

How Roman Poets Shaped The Language of Early Christianity

by Sven Nilsen, 2024

In this essay I explore the historical possibility of how Roman poets shaped the language of Early Christianity through satire to criticize the Roman elite. This literary genre transformed into the gospels about Jesus of the New Testament in the Bible. What originally started as satire, became powerful metaphors for equality and justice in Gnostic movements and which message was hijacked by the elite in Rome, who fabricated false history to crush these unions.

A normal reader in the late 1st century, receiving a copy of Josephus' "Antiquities of the Jews", would have skimmed over the section about Atomus employed by Felix. However, for a Roman poet, looking for a culture to use as parable, to write satire about the Roman elite, this section would pique their interest.

The problem that Roman poets had at the time, was that after the Republic being demolished by Caesar and consecutive following emperors, the Roman elite became ever more sensitive to criticism. Juvenal, a famous Roman poet, was condemned to exile after having written satire that went into the details about the Roman justice system. So, the other Roman poets needed a way to disguise their satirical literature, an important tool in the fight against oppression, against direct accusations of the kind that Juvenal was exposed to.

New Testament scholars love to put the datings of first original gospels about Jesus to the middle-late of the 1st century. However, I will show that this is an historical impossibility as it collides with a lot of evidence we have about the 2nd century. In Seminary, where New Testament scholars study, it is common to sign a declaration of the historicity of Jesus. This leads to a biased scholarship that excludes sources such as the Hellenistic culture in which Early Christianity evolved.

The first piece of evidence one should consider is that in "Acts of The Apostles", there is a reference to "Simon Magus". This figure was in late 2nd century worshiped as a deity by Simonians. The title "Magus" was not used by Simonians themselves, but by one orthodox writer in the 2nd century: Justin Martyr.

The "Acts of The Apostles" gives the impression that Luke, the anonymous author of "The Gospel of Luke", is also the author of "Acts of The Apostles". However, how can this author use the title "Simon Magus" when this does not appear anywhere besides in Justin Martyr's writings?

The answer is that Justin Martyr is not the saint that the orthodox church wants people to believe. The amount of corruption and fabrication of history in church history is staggering, which puts this institution on par with other criminal enterprises. This is not a fairy tale of how virtuous and how much of a source of divine authority the orthodox church considered themselves. I will let these lies be told by the people who are willing to sell their intellectual integrity.

Just imagine how much influence "Acts of The Apostles" has on history. Why did people perceive these events as historical? One of the reasons is that the language of Early Christianity develops powerful metaphors that people seek to ground in actual historical events. The language is so persuasive and alluring that people think it has to be true, so there must be a historical account that explains how this message can cause the powerful emotions that people experience.

However, this powerful language did not come from a poor preacher in Judea. As much as people want this to be true, the evidence we have points to a completely different source. In my opinion, this source has equally as much voice to be heard, the voices of thousands of men and women who were silenced through history by oppression and persecution. Men and women that dared to stand out of the crowd and risk their lives for greater equality and justice.

I think that nobody today can say with certainty whether there was a poor preacher in Judea or not that resembles and originates some aspects of the Jesus that everyone are familiar with. What I believe is that his written sayings and doings are a result from a complicated process that starts with other characters first and later were attributed to Jesus.

To even begin to understand how it was like to fight against oppression in this time, one must consider slavery. Slaves were sometimes tortured for arbitrary reasons. Female slaves were raped and their newborn babies were often killed. When a slave got too old for work, he or she was often crucified, like Jesus, and tortured to death in the most painful way that people could invent.

When slaves produced offspring by command of the owner, it could be without consent of the man or woman. Their children was often separated by force and sold on a slave market. This was the cornerstone of the economy in the Roman empire. Without this mechanism, the Roman empire would quickly disintegrate into parts fighting each other. Therefore, the Roman empire enforced strict laws which first was under Republic government, but over time was ruled by one supreme person that was considered both human and a deity at the same time.

One can understand, that an educated person who can read and write and with the ability to reflect philosophically over society, would sometimes see the Roman emperor as the essence of evil.

