

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' magnum 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.

Two common themes in these satirical pieces is miracle workers and martyrdom. Crucifixion, beheadings, torn apart by beasts in an arena etc. Crucifixion was not considered more holy than other execution methods until The Gospel of Mark, which was written around 98 AD, plus minus 5 years. The Greek in Mark is considerably worse than the other gospels. The author is somebody reading satire and making his own version in response, since Jesus "picks up" other known characters from martyrdom satire as disciples, a brilliant tactic as it makes Jesus "the king" of this genre.

A recurring theme in Mark is the secrecy of Jesus being Messiah, that explains to the readers why Jesus was not considered more important in previous stories. However, at the time, Paul was not known, otherwise it would be likely that Paul would be used in Mark as a disciple.

The author of Mark could have been a bored student who makes up a story to memorize a section of Antiquities of the Jews and encoding various fragments as plot devices in Mark. This is not strange, since Simon could have also been based on Antiquities of the Jews and the student could have learned this technique from other students or the teacher. The final part of the original Mark is very telling, because it stops with the women discovering an empty tomb, leaving a cliffhanger for the readers. This fits with a genre that produces multiple stories where the same characters are reused by others. Soon after the published Gospel of Mark, Jesus becomes the second most popular figure after Simon and people start to compare Jesus with Simon.

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.

A possible author of Mark might be Saturninus of Antioch, which studied under Simonianists and starts his own school teaching about Jesus around 100 AD. The growing popularity of the Jesus figure could have resulted in the author realizing the potential for making a living out of his work.

By the time when Pliny the Younger writes to Trajan in 112 AD, there are Christians that cause social unrest and suspicion by meeting up before dawn to sing hymns to Lucifer, the lightbringer, which at the time was connected to Jesus by Christians. In tradition with the Gnostic schools, Lucifer or Satan was thought to be the savior deity and considered evidence that Jesus participated in stories of the old Hebrew bible. It is only later that Lucifer or Satan is associated with the devil. After singing hymns, the followers gathered around a meal.

Reconstructing the original Mark as it might have been written by Saturninus of Antioch around 98 might be difficult, but one can use available scientific evidence and a bit of creativity. Gnostic Early Christians had a different concept of sin than in Late Christianity. Time could be perceived as cyclical. We know from Dionysus cults that death and resurrection could be interpreted metaphorically as the change of the seasons. Therefore, it is possible that the original beginning and end of Mark might have been something like:

The good news about Jesus the Nazirite, the Son of God.
Jesus the Nazirite came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

...

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large,
had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed
in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazirite, who was crucified.
He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.
But go, tell his disciples and Simon,
‘He went ahead of you into Galilee.
Where you saw him, just as he told you.’”

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.
They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Contrary to what many people believe, resurrections were not uncommon in the Hellenistic world. Important people were often deified using a translation fable, that involved birth by a virgin, signifying unusual gifts or abilities, a tragic death, signifying sorrow, a missing body, signifying mystery, having met or being seen by somebody while traveling, signifying a witness, ascension toward the heaven, signifying divine status. Such translation fables were part of the legacy of authority in the Roman empire. There are over 70 such stories circulating in the 2nd century.

What the Gnostic Early Christians philosophize in schools about using satire, is a “suspension of belief” in the existing authority, kind of when an actor addresses the audience in the middle of a performance. So, Jesus in the hypothetical original of Saturninus’ Mark might have been satire about translation fables in general, connected with the martyrdom satire genre.

In most religious doctrines, a holy person is attributed historical events that defy the assumptions that historians use when reconstructing a chronology of events in the past. These assumptions are: People do not have superpowers, people age one year continuously per year, people get born and die, people do not go to space, people do not travel in time, people do not ride fantastical animals and people do not resurrect from the dead or resurrect others. Out of these assumptions, there is one that is avoided in religious doctrine because it complicates the belief system: Traveling in time.

