An Analysis of Plutarch’s “On Superstition”

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“On Superstition” is a treatise regarding the divergence between atheism and superstition, generally thought to be one of the early writings of Plutarch, although there are some questions concerning the authorship. It presents atheism and superstition as two extremes that should be avoided, with appropriate piety resting somewhere in between. Following this premise, *On Superstition* makes the claim that atheism is the preferable extreme. In both form and content, scholars have demonstrated that this work is out of character for Plutarch. Its passionate, rhetorical style contrasts with most of Plutarch’s later writings, and he appears to condemn many beliefs that he is known to have held. Several theories have been presented to account for the discrepancies. Even with these problems acknowledged, *On Superstition* raises important points about Roman piety in the pre-Christian Empire and the later portrayal of the Roman state religion by Christian writers.

In *On Superstition*, Plutarch twice makes reference to himself by name.\(^1\) Thus, it has traditionally been assumed to have been a work of Plutarch, but according to Morton Smith, the evidence for this is actually rather tenuous. He says there are those, such as J. Hartmann, who outright reject the idea of Plutarch as author. Additionally, Plutarch’s reference to himself “is so atypical that it rather requires defense than affords proof of authenticity; it might be explained as a clumsy attempt to pass the work off as Plutarch’s.”\(^2\) Furthermore, Morton believes the content of the tractate is contrary to what one might expect from Plutarch, stating that, in other works,


Plutarch completely contradicts some of the statements made in *On Superstition*. On the subject of the authenticity of the document, Morton concludes that one should exercise caution in using “On Superstition” “as evidence of Plutarch’s usage.” It should be noted, however, that much of Morton’s hesitancy comes from his emphasis on the content of *On Superstition* being vastly different from Plutarch’s other works. As we shall see, this is not necessarily the only interpretation of the discrepancies. In any case, most scholars have accepted the work as Plutarch’s and have analyzed the text accordingly.

Plutarch himself was a Greek philosopher and biographer who lived in the first century CE. He was born in Chaeronia in Central Greece, but that is the extent of what is known about Plutarch’s formative childhood years. As a young man he was almost certainly educated in rhetoric, as this was a skill that was of the utmost importance in the Greco-Roman world at the time. He later moved to Athens and completed his education at the Academy under a teacher called Ammonius. He served in the political sphere as an ambassador and eventually obtained Roman citizenship. Being an extremely pious observer of the Roman imperial cult, in his later years he became a priest at Delphi. Heavily influenced by Platonism, Plutarch wrote frequently of *daimones* as the cause of evil in the world. He was, by any standard, a prolific writer and an extremely respected biographer both then and now. He is most famous for his biographies in the *Parallel Lives* but he is also well known for *Moralia*, the collection in which “On Superstition”

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3 Ibid., 3-5.

4 Ibid., 6.
Before beginning the analysis of “On Superstition,” it may be necessary to evaluate some of the language originally used by Plutarch, so that it can be better understood what he meant when he denounced superstition. The Greek word *deisidaimonia* is the one which has been translated into the English word “superstition.” Dale Martin, professor of Religious Studies at Yale University, explores this issue in his book *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians.* The word *deisidaimonia*, at its most basic, means “fear (*deisi*) of daimons (*daimones*).” However, Martin stresses, both of the root words must be allowed an array of meanings:

_Deisi_ could refer to awe or respect rather than actual fear. And _daimones_ could be taken to refer to gods or goddesses, semi-divinities, or any kind of superhuman being (like “lower grade” gods, “heroes,” daimons/demons, or what moderns might think of as ghosts or angels). Thus _deisidaimonia_ could be a positive or neutral term . . . referring to the piety or the respect of sacred things . . . [or it could refer to] irrational or exaggerated fear of benign or nonexistent beings and forces.

This definition should assist the understanding of Plutarch’s tract and separate the modern meaning from the word “superstition.”

In his classic 1902 book *The Religion of Plutarch,* John Oakesmith gives a thorough rationalization of “On Superstition,” in which he states that Plutarch “has no sympathy with any notion . . . in many religious minds, that Superstition is but a mistaken form of piety, deserving

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tenderness rather than reprehension. . . .”

Indeed, for, while atheism and superstition come from the same source, Plutarch says, “atheism is falsified reason, and superstition is an emotion engendered from false reason.”

To illustrate his point, he repeatedly cites beliefs which are erroneous but which should not cause emotional distress. For example: “A man thinks that in the beginning the universe was created out of atoms and void. His assumption is false, but it causes no sore, no throbbing, no agitating pain.” Compare this to a man who “assumes that wealth is the greatest good. This falsehood contains venom, it feeds upon his soul, distracts him, does not allow him to sleep. . . .”

This is, of course, an analogy for the atheist and the superstitious man. Oakesmith illustrates the practical ramifications of superstition:

“The troubles of actual life are assigned by the Atheist to natural causes, to defects in himself or his circumstances; and he endeavors to mitigate or remove them by greater care. But to the victim of superstition his bodily ailments, his pecuniary misfortunes, his children’s deaths, his public failures, are the strokes of a god or the attacks of a daemon, and cannot therefore be remedied by natural means, which would have the appearance of opposition to the will of God. Hence light misfortunes are often allowed to become fatal disasters.”

