New Testament Studies (2025), **71**, 333–336
doi:10.1017/S0028688524000419

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

SHORT STUDY

Jesus is Driving Them Crazy: Language and Context for Luke 6.6-11

Stephen Fowl

Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, CA, USA
Email: sfowl@cdsp.edu

Abstract

This article develops the position of Rebekah Eklund's earlier *NTS* article on ἀνοία in Luke 6.11. Eklund argues that there is no basis for translating ἄνοια in Luke 6.11 as rage or fury. Instead, she shows that ἄνοια is used consistently to indicate folly that is either induced by madness or ignorance. This article offers a reading of the healing of the man with the withered hand in Luke 6.6–11 that provides a more congenial context for the conventional way of reading ἀνοία as madness-induced folly.

Keywords: ἄνοια; Sabbath; healing; folly

In Lk 6.6–11 we read about a man with a withered hand, who is present in a synagogue on the Sabbath when Jesus is teaching. Jesus 'heals' the man's hand. At the end of that passage, we learn that the Pharisees and scribes, who were observing this episode, were, αὐτοὶ δὲ ἐπλήσθησαν ἀνοίας. Recently, Rebekah Eklund argued in these pages quite persuasively that ἀνοία in Lk 6.11 could not reasonably be translated as 'rage' or 'fury'.[1] This countered virtually all major English translations of Luke, as well as the majority of English commentaries on the passage. The linguistic evidence Eklund marshals is quite overwhelming. Arranging evidence from Plato through to Procopius, Eklund shows that ἀνοία is consistently used to signify folly – either folly due to ignorance or due to madness.[2] At the same time, one must admit that in many cases it is difficult to discern the difference between folly induced by madness and folly induced by ignorance.

To be fair to those who read ἀνοία as rage or fury, the context of the passage would seem to lead to such a reading. From Lk 5.17–6.11, Jesus has regularly engaged in conflict with Pharisees, scribes and others over such matters as forgiveness, eating with sinners and fasting. In the immediately preceding paragraph, Jesus has also engaged in controversy over Sabbath-keeping. One can easily see, in the light of this increasing hostility (cf. 5.21, 30; 6.2),

[1] Rebekah Eklund, 'Fury or Folly? ἄνοια in Luke 6.11', *NTS* 69 (2023) 222–9.

[2] This sense is picked up by some German translators and commentators who translate ἀνοία as 'unsinnig' or 'Unverstand'. Michael Wolter is one of the few modern commentators to directly confront the problem of translating ἄνοια in ways that connect it to anger. Wolter uses Unverstand in his German commentary, *Das Lukasevangelium* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 239. The English translation of Wolter's commentary uses the confusing phrase 'filled with want of understanding', see *The Gospel According to Luke* (BMSEC; trans. W. Coppins and C Heilig; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016) 254.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688524000419 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that when Jesus heals on the Sabbath in 6.6–11, the Pharisees and scribes would be filled with rage.[3]

Unfortunately, this is not what Luke says. The linguistic evidence argues quite strongly against translating ἀνοία as rage or fury. In the case of most English translators and commentators, the contextual expectations seem to have bent the linguistic evidence to their will.[4] Without question, there is a conflict here between the linguistic evidence regarding ἀνοία and the contextual expectations of 6.6–11.

One way of resolving this conflict would be to argue that in 6.11, Luke uses ἀνοία in an unconventional and creative way to signify rage or fury. Sometimes when context and vocabulary seem at odds, linguistic innovation is the best explanation for the apparent conflict. In this particular case, the strongest argument against this is to recognise that when Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth and makes it clear to the people there that he is not going to perform a set of miracles for them, Luke says, καὶ ἐπλήσθησαν πάντες θυμοῦ ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ ἀκούοντες ταῦτα (Lk 4.28). Moreover, from 5.17 through 6.6, Jesus and the Pharisees have been in an adversarial relationship in which the Pharisees accuse Jesus of blasphemy, inattention to the company he keeps and violation of Sabbath law. Luke is perfectly capable of using conventional vocabulary to describe people's furious response to Jesus. In addition, Eklund's work shows that there do not appear to be any instances where ἀνοία 'functions to indicate a kind of insanity accompanied by rage'.[5] Thus, rather than an unconventional, but creative, use of ἀνοία, it would seem that if Luke means to convey the idea that the Pharisees and scribes are filled with rage, he is simply using ἀνοία in an idiosyncratic way that invites misunderstanding.

A more plausible path forward towards resolving the conflict between vocabulary and context is to re-look at the activities in 6.6–10 to see if they may provide a more congenial context for the conventional way of reading ἀνοία, typical from Plato to Procopius.