Saturninus of Antioch might have written Mark as satire while being bored as a student. Everybody that reads Mark at this time are in the social environment of Saturninus. They know that this is meant to be satire. It is only later that people start emphasizing the holiness of the text. While this story was not interpreted literally at the time, it could have been fascinating enough and considered relevant for philosophical ideas and critical thinking about history. The success of Mark could have made it possible for Saturninus to realize that he could make a living as a teacher.

One reason that a such origin of Mark makes sense, is that there are few people who can read and write. These people are more closely socially connected as a group than average people. They have different opinions and beliefs they advocate. Most people who learned to read and write, learned Greek and were often inspired by classical texts from ancient Greece, due to the legacy of Alexander the Great. Schools are the most likely places to find people who engage in intellectual debates and experimentation with literature. This means it is not unthinkable that Mark might have been written by a student or teacher, like Saturninus of Antioch.

Schools were heavily in competition with each other, so using a mystical avatar for the school was a marketing scheme. When new students arrived at the harbour, the teachers might occasionally start violent fights among themselves to get more students. While Simon and Jesus are avatars that people today associate with religious beliefs, these avatars at the time might have been more like brands of education. Students learned about these characters alongside history, philosophy, literature and other more practical disciplines related to governance, politics, analytics, math, geometry etc.

It is unlikely that Saturninus would have included John the Baptist in his version of Mark. The reason is that the sections with John the Baptist are using quotations of scripture, which was not common in early 2nd century. Furthermore, these sections in Mark are like official stamps and signatures of churches to verify the authenticity of Jesus as both historical and divine. It makes more sense for a Gnostic to tie back the end to the beginning of the story. Early Christians also preferred texts in book format, which unlike scrolls did not have to be rewinded back to the beginning. The story of Mark with a connected end and beginning might have a bigger effect for readers who could immediately start over with the first page after closing the last page.

Simon in Saturninus’ Mark might have not changed name to Peter, as it is no reason for him to do so based on the satire genre available to him at the time. This could be a later 2nd century change.

The antagonizing of Satan in Mark might not have been part of the original. However, it is possible that Satan was used to introduce paradoxes, such as when Jesus is blamed to drive out demons because some claims he is possessed by an evil demon himself. The Gnostics did not view Satan as evil, but as a powerful archangel or archeon that was an adversary to the creator deity. Satan or Lucifer might have been considered an avatar of the highest deity that defied historical realism. This is because Lucifer, the lightbringer, was seen as a mediator of the message that gave enlightenment to the followers. When Jesus in Mark wakes up early in the first chapter, this might have not be to pray, but to sing hymns. His disciples, looking for him, finds Jesus at sunrise (this makes much more sense instead of saying that everyone are looking for him). This could be why Early Christians woke up before dawn to sing hymns to Venus, the planet associated with Lucifer, at the time of the writings of Pliny the Younger in 112 AD.

The Messianic title of Jesus could have been a middle to late 2nd century change to better handle Jesus as a character in politics. The original title might have been “the Nazarite” or “the Nazarene” from the story of Samson in the old Hebrew bible, Judges 13:5:

You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched
by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb.
He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines.

Due to the events of the 2nd century, the later section of this verse might have been interpreted as The Nazarite leading the rebellion against the Roman empire. So, The Nazarite could have been changed into Nazareth, a city, by some people reading Apocryphon of John as a side story taking place while the disciples are looking for Jesus before sunrise. By turning this title into a city, it was less politically provoking and The Messiah, which by the Qumran sect could also mean a priestly person, was put in place. However, the angel at the end of the story says “Nazarene” which might be a historical trace left behind of the original title of Jesus (it does not make sense for the angel to refer to Jesus’ birthplace).

