

Joker Escapism

by Sven Nilsen, 2025

In this essay, I discuss a language bias that might be particularly useful to reconstruct 2nd century cultural literature context of Roman satire in Early Christian texts.

A hobby project of mine is to research history of 2nd century Early Christianity. This is a period where historical events are hard to decipher and the chronology of Church history is messed up badly. The evidence that goes back to the 1st century about historicity of Jesus is thin. Working on the 2nd century makes sense, as there is some data to use, but not too much data and not too late to be irrelevant. I am motivated by this work to understand our history in general, because so many ideas and influences go back to the 2nd century and the Early Christians.

In many ways, the history of the 2nd century is a turning point in the Western civilization, where a lot of things happen, but people living during this century do not understand the way their own past and what they do, will influence greatly how the Western civilization views itself later on.

Through an attempt to reconstruct a chronology for the 2nd century, I came over a possible source of influence in Early Christianity that I never thought would have anything to do with it: The exile of Juvenal, a roman poet.

In a similar way to how Charles Darwin influenced post-Hegelian philosophy, without being acknowledged as a philosopher in his own terms, Juvenal might have a great influence on Early Christian writers without them seeing Juvenal as among their own. The exile of Juvenal signals a shift in the politics of the Roman empire, that in the past was relatively tolerant toward authors who wrote comedy and satire. In particular, criticism of the Roman empire became a sensitive topic.

The role Roman poets play during religious festivals is that they write texts for plays that people enjoy. People travel together every year to these festivals from afar to experience them. Poets are pressured socially to produce plays that satisfy visitors such that they will revisit and bring economic benefits to the cities. Thus, producing a good play is a difficult intellectual challenge in itself. One might compare this challenge with modern video game design, where the market is saturated with products and designers are competing among themselves over the same customers. A good video game designer needs to draw on a broad cultural base of knowledge from many different domains of expertise, each capable of providing criticism of the final product.

The financial burden on poets in the ancient world, means that a lot is put on risk. The product has to be delivered in good time for actors to memorize their lines and make artistic choices to present characters the way that the audience might like. So, when poets all of a sudden are exposed to the risk of exile, one has to understand the seriousness of the situation: A city losing a good poet could mean years of economic loss. The exile of a single person could start a negative snowball effect, where one bad event leads to many new bad ones. It is important to not only think about the poet's personal feelings and economic situation, but the entire picture where the poet has a special relation to their community. Exile is a threat of destruction for both the poet and the community.

Understandably, if a good poet is threatened, the community perceives this as an attack on all of them by the state. By attacking the poet, the state risked to anger the whole community. Sometimes, it could result in violent rebellions against the state. In one sense, the poet acts as a self-ironic character within the community, where their message is oriented toward entertainment and pleasure. However, since this entertainment keeps the city alive through festivals, the poet is also a leader.

The poet is not surrounded by guards and can not fight well with a sword in battle, but their words are weapons more potent than any group of soldiers. Words can travel far. Satire is used to bring a balance in power between communities and the empire. However, it is a two-edged sword: Once a text is written and well known, it is hard to retract it. A poet lives with the consequences of their choices, which might have been made under all sorts of influence that are not easy to control.

In that regard, the poet's leadership resembles the emperor's responsibilities. They have both similar relationships to their communities, but an emperor is considered serious, while a poet is considered unserious. When the fall of an empire starts to spin out of control, in the eyes of the public, the emperor becomes a poet and the poet becomes an emperor. The power balance shifts from the emperor to the individual communities, that are defending themselves through the poet's work.

The exile of Juvenal is not just a signal of a change in the politics of the Roman empire, but also a signal to people that there is a such thing as a poet with too much power. Poets become seen as possible threats to the empire. This is a powerful external influence on the culture in the 2nd century.

This realization made me rethink my project and focus more on use of Roman satire in Early Christian texts. I nicknamed the 2nd century for "The Century of Satire". In Latin: In Saeculum Satyrarum. A century that would haunt the following centuries in the entire Western civilization.

The most important language bias for these religious festivals is Escapism. People come together to experience and re-experience belonging in a society and get satisfied intellectually, even sexually. Regardless of how much pain and misery there is in the world in general, at these festivals people want to escape the limits of their every day life and get reborn mentally. This mental rebirth helps people get through another year, which in the ancient world was a violent and desolate place to be. With other words, the festivals were the lifeblood of most organized societies.

