

Luke's Warning: A Dangerous Economy in Ephesus (Acts 19:25-27, 35b-40)
By Joy Warren¹

From the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. Jeremiah 6:13

Ephesus, one of the largest cities in Asia Minor during the first century, provides the setting for Luke's exciting riot of Acts 19:23-41. Following the rabble-rousing speech of Demetrius the silversmith, an angry mob convenes in the sizeable theater of Ephesus, only to be dispersed with the speech of the town clerk. The contributing factors that provoke Demetrius' demonstrative speech have political, religious and economic roots, though the economic interests surface first. The town clerk will address all of the root causes in a logical, deliberative way in order to diffuse the crowd's fervor. Luke's illustration of the economic interests surrounding the temple of Artemis in Ephesus sounds a calamitous warning today as the political and economic status quo form significant buttresses to the institution of the Christian Church.

Luke's Gospel is full of good news for the poor, from Mary's "Magnificat" to Luke's version of the Beatitudes, which focus on rectifying social justice issues of the poor. In Acts, Luke's description of the early Christian community is one where members sell property and distribute in a way that meets everyone's needs. For Luke Timothy Johnson, one of Luke's subthemes is, "the way in which responses to God's visitation are symbolized by attitudes toward material possessions...the acceptance of God's call is accompanied by the sharing of possessions. With equal regularity, we have seen how opposition to the Gospel is expressed by the love of money" (353). For Luke, Johnson says, ignoring the needs of others and pursuing the accumulation of wealth symbolizes the rejection of God's call. It is with this understanding of Luke's economic perspective that I turn now to the environment that precipitates Demetrius'

¹ Joy Warren is currently a Masters of Divinity student at Memphis Theological Seminary. Email: ejwarren@memphisseminary.edu

speech.

The temple of Artemis is one of the wonders of the ancient world. In addition to being an important center for worship, the temple also served as the primary banking center of not only Ephesus, but also all of Asia (Gaventa 271). Artemis, goddess of fertility and hunting, attended the births of humans and animals, encouraged fruitful harvest, and offered protection especially to the city of Ephesus (Klauck 103). In other regions, the goddess held the title, “Artemis of Ephesus.” Archeological evidence reveals miniature terracotta and marble, not silver, temples; however, the lack of such evidence does not detract from the “truth” of Luke’s depiction of Demetrius and the other artisans (Klauck 104).

Demetrius’ money had Caesar’s face on one side and the Temple of Artemis on the reverse. This currency “communicated to anyone who used [it] that there was a close connection between the imperial power and Artemis, between Rome and Ephesus; the emperor supported Artemis, and Artemis stood behind the emperor” (Brinks 785). The money paid in the temple by devotees on pilgrimage and spent on shrines of the temple sold in Ephesus benefitted the city whose goddess wore a miniature temple upon her head, whose divine benefactress provided for Ephesian citizens.

Marion Soards divides Demetrius’ speech into three parts: 19:25b, addressing the silversmiths; 19:26, recognizing Paul’s success; and 19:27, declaring danger (103). Soards describes Demetrius’ use of rhetoric as epideictic and deliberative. Though Demetrius stirs up the crowd, alerting the artisans to the danger threatening their business and their goddess’ reputation, he does not supply a solution. Luke introduces the speech with a curious repetition of similar phrases; he describes the event as “no little disturbance” started by a man who brought “no little business to the artisans” (19:23-4). Before Demetrius even opens his mouth,

Luke's repetition warns readers of the financial nature of the disturbance and its implications. Indeed, Demetrius' first sentence draws the artisans' awareness to their income. Next, the work of Paul, drawing away customers by "saying that gods made with hands are not gods," (19:26) illuminates the immediate threat to the legitimacy of their livelihood. In addition to the financial threat, Demetrius lastly indicates the dishonor of Artemis and her temple. This last piece of rhetoric gives the crowd something to shout about "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" and the riot ensues (19:28-34).

After two hours of rioting in the streets and theatre of Ephesus, the crowd quiets down and listens to the town clerk's speech. Soards describes Luke's rhetoric for the town clerk as deliberative (104). He divides the speech into four main parts: 19:35b, the address to the crowd with an opening rhetorical question; 19:36, advice; 19:37-39, the clerk's argument concerning his advice; and 19:40, declaration of the dangerous situation of the crowd. Though succinct, the speech manages to have religious, political, and economic overtones. The clerk declares the renown of Artemis of Ephesus with his rhetorical question and continues to logically show the crowd why it should release Paul's companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, who are "neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess" (19:37). He encourages the crowd to take up any personal grievances through the proper legal channels and ends his brief speech with a warning of the dangers of rioting with no justification. The town clerk's practical, methodical means of diffusing the crowd's frenzy results in proving obvious lack of evidence for a legal case and bestowing sufficient threat to disperse the crowd.

Both speeches include the word *kindyneuo*, or "danger," but it is Demetrius, not Paul, who poses the greater threat to the city (Gaventa 274). The town clerk picks up on Demetrius' use of the word and turns it back on the instigators of the riot to show a magnified threat with

consequences for the whole city, not just the artisans, which it brings upon itself. What is the economic cost to Rome of a two-hour riot in Ephesus? The town clerk knows this price tag and knows whom Rome will hold responsible for the loss. In taking a time-out to point the finger at “this Paul,” Demetrius finds himself in jeopardy of losing more than his personal income. For Rome, the economic enemy of the State is the one who starts the riot. As long as religion does not endanger the status quo, its worshippers enjoy relative safety.

What does all of this mean for us today? As Christians, we may no longer purchase silver shrines of Artemis; however, we do purchase quite a lot of religious merchandise. From Veggie Tales videos to pew hymnals, altars and pulpit stands to illuminated church signs, disposable communion sets to WWJD bracelets, consumerism and Christianity go hand-in-hand. With what do we purchase these and many other religious must-haves? We use currency depicting the likenesses of dead presidents and the words, “In God We Trust.” Our currency indicates our government’s endorsement of our God, and the slogan stamped on the coins and bills indicates our God’s endorsement of our government. Beyond that, there seems to be a divine approval of any purchase made with money that reads, “In God We Trust.” If we trust in God, surely, our purchases must be divinely inspired. Suppose a distributor of Christian supplies received the message that “gods made with hands are not gods?” What of the resin crosses and prints of the crucifixion? Moreover, what of the shelves full of “Resurrection Eggs” and the “Cross in my Pocket” inventory?

Will it be possible to stand outside the governmental endorsement and Christian patronage in order to understand the potential danger? What is the good news for the community whose poor desperately need resources to cover basic needs but whose churches have all their funds tied up in building projects and other internal operational costs.

Who is Demetrius today? When the tax-exempt status of the church comes into question, is it Demetrius or Paul who responds? Who is the person who instigates riots today in the church? Is it possible the followers of the Way remain a small sect of a larger religion today? Those who want to enjoy public endorsements and financial benefits claim the title, "Christian," but others who hear another message, who unmask the ambiguities of Luke's theology, must search for their place within this institution. How many Christians today resist the gospel message because of these benefits, and how will the church rediscover this message?

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