When Tacitus writes around 116 AD, he is suspicious toward Christians and blames them for the Great Fire of Rome under Nero. However, this is not historically possible as Christians did not call themselves “Christians” at that time. Furthermore, he uses the title “procurator” for Pontius Pilate which indicates he uses Antiquities of the Jews. This also implies that the section about Jesus where he is executed by Pontius Pilate is authentic by Josephus. This again explains where the author of Mark gets the name “Jesus” and the execution by crucifixion.

As the texts from these cults were copied into remote regions of the Roman empire, people started to interpret them literally as historical events, with help from Tacitus’ writings. However, instead of people thinking about these as events taking place in the 1st century, some thought, lacking training in history, that 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. This idea of abolishing circumcision opens up for the later author of Paul’s epistles to integrate gentiles with Jews under the same religion, but without coercion.

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. Neither did Marcion think about using Jesus as the main character, but he had read Acts of Paul and Acts of Andrew and with his own training in writing letters, he thought about writing under the name of Paul. The lexicography of Marcion’s gospel is very similar to his letters by Paul, but he does not reference the gospel in these letters. So, this means Marcion’s gospel was written later and Marcion might have started on Paul’s letters prior to arriving in Rome. Marcion refers to Paul fighting wild beasts in an arena in Acts of Paul and the incestuous mother in Acts of Andrew in Paul’s letters. Marcion starts on his gospel without a historical character in mind, but he might have used The Gospel of Thomas for inspiration. Marcion’s gospel becomes the Q source for Matthew and Luke.

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. They use Jesus as the main character, which is a problem since Pontius Pilate last year as prefect is in 36 AD, the same year when John the Baptist dies. However, this historical detail was unknown to the community, so they make Jesus preach for whole 3 years after the death of John the Baptist, before being executed by Pilate.

All the canonical gospels in the New Testament were written or redacted in this time. The authors of these gospels knew Marcion and they critized each other’s texts. The authors of Matthew and Luke have in front of them Mark and Marcion’s gospel 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 finishes the seven letters attributed to Paul, but hesitates with referencing from the life of Jesus, as his original intention was to create a new Jewish practice in a more Platonic sense, allowing gentiles to partipate. So, Marcion writes under the name of Paul insisting that the revelations were not received by Jesus in person, but in vision after the death of Jesus.

In these texts, Lucifer or Satan is redacted from being associated with Jesus, but they use Seth from Isis cults, which had temples in Rome at the time, to create the devil character, in order to discredit the competing Gnostic sects. Another possible source of the devil might be Zoroastrianism. They have Jesus claim that the Pharisees are children of the devil. This divorces the Jesus character from earlier schools of Gnostic traditions and the spiritual rituals of singing hymns before dawn.

Marcion considers the other gospels, except his own, as plagiarism, combined with worries that people would interpret the Jesus character as a solid historical figure instead of as an inspirational mythical figure based on the satirical texts he read. He publishes his canon without Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. At the time, Acts of The Apostles is not yet written. However, there are 3 additional letters attributed to Paul in his canon, which might have been written by Apelles, a disciple of Marcion. Paul's Apollos might be simply Apelles replacing "e" with "o". 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. Knowing that Apollos refers to Apelles, this figure is claimed in Acts to only know about baptism of John the Baptist, something that contradicts Paul's letters. This claim is to compete with Apelles' version of Marcionism in Alexandria. 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 make 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 sometimes 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.

Tertullian writes about a preface to Marcion's gospel that accuses the other gospels of plagiarism. This means that the gospels must have been written around the same time as Marcion's gospel.

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.

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

I believe Justin Martyr redacted the first meeting between Jesus and Mary of Magdala because it basically ruins the whole story. The better story existed prior to this change. Mary of Magdala is the first person who meets the resurrected Jesus and Jesus says to Mary of Magdala that she should not touch him. This means, they were probably having a romantic relationship in the original story. This is in line with the parallels between Mary of Magdala and Helen of Tyre.

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 that fooled people for a long time. However, Acts of The Apostles uses Antiquities of the Jews frequently and contradicts Paul's letters, which indicates that it is a forgery.