However, during periods of living under threats of exile, the poets start to contemplate their own existence. They want to get out of the situation, but rebelling directly against the Roman empire will only increase the risk of getting exiled. The community also feels this tension in the air. On one side, they want revenge. On the other side, they want to live. A community has people in all kinds of stages in life. Many of these people are incapable of defending themselves, which puts a lot of responsibility on a few people that make key decisions. The solution is a retreat, into philosophy.

After a lot of contemplation and seeking through historical sources for inspiration, the poets developed two characters that became increasingly popular during the 2nd century: Simon Magus and Jesus Christ. Their respective ethnicities are Samaria and Judea, two nations that have been in the backwater of the Roman empire for centuries. Ruling these regions was seen as a punishment by the Roman elite. Samaria was a little more respectable than Judea. So, if you were ruling Judea, then you were at the bottom of the bottom, politically speaking. It is from this country, at the lowest of the lowest, that Jesus Christ arises as a satirical character that will change the world forever.

The genius stroke of some poet, who might first have developed the character Simon Magus, is to attack the Roman empire through another culture. This way, people could deny in court that what they were doing was blasphemy. To make this seem as a sincere act, people had to behave as if this was their own religion, identifying with the Simon Magus savior figure. The Roman empire is trying to integrate Samaria with their own Hellenistic culture. These countries have been speaking Aramaic for centuries. With help from Greek speaking Jews in Alexandria, the empire starts to influence these regions and more people learn Greek. Roman authorities are opening up higher education to fill government positions. For poor people, this is an opportunity to start cooperating with the Romans, securing peace for their own families, their children's education and economic future. This political move was very successful in Samaria, but in Judea it failed dramatically.

Politically, Judea became over time seen as a lost cause for the Roman elite. Many people from there were refugees of war. Yet, because of the interest in Simon Magus and Jesus Christ all over the empire, people wanted to learn more about this culture, so they integrated the refugees. Some people came from the Jewish side, reflecting back on war, but others were using the Jewish cultural identity as some kind of exotic “new-age” religion. The latter people were not circumcised, but believed that by putting up plays about Simon Magus and Jesus Christ, it could bring peace to all people regardless of their background, ethnicity or religion. With other words, the combined influence of threats of exile, plus the desire to make peace, made this a powerful combo for poets. This is the rising cultural identity of Early Christians during the 2nd century.

In these characters, Simon Magus and Jesus Christ, the poets found inspiration, which they took as personal projects to transcend the genre of satire into philosophical domains. This is another side effect of living under threat of exile. People who get humiliated often focus their attention onto something they can control, no matter how small. Simon Magus and Jesus Christ get more attention among poets and with this attention, reputation and status also increase. Soon, the poets were trying to out-perform each other in creativity. It was no longer enough to produce a good play about existing century-old characters. New plays had to include Simon Magus and Jesus Christ to rise to the top in the harsh competitive cultural environment. This in turn gave people who identified with these characters as savior figures more authenticity. Although it was based on satire originally, the identity becomes over time associated with a person who is genuinely fighting for people’s rights. The inversion of this language bias is not strange, when considering that the poet acted like a leader for the community, in a satirical sense, where comedy and hidden criticism of the Roman empire scored points with the audience. Taking on a cultural identity to worship a satirical savior figure, signaled to other people that you were on their side in the political drama that played out over time.

During this period, poets had to avoid direct confrontation with Roman authorities. After the Bar Kokhba war, people renamed their savior figures from “Simon”, due to Simon bar Kokhba, the leader of the Jewish rebellion. The Jews almost won the war against the Roman army. The Roman emperor was close to defeat and broke political tradition, to signal the seriousness of the situation, when facing the Senate for the first time afterwards. It was a war that would leave a lasting wound in the relationship between Romans and Jews. Over time, Jesus Christ won over Simon Magus in popularity, possibly because the name “Jesus” was more socially acceptable. In this time period, the characters Peter and Paul, both being possibly renamed versions of Simon Magus, enter the scene.

