

## No More Itch (2 Tim 4.3)

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The majority of translations and commentaries render the phrase *κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἄκοήν* in 2 Tim 4.3 as ‘having itching ears’ (or something to the same effect). Many commentaries and lexica claim, furthermore, that this figure of speech expresses curiosity. The present study demonstrates that the phrase found in 2 Tim 4.3 is an idiom that occurs quite frequently in first- and second-century CE literature. Contemporary usage of this expression suggests, first, that the translation at 2 Tim 4.3 should be ‘having their ears tickled’, rather than ‘having itching ears’, and, second, that the idiom refers primarily to the experience of pleasure rather than curiosity. This translation and interpretation of *κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἄκοήν* fits the context of 2 Timothy better than other commonly proposed readings and is significant for how we understand the author’s portrayal of his opponents and their appeal to the believers.

**Keywords:** 2 Timothy, Pastoral Epistles, polemic, opponents, figure of speech, curiosity

### Introduction

The phrase ‘itching ears’ occurs in the majority of English translations of 2 Tim 4.3. According to this reading of the Greek text, (Pseudo-)Paul claims that ‘the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but *having itching ears*, will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires’ (NRSV). The Greek phrase translated as ‘having itching ears’ is *κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἄκοήν*. In its active form *κνήθω* means ‘to scratch’ or ‘to tickle’, and one possible meaning of the middle/passive is hence ‘to be scratched/tickled’.<sup>1</sup> Many translations and commentaries, however, opt for ‘to itch’.<sup>2</sup> A significant number of

1 BDAG 550; G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) 759; F. Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015) 1143. It is often difficult to decide between ‘to scratch’ and ‘to tickle’ in any given context; the present study focuses on whether ‘to tickle/scratch’ or ‘to itch’ is to be preferred in 2 Tim 4.3.

2 Exceptions to the most common translation ‘having itching ears’ include the NASB (‘wanting to have their ears tickled’). This rendering finds support especially in German-language scholarship. See e.g. V. Hasler, *Die Briefe an Timotheus und Titus (Pastoralbriefe)* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1978) 76; H. Merkel, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (Das Neue Testament

commentators claim, moreover, that the phrase has to do with curiosity. I. Howard Marshall, for instance, argues that ‘the thought is of insatiable curiosity’.<sup>3</sup> According to Luke Timothy Johnson, ‘(t)he itchiness is a restlessness to hear new things’.<sup>4</sup> And for Jouette Bassler, the expression ‘alludes to an eagerness for novelty’.<sup>5</sup> This understanding of the phrase appears in bible translations as well. The *New English Translation* reads, ‘they will accumulate teachers for themselves, because *they have an insatiable curiosity to hear new things*’. Translators and commentators can cite Frederick William Danker’s authoritative lexicon in support of this interpretation. BDAG offers the following definition of κνήθω (with reference to 2 Tim 4.3, the only occurrence of the verb in the New Testament): ‘**itch** pass(ive) w(ith) act(ive) sense *feel an itching* ... Fig. of curiosity, that looks for interesting and juicy bits of information. This itching is relieved by the messages of the new teachers.’<sup>6</sup> The lexicon also notes, however: ‘W(ith) the same components as a background one might transl(ate): *to have one’s ear tickled*.’<sup>7</sup>

In this article I will argue, on the basis of analysis of a number of closely related phrases in contemporary Greek and Latin literature as well as the interpretation of κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἄκοῖν in later Greek commentary, that the latter option (‘to have one’s ear tickled’) is the preferred translation at 2 Tim 4.3, and that the rendering ‘to itch’ as well as the connection with curiosity lack solid support. The expression refers to the experience of pleasure, not to the experience or relief of curiosity.

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Deutsch; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991) 79; L. Oberlinner, *Erster Timotheusbrief, zweiter Timotheusbrief* (Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002) 151. G. Holtz, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1965) 191 and N. Brox, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (Regensburger Neues Testament; Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1969) 264 suggest that the ears are both itching *and* being tickled. More recently, M. Engelmann, *Unzertrennlche Drillinge? Motivsemantische Untersuchungen zum literarischen Verhältnis der Pastoralbriefe* (BZNW 192; Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2012) 400 claims, ‘Eine eindeutige Entscheidung ist hier nicht möglich.’

3 I. H. Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999) 803.

4 L. T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 35A; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 429.

