

In Saeculum Satyrarum – The Century of Satire

by Sven Nilsen, 2024

In this essay I explore the historical possibility that Early Christianity in the 2nd century largely developed in Rome around a handful of people who engaged in satirical creative writing, which upon the discovery that people actually interpreted this literally as historical events with religious fervor, the group decided to exploit people for their superstitious beliefs.



AI image: Thecla in the arena (Acts of Paul – a satirical work from 2nd century)

In the beginning of the 2nd century, in 100 AD, the Roman poet Juvenal is 45 years old and living in exile from being accused of mocking the Roman empire. Other Roman poets took this lesson to heart and looked for ways to criticize the Roman empire indirectly. The primary motive was to use other cultures instead of Rome as parable for the Roman elite, out of which two favour cultures became the leading candidates for satire: Samaria and Judea.

There were two story archetypes being developed in this period: Simon from Samaria and Jesus from Judea. The names give clue to their satirical nature, as they are common names from these regions and rhymes. Simon from Samaria was possibly the first character being developed, with anti-semitic undertones where Yahweh of the Hebrew bible was portrayed as evil. However, the influence of Josephus magnus opus “Antiquities of the Jews” centered the attention on Judea and soon a new character, Jesus from Judea, was developed.

Citizens of Rome considered themselves more civilized compared to people living in remote regions of the empire, which they called “barbarians”. The Roman empire and the emperor frequently meddled with religions wherever they went, considering religion in general as a tool. So, it was not strange for them to mock religious beliefs in the regions of Samaria and Judea.

Satire was often performed in front of an audience, who might meet at night in secret social clubs surrounding worship of deities like Dionysus. These meetings involved explicit sexual activity, singing songs aloud and drugs. People mixtures entheogens, psychoactive substances that produced hallucinations and this in combination with satire helped the audience to perceive the “deeper meaning” of the story.

In Antiquities of the Jews, Josephus mentions an Atomus, a Cypriot magician working for Felix at Caesarea. Atomus convinced Felix to marry a divorced woman. This woman's sexual status was later exaggerated and related to Atomus directly, which means "the small one", or another popular name of similar meaning: Paul.

Paul and Simon from Samaria were characters parallel to each other and during the 2nd century they became associated with Thecla and Helen of Tyra respectively. Thecla is a devoted disciple of Paul who is publically shamed naked in a gladiator arena, repeatedly escaping rape and depicted in humiliating terms in relation to Paul when he is in prison. Helen of Tyra was a sex slave in Tyre which Simon from Samaria purchased and took as wife.

The role of Paul with Thecla and Simon with Helen of Tyra in satire was in sexual context, hissing up the crowd as a foreplay for orgies. Since such secret societies were forbidden under Roman rule, people used code words as "divine revelation" to refer to these experiences. The complexity of the code words became over time whole parables that both mocked Jews, laws and became new cults. Jesus as a character reflects the story archetypes of Paul and Simon, but with Mary of Magdala as a consort. The parallel between Tyra and Magdala is clear, since Tyra is a city by the sea at the point most far toward west in the local region. Magdala is a city by the shore of Sea of Galilee. These two cities are in proximity to each other. The geographically metaphors refer to sexual climax.

Over time, the coded language of these secret cults was used to identify members as in-group or out-group by their knowledge of the satirical undertones (in-group) and literal historical interpretation (out-group). This served two purposes: One that new members could be attracted to these cults by writing about their teachings as religious mysteries. If you passed the initiation ritual, then you got access to more secrets, until you reached the inner circle who participated in regular meetings with explicit sexual activity and mystical rituals under influence of entheogens.

The influence of Platonism connected philosophical ideas to the cult characters. Simon was associated with Nous, which means "mind" or "intellect". Helen of Tyra was associated with "Ennoia" which means "thinking" or "thought". Jesus was associated with "Logos" which means "word" or "reason". Mary of Magdala was associated with Zoe which means "life".

In The Gospel of John, The Word refers to Jesus, but also in the original Greek text, there was Zoe that was The Life. Later Zoe was mistranslated as "life" with a small capital letter, losing its original meaning. Some chapters later, when Jesus meets a Samaritan woman by the well of Jacob, people in Rome knew from Josephus' first volumes about the history of Jews that Jacob met his wife by the well. Since Mary of Magdala is an important character in this gospel, it is likely that the anonymous Samaritan woman was actually Mary of Magdala, having previous sexual relationships.