When taking all Early Christian texts as a basis for scientific data, the increased use of satire might be correlated with an earlier dating. The more serious a text is in tone, the later it is. The more creativity the author displays in the text, the earlier. The less creative, the more likely it is to be a later text. This data suggests that there is some social mechanism in the use of the text. Possibly, because the text was performed as a play in front of an audience. Authors put social criticism in these texts for the setting of satire and comedy. Without these elements, the texts would not gain a large following. It was the popularity of the texts that made the characters possible for Escapism.

The titles “Magus” and “Christ” are used in a similar way. However, the word “Magus” carries less Nihilistic implied meaning. This Nihilism in the use of “Christ” is reflected in the past, of violent conflicts with the empire. In classical philology, the meaning of this term comes from medicine, which is a process of making people unconscious by applying death-inducing drugs. The antidote, or the process of bringing people back alive, is “Anti-Christ”. It means to bring people back from an unconscious state, that was induced in this very technical way. The Nihilistic language bias of the use of the term “Christ” as title, comes from a kind of “Hardcore Escapism”. It promises people a more immersive experience, kind of like “Hard Rock” today tends to be more Nihilistic in artistic expression than merely “Rock”. With other words, Early Christians view themselves as more devoted on average, than other people that practice religion. Almost as if it carries a death sentence.

Early Christians practice a triple perspective in Nihilism: Death, crucifixion and the death-inducing medical process, understood through the Dogmatic school of medicine. Crucifixion is not given that much weight, as the crucifixion is a satirical theatrical performance to criticize the Roman empire through another ethnic culture. The focus in the beginning was on death and death-inducing processes. This is part of Mystery Religion, where people get initiated, to gain access to more knowledge and to gain more status in society. Initiation through a Mystery Cult is kind of like a metaphorical door that opens up more social opportunities. The Nihilistic perspective of “Christ” in this is sense, is like a door, or a path, leading toward a future that is loaded with mysterious meaning. It promises adventure, something unexpected and potentially interaction with the divine.

While this language bias has an appearance and a language surface of being Nihilistic, at the depth or core the language bias it is still Escapism. At the center, the focus is on communities and families. The Nihilistic perspective is integrated in the coming-of-age rituals to process the past as some mindset young people grow their way out of. The whole community participates in guiding and supporting the individuals that go through initiation. Metaphorically, the community are “witnesses” to the death and transformation of an individual into a newborn mind. This strong symbolism represents the transformation of the community itself, its hopes and desires for a more stable and wealthy future. A future where the community is no longer subsumed to arbitrary violence, but themselves gaining power to rule.

The Roman empire forces the people in Judea to live elsewhere, where they are given less rights than most people. The Jews are forbidden access to various things, for example owning land or growing food, forcing them to take government jobs to survive. In government positions, the Jews have been used as scapegoats, a kind of safety mechanism of power. When something goes wrong with the governance, the ruler is ready to accuse the Jews for their own wrongdoings. This abuse continues for centuries, up until modern age. Plenty of modern conspiracy theories attack Jews as its central group of people that are treated as suspects. Many Jews that have lived under these psychological conditions, have flourished in art and science. This is another way where Nihilism on the surface and Escapism in depth, transforms how people use their brains.

In Joker Calculus, when Escapism and Nihilism are used as fundamental language biases, one can use Joker Escapism to talk about this particular language bias. Joker Escapism is a two-layered language bias with Escapism in depth and Nihilism as the surface:

$$?X = (X, !X) \quad \text{Joker Escapism} = (\text{Escapism}, !\text{Escapism}) = (\text{Escapism}, \text{Nihilism})$$

Escapism and Nihilism are both language biases with their own rich philosophical ideas. However, when combining the two, it becomes a new language bias of higher duality, Joker Escapism, that satisfies many of desirable properties for cults. It gets addictive and enables more social control.

Humans are social animations. We have a strong desire to be useful and to belong in society. Threat of exile is one of the harshest penalties for the human nervous system, to be isolated and taken away from one’s own community. A Roman poet that lives under threat of exile, might see Jews forced to live elsewhere in the world than in their own place, as a recognition of the situation that the poet is finding problematic. A contemplative mind that tries to seek out and meet refugees of war with empathy. Meeting people halfway who feel they do not belong anywhere. A psychological embodiment of its own struggles in balancing the concerns of community with the state. The constant fear of losing everything, including writing poetry. Because, without a community to write for, what is the purpose of the life of the poet? The Jews actually lost what the Roman poets are fearing to lose. They have a different approach to Jews in power. One that promises cooperation and coordinates attacks to take down the emperor that blocks their own spiritual and creative freedom. Thus begins a long struggle for recognition, where poets use other cultures to express themselves.

