

Hidden Agendas Laid Bare

(2 Of 3)



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Acts 19:21-41

Now after these things had been accomplished, ["these things" are the events regarding the sarcastic demon, with which we shall deal tomorrow] Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said, "After I have gone there, I must also see Rome." So he sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he himself stayed for some time longer in Asia.

About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, "Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her.

When they heard this they were enraged and shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" The city was filled with confusion; and people rushed together to the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travel companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theatre. Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd gave instructions to Alexander, whom the Jews had pushed forward. And Alexander motioned for silence and tried to make a defense before the people. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours all of them shouted in unison, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" But when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven? Since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the artisans have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another. If there is anything further you want to know, it must be settled in the regular assembly. For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." When he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.

This is a very interesting and strange passage; one which is clearly ancient, coming from a by-gone age of deities now forgotten, and yet a strikingly modern passage. Let us look first at the ancient setting of the text. The passage takes place in the city of Ephesus, one of the largest of the Roman Empire and certainly the most important of the provinces of Asia. The city was prosperous and important partly due to its seaport but also due to its famous goddess and her temple. Some of you may recall that in the old King James Version this goddess was called Diana, whereas in the RSV, and in most more modern versions, she is called Artemis. What the Greek text actually says is Artemis. The reason why in some ancient translations she is called Diana is that when the Romans built their empire, they made an effort to identify their gods with those of the conquered people, and thus the Greek Artemis was identified with the Roman Diana. That was no innovation, for in point of fact the "Artemis" who was worshipped in Ephesus was not originally Artemis at all, but an ancient fertility goddess, worshipped in that region since time immemorial, and whom the Greeks identified with their own Artemis when they conquered the area. Her image was a rough stone carving of a woman with many breasts who was said to have fallen from heaven.

In any case, this Diana-Artemis was worshipped at Ephesus in a huge temple, which was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was some one-hundred meters long, if you are used to the metric system—or, if you prefer American measures, it was as big as a football field and then again some more.

According to the text, Demetrius and apparently many others made their money by producing and selling small silver replicas of the great temple. (It is interesting to note that the Greek word employed

here, which the NRSV translates as "business," *ergasia*," is the same word employed to refer to the business of the men in Philippi who owned a slave girl with divining powers and who made a business, an *ergasia* out of her divination. About that, too, we shall have something to say tomorrow.)

Archaeologists have never found a silver replica of the great temple of Artemis in Ephesus, although there are plenty of clay replicas. Apparently, what has happened is that, as the value of silver went up and the worship of Artemis declined, the silver replicas made by people such as Demetrius were melted down.

So, Demetrius was in the tourist business. More specifically, he was in the business of religious tourism. But now, because of the preaching of Paul and other Christians, his business was threatened. So, he called a meeting of others who were equally threatened and gave them an interesting harangue.

He began talking only about their business and the threat to it: "you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods."

So far, the economic interest is clear. "Hey, fellows, this Paul is wrecking our business."

But then the plot thickens, for Demetrius subtly connected the economic interests of his hearers with religious issues: "And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty

that brought all of Asia and the world to worship her.” The mixture of themes was subtle and left to the preferences of the hearers.

For those whose religious motivations were profound and sincere, the issue was that somehow Artemis would not be worshipped as before.

For those whose economic motivations were paramount, it should be clear that if “all of Asia,” which until now has been visiting the holy shrine, should stop doing so, business would suffer.

The way Luke tells the story, however, there is no distinction between these two motivations. On the contrary, they seem to coalesce, so that the economic motivation, explicit at the beginning of the story, eventually dissolves into the background.

Now the silversmiths were “enraged” and began to shout, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Why were they enraged? Was it because their trade would suffer? Or was it because Artemis would be offended? Luke does not tell us. Rather, the text seems to imply that they themselves combined the two, for to them their business, honoring Artemis, was part of their devotion.

Then comes the next and even more surprising development in the story. The whole city joined in. Apparently, some of the leaders of the riot still knew what it was all about, for they seized two of Paul's companions. But the people themselves did not know much. Probably all that they knew, or surmised, was that someone had insulted the great goddess Artemis or their city.

So, the cry, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" was both religious and patriotic. Eventually, as the text depicts the situation with masterly strokes, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

By this time, they were in the theatre, a vast semicircle that could hold some 24,000 people, with a raised platform for a stage. Again, in contemporary measures, that is roughly half as many people as the Atlanta Fulton County Stadium holds, where the Braves play.