This is where we meet the Roman poets intellectually. They did not saw their time through rose tinted glasses, like fascist people in our time (e.g. Adolf Hitler) looking back to the Roman empire to admire it. Some were likely fighting, like Hell, against oppression in any way they could.

To think that the language of Early Christianity, that invokes powerful emotions in people even today, at this time evolved as if in a vacuum apart from the culture where it evolved, is discrediting these people who fought against oppression in the most disgraceful way. I think it would be dishonest to make such claims and at the same time claim to be intellectual honest.

I really do not care about the entire field of New Testament scholarship and the one billion Christians in the world today, uniting against me. The truth of the late 1st century and 2nd century must come out, so people can make informed judgements about their past and present.

I am a scientist. When I talk about these events, I do it as a scientist. This is not an attempt to disgrace Early Christianity or to undermine the established religions from it. My interest is in uncovering the truths about how religious language evolves and how language biases function in spiritual reasoning. The interpretations of history, finding powerful metaphors, is up to people who have need for those. I have no doubt that future generations will find these metaphors in their own history regardless of how much my critique might alter how these events are perceived today.

In relation to slavery, the Jewish history was of outmost importance, as it tells the tale of Moses who brings the Israelite people out of Egypt and into the promised land. However, at the time of Josephus' writings, there were no good sources for Greek readers to access. The Septuagint, a 3rd century BCE translation of the Hebrew bible, was written in an outdated version of Greek that readers might hesitate to quote as the language might seem archaic to other people.

All this changes when Josephus writes “Antiquities of the Jews”. He spends the first volumes writing about the history in the Old Testament. Now, the access to the story of Moses and other characters become available to a larger Greek audience.

It is in this context, people philosophizing over equality and justice in society, that they start to read Josephus. However, the Roman poets are looking for something special, let us call it “divine inspiration” for their next literary piece of satire.

This is where the section about Atomus becomes an epic climax in the history of literature. Atomus means in Greek “the small one” which in itself might produce a chuckle. However, the fact that Atomus convinces a woman to divorce her husband and marry Felix, is for these people reading the text hitting the nail on its head. At the time, marriage was synonymous with sexual relations. So, the phrase “the small one” next to a topic about sex, yeah, you can imagine the interpretation these poets had:

A small dick.

What the poets might have thought Josephus was writing, was a clever way to tell his readers that this Roman elite person, Felix, had a small penis, possible due to his unpleasant nature when encountering him. Josephus might have written this as revenge, but it could also be a historical coincidence that Josephus missed, not being brought up into this culture.

They laughed.

Perhaps the poets understood what might have happened here, the ambiguity of some Jew writing in Greek referring to historical events, or as revenge. Either way, the ambiguity itself was entertaining.

We do not know who the first person was that decided to use this text as inspiration for writing satire. Yet, what we do know, is that in some latin translations, Atomus was “Simon” and there is another Roman name with similar meaning to “the small one”: Paul.

Simon and Paul became parallel characters in the satire genre that evolved from this text. These stories center around a woman that is promised to be married by a rich man. Simon or Paul “rescues” her from low social status and raises her up to the elite, or divine status. However, she must leave her husband or fiancé behind first, in order to not commit adultery.

In the context of these stories, the poets used the Jewish cultural background of Samaria and Judea. The most popular characters were Simon, Paul and Jesus. One character, “Simon from Samaria” becomes associated with the Gnostic sects in Early Christianity. Another character, “Jesus from Judea” becomes associated with the Orthodox sects. The reason the poets use the cultural background of Samaria and Judea, is that they preserve a nugget of humor tracing back to Josephus, where the Jewish culture clashes with the Hellenistic world, adding to the plot of the story by simultaneously presenting a Jewish misunderstanding and a critique of the Roman elite.

Imagine being one the first people who are handed a small book with the title “Simon from Samaria”. In it, you read about a magician who is hired to spread his “good news” to a woman that is married, that there is a better bridegroom out there if you only dare to follow him. The woman climbs out of her bedroom window (a predecessor of the later Medieval “virgin in the ivory tower”, letting her long hair down so the knight can climb up), into the night. These are sexual metaphors.

However, one should not underestimate the power of such stories. In one sense, it is mocking the rich and powerful, but also it speaks about liberation using a culture associated with freedom.