5 J. M. Bassler, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996) 170. For other examples, see e.g. W. Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (I & II Timothy and Titus)* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924) 113; H. Ridderbos, *De pastorale brieven (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament)*; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1967) 235; Brox, *Die Pastoralbriefe*, 264; G. W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1992) 455–6; P. H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 604–5.

6 BDAG 550.

7 *Ibid.*

This is significant for, among other things, how we understand the author's portrayal of his opponents and their appeal to the believers.

### 1. A Topos

When discussing κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἄκοήν, many commentaries cite the following passage from Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 1.3.22):

Puffed up by their skill, the unfortunate sophists, babbling in their own jargon ... show themselves to be more talkative than turtledoves; tickling and titillating, not in a manly way, it seems to me, the ears of those who wish to be tickled (κνήθοντες καὶ γαργαλίζοντες οὐκ ἀνδρικῶς, ἐμοὶ δοκεῖν, τὰς ἀκοὰς τῶν κνήσασθαι γλιχομένων).<sup>8</sup>

Clement uses both κνήθω (κνήθοντες) and the more properly Attic form κνάω (κνήσασθαι), as well as the semantically closely related verb γαργαλίζω. Consequently, any attempt to understand the figure of speech in 2 Tim 4.3, where the verb is κνήθω, must be attentive to occurrences of the same idiom with these other verbal forms as well.

Thomas Magister states in his *Ecloga nominum et verborum Atticorum* that κνάω is to be preferred over κνήθω in this expression (κνᾶσθαι τὸ οὐδ, οὐ κνήθειν).<sup>9</sup> The fact that the expression warranted this comment suggests that it was quite frequently used. Indeed, we do find it attested with some variation fairly frequently, not only in Greek but also in Latin literature of the first and second centuries CE. Before we leave Clement, however, we should note that he uses κνήθω and κνάω in the sense of 'to tickle' or 'to be tickled'. The section of this passage that most closely approximates 2 Tim 4.3's κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἄκοήν comes at the end: τὰς ἀκοὰς ... κνήσασθαι. It is clear that in Clement the verb does not mean 'to itch', because no one 'longs for' (γλίχομαι) an itch, whereas 'being tickled' or 'being scratched' is something that one might well desire.<sup>10</sup>

8 My translation of the Greek text in O. Stählin and L. Früchtel, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, vol. II: *Stromata*, Buch I–VI (GCS; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1960). Non-biblical Greek and Latin texts and translations in the remainder of this article are taken from the Loeb Classical Library, unless otherwise noted.

9 F. Ritschl, *Thomae Magistri sive Theoduli Monachi Ecloga vocum atticarum* (Halle: Orphanotropheum, 1832) 198.

10 In the English translation of the commentary on the Pastoral Epistles by Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, which appeared in the Hermeneia series (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), the final part of Clement's phrase is translated as 'ears which are plagued with itching' (120). This is an indefensible translation of γλίχομαι (which means 'cling to, strive after, long for' (LSJ s.v., Lampe s.v.)) and presumably originated out of a misunderstanding of the figure of speech in 2 Tim 4.3. On the (incorrect) assumption that itching is in view in 2 Tim

## 2. Seneca

A particularly instructive example of how the figure of speech used in 2 Timothy functioned is found in Seneca. In *Letter 75*, Seneca responds to his friend Lucilius' complaint that his letters are 'rather carelessly written'. Seneca replies by drawing a contrast between his style and that of an orator:

I prefer that my letters should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another's company or taking walks together – spontaneous and easy; for my letters have nothing strained or artificial about them. If it were possible, I should prefer to show, rather than speak, my feelings. Even if I were arguing a point, I should not stamp my foot, or toss my arms about, or raise my voice; but I should leave that sort of thing to the orator, and should be content to have conveyed my feelings to you without having either embellished them or lowered their dignity. (75.1–3)

Seneca is not opposed to good style and eloquence. 'Even philosophy does not renounce the company of cleverness', he writes (75.3). Yet he argues that oratorical pleasantness should never be an object in itself:

Our words should aim not to please, but to help (*non delectent verba nostra, sed prosint*). If, however, you can attain eloquence without painstaking, and if you either are naturally gifted or can gain eloquence at slight cost, make the most of it and apply it to the noblest uses. But let it be of such a kind that it displays facts rather than itself. It and the other arts are wholly concerned with cleverness; but our business here is the soul (75.5).