The basic creative problem is that the Roman poets during the 2nd century can not explain themselves, nor make themselves understood to people, without risking to lose everything. They have to work on texts, which success their entire community might depend on to survive. It is an enormous conflict, but the conflict is silently raging inside the poet's mind. Yet, there is also a solution to this problem: A poet can speak to another poet, through their own works. In this mutual recognition, poets are brought closer to each other.

This process weakens the Roman empire over time. The poets ally among themselves, to protect their interests against the Roman emperor. This leads to increasing instability and further provocative attacks against communities. Which again make poets more likely to support each other, instead of uniting under a single ruler. People in communities find that when they identify in new ways that break with cultural traditions, there are less people who protest against them, causing an explosion of cultural transformation. Many Early Christians start to philosophize about Justice. They produce texts contemplating over society and the value of knowledge. The way these people use the word "faith" is a kind of like a will for transformation. A directed focus. Both faith and knowledge are tools to achieve salvation. Yet, love is seen as a higher philosophical principle, a guidance where faith and knowledge are subservient.

During the 2nd century, there is a significant progress in the art of medicine, particularly in surgery. The terminology for "Christ" and "Anti-Christ" might have been used by Early Christians because it signals that they are "modern" people with higher education, that includes some study of medicine. It is kind of similar to how people today use words like "Artificial Intelligence" or "Cloud Computing" as buzzwords. The practice of medicine is far from our modern medicine, but Early Christians believe in the power of knowledge. This idea is what they express in their texts. Knowledge to them, carries religious and spiritual weight. Basically, the belief that when people gain enough knowledge and skill, they can transcend the limitations of human life and be divinized.

Simon Magus and Jesus Christ are savior figures that are viewed by some of their followers, as ordinary men that gained divine status, through knowledge and faith. This promises other people that they might also go the same way. The problem with this approach is, when these movements become big, that some people start to view themselves as greater than the savior figures most people in these movements worship. More people want in on the same deal. Therefore, Simon Magus and Jesus Christ get made more divine over time, to prevent them from being outgunned by newcomers. Savior figures could use a little bit of saving, for themselves. Jesus Christ retreats from plays and his disciples get a more prominent role, but Jesus Christ is still around in the background as a kind of retired deity that is all-powerful. To prevent Jesus Christ from aging, the older deity Yahweh is brought up again by need, such that Jesus Christ once more can play the role of a newborn baby, a young man, an adult and ascend to heaven again. The Jesus Christ character loses its satirical tone and becomes yet another Translation Fable.

The scholar Richard C. Miller gathered evidence about what he refers to as "Translation Fables" in the Roman empire. Basically, it is a tradition to show respect toward some celebrity or important person. His argument is that Early Christians would have recognized certain literary clues in the stories about Jesus that this was not meant a historical resurrection. Instead, it is a tradition of paying respect. Some of these clues are:

1. Death
2. Missing body
3. Somebody meets the deceased person while traveling on a road and witnesses about it
4. Ascension toward heaven

I believe that Early Christians would recognize these cues, but they left some out on purpose.

In the original ending of the Gospel of Mark, there is no meeting with some person while traveling, nor any ascension toward heaven. It stops at the step of the missing body. There is a messenger inside the open grave of Jesus, that tells the women, who were the first visitors to the grave, that he would meet his disciples in Galilee. The women flee from the grave and tell nobody about what they saw.

Later on, Early Christians extend the end of Mark to include the cues of a full Translation Fable. This means, they were not only aware of these cues, but they added them to pay respect to Jesus.

The explanation might be a little surprising: The original Mark is not a conventional Translation Fable, but a satirical version that makes fun of Translation Fables in general. Technically, the messenger does not tell that Jesus is alive in that moment. On the contrary, the messenger says Jesus is not here. The messenger says that Jesus has risen, which is a statement about an event in the past. There are multiple sentences in the messenger's statements, but they are all possible to interpret as something that has already happened, concerning Jesus. The statements about the disciples is that they will see him in Galilee. Jesus is going ahead of them to meet them.

