

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 favourite 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 mixed wine with 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 a woman to divorce her husband, who had circumcized to marry her, to marry Felix. 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 Tyre 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 Tyre, a play on "Helen of Troy", 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 Tyre 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 Tyre and Magdala is clear, since Tyre is a city by the sea at the point most far toward west in the local region. Magdala is a city by the west 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. Two 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 Nous, which means "mind" or "intellect". Helen of Tyre 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, referring to Mary of Magdala. 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. However, instead of people thinking about these as events taking place in the 1st century, they thought these texts were prophecies or records of history from the 2nd century, due to mixing the names of Simon from Samaria and Jesus from Judea with the rebel leader Simon bar Kokhba under the Bar Kokhba revolt.

From 132 to 135 AD, a rebel named Simon bar Kokhba established a Jewish state in Judea. Simon crowned himself as nasi (prince) and was by some rabbinic scholars imagined to be the expected Messiah. Simon was killed by Roman troops and within the next year all rebels were killed or enslaved. However, the war was catastrophic for the Romans as well, who were almost defeated.

Samaria had before the war integrated their religious rites with Hellenistic ones. Emperor Hadrian planned to do the same for Judea. The war started when Hadrian abolished circumcision.

Most people in Rome at the time thought about Samaria and Judea as more or less the same place geographically. Therefore, "Simon from Samaria" was conflated with Judea, due to the name of the rebel leader and "Jesus from Judea" was also conflated with the same person and by the parallels in the satirical stories.

Before the war, the stories about Simon from Samaria and Jesus from Judea were biased toward Platonism. However, after the war, the Messianic motive and the suspicion of rebelling against the Roman empire was connected with these two characters. The role of savior, as in enlightenment, was conflated with the role of savior from oppression. The result was that Gnosticism and Christianity were being started to be seen as a threat.

One of these people who anticipated this problem was Marcion of Sinope, who made his wealth from ships in connection to the Roman elite. He started thinking about a new version of the Jewish religion that could reduce the tension between Jews and Gentiles. Through his connections, he became aware of the schools in Rome preaching about Simon and Jesus. He traveled to Rome and joined the communities around these schools, with the plan to establish his own school preaching his new approach.

Marcion's idea was to take some books from the Hebrew bible and create new texts to start a new religion that contrasted the old Jewish texts with the new texts, side by side. He did not have a concrete time period in mind for the new texts, but thought about it in a Platonic sense.

From 138 to 144 AD, the community in Rome interacts with Marcion and comes up with the idea to place the time period of the new texts in the 1st century, before the Alexandrian riots in 38 AD. John the Baptist died in 36 AD, so this was a convenient starting point to branch off historical reality into the made-up history that would underlie this new religion.

All the canonical gospels in the New Testament were written in this time, likely with some inspiration from existing satirical literature. The authors of these gospels knew Marcion and they criticized each other's texts. Marcion had written a gospel which the authors of Mark, Matthew and Luke had in front of them when writing. The author of John might have taken a romantic story about Jesus and Mary of Magdala and adapted themes from Marcion's gospel. Marcion also writes seven letters attributed to Paul, which character was previously established in a satirical work, Acts of Paul. Marcion refers to Paul fighting beasts in an arena from this story in one of the letters.

The resurrection of Jesus comes from the idea in Mark to use an empty tomb as a cliffhanger. The importance of Jesus as a Messianic character comes from the Bar Kokhba revolt and the disciples are various characters that appear in other satirical or spiritual texts. They are all martyrs. Therefore, Jesus becomes "The King" of this martyr genre and crucifixion wins over other methods.

Marcion considers the other gospels, except his own, as plagiarism and publishes his canon without Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. At the time, Acts of The Apostles is not yet written. Marcion's canon becomes the standard, also among scholars who supplement with Mark, Matthew, Luke and John and other texts. Marcion's canon shields him from satire and Marcionism spreads successfully.

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 cult 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.

Like any organized religion in history around the world, this new religion is not exempt from profit motives. Forgeries at the time are common by opportunists and with them comes accusations of heresy. However, the Ancient Greek word *haíresis* (αἵρεσις) at the time means party, or school, of a man's choice. This is a reference back to the early 2nd century when there were Gnostic and Christian schools. Accusations of heresy is primarily a fight about profits, not authenticity.

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 for women.

The first scholar 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, that might have originated with the conflation of Samaria with Judea under the Bar Kokhba revolt. 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:

In Saeculum Satyrarum – The Century of Satire

THE END

Appendix A: Why this chronology more likely than the traditional chronology

There are two primary reasons why the traditional chronology fails:

1. The Synoptic problem
2. Failure to ground Early Christianity in any external source before Antiquities of the Jews

The Synoptic problem is that Mark, Matthew and Luke are so similar texts that they can be compared side by side and sometime uses the exact same sentences. This means they can not be independent sources. However, they are also different, so one must give some hypothesis to why this is the case. To solve this problem, scholars suggest an unknown “Q” source. However, nobody has given a good explanation why the authors of Mark, Matthew and Luke could write separately by decades in the traditional chronology using the same Q source, without any other author seemingly knowing about it.

The answer, suggested by Prof. Markus Vinzent, is that there is a small group of people who know each other and their works. They change their texts in response to the other texts. This is reasonable given how few people can read and write at the time and the authors contribute to similar genre.

There is a lot of evidence that people in the Christian tradition fabricated the historical paper trace back to the supposed events in the 1st century. There is no reliable external source, even Tacitus, a respected historian, because he writes around 116 AD about Nero’s persecution of Christians, while Antiquities of the Jews was written in 93 AD.

However, even if Tacitus used Christian sources of his time, then Jesus’ execution by Pilate must have been established in the literature prior to Marcion traveling to Rome, around 138 AD. One solution is that some work about Jesus was written where he was executed by Pilate, perhaps the romantic story with Mary of Magdala that was used as source for The Gospel of John. The connection to Pilate is through Antiquities of the Jews where the title “procurator” is used instead of “prefect”, the same as in Tacitus.

The traditional chronology uses Papias of Hierapolis to connect 2nd century with oral traditions in the 1st century. However, the quote of Papias about Judas is satirical, in line with the satire hypothesis. Given that the birth of Justin Martyr varies by 20 years of the given evidence, Papias might have lived 20 years later than the traditional chronology from 60 AD to 130 AD. This puts Papias around 80 AD to 150 AD, only 13 years old when Antiquities of the Jews is published.

Appendix B – Justin Martyr as author of Acts of The Apostles

When exploring this direction, I assumed that Justin Martyr wrote Acts of The Apostles. This is simply because he writes in Greek, knows Marcion, has the right age and criticizes other sects in Early Christianity that competes with his own. On what basis, unless he establishes his own canon?

Justin Martyr has ability, motive and opportunity.

There might some other person at the time, however, due to Occam’s razor, there is no reason to invent additional entities.

Acts of The Apostles is clearly written with help from a chronicler, which I assume is Hegesippus. This text forms the basis for the traditional chronology. However, Acts of The Apostles uses Antiquities of the Jews frequently, which indicates that it is a forgery.