The philosopher is concerned with matters of too great importance to pay much attention to eloquence. The philosopher is in many ways like a doctor, Seneca says, and it is in this context that he uses the expression 'tickling the ears':<sup>11</sup>

A sick man does not call in a physician who is eloquent; but if it so happens that the physician who can cure him likewise discourses elegantly about the treatment which is to be followed, the patient will take it in good part. For all that, he will not find any reason to congratulate himself on having discovered a physician who is eloquent. For the case is no different from that of a skilled pilot who is also handsome. Why do you tickle my ears? Why do you entertain me? (*quid aures meas scabis? quid oblectas?*) There is other business at hand; I am to be cauterised, operated upon, or put on a diet. That is why you were summoned to treat me! (75.6–7)

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4.3, the decision was made that this was also what Clement must have meant, which then necessitated a translation of γλίχομαι that has no basis. Cf. Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 803 n. 122.

11 Seneca uses a form of the verb *scabo*, which like κνήθω can mean 'to scratch' or, as the Loeb translation renders it here, 'to tickle'.

It is remarkable how well the context of this passage in Seneca aligns with the context of 2 Tim 4.3. Abraham Malherbe has demonstrated that the Pastorals have much in common with writings of contemporary moral philosophers (such as Seneca) and, more specifically, that the Pastor extensively employs medical imagery that is also often found in such philosophical contexts.<sup>12</sup> In the immediate context, the Pastor claims that the people who want to have their ears tickled cannot endure ‘the *healthy teaching*’ (ἡ ὑγιαίνουσα διδασκαλία, 2 Tim 4.3a). They are the opposite of the sick man in Seneca who does *not* wish to have his ears tickled, because he wants to be healed by being ‘cauterised, operated upon, or put on a diet’. The context in Seneca also dovetails nicely with the work of Robert Karris, who has argued that the Pastoral Epistles feature anti-sophistic polemic.<sup>13</sup> The connection with oratorical entertainment in Seneca fits well with Karris’ suggestion that the Pastor used phraseology deriving from philosophical polemic against oratory and sophistry.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly significant for our purposes is the gloss that Seneca provides for the expression ‘tickling the ears’. He writes, ‘Why do you tickle my ears? Why do you entertain me?’ (*quid aures meas scabis? quid oblectas?*). For Seneca, the expression ‘tickling the ears’ connotes entertainment. This goes against the association with ‘curiosity’ that many commentaries on 2 Timothy assert. Seneca’s ‘sick man’ is clearly not asking his doctor, ‘Why do you make me curious?’ or ‘Why do you relieve my curiosity?’ Instead, because he needs to be healed, he asks, ‘Why do you entertain me (when what I really want is a cure)?’

### 3. Lucian

Another significant use of the expression found at 2 Tim 4.3 occurs in Lucian of Samosata’s *The Dance*. In the opening part of the dialogue, Crato accuses his friend Lycinus of abandoning philosophy to take up ‘unmanly’ pursuits:

Who that is a man at all, a life-long friend of letters, moreover, and moderately conversant with philosophy, abandons his interest, Lycinus, in all that is better and his association with the ancients to sit enthralled by the flute, watching a girlish fellow play the wanton with dainty clothing and bawdy songs and

12 A. J. Malherbe, ‘Medical Imagery in the Pastoral Epistles’, *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers* (ed. W. E. March and S. D. Currie; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1980) 19–35; reprinted in A. J. Malherbe, *Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity. Collected Essays, 1959–2012* (ed. C. R. Holladay *et al.*; NovTSup 150; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014) 117–34.

13 R. J. Karris, ‘The Background and Significance of the Polemic of the Pastoral Epistles’, *JBL* 92 (1973) 549–64; *idem*, ‘The Function and Sitz-im-Leben of the Parenetic Elements in the Pastoral Epistles’ (unpublished Th.D. thesis: Harvard, 1971).

14 This is true also of the passage from Clement quoted above, who associated the tickling of ears with the ‘babbling’ of the sophists.

imitate love-sick minxes ... a ridiculous business in all truth, which does not in the least become a freeborn gentleman of your sort. So for my part, when I learned that you give your time to such spectacles, I was not only ashamed on your account but sorely distressed that you should sit there oblivious of Plato and Chrysippus and Aristotle, getting treated like people who have themselves tickled in the ear with a feather (εἰ Πλάτωνος καὶ Χρυσιππου καὶ Ἀριστοτέλους ἐκλαθόμενος κάθησαι τὸ ὅμοιον πεπονθῶς τοῖς τὰ ὦτα πτερῶ κνωμένοις). (*The Dance* 1-2)