Now, this might not make much sense at first. The reason is that Early Christians preferred books over scrolls. When you write on a scroll, you have to rewind it to start over. Almost like old cassettes or video tapes. The book format allows people to just turn the page and start over. You can imagine that Jesus is like a cartoon character that moves out of the frames and enters new ones. In the final frame, Jesus jumps back to the beginning, such that the reader can meet him again. This works if the beginning with John the Baptist was added later, that contains a quote from Isaiah. Quoting scriptures became popular practice among Early Christians after Theodotion's translation around mid 2nd century. With other words, the end of Mark might have been designed to loop back to the beginning, like a never-ending tale. When put in context that this is a liturgical text, repeated on a yearly basis, it makes more sense, that Early Christians would make a story to serve the community using that story, before rational principles. After all, the story of Jesus is a story about miracles and wonders. Time travel is just another property of such fictional literature.

It is a very clever way to use satire, to leverage the contemporary culture of using Translation Fables. Jesus Christ "transcends" the normal genre and makes something new. To make something new in the arts was considered the highest form of culture. Early Christians were self-conscious over the art of writing. They also produce fictional letters where the voice of the text seems self-aware of writing. This might have been a method to bring more life into the texts. Being able to write, was something families were proud of. Perhaps they were occupied with writing as a process and paid less attention to possible theological contradictions. Later on, Early Christians start to try "cleaning up" the mess that people before them produced and give it a more rational foundation. This is when we first get a complete list of cues that the story is meant as a Translation Fable.

When Early Christians write their texts, they might have produced them out of demand, to be used as part of some festival. Therefore, the texts vary with the moods and politics of that given year. It is used to instruct the actors. Hence, the texts are not thought of as taking place in the past, but they are plans of how to perform a harmonious act on a stage. The author writes as if the story happened in the past, but what is going on in their mind is that the "long time ago" part is to immerse the audience. A specific text might have been written with a specific stage in mind.

This form of production is centered around the stage and facilities of the theatre. For example, when Jesus holds his famous speech, it is written as if the audience can picture themselves listening to Jesus. The immersive experience is a form of Escapism, where people use their creative imagination to transform things around them into playful language tools of fantasy. Early Christians have a lot in common with people who role play today, including the interest in artificial constructed languages.

There are two successful artificial constructed languages used by Early Christians: Hebrew and Syriac. Hebrew might have been constructed specifically to produce the Pentateuch, drawing on some sources and perhaps using archeological findings about an older semitic language. Aramaic was used as basis in this reconstruction, but some scholars argue that Greek has also an influence. Syriac was constructed in the beginning of the 2nd century by Early Christians and used as a liturgical language. In late 2nd century, Irenaeus writes fluently in Greek, Latin and Syriac. He travels through multiple countries, a vast distance to travel at the time. This shows how much skills Early Christians developed and were appreciated among themselves.

There is much controversy among scholars about the philology of the term “Christ” today. The classical philologist Ammon Hillman argues that it is a drug related term that comes from medicine. Using databases of Ancient Greek literature, he points out that the term is used specifically in the context of death-inducing drugs. This means, it can be interpreted as a controlled or intentional death-related process.

In the field of semiotics, experts study how signs are used by people. A symbol in sense of Charles Sanders Pierce is a sign one can not detect the meaning of it, not directly. You have to be integrated into the culture that uses the symbol, or read about it to know what it means. My own field, Path Semantics, studies the use of symbols in general, using an axiomatic foundation formalized in an extension of Intuitionistic Propositional Logic. In addition, I use formal languages like Joker Calculus to express language biases in art and philosophy. As part of this research, I formulate hypotheses about the dynamics of the use of symbols and trends in language biases over time.

From the perspective of Path Semantics, it is arbitrariness in use of symbols that is of interest. How people change how they view the same symbols over time. One hypothesis is that through history, people tend to forget feminine symbols and replace them with masculine ones. After losing memory of the original feminine symbols, they tend to see the evidence of such feminine symbols as a kind of conspiracy. They interpret the evidence as if there is a secret group of people that controls society behind closed doors. What actually happens is that people have forgotten the original use of feminine symbols and these become mysterious to them, because people can not understand what the symbols mean directly, without knowing a lot more about the cultural context.

