin, Apuleius uses the term *curiositas* and develops this theme along a theological trajectory.¹³ Whereas Ps.-Lucian in *Lucius, or the Ass* does not regard πολυπραγμοσύνη as so grave a moral fault as does Apuleius, it is worth noting that both writers tell the story of the man transformed into a donkey to warn their readers about the dangers of dabbling in magic and the occult (Apuleius, *Metam.* 11.15.1; 11.23.6). The inserted tale of Cupid and Psyche conveys the same message: resist the temptations of *sacrilega curiositas* (*Metam.* 5.6.3; cf. 6.20.5; 6.21.4).¹⁴ On the one hand, Apuleius scoffs at such activities as silly and meddling; on the other, the profundity of his own religious experience leads him to regard witchcraft and other attempts at initiating traffic with the gods as an illicit penetration of holy mysteries.¹⁵

Apuleius' concerns dovetail with those of Plutarch. Although he does not make the link explicit in the essay on πολυπραγμοσύνη, Plutarch is distressed by the same dangers of curiosity as Apuleius. He voices these concerns in his essay on superstition (δεισιδαιμονία). It is no coincidence that he cites the same Pythagorean maxim in this essay and in the one on curiosity. In the latter essay he quotes from the *Carmina Aurea* 42—"Where did I err? What have I done? Which of my duties have I neglected?"—to provide an example of introspection for the habitually inquisitive (*Curios.* 515F). In the former essay he puts the verse in the mouth of the self-reflective atheist whom he compares favorably to the superstitious whose tendency it is to blame the gods

¹² In this respect Plutarch prefers the Aristotelian position in favor of disinterested inquiry to the Stoic tendency to eschew all study which distracts the individual from the pursuit of virtue. Cf. Walsh, "The Rights and Wrongs of Curiosity," 78-80.

¹³ On the relationship between the Latin and Greek vocabulary, see Labhardt, "Curiositas," 206-16; and Carl C. Schlam, "The Curiosity of the Golden Ass," *CJ* 64 (1968-69) 120-21.

¹⁴ Apuleius' elaboration of the theme he shares with the Greek *Metamorphoses* has been analyzed by H. J. Mette, "Curiositas," *Festschrift Bruno Snell* (Munich: Beck, 1956) 227-35; S. Lancel, "Curiositas et préoccupations spirituelles chez Apulée," *RHR* 160 (1961) 25-46; and Walsh, "The Rights and Wrongs of Curiosity," 174-8.

¹⁵ Schlam, "The Curiosity of the Golden Ass," 122-5.

for every calamity (*Superst.* 168B). Excessive interest in natural phenomena, furthermore, all too easily evolves into an obsession with omens, prodigies, astrology and the like.¹⁶ His concluding endorsement of the golden mean (*Superst.* 171F) therefore functions as a check on religious exuberance and intellectual inquisitiveness alike, inasmuch as the latter frequently leads to the former.

2. *Luke's Curious Athenians*

When Luke has Paul address his audience in Acts 17:22 by commenting that they are *δεισιδαίμονέστερος*, it is not likely by accident in light of the common association between superstition and curiosity in the first century, nor is it intended as a straightforward compliment for their perspicuity in spiritual matters. Other components of the speech and its narrative frame likewise overlap with matters of concern in discussions of curiosity and thus contribute to the negative characterization of Paul's audience. That the Athenians misconstrue his preaching about "Jesus and the resurrection" as a deity and his female consort—like Venus and Adonis or Zeus and Dione—is in line with the busybody's prurient interest in sex. Their devotion to the "unknown God" conforms to the pattern of prying into things that are hidden or concealed. Paul also attempts to shift their attention away from calendrical and cosmological speculations about the times and seasons and toward the true god (vv. 26-27).¹⁷ Many interpreters argue that Luke is intentionally conjuring up images of Socrates in his portrayal of Paul.¹⁸ If so, he probably takes great delight in having Paul cite a well-known pagan treatise on astronomy (Aratus, *Phaen.* 5) in censuring the Athenians, whose ancestors condemned Socrates for

¹⁶ Such preoccupations receive the pejorative label *δεισιδαίμονία* throughout Plutarch's corpus (e.g., *Quaest. rom.* 269E-F; *Rom.* 24.1; *Per.* 6.1; *Nic.* 23.1, 5; *Brut.* 39.3; *Alex.* 75.2; *Caes.* 63.7). In *Alex.* 2.5, he links *πολυπραγμοσύνη* with magic.

¹⁷ Decades later the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* uses the same language and resorts to a similar collocation of motifs in differentiating Christianity from Judaism. He places Judaism in the category of *δεισιδαίμονία* (1; 4.1) alongside the Greeks because they foolishly believe that God, "who made heaven and earth and all that is in them" (3.4), actually has need of their sacrifices. Inordinate attention to the stars and the moon and arbitrary distinctions between the shifting seasons ordered by God furthermore marks the Jews as superstitious. By rejecting these, says the author, Christians avoid the pitfalls of Jewish *πολυπραγμοσύνη* (4.6; 5.3).

¹⁸ Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 527-8; Karl Olav Sandnes, "Paul and Socrates: The Aim of Paul's Areopagus Speech," *JSTNT* 50 (1993) 13-26.

his inordinate interest in "things above and things below the earth" and for introducing new, foreign gods (Plato, *Apol.* 19B, 24B).