Luke 6.6 sets the scene. This incident takes place on 'another Sabbath', thus setting this story apart from the previous one about the disciples plucking heads of grain. This story takes place in a synagogue in which Jesus is teaching. In addition to Jesus, we are told there is a man with a withered right hand. Luke 6.7–8 indicates that Pharisees and scribes were also there watching Jesus to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. The use of παρετηροῦντο helps to signal the hostile nature of this context.[6] Although watching with hostile intent

[3] This is against Wolter, who takes 6.11 as a summary of 5.17–6.11 and claims that, 'Luke has the "ignorance" (ἄνοια) gain entrance into the Pharisees here.' Wolter asserts without any textual evidence that 6.11 serves as a 'conclusion of the overarching narrative complex' (239). The fact that the healing in 6.6–11 is unlike any other in Luke, seems to make it less likely that its conclusion serves as any sort of summary. In addition, it is not ignorance that enters the Pharisees, but madness – even if caused by ignorance.

[4] Joel Green nicely displays this tension when he says, 'Their "fury" is more than anger. This is rage born of incomprehension.' Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 257. Green clearly sees that anger is an appropriate response to Jesus' action, but also recognises that this is not the conventional meaning of ἀνοία. Unfortunately, 'rage born of incomprehension' is simply an unclear explanation and fails to note that there is no obvious connection between ἀνοία and anger. I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 236 reflects a similar approach, translating ἀνοία as 'senseless wrath' and then commenting that the Pharisees are 'At their wits' end.' Being at the end of one's wits does not convey the anger implied by senseless wrath.

[5] Eklund, 224. Eklund, 227–8, nicely covers and undermines the move made by some such as J. Fitzmyer, to link ἀνοία with Plato's version of μανία and then to claim that Plato's notion involves fury as well as madness. See J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1981) 1.611. Fitzmyer cites Plato, *Timaeus,* 86b and then simply asserts that Plato's use of μανία can mean 'fury' as well as 'madness'. This really is nothing more than a wishful reading of the relevant Plato text.

[6] Throughout Lk and Acts the verb παρατηρέω is used to signify watching with malicious or hostile intent. For example, the word appears in 14.1 where the scribes and the Pharisees, the same groups mentioned in Lk 6, are again watching Jesus to see if he will heal on the Sabbath so that they may make a case against him. In Lk 20.20,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688524000419 Published online by Cambridge University Press

may certainly generate rage at some point, this is not necessarily so. For example, in Lk 14 when the scribes are watching with hostile intent, and Jesus is presented with the chance of healing someone on the Sabbath, he asks his audience questions very similar to the ones he poses here in Lk 6. In Lk 14, these questions are met with silence. Jesus does heal in that passage, but we never learn of the emotional state of the Pharisees or scribes. Nevertheless, it seems clear that in Luke 6, the point of this watching is to witness Jesus violating the Sabbath so that the Pharisees and scribes can bring an accusation against him. The stage is set for conflict, for actions that would generate fury.[7]

Luke tells us that Jesus understands the hostile motives of his opponents. In that light, Jesus calls the man with the withered hand to stand in the midst of everyone. Presumably, this will make everything that subsequently happens evident and visible to all. Before anything else happens, Jesus poses a question to those around him in 6.9: ἐπερωτῶ ὑμᾶς εἰ ἔξεστιν τῷ σαββάτῳ ἀγαθοποιῆσαι ἢ κακοποιῆσαι, ψυχὴν σῶσαι ἢ ἀπολέσαι; 'I ask you, is it permissible to do good or do evil on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy one?' Despite the fact that Jesus never receives an answer to this question, the correct answer seems to be clear. It must be permissible to do good rather than evil, to save rather than destroy life. Alternatively, this question seems a bit abstract for this situation. One could support doing good and saving life on the Sabbath, while also suggesting that waiting to heal this man does not count as 'doing evil' or 'destroying a life'.[8] Indeed, there are discussions of Jews foregoing immediate action to relieve a situation of pain in order not to violate the Sabbath. One could argue that the fit between the question and the situation seems a bit loose.

Moreover, in this particular case, and unlike most other healing stories, this man has not asked for or sought out healing. There is no indication at all that he was seeking Jesus' attention. He simply is there in the synagogue when Jesus is there. There seems to be neither plea for healing nor urgency about receiving healing. One might certainly argue that this particular case would be one in which most Jews would argue that healing could wait until the Sabbath was over, even if they were, in principle, open to healing or doing good on the Sabbath in matters of urgency.