This means that the word “Christ” might have carried a feminine symbolism. One particular possible influence on Early Christianity is in The Ephesian Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes. Anthia and Habrocomes are lovers, that get separated and travel the world along different routes in search for each other. In this tale, Anthia conspires with Eudoxos, an Ephesian physician, to give her a poison. She promises that she will wait until Eudoxos has left. In return, she gives him possessions of her robber fiancé. Eudoxos gives her a hypnotic drug instead of a lethal one, knowing he will be long gone by the time Anthia awakens. After her wedding, she drinks the poison and wakes up in a funerary chamber.

On the male side of this story, Habrocomes is left on a cross overlooking the Nile and left to die. A wind blows the cross into the river and Habrocomes drifts downstream until he is recaptured.

So, both lovers go through near-death experiences. The difficulties they go through are particular for their own gender. What I observe in the story about Jesus Christ is a combination of the two. It is not entirely clear to me that there is a death-inducing drug involved during the crucifixion of Jesus, but there are some signs in the text that are consistent with this hypothesis, such as the Roman soldiers taking down the body the same day. This was uncommon for crucifixion, that usually lasted days. It was meant to be a painful and slow death.

To Early Christians, there might be a possibility they would recognize Jesus’ crucifixion as satire.

If The Ephesian Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes was written before the original Gospel of Mark, then it is possible that it has an influence on the text. This could mean that the death of Jesus was meant as a trick. The resurrection might have been used to make fun of Translation Fables in general, to be retold in a book format specifically. The first people who read these texts might have been more pre-occupied with the skill of writing than paying attention to finer theological points. Basically, all the actions and miracles that Jesus performs in the Gospel of Mark, seems to have precedence in similar contemporary literature. However, the author attempts to surpass each single one. If Dionysus is claimed to have done something, then Jesus must do it better. If it just happened one or two times, then this might have been a coincidence. However, this is a repeated occurrence through the text and therefore becomes a pattern. It seems likely that the crucifixion is based on a similar story like The Ephesian Tale and not meant to be describing a historical event. When searching for historical recorded events among Early Christians during the entire 2nd century, there are no names of any ordinary poor Early Christian among them. Every person or character that gets mentioned in all of Early Christian texts are somebody of high status or have done something extraordinary. This rules out influence of a reliable oral tradition going back to the 1st century.

The most plausible explanation for how Early Christians use their texts in my view, is that they are influenced by contemporary works and use the texts to perform rituals and keeping religious traditions alive. The miracles are of similar kind to earlier claimed miracles by competing deities, most likely to produce similar social experiences during festivals. The poets, or authors, of these texts are specifically trying to surpass other rituals, meaning that the people that were in their audience knew about other rituals. The texts are trying to out-perform other popular rituals.

Lack of any records of ordinary names, during the entire 2nd century, is consistent with orientation of text toward extraordinary events and plays. This means that the author does not have in mind historical accuracy, but writes the text specifically for a particular stage and an expected audience. Possibly, the author knew the demographics of that audience well, to produce a suitable play for the given year it was relevant. For some reason, this was a success and the same play was repeated on yearly basis, modified to fit new cultural context, economic resources and political environments.

Once a successful formula was found, people kept repeating it, year after year.

In summary, a language bias that might be useful to reconstruct 2nd century cultural literature context of Roman satire in Early Christianity texts, is Joker Escapism. On the surface level, it appears Nihilistic and is centered around death or near-death experiences. However, at the deeper level, it is a similar language bias to contemporary literature, such as The Ephesian Tale, where most of the focus is on love, family, miracles and escaping dangers. With other words, it is something that ancient people might have found interesting when performed on a stage. In the beginning, the tone of these plays was satirical and creative. Over time, these satirical tones vanished more and more and left behind a more boring Christian identity. All the fun ended up in endless Latin lectures to sleepy audiences, every Sunday, for centuries.

If this ending disappoints you, then there is no reason for despair. We can just start over!

You know, sometimes, the best ending is a new beginning, with a clean slate that you can use to fill in with what YOU want to create, not what people in the past have done. My point here is that the community, the audience, is the entire reason that people made up such stories in the first place. Without an audience, what is the purpose of the life of a poet? Luckily, the risk of exile is now low.

Once upon a time...

THE END