Here again we find the expression ‘having the ears tickled’ in a philosophical context, where it is employed to describe something that is regarded as incongruent with philosophy. By giving up philosophy and handing himself over to superficial pleasures, Lycinus has become like ‘those who have themselves tickled in the ears with a feather’ (τοῖς τὰ ὦτα πτερῶ κνωμένοις). As in Seneca, the phrase in Lucian has to do with entertainment, not curiosity. Lycinus has abandoned philosophy for empty entertainment, which gives him pleasure but does not relieve his curiosity. And, like the author of 2 Timothy, Lucian uses the middle/passive participle to express this thought (κνώμενοι). The verb should not be translated as ‘itching’ in this case, because the people to whom Lucian refers are not ‘itching with a feather (πτερῶ)’. Rather they are ‘being tickled with a feather’.

Lucian uses a closely related version of the same expression in *Slander* 21. ‘Somehow or other’, he writes, ‘we all like (ἡδόμεθα) to hear stories that are slyly whispered in our ear, and are packed with innuendo: Indeed, I know men who get as much pleasure from having their ears titillated with slanders as some do from being tickled with feathers (οἶδα γοῦν τινὰς οὕτως ἡδέως γαργαλιζομένους τὰ ὦτα ὑπὸ τῶν διαβολῶν ὥσπερ τοὺς πτεροῖς κνωμένους)’. Here too the present middle/passive participles (γαργαλιζομένους and κνωμένους) should not be translated as ‘itching’. In addition to the utilisation of feathers, these verbs express something that is pleasurable (ἡδέως; cf. ἡδόμεθα), and itching is not. Experiencing pleasure or being entertained is once again clearly in view, as is the philosophically inclined speaker’s disapproval of this experience of pleasure or entertainment. While the people in question may have been curious about the message of the slanderers, that is not what ‘tickling the ears’ or ‘having their ears tickled’ primarily conveys. The focus is on the pleasure they are experiencing.

#### 4. Plutarch

Plutarch is a third contemporary author who speaks of ‘tickling the ears’. In *Superstition* 5 (*Moralia* 167B), he writes:

Plato says that music, the creator of harmony and order, was given to mankind by the gods not for the sake of pampering them or tickling their ears (ὑπὸ θεῶν

οὐ τρυφῆς ἔνεκα καὶ κνήσεως ὧτων δοθῆναι), but so that whatever in a man's body is disturbing and errant ... music should, in its own way, disengage and bring round and restore to its proper place again.

'Tickling' is expressed in this passage with the verbal noun κνήσις rather than the cognate verb κνήθω used in 2 Tim 4.3. But there can be no doubt that the same figure of speech is in mind. Since 'tickling the ears' is placed in apposition to τρυφή (rendered 'pampering' in the Loeb translation), it is clear that it has to do with experiencing pleasure in this passage as well. Hence 'itching' is excluded as a possible translation. Here Plutarch uses the phrase as part of his argument that (according to Plato) music is not empty entertainment, that is to say music is not meant solely for the 'tickling of the ears', but brings about restoration of body and soul.

Plutarch offers a slightly different version of the same expression in *Table Talk* 7.5.3 (*Moralia* 705E). There he warns against the 'degeneracy and luxury that titillates the eyes and ears' (τὴν ἐν ὄμμασι καὶ τὴν ἐν ὠσὶν γαργαλίζουσαν μαλακίαν καὶ ἡδυπάθειαν). Once again, the phrase is employed disapprovingly in a philosophical context and concerns pleasure, not curiosity.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Other Contemporary Authors

Several other examples further support the interpretation of the figure of speech in 2 Tim 4.3 presented thus far. For instance, Sextus Empiricus, also employing the idiom polemically, writes in *Pyrrh. Hypotheses* 235:

... what they say may be able, perhaps, to tickle the ears of the casual hearer (ταῦτα δὲ τὰς μὲν τῶν εἰκαιοτέρων ἀκοῆς ἴσως δύναται γαργαλίζειν), superfluous though it is and the result of vain labour on their part (περιττὰ δέ ἐστι καὶ μάτην αὐτοῖς πεπονημένα).

Again, what is in view are statements that sound convincing and pleasant, but lack substance (they are 'superfluous' and the result of 'vain labour') and hence deceive the undiscerning hearer.<sup>16</sup>

15 In *On Being a Busybody* 14 (*Moralia* 522D), Plutarch speaks about the 'tickling/scratching of curiosity' (ὁ τῆς πολυπραγμοσύνης γαργαλισμός), which seems to suggest that curiosity is comparable to an itch that one cannot help but scratch. No ears are mentioned in this context, however.