The scene reaches its climax with Jesus looking around at them [presumably the Pharisees and scribes] and then telling the man to 'stretch out your hand'. Luke then uses a passive verb to note that the hand is restored [ἀπεκατεστάθη ἡ χεὶρ αὐτοῦ]. Perhaps, as Wolter suggests, this is a divine passive, and readers should see God as the one who heals.[9] As readers, we seem very strongly directed to assume that Jesus is the agent of the healing, but the passive verb also seems to blunt Jesus' agency here. My point is neither to

---

the scribes and Chief Priests want to arrest Jesus. To that end, they send spies to entrap Jesus and they watch (παρατηρήσαντες) so that they can arrest him. In Acts 9.24, the term is used in describing the actions of those watching the gates of Damascus hoping to catch Paul. See also the use of παρατηρέω in the parallel story in Mark 3.2. This word is also used in this way in the LXX (Ps 36.12; 139.3). Interestingly, Gal 4.10 and Jos. *Ant.* 14.264 use this verb to describe keeping or observing certain days such as the Sabbath.

[7] Of course, it was a matter of discussion in Jesus' day whether, and under what conditions, healing someone constituted a suitable reason for violating the Sabbath. See for example, Nina Collins, *Jesus, the Sabbath and the Jewish Debate: Healing on the Sabbath in the First and Second Centuries CE* (LNTS 474; London/New York: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2014) xxii + 482 pp. Even if Collins is correct that all Jewish groups agreed that it was permissible to break the Sabbath to save a life, there is still debate about when and how the standard of saving a life might be met. See W. Horbury's largely appreciative review of Collins' book in *NovT* 58 (2016) 411–14, who injects some qualifications regarding Collins' claims.

[8] M. Yoma 8.6 encourages erring on the side of caution if one is not certain about whether or not a life is actually at stake when faced with trying to heal on the Sabbath. It seems hard, however, to fit this particular malady into one of those situations imagined in m. Yoma.

[9] Wolter, *The Gospel According to Luke,* 257.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688524000419 Published online by Cambridge University Press

question whether Jesus is the ultimate agent of healing here nor to inject some sort of separation between Jesus' actions and God's, as if God performs this healing outside of Jesus' own desires. Rather, I simply want to note that in contrast to the overwhelming majority of healings in Luke, Jesus' agency is pushed to the background. We see this further, when we note the following: Jesus never touches the man;[10] and Jesus never expresses a command regarding healing.[11] Whether it involves touching or verbal instructions or combinations of these two, there is never any doubt in other Lucan healing stories that Jesus is the active agent of the healing.[12] In this case, all Jesus does is tell the man to stretch out his hand. As the text describes it, Jesus has done nothing that could be construed as Sabbath breaking by even the most observant Pharisee or teacher of the law. At the same time, a miraculous healing clearly takes place. In some respects, Luke represents Jesus as having his cake and eating it, too. The man is healed, and readers are left in no doubt about the agent of the healing. At the same time, as Luke narrates things, Jesus cannot be accused of violating the Sabbath.

In this light, the emotion ascribed to the Pharisees and scribes is much more like frustration than fury. They are being driven crazy or mad by Jesus' cleverness. They watch Jesus with malicious intent. Jesus understands their motives. His question to them pushes them towards opposing what seems morally correct. That is, they appear opposed to doing good on the Sabbath. Then, finally, the man is healed, and they have found nothing about which to accuse Jesus regarding Sabbath observance. The result of this is that they are filled with ἀνοία in the sense of folly-induced madness.

As noted above, this healing is different from the other healing accounts in Luke in several respects. Perhaps its uniqueness is matched by the response it provokes in the Pharisees and scribes, which is not rage or fury, but a type of folly-induced madness. This reading has the virtue of providing a reading of 6.6–10 to which in 6.11 ἀνοία, as conventionally understood in Greek, is an appropriate response. Jesus has not enraged them so much as driven them crazy with frustration.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Carl-Magnus Carlstein and my erstwhile colleague Rebekah Eklund for their insights and advice concerning this article. All errors, however, are solely my responsibility.

Competing interests. The author acknowledges none.

[10] In Lk 4.40, Jesus touches all those brought to him for healing. In 5.15; 7.14; 8.54; 13.12–13; 14.4; 22.51, Jesus also touches those he heals. In 6.19 and 8.44, those seeking healing touch Jesus. It is not always the case in Luke that Jesus touches those he heals, but it is common. This is in sharp contrast to the Sabbath healing in Jn9, where Jesus both makes mud and touches the blind man.

[11] In 4.38; 5.24; 7.14; 8.54; 13.12–13; 17.14 and 18. 42, Jesus issues some sort of command directed at healing.

[12] See, for example, 4.38; 4.40; 5.13; 5.24; 6.19; 7.1–10; 7.14; 8.44; 8.54; 13.12–13; 14.1–6; 17.14; 18.42; 22.51.

Cite this article: Fowl S (2025). Jesus is Driving Them Crazy: Language and Context for Luke 6.6-11. *New Testament Studies* **71**, 333–336. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688524000419

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688524000419 Published online by Cambridge University Press