To build up the mythology around Jesus from Judea, new schools were established in early 2nd century by people who originally were followers of Simon from Samaria. The Platonic teachings in relation to these schools might have resulted in people running these schools knowing that what they taught was fiction or satire. The reason is that Plato in "The Republic" advocates lying to the populace while preserving the truth for the elite.

As the texts from these cults were copied into remote regions of the Roman empire, people started to interpret them literally as historical events. One of these people were Marcion of Sinope, which traveled around spreading the gospel of Jesus, thinking he was a follower of Paul. Marcion of Sinope collected money from places he traveled and went to Rome, expecting to be received with open hands. However, the culture evolving around Jesus in Rome was far from his anticipations.

What happens in Rome in this period, around 144 AD, is unclear. However, one hypothesis is that “Acts of Paul” is written as a satire mocking Marcion of Sinope. A few years later, Theodotion translates the Hebrew bible into Greek, which becomes the most popular version at the time. This makes it possible for Marcion of Sinope to respond to his criticism, writing under the name of Paul, referring to events in Acts of Paul. At the time, Acts of The Apostles is not yet written. Marcion of Sinope publishes a canon of books including the letters he wrote. This shields his message from satire and Marcionism spreads like a wildfire.

In the middle of the 2nd century, satire has become a weapon, not used to mock the Roman elite or Jews, but to attack other competing cults who produce texts in the same genre. Justin Martyr, being familiar with the events surrounding Marcion of Sinope, responds to Marcion’s canon by modifying The Gospel of John, censoring out the first meeting between Jesus and Mary of Magdala. The reason is that he wants to disassociate Jesus from Simon from Samaria, such that he can put Simon into Acts of The Apostles and make fun of him as a reference to Marcion of Sinope. Justin Martyr hires a chronicler, Hegesippus, to outline the story of Acts of The Apostles. This is in 157-165 AD. Justin Martyr is a resourceful man. He not only produces Acts of The Apostles to exploit the new Pauline movement, but he also modifies The Gospel of Luke to make it sound like the same author of Luke has also written Acts of The Apostles. However, Justin Martyr is not satisfied. He writes “First Apology”, inspired by Apology of Socrates by Plato. This gives him leverage to present his cults as persecuted by Roman authorities and give more credence to Jesus and Paul as characters.

By the time of the late 2nd century, the competition between these cults spiraled into many-layered meanings of the same texts, to a such extent that the profits of obtaining new followers, in combination with the aging founders who no longer participated in sexual rituals, focused their energy into developing their mythology and presenting it as superior to everyone else’s.

The texts are exploiting vulnerable women with low education, to use them as sexual partners and to extract as much wealth as possible. Women in Rome were a minority, only 1 out of 4, but they could own property and some of them were wealthy. The wealthy female patronesses sponsored the meals during the meetings of the cults, which were significant costs, since people had to travel long distances and get a proper meal in order to have enough energy to return. This meant that saving money for the future, establishing families and having children was less of a concern.

The first person who got really fooled by the cult of Jesus might have been Tertullian. He notices something suspicious about Paul: Paul seems very similar to Simon from Samaria. However, since in The Acts of The Apostles, the authors makes up a Jewish name for Paul, interpolating between “Shimon” and “Paul” to get “Shaul”, Tertullian believes in his naivety that “Saul” is connected to King Saul in the Old Testament. Unable to reason critically, Tertullian accepts Paul as an apostle of Jesus for the gentiles.

Tertullian goes on to create texts condemning the feminist radicals who did not worry about starting families and he also tries to harmonize the various competing cults which were both polytheistic and monotheistic. He invents The Holy Trinity of “The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit”, based on Simonianists’s Trinity “Father of Samaria, Son of Judea and Spirit of the Nations” in 180 AD. The ball keeps rolling for centuries to come, when these events are forgotten.

What started as satire in the beginning of the 2nd century ended up being interpreted as literal historical events at the end of the same century. This is why I nickname this century:

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