In their reaction to the last two verses of the speech, Paul's Athenian audience displays the most culpable traits of the busybody. Nothing peculiarly Christian has appeared in the speech prior to v. 30. Numerous studies have documented the many ways in which the content of vv. 23-29 resonates with pagan, and especially Stoic, ideas about the gods and the universe.¹⁹ Paul turns a corner in vv. 30-31 and makes exclusivistic claims about the Christian revelation:

God has overlooked the times of ignorance but now commands all humans in all places to repent, because he has set a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man who he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.

Insofar as the speech is Luke's composition, these lines form the conclusion. Whether the historical Paul concluded in this fashion cannot be ascertained. Nor is it clear whether Luke intended to present this piece of oratory without its planned ending, that is, cut short by the audience's reaction to it. It is possible either that Luke means to portray the audience as interrupting Paul before he is able to finish or that he intentionally brings the discourse to a close with a kind of theological cliffhanger: Who is this unnamed judge? When is the appointed day of judgment? What is the meaning of this talk of "rising from the dead"?²⁰

However one construes Luke's compositional technique in vv. 30-31, in terms of content the timing of the Athenians' reaction is telling. Perhaps Paul continued speaking, but Luke portrays the audience as no longer listening to him at the mention of the resurrection (v. 32). Some mock him and some simply withhold their judgment until they hear more at a later time.²¹ When Luke introduces the characters in

¹⁹ Among many others, see Martin Dibelius, "Paul on the Areopagus," in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. H. Greeven; trans. M. Ling; New York: Scribner's, 1956) 26-77; and David L. Balch, "The Areopagus Speech: An Appeal to the Stoic Historian Posidonius against Later Stoics and the Epicureans," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. D. Balch, E. Ferguson, and W. Meeks; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 52-79.

²⁰ George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 131.

²¹ C. K. Barrett ("Paul's Speech on the Areopagus," in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World* [ed. M. Glasswell and E. Fasholé-Luke; London: SPCK, 1974] 71) and Jerome H. Neyrey ("Acts 17, Epicureans, and Theodicy: A Study in Stereotypes," in Balch et al. [ed.], *Greeks, Romans, and Christians*, 127-9) contend that Luke means for the reader to see here a division between the Stoic and Epicurean responses to Paul.

vv. 19-21, he comments on their preoccupation with novelties. The reader understands that they listen attentively up to the point in v. 30 when Paul begins his peroration, yet nothing particularly new appears in this section of the speech. The announcement of God's call for repentance, of eschatological judgment, of Jesus' role as judge, and of the resurrection is truly novel. Why, then, do they lose interest?

Two specific topics broached by Paul, along with the proclivities of the stereotyped busybody, supply the answer to this last question. First, Paul calls attention to the deficiencies of his audience and issues a call for introspection. Although much of the speech is taken up with affirmations of beliefs about God held in common by Christians and pagans, Paul's indictment of the "times of ignorance" in v. 30 extends to those, like his audience, who live in those times. As diplomatically as possible, Paul states that their knowledge of God remains incomplete. The required supplement to their natural knowledge of God, moreover, is not optional. While God has winked at ignorance in times past, a day of judgment is coming on which such ignorance will be deemed blameworthy. Knowledge of God has as its corollary a knowledge of oneself, manifested in the act of repentance. This transition in Paul's message is anathema to busybodies. They take great pride in what they know, so the last thing such persons want is to be thought ignorant. Even more, the curious man is loath to dwell on his own sins. The sins of others are far more interesting, but the call to repentance in v. 30b forces the individual to turn inward. Repentance (*μετάνοια*), a favorite theme of Luke's, entails not only a change of thinking but also a conscious turn away from sins, which are forgiven by God as a result.²² True to character, then, the Athenians turn away when Paul confronts them with the very personal implications of his message.

Second, the Athenians grow restless when Paul mentions the resurrection. In light of their initial interest in Paul's preaching about "Jesus and the resurrection," this is somewhat surprising. By this point

N. Clayton Croy focuses on the possibility that the Epicureans respond negatively and the Stoics positively on the basis of their respective notions concerning life after death ("Hellenistic Philosophies and the Preaching of the Resurrection [Acts 17:18, 32]," *NovT* 39 [1997] 21-39). While this is certainly plausible, Luke does not see fit to press the distinction or to make anything more of it.

²² Luke 3:3, 8; 5:32; 15:7; 24:47; Acts 5:31; 11:18; 13:24; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20. For the corresponding verb form, see Luke 11:32; 13:3; 17:3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22. See most recently Guy D. Nave, Jr., *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts* (Academia Biblica 4; Leiden: Brill, 2002).

it has become clear that ἀνάστασις is not a female consort to the foreign god Jesus and that no salacious details about their relationship will be forthcoming. “Resurrection” in this context refers to something quite different. The message of the resurrection is the heart of the good news according to Luke, but those beset with the vice of curiosity only have ears to hear bad news (Plutarch, *Curios.* 519A-B). Good news, as far as they are concerned, is no news at all. Morbid curiosity, it would seem, cannot tolerate talk about the resurrection of the dead.²³

²³ The juxtaposition of the good news of the resurrection alongside implications of the audience’s guilt is a characteristically Lukan christological strategy; cf. Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 99-100.



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