Plutarch’s point seems to be that it is better not to believe that God exists than to have an incorrect impression of His nature or to blame Him for one’s misfortunes. Hence, he is


8 Plutarch, “On Superstition” in *Moralia*, 165C.

9 Ibid., 165A.

incredulous as to how some can say atheism is impiety but superstition is not.\textsuperscript{11}

Another, somewhat paradoxical, point Plutarch makes in “On Superstition” is that superstition is dangerous for the fact that it leads to atheism. To do so, he utilizes the aforementioned idea that superstition and atheism are on opposite, extreme ends of the same spectrum, with piety in between them. Part of the reason superstition is the worse alternative, says Robert Wilkin, is that “instead of producing genuine religion it eventually leads men and women to have doubts about the very existence of the gods.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, Plutarch believes it imperative to recognize the sickness that is superstition and “escape it in some way which is both safe and expedient. . . .”\textsuperscript{13} The alternative is one in which some have fallen into, he says: “some persons, in trying to escape superstition, rush into a rough and hardened atheism, thus overleaping true religion which lies between.”\textsuperscript{14}

Having stated the general ideas expressed in “On Superstition,” we shall now move on to analyzing the apparent contradictions it creates. Dale Martin raises a problem with Plutarch’s presentation of \textit{daimones}. “Plutarch’s main argument against ‘superstition’ was that it wrongfully attributed evil motivations and intentions to gods \textit{and daimones}. But Plutarch himself

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\textsuperscript{11} Plutarch, “On Superstition” in \textit{Moralia}, 169F.
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\textsuperscript{13} Plutarch, “On Superstition” in \textit{Moralia}, 171F.
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\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
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elsewhere seems to admit the possibility of evil daïmones.”¹⁵ There are other examples: in “On Superstition,” he attacks dreams and oneiromancy, whereas elsewhere (particularly in the Lives) he seems to ascribe great importance to them. In “On Superstition” he also disapproves of belief in punishment after death, while in other places in the Moralia he actually describes scenes of afterlife punishment.¹⁶ Several scholars have proposed theories to explain the apparent contradictions. Frederick Brenk narrows them into three main lines of thought. The first is an interpretation of Plutarch as “a writer with little competence in Epicurean or Cynic philosophy who constructed something resembling a scissors-and-paste collage, without understanding that the result was inconsistent with the rest of his philosophy.”¹⁷ The second line of thought sees “On Superstition” as a product of Plutarch’s time in the rhetorical schools, perhaps a practice piece written as just one side of a rhetorical debate. The third approach says Plutarch’s views must have evolved and matured over time, so “On Superstition” could have been an outcome of his days at the Academy, which was known to have promoted “moderate skepticism.” The idea is that this work represented “the heady cynicism of youth, while the religious treatises . . . would represent the dazzling spectrum of Plutarch’s mature thought, especially that of his latest years when he looked down upon the world from the lofty heights of Delphi.”¹⁸ Brenk says this

¹⁵ Dale Martin, Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians, 104.


¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11-13.
latter theory is accepted by virtually all scholars, but then he presents an entirely different explanation.

This alternative approach is supported by Frederick Brenk and was originally proposed by H. Erbse in 1952. Perhaps, it says, the differences between “On Superstition” and Plutarch’s other works have been exaggerated. Perhaps “Plutarch’s attitude in De superstitione is not so far removed from that in the rest of his writings as has sometimes been thought.” This interpretation emphasizes the similarities in opinion found in Plutarch’s later works and supposes that there are just as many such similarities as differences. According to Erbse, “Plutarch’s statements on superstition, on human sacrifice, on the Jews’ refusal to fight on the Sabbath, and on punishment after death, can be paralleled by statements in writings regarded as late.” The compromise between the accepted view of Plutarch’s intellectual development as the explanation for the discrepancies and H. Erbse’s view is acknowledging that “De superstitione is an early work of Plutarch, but is probably not as important for the development of his thought as sometimes believed.”

Beyond questions of Plutarch’s theological consistency and doubts about its authorship, “On Superstition” raises some important points about the role of piety in the Roman imperial cult and the role later Christian writers have played in shaping modern views of Roman paganism.

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19 Ibid., 27.
20 Ibid., 14.
21 Ibid.
Bibliography


ON SUPERSTITION. The want of learning and the want of knowledge concerning the gods, splitting into two separate streams immediately at the source—the one, as if flowing in hard ground, has in unyielding dispositions generated Atheism; the other, as if in moist soil, produces in tender minds its opposite, Superstition. This, Superstition does not allow one to exclaim, for it is the only thing that makes no truce with sleep, nor grants to the soul then, at least, to repose, and gain a little courage by driving off its burdensome and painful notions about the Deity, but as it were in the realms of the damned, it raises up in the sleep of Plutarch’s lives. Theseus and Romulus. Preface, containing a life of Plutarch. The collection so well known as Plutarch’s Lives, is neither in form nor in arrangement what its author left behind him. To the proper work, the Parallel Lives, narrated in a series of Books, each containing the accounts of one Greek and one Roman, followed by a Comparison, some single lives have been appended, for no reason but that they are also biographies. I shall attempt to demonstrate that Plutarch’s discussion of Themistokles’ family in Them. 1 plays an important “proemial” role within the Life in which it is placed: it introduces themes and images which will be of importance throughout the Life, and implicitly reveals character-traits of the subject which will be developed later. We will analyze in particular the lunar eclipse episode included in Nicias 23 and Dion 24, in order to prove that the repetition of the episode in different contexts functions as an invitation to think further about superstition through an original and more attractive perspective than philosophical theorization.