16 Another possible *comparandum* is a passage in Lucretius, in which he contrasts a serious interest in the truth with the enjoyment of 'fine-sounding phrases'. The latter 'prettily tickle the ears'. In other words, they are enjoyable to listen to, but mislead the hearer into accepting as true what is really false. 'Therefore', Lucretius writes, 'those who have thought that fire is not the original substance of things, and that the whole sum consists of fire alone, are seen to have fallen far away from true reasoning. Of these Heraclitus opens the fray as first

Thus far, we have cited authors of the first and second centuries CE who are all associated with the philosophical tradition in some way. Related phrases are also found in a few contemporary authors who were not philosophers per se (although it is difficult, and inadvisable, to draw strict boundaries between philosophy and related fields).<sup>17</sup> For example, in his speech *Against Those Who Burlesque the Mysteries of Oratory*, Aelius Aristides attacks orators who ‘transgress the bounds of order and rectitude’ (ἐκβαίνουσι τοῦ ῥυθμοῦ καὶ τῆς ὀρθότητος) and say they do so in order ‘that they can please as many as possible’ (ὡς πλείστους ἀρέσαι δυνηθῶσι) (34.1 (401)). He characterises the activities of these people, who follow ‘wanton behaviour in their oratory’ (ἀσελγαίνουσι περὶ τοὺς λόγους, 34.3 (402)) and do not ‘wish to say what is just and true’ (τὸ μὲν δίκαιον ... καὶ ἀληθὲς οὐκ ἐθέλουσι λέγειν, 34.7 (403)) in their attempts at ‘gratifying their audience’ (τοῖς ἀκροαταῖς χαριζόμενοι, 34.7 (403)), as ‘titillating someone’s ears’ (τὰ ὦτα γαργαλίσαι τινῶν, 34.16 (405)).<sup>18</sup> Here, this idiom appears once again in a context of disapproval, is connected with oratory, and signals attempts to please in a way that is not beneficial to the hearers.<sup>19</sup>

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champion, one illustrious for his dark speech rather amongst the frivolous part of the Greeks than amongst the serious who seek the truth. For dolts admire and love everything more which they see hidden amid distorted words, and set down as true whatever can prettily tickle the ears (*quae belle tangere possunt auris*) and all that is varnished over with fine-sounding phrases’ (*De rerum natura* 635–44).

17 Lucian is a good example of someone whose position on the intellectual spectrum between philosophy and rhetoric is hard to pin down. He studiously avoids consistency on the topic of his personal views. Like others in this period, he seems to have experienced a ‘conversion’ of sorts from rhetoric to philosophy, but what exactly took place is unclear. For discussion, see e.g. J. Hall, *Lucian’s Satire* (New York: Arno, 1981) 35–8, 155–65; C. P. Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 12–14.

18 Translation: C. A. Behr, *P. Aelius Aristides: The Complete Works*, vol. II: *Orations XVII–LIII* (Leiden: Brill, 1981) 173–84.

19 A passage in Fronto, who writes to his (former) pupil Marcus Aurelius, is also potentially relevant. He states: ‘Herein lies that supreme excellence of an orator, and one not easily attainable, that he should please his hearers without any great sacrifice of right eloquence, and should let his blandishments, meant to tickle the ears of the people (*quae mulcendis volgi auribus comparat*), be coloured indeed, but not along with any great or wholesale sacrifice of dignity: rather that in its composition and fabric there should be a lapse into a certain softness but no wantonness of thought.’ The verb rendered ‘to tickle’ in the Loeb translation is *mulceo*, which more commonly means ‘to stroke, touch’ or ‘to soothe, delight’ (Lewis and Short s. v.; cf. *OLD* s.v. 1). Fronto also associates this sort of thing with entertainment (‘pleasing his hearers’). For Fronto, however, this is not necessarily a bad thing; as an orator, he sees value in ‘pleasing his hearers’. At the same time, it is evident that Fronto thinks one can go overboard: ‘tickling/stroking the ears’ is appropriate, but ‘any great or wholesale sacrifice of dignity’ in the process is not. In spite of his different perspective on ‘tickling/stroking the ears’, Fronto, no more than any of the philosophical authors, associates it with curiosity or its relief. Quintillian also attacks those who, ‘as well as the other vices of life, are slaves to