A slave would read this story in a completely different way than a rich and educated person. While most slaves did not have access to education, there were some who learned to read and write because they were sent to the slave markets to trade on behalf of their owners. The slave markets were not simply rich people trading slaves among themselves. Most of the work, as horrible it was, was outsourced to slaves by rich people pulling their strings. This means that some slaves could meet other slaves they knew on a regular basis and exchange rumours and stories.

You can imagine the regular reminder of the cruelty that was the basis of the Roman empire, as the background of these educated slaves meeting and telling each other about Simon from Samaria.

In Julius Caesar's time, there was a slave rebellion so large that it threatened Rome itself. Only through genius war tactic, Julius was capable of fighting down the rebels. He crucified so many slaves, putting them along the high way to Rome, that people had to ride kilometers while watching the slaves suffocating on their crosses and thereafter the half-rotten corpses and skeletons hanging and dangling in the wind, before they were put into a mass grave.

The wealthy citizens in Rome were isolated from these cultural exchanges that happened underground in various parts of the Roman empire. They saw Simon from Samaria as a joke and used it as entertainment in their night clubs and secret societies, which were forbidden under Roman rule unless they performed charity. This was the relation between charity and the church originates. It was a cover for illegal opposition against the elite, which had no other alternative since the Senate was under the emperor's thumb.

Simon from Samaria was a character that played an enormous important role in developing the language of Early Christianity. He was associated with "Helen of Tyre", a play on "Helen of Troy". Helen of Tyre was a sex slave in a brothel in Tyre which Simon purchased and took as wife. If you are familiar with Homer's story about the war in Troy, Helen is kidnapped and causes all the nations going to war who swore to protect her in a lottery won by her husband. So, the allegory is that there is some kind of erotic relationship to the many before "the one" takes the prize. Helen is also causing the misery of others, often interpreted metaphorically about the symptoms of being in love.

Helen of Tyre, while at first provoking laughs as a dirty joke, strung a cord in the heart of Hellenistic people. The story about the war in Troy for Helen's sake was the pinnacle of culture. Only because Helen of Tyre starts as a low status person, does not mean that people antagonized her over time. In fact, she became a powerful symbol of liberation and intellectual enlightenment.

The theology took a serious turn with the Gnostics, who thought about laws and regulations as constraining for those who were enlightened. The word "Gnosis" means "knowledge", which was the highest virtue to obtain. The mockery of people with low status in society became a sign of ignorance and stupidity among those who had obtained true Gnosis. Its meaning changed from satire, weaponized against the Roman elite, to becoming something authentic on its own, to a such extent that people started believing they could ignore the power apparatus and devote themselves to a life within their respective sects.

Many New Testament scholars love to depict people among Early Christians as ignorant Jews and some naive gentiles who thought the world was going to end soon. However, this is far from reality. "The world is ending" was for people in these sects a metaphor for the coming kingdom of equality and justice. In a short amount of time, people organized in complex social structures with advanced mythology that the elite in Rome was not capable of understanding. The wealthy citizens, who thought about Simon from Samaria only in terms of satire, got shocked when people came to Rome expecting to find similar sects that they had in their home places. To them, what these "barbarians" preached sounded completely alien and extremely dangerous to their own status in society.

One of these people coming to Rome in a display of power was Marcion of Sinope.

It is important to understand that people in Rome who visited night clubs, where satire was performed, were familiar with characters like Simon from Samaria or Jesus from Judea. There also was a growing influence of the Gnostic sects who had very radical views of equality and justice. However, a lot of people did not really understand how influential these sects were in remote regions of the empire. They completely misunderstood the power and diversity of these sects.

Marcion of Sinope collected money from various places he visited and came to Rome with the belief that the movement he was part of also was established in Rome. However, under the close watch of the emperor, these sects did not have the same foothold in the Roman capital. Yet, Marcion was not a nobody, he brought with him an amount that at the time would be very impressive. It is in this context, when Marcion of Sinope meets other people in Rome, who consider themselves founders of various sects, but they do not know anything close to his amount of knowledge about sects outside Rome and about the people who participated in them.