Eventually, the confusion got to such a point that even we, who read the text, do not know exactly what is happening. For instance, here was this Alexander, whom the Jews pushed forward. Who was he? All that we know is that he was a Jew. Did the Jews push him forward because they feared that the riot, which somehow had to do with the honor of Artemis, might turn against them, who did not worship her? If so, they pushed Alexander forward so that he could speak in their defense. But there is also the possibility that Alexander was a Jew who had accepted Christianity, and that the Jews pushed him forward hoping to make him pay for this.

Whatever the case may be, Alexander was shouted down, and now the crowd was so fired up that they shouted for two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

Finally, the town clerk intervened. The title that the NRSV gives him, "town clerk," does not sufficiently express his importance and authority. From what we know of the government of Ephesus at the time, his responsibility was to carry out the decisions of the assembly, of the *demos*, and therefore he was

one of the principal officers of the city, who also served as a sort of go-between between the *demos* and Roman authorities.

His speech is also interesting. He began by calming down the fears of the crowd regarding the honor of the goddess and of their city: "Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven?" (In passing, it is likely that his reference to the heavenly origin of the statue was a response to what Demetrius had said about Paul's preaching, that "gods made with hands are not gods." Since the statue of Artemis came down from heaven, her value was not threatened by anything that Paul and others might say about "gods made with hands.")

Then the clerk, like Demetrius before him, but now in reverse order, moved from the patriotic and religious motivations of the Ephesians to their more material interests:

"You ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open. If there is anything further you want to know, it must be settled in the regular assembly. For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause to justify this commotion."

The word that the clerk uses here to describe the commotion, *stasis*, would have immediately provoked fear among any who lived in the Roman Empire. This was the technical term employed for a riot, usually against the Empire or its officers, and was punishable by death. Furthermore, since such a crime was difficult to ascribe to particular individuals, it could also bring general and harsh punishment upon the entire city.

Thus, in brief, what the clerk was saying is, first, that they should not be worried about the good name of Artemis or of the city, for all know how great she is, and that her famous temple is in Ephesus. And, secondly, that they should worry rather about their own conduct, which could bring upon them the wrath of the Empire. Thus, while Demetrius's speech moved from self-interest to religiosity and patriotism, the speech of the town clerk moved in the opposite direction, from religiosity and patriotism to self-interest.

I said at the beginning that this text, although referring to a goddess long forgotten, is strikingly modern. No one, as far as I can tell, worships Artemis anymore. The ancient seaport of Ephesus is now so filled with silt that the city is several miles from the coast. And yet the text is surprisingly modern. It is modern because, just as in the time of Demetrius and the silversmiths, self-interest is often clothed in the garb of religion and patriotism.

Last Saturday, as I watched that long, drawn-out game between the Braves and the Dodgers, I suddenly realized that I was getting more excited than was reasonable. In those late innings, every time the Braves got someone on base and a run would have ended the game, I found my heart beating as fast as if I myself were running the bases. Every time Darryl Strawberry came to bat, and a swing could win the game for the Dodgers, I found myself holding my breath and wishing that somebody or something would indeed crush the Strawberry!

When you stop to think about it, Strawberry plays for the Dodgers because that's who pays him what he wants, and Pendleton plays for the Braves for exactly the same reason. The games are on television

because there is big money involved. And yet, thousands upon thousands of us get all wrapped up in it, as if it were a matter of ultimate significance: boom; boom, boom, boom... "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" boom, boom, boom, boom. And meanwhile Demetrius and the silversmiths, who started it all, sold even more little silver temples.

So far, so good. The ancient Ephesians allowed their religion to be moved by economic interests, and we allow economic interests to guide our enthusiasm for our modern-day gladiators. But should we not carry the text closer to home? Is it not possible that we, too, like the Ephesians, allow economic interests to enter unawares into our religious practices?

We all know that Christians are quite capable of doing precisely that. Next year it will be five hundred years since European Christians began exploring and settling the Western Hemisphere. Those five hundred years are ample proof that when it comes to dressing up self-interest in religious garb, and to fool themselves into thinking that their motivation is purely religious, Christians are just as good at it as were the ancient Ephesians.

First came the Spanish. When Columbus returned to these lands, no longer as an explorer, but now as a colonizer, Ferdinand and Isabella, "Their Catholic Majesties," gave him clear instructions: "you must diligently bring the natives of said Indies to peace and quiet, so that they may be meekly under our lordship and subjection, and above all that they may be converted to our holy Catholic faith" For the good of our Catholic Faith! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Boom, boom, boom, boom.