In sum, there are quite a number of examples from first- and second-century CE authors that elucidate the use and significance of the phrase κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἀκοήν at 2 Tim 4.3. Some of this evidence has been previously overlooked, perhaps owing to the variations in the expression of this idiom. We have observed that κνάω, γαργαλίζω and the verbal noun κνήσις are used in extant Greek sources in addition to κνήθω, and there is arguably even more variation on the Latin side. However, in the great majority of cases it is evident from the context, where these various words are used in connection with ears to express not a literal tickling/scratching of the ears but a figure of speech that expresses the effect of listening to something, that what we have are variations on the same theme. Whenever the figure appears in the contemporary texts discussed above, it does not refer to *itching* ears, but rather to ears that are *being tickled*. For all of these various authors, this connotes the experience of pleasure, and is unrelated to curiosity or its relief.<sup>20</sup>

## 6. Late Antique Evidence

In addition to the oft-cited passage from Clement of Alexandria, there are several other early Christian and other late antique authors who take up the figure of speech used in 2 Tim 4.3. Their interpretations support the reading developed thus far, namely that it refers to tickling, not itching. For instance, the fifth/sixth-century lexicon of Hesychius of Alexandria (Συναγωγή Πασῶν Λέξεων κατὰ Στοιχεῖον) states that the phrase κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἀκοήν means ‘seeking to hear something pleasurable’ (ζητοῦντές τι ἀκοῦσαι καθ’ ἡδονήν, *Kappa* 3101). Hesychius’ definition closely approximates that of John Chrysostom, who in his ninth homily on 2 Timothy glossed κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἀκοήν as ‘seeking

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the pleasure of listening to sounds that stroke their ears wherever they are’ (*et sunt quidam qui secundum alia vitae vitia etiam hac ubique audiendi quod aures mulceat voluptate ducantur* (trans. LCL, adapted)). Again, it is clear that such ‘stroking’ of the ears (*mulceo*, as in Fronto) is viewed disapprovingly and that it is connected to the experience of pleasure (*voluptas*).

20 In place of the simple verb κνάω, a number of passages use the more intensive compound form ἀποκνάω (ἀποκναίω in post-classical texts), which means ‘to scrape, rub off’ and is used in the sense of ‘wearing out the ears’ (LSJ s.v.; cf. Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, 253). Plutarch, for instance, complains about people who ‘actually wear out our ears by their repetitions (οἱ δ’ ἀποκναίουσι δῆπου τὰ ὄτα ταῖς ταυτολογίαις), just as though they were smudging palimpsests’ (*On Talkativeness* 5 (504D)). Plutarch’s use of ἀποκναίω in this context is perhaps a pun on κνάω: these people try to ‘tickle (κνάω) the ears’, but end up ‘wearing out (ἀποκναίω) the ears’. Philo of Alexandria may be employing the same pun in his relatively frequent references to ‘wearing out the ears’ (see *Detr.* 72, *Post.* 86, *Agr.* 136, *Migr.* 111, *Mut.* 196–7). Many of these passages draw a direct connection with the sophists, who sought to tickle their audience’s ears with their oratorical displays.

after those who speak for the sake of pleasure and delight the hearing' (τῆς ἡδονῆς χάριν λέγοντας καὶ τέρποντας τὴν ἀκοὴν ἐπιζητοῦντες, PG 62.651, ll.50–1). In his commentary on the letters of Paul, Theodoret offered a similar gloss for the figure of speech (PG 82.852, ll. 27–30). He defined κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἀκοήν as τερπόμενοι, i.e. 'enjoying oneself' (Τὸ, κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἀκοήν, ἀντὶ τοῦ, τερπόμενοι, τέθεικεν), and explained that 'tickling the ear creates a certain experience of pleasure' (ἐπειδὴπερ ἡδονὴν τινα τῆς ἀκοῆς ἢ κνησις ἐργάζεται). The definitions offered by these three authors cohere with what we discovered above in literature from the first and second centuries CE.

### 7. Translation and Interpretation of 2 Tim 4.3

In all of the instances discussed, κνήθω, κνώω and related verbs mean 'to tickle/scratch' in the active and 'to be tickled/scratched' in the (middle/)passive. I do not dispute that these verbs *can* mean 'to itch'. Galen, for instance, describes a medical state in which people experience an itch accompanied by nausea (ἀσωδῶς κνήσεσθαι συμβαίνει τισὶν, *De methodo medendi*, ed. Kühn 10.437, l. 10; cf. 10.979). However, when the verb is used not in a strictly medical context but as a figure of speech involving ears that refers to the effect of, or response to, what one hears, I have been unable to identify any instance in surviving Greek and Latin literature from the first two centuries CE where 'itching' is a necessary translation. In none of the examples cited above is there any such indication; rather, all these contemporary texts speak of 'tickling the ears' and employ it with reference to empty entertainment. From the evidence collected here it is clear that 'tickling the ears' was a commonly used phrase around the time that 2 Timothy was composed. Any translation and interpretation of the expression of 2 Tim 4.3 should take the way it is used in such contemporary texts into account.