Think about this situation from these people's perspective. They live in the capital of the entire world that they are aware of. They are highly educated and think they know "everything" compared to an ordinary person. They pride themselves on their wealth and knowledge. No person outside the capital is perceived as a competitor, because they expect them to be far inferior to themselves. Until the day when a person shows up displaying an unprecedented amount of wealth and knowledge about the things they consider themselves experts about and their entire model of reality collapses. It was an identity crisis.

How do they respond? Shocked and in disbelief, they grasp the primary tool they have relevant for their common background: Satire.

Marcion of Sinope developed a more potent version of Gnosticism that is more suitable for spreading in the Hellenistic culture, that did not antagonize Jews. Like the Gnostics, he preached two Gods, one of the old Hebrew bible which was inferior and one of a "New Testament" that was the true God and all-mighty one. However, unlike most Gnostics, he did not portray the god in the old Hebrew bible as evil, but merely just, a predecessor for better things to come.

To separate himself from Simonians, Marcion of Sinope uses Paul as the true apostle, while Jesus is the god in human form, sacrificing himself for humanity. The same language from satire is used, where people are converting from a "wordly" lifestyle in sin, like Helen of Tyre, preparing themselves as bridegrooms of Christ. In his gospel, the bridegroom with following marriage is not an event that happened in the past, but something that will happen in the future.

What this message does to people at the time, is to take something that was kind of obviously satirical yet on closer reflection could also be a powerful metaphor, into something that is more directly addressed toward the reader and personal confrontation with the spiritual.

The reaction is the satirical work "Acts of Paul", where the authors attack Marcion of Sinope and his way to preaching to his followers. The authors use the same old metaphor of the woman, here named Thecla, that is taken from her fiancé after being preached to by Paul, but she is not promised as a bridegroom to a worldly person. Instead, she devotes her life to Christ. This work shows that the authors actually understand the difference between previous iterations of satirical texts and what Marcion of Sinope is preaching. There is no spiritualized version of Helen of Tyre. Instead, there is a fleshly woman which is humiliated and shamed in the story by the disgracefulness of the authors.

Imagine that this work was written by Justin Martyr. It would be a scandal without parallels.

The authors need to be somebody that are familiar with the satirical literature, but also understanding Marcion of Sinope's message in a deep way, and still have a the motivation to mock it drawing on their own background as interpreting satirical works as hidden metaphors.

What is happening in this text is complex, because it is taking something that people revered as holy, reversing it and aiming the result to hurt somebody else. This could happen at the same time as the authors themselves felt threatened by this new variation, that it actually was better in many ways to what themselves believed in.

In the later literature, one can see how these people, possibly involving Justin Martyr, hijacking the very message that they previously attacked. They have to become even more Marcionists than Marcionists themselves. No longer is the God in the old Hebrew bible merely just, but also good and the same God as in the "New Testament". They have to jump from anti-sementic undertones in their own beliefs, toward embracing the Jewish culture, yet still from a Hellenistic perspective.

This is an open war about religious beliefs, where one side claims to follow Christ and calls Marcion of Sinope "anti-Christ". There is no scarcity of literacy ammunition being used.

However, Marcionism is spreading so successfully that it largely ignores the small group in Rome who struggles to grab more power for themselves. Marcionism explodes, spreading like a wildfire to many corners of the Roman empire.

The irony is that this small group in Rome, understands the satire, what "small penis" means in the context of power and influence. It is kind of funny across various metaphorical levels. Their pants are set on fire.

It is only by leveraging the tendency to interpret the gospels as literal historical events, that the group in Rome manages to climb back as the leading sect. They grabbed power in every perceivable way. Their sect becomes the elite power in Rome and they soon persecute everyone with a slightly different variant of their own "blessed" canon. The amount of misery that this group has caused is extreme. From burying a diverse movement in Early Christianity, it is replaced by a mix consisting mostly of boredom and violence. Many people consider the diversity in Early Christianity greater and more spiritually fascinating than between the most extreme variants of Christianity today.

The message of equality and justice did not arrive in Europe until the period of Enlightenment, but there was a Christian philosopher in Etopia in 1600s who formulated several principles while living in a cave, after escaping persection from the thought police of his time: Zera Jacob.

However, this another story.

THE END