Then came the Portuguese. One of their missionaries, seeking to justify his work, wrote to the crown:

"If the Indians were to have a spiritual life, acknowledging their Creator and their vassalage to Your Majesty... the land would be peopled with colonizers; our Lord would gain many souls, and Your Majesty would receive vast income from these lands. Our Lord would gain many souls!" Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Boom, boom, boom, boom.

Then came the British. They came to establish holy commonwealths. To that end they needed land. And, as these lands were already inhabited, their inhabitants must be nothing but savages, godless Canaanites whom it is lawful to dispossess. Ours is a holy commonwealth! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Boom, boom, boom, boom.

Finally came the drive for independence. That cry made it almost a matter of religion that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Yet "all men" did not include the native Americans just over the frontier, for several of the most prominent among those who signed this historic document were incensed that the British would not allow them to take over Indian lands upon which they had cast a greedy eye. "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Boom, boom, boom, booms

In the part of the country where I now live, slaveholding was considered compatible with Christianity. Even a Methodist bishop held slaves. After all, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, didn't he? And in any case, the slaves were being done a great favor by being given the opportunity to hear the Gospel.

The South can't be wrong. Cotton is king. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Boom, boom, boom, boom.

And now, it is our turn. We, United Methodists, late in the twentieth century. We would never fall into such a trap! We are sincere Christians!

Now, just a moment, as far as we can tell, those who shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" were sincere in their beliefs. And so were the Spaniards, and the Portuguese, and the British, and all those who killed and robbed the native inhabitants of these lands. So was Simon Magus, for all that we know.

Being sincere is not enough. What God demands of us in this hour is not merely that we be sincere. What God demands is obedience and faithfulness, even if that obedience may work against our own self-interest.

There are many examples that could be given. Let me just take one that has different facets. Over the last few years, I have become increasingly aware that, if the United Methodist Church is to reach the masses of population in this country, ethnic minorities, the urban poor, and if it is to retain its traditional foothold in the countryside, it must go through a radical reformation, and that this reformation must involve not only a spiritual awakening but also a structural reformation.

Why do I say this? A few years ago, I happened to be present at a session of an Annual Conference in which there was a rather upbeat report about how the United Methodist Church had succeeded in having laws passed against redlining by banks—that is, against the practice of refusing to lend money to be invested in poor neighborhoods. In that same session, the decision was made to close down a church because, as they put it, it was "not viable." It was not viable because its members were too poor to pay the minimum salary required in that Annual Conference, and the Annual Conference felt that it had been subsidized long enough. Great is the United Methodist Church that wins such victories against redlining! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Boom, boom, boom, boom.

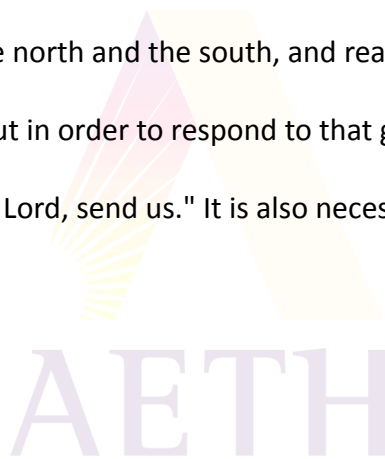
The members of that church had requested that a different arrangement be made, allowing them to continue as a church without all the obligations imposed on other, larger churches. Their petition was refused because the Discipline did not allow it. After all, we are a connectional church! They then requested that, since these obligations were imposed upon them by the Connection, the churches in the Annual Conference be asked to continue the subsidy. That, too, was refused on the grounds that the Conference could not demand such support from its larger churches. Great is *The Discipline*! Great is the connectional system, which allows large and rich churches to behave as if they were congregational! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Boom, boom, boom, boom.

Yesterday we were speaking about Simon Magus. We have all learned in Church History that during the Middle Ages there was a practice called "simony," which consisted in buying and selling ecclesiastical offices. A terrible practice, which we all abhor. But do we? Or have we developed a system in which the

rich and powerful churches get the minister they want and can afford, and the others get the rest?

Great is the appointive system! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians Boom, boom, boom, boom.

My brothers, my sisters; Simon was a sincere believer. Yet, he had to repent because his own power and security were such that they did not allow him to see what God was doing before his very eyes. I know that we are all sincere Christians. I know that we all wish to do what the Lord requires of us. I submit to you that the Lord is doing a great thing before our very eyes: that God is calling us to a great mission in this nation, in this very state, placing before us countless multitudes; multitudes coming from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and ready to sit at the table of the Lord, if only we know how to invite them. But in order to respond to that great call, it is not enough to say, even with all sincerity, "here we are, Lord, send us." It is also necessary to repent, and to say, "here we are, Lord, change us."



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