This is not simply a lexicographical matter. The translation 'to itch' essentially reverses what the figure of speech conveys.<sup>21</sup> We have seen considerable evidence that 'having one's ears tickled' refers to the experience of pleasure. The common translation 'itching ears' suggests the opposite: the experience of annoyance and irritation. The rendering 'itching ears' runs the risk of further skewing the figure's point by suggesting that the persons in view are suffering some condition for which the rival teachers mentioned in 2 Tim 4.3 are offering a cure (cf. BDAG's

21 Translating the phrase correctly does not guarantee an accurate understanding of the idiom, however. Donald Guthrie, for instance, correctly translates 'having their ears tickled', but then he suggests that it expresses the idea that 'what they heard merely scratched their eardrums without penetrating further' (*The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 179). Such an interpretation finds no support in contemporary literature's usage of this phrase.

definition quoted above). After all, tickling or scratching the ears is usually an effective way to get rid of an itch. In other words, interpreters who translate ‘to itch’ often end up suggesting that the opponents offer a solution to a problem experienced by the believers. Perhaps in an attempt to prevent this implication, one recent commentator introduces – *ex nihilo* – ‘sores’ and claims that the itching experienced by the people in 2 Timothy derives from those posited sores and that their scratching by the teachers is only making matters worse.<sup>22</sup> The suggestion that the rival teachers are offering a cure is avoided in this way.

Translating κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἄκοήν in a way that is consistent with contemporary usage of this expression avoids the need for such exegetical gymnastics. The people who want to have their ears tickled in 2 Tim 4.3 are not looking for a cure. They are looking for pleasure. This construal fits the immediate context well: the people who want to have their ears tickled are collecting teachers κατὰ τὰς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας (‘according to their own desires’). In other words, they are doing what makes them feel good, not what is ultimately beneficial. The corollary of the author’s criticism of these people and the teachers whom they are after is that the ‘true’ teacher, much like Seneca according to his self-presentation in *Epistle* 75, does not concern himself with whether what he says is pleasing (i.e. ‘tickles the ear’) or not.<sup>23</sup> This reading again fits the context well, because in the preceding verse (v. 2), the author instructs Timothy to ‘preach the word, be persistent in season and out of season, refute, rebuke, encourage’ (κήρυξον τὸν λόγον, ἐπίστηθι εὐκαίρως ἀκαίρως, ἔλεγξον, ἐπιτίμησον, παρακάλεσον). The imperatives ‘refute’ (ἔλεγξον) and ‘rebuke’ (ἐπιτίμησον) in particular imply that Timothy’s hearers will not find his speech pleasing to hear.<sup>24</sup>

We have found no clear evidence that the idiom κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἄκοήν concerns curiosity. This notion is not supported by the usage of this figure of speech in literature of the first and second centuries. It is also absent in the explanations offered by late antique authors, such as John Chrysostom, Theodoret and Hesychius. The emphasis placed on curiosity in many commentaries suggests that the people mentioned in 2 Tim 4.3 are ‘piling up’ teachers because they

22 A. B. Spencer, *2 Timothy and Titus: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014) 137.

23 On the function of the polemic of 2 Timothy as ‘providing a contrast to the ideal Christian teacher’, and thus essentially paraenetic, see L. T. Johnson, ‘2 Timothy and the Polemic against False Teachers: A Re-examination’, *JReSt* 6–7 (1978–9) 1–26; reprinted in *idem*, *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays* (NovTSup 146; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013) 331–61.

24 The adverb ἀκαίρως (‘untimely’) likewise suggests that it should be of no concern to the ideal teacher whether the audience finds the message pleasant or not. On εὐκαίρως ἀκαίρως, see A. J. Malherbe, ‘“In Season and Out of Season”: 2 Timothy 4:2’, *JBL* 103 (1984) 235–43; reprinted in Malherbe, *Light from the Gentiles*, 187–96. Cf. also Marshall’s critique of Malherbe’s interpretation (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 800–1).

are actually interested in learning something new. This study has shown that such a reading is difficult to maintain. Rather, they are assembling teachers who tell them what they consider pleasant to hear. It is not curiosity, then, but pleasure that drives them. Their turning away to myths mentioned in 2 Tim 4.4 does not suggest otherwise. Listening to myths could be very pleasant and entertaining indeed, as the rhetorical *progymnasmata* indicate.<sup>25</sup> And long before them Thucydides had already associated the mythical (τὸ μυθῶδες) with what is pleasant to hear, rather than true (προσαγωγότερον τῆ ἀκροάσει ἢ ἀληθέστερον, *War* 1.21), thereby drawing much the same contrast as 2 Tim 4.4 with its opposition of ἀληθεία to μῦθος.

Interpretations of 2 Tim 4.3 that speak of curiosity introduce something unattested elsewhere in the letter. It is true, of course, that 2 Timothy does not exactly encourage curiosity, given its stress on the παραθήκη that has been entrusted to Timothy (2 Tim 1.14; cf. 2 Tim 1.12, 1 Tim 6.20). This ‘deposit’ is presumably a fairly definitive set of traditions that he has received from Paul and is supposed to hand on to others (2 Tim 2.2). The letter also refuses to offer detailed explanations of doctrinal positions (e.g. 2 Tim 2.18), which could be construed as an implicit rejection of inquisitiveness. However, curiosity itself is not explicitly condemned, and interpreting 2 Tim 4.3 as if it were introduces an idea that is not already clearly present elsewhere in the letter.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

In light of the above considerations, I propose the following translation of 2 Tim 4.3: ‘For there will be a time when they will not put up with healthy teaching, but will heap up for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, in order to have their ears tickled.’ Taking κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἀκοήν as a circumstantial participle expressing purpose fits the usage of the phrase in contemporary literature.<sup>27</sup> The people in view in this passage want to experience pleasure (‘have

<sup>25</sup> Compare the sections on the composition of *mythoi* in Aelius Theon (72–8), Pseudo-Hermogenes (1–4); Aphthonius (21) and Nicolaus the Sophist (6–11).

<sup>26</sup> 2 Tim 2.16 warns against καινοφωνία according to a few late manuscripts, but the reading καινοφωνία is much better attested and widely adopted by scholars. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 399–400 renders 2 Tim 2.22 as ‘[f]lee cravings for novelty’ (τὰς δὲ νεωτερικὰς ἐπιθυμίας φεύγε), but this requires, as Johnson himself recognises, an unusual understanding of νεωτερικός, which more commonly means ‘youthful’. Finally, the ζητήσεις that are to be avoided according to 2 Tim 2.23 could refer to ‘investigations’, which would imply some level of curiosity, but the meaning ‘controversies’ or ‘disputes’ is also possible and may fit the context better (see especially the immediately following phrase εἰδὸς ὅτι γεννώσιν μάχας; cf. also 1 Tim 6.4 and Tit 3.9).

<sup>27</sup> In classical Greek, the circumstantial participle only rarely expresses purpose in the present (more commonly, the future tense is used; see e.g. W. W. Goodwin, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1890) §840 (335)). But BDF §418 notes

their ears tickled'), and for that reason they accumulate teachers who can offer this. They are uninterested in whether what they hear is 'healthy', but only in what is pleasurable and thus 'in accordance with their own desires'. Translating and interpreting κνηθόμενοι τὴν ἄκοίην in this manner is consistent with how the figure of speech was used in the period, especially in literature that shares the Pastorals' popular philosophic milieu. When this figure is employed in contemporary texts it never expresses the idea of 'itching ears'. To the contrary, it always means 'tickling/scratching ears' or 'having one's ears tickled/scratched'.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the phrase overwhelmingly refers to the experience of pleasure, itself regularly associated with the pleasantries of oratory, which, from the point of view of the philosopher, lacks substance and may even be harmful. Its primary association is a desire for entertainment, not the curiosity so frequently posited in the commentaries.

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that in such cases 'in the NT ... more commonly the present participle is used' (215); cf. §339 (2c) for several examples from related literature. Similarly, J. H. Moulton and N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) 11.3e (3:157).

<sup>28</sup> It is of course possible to assume that the people in question wish to have their ears tickled because they are suffering from an itch. The *comparanda* collected here, however, do not offer any clear evidence in support of this hypothesis; in contemporary texts from the first and second centuries CE, we have found little to suggest that those who want to be tickled are suffering from an itch. The point of the figure of speech is that they want to experience pleasure, not that they are seeking a cure for something troubling.