

The *Satiricon* and the Christian Oral Tradition¹

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO I offered a tentative suggestion that some “minor, but nonetheless tantalizing, resemblances between the famous Milesian tale of the matron of Ephesus” in the *Satiricon* and the Biblical account of Christ’s burial were the result of cynical and garbled use by Petronius of an oral version of the new Christian gospel which he may have heard, perhaps in Bithynia.² So modest was my proposal that I supposed there were no other resemblances. I now believe, however, that at several other points the oral version of the Christian tradition impinges upon Petronius’s picaresque romance.

There are a few details of his life³ to which I wish first to direct attention, since they apparently lend credence to the possibility and even probability of this influence. In A.D. 39, when Petronius was only nineteen or twenty years old, he accompanied his uncle, Publius, when that kinsman became governor of the province of Syria. For a while he may have enjoyed the life of Antioch-on-the-Orontes as well as a visit to Egypt.

It is well then to remember that he was in Palestine at the very time when the new religious movement was creating its initial stir in legal trials and persecutions. It was indeed in Antioch about this

¹This paper was presented at the Third International Congress on Patristic Studies Christ Church, Oxford, 21-25 September 1959.

²Allen Cabaniss, “A Footnote to the ‘Petronian Question,’” *CP* 49 (1954) 98-102.

³Gilbert Bagnani, *Arbiter of Elegance: A Study of the Life & Works of C. Petronius (The Phoenix, Suppl. vol. II [Toronto 1954])*. Despite his intemperate language, I believe that Bagnani has made his case that the *Satiricon* was written by Petronius between A.D. 58 and 65. Referring to my remarks in *CP* (*supra* n. 2), Bagnani states ambiguously (*op.cit.* 64, n. 71): “If these similarities are anything more than coincidences — which seems to me doubtful— Petronius may possibly have heard some vague accounts of the Crucifixion while in Bithynia.” Bagnani’s sentence does not lend itself to precise grammatical analysis and I cannot decide whether he agrees with me or not.

very time that "Christians" first received that appellation (Acts 11:26). And St. Paul had visited there about 38.⁴ The governor, Publius Petronius, was indeed indirectly involved in these affairs. It was he whom Caligula ordered to install the imperial image in the Temple at Jerusalem and it was in the summer of 40 that he advanced to obey the order. This particular effort caused such dismay among both Jews and Christians that its effect can still be read in the pages of the New Testament (cf. Mark 13:14). Because Publius Petronius realized its folly he delayed and tried to dissuade the emperor. The latter, infuriated at such an attitude, decreed the governor's suicide, but the execution was not accomplished, for Caligula himself was assassinated on 24 January 41.⁵

If within the years 40-42 the young Petronius traveled anywhere in the eastern Mediterranean area he would have inevitably seen and heard about the new movement. And when he did become governor of Bithynia in 55-56, he was in an area where the Christian mission was unusually successful.⁶ It was probably while he was in Bithynia, about 56, that St. Paul was enduring his Caesarean imprisonment under the governor Felix. What is of interest is the apparent association of Felix's wife Drusilla in the government (Acts 24:24). Her name would have a familiar ring to Petronius because it was the same as that of Emperor Caligula's sister, whose deification-proceedings he had attended and ridiculed somewhat earlier.⁷ All in all there is every reason to surmise that Petronius did in fact have ample opportunity to gain some knowledge of the Christian gospel while it was in its pre-literary stage. It is a fact that his name or that of a member of his family (his uncle Publius? another?) was remembered by Christians and entered the Christian tradition. For according to the apocryphal Gospel of Peter (about 150) 8.31,⁸ the centurion guarding Christ's sepulcher bears the name of Petronius.

I shall not again treat the story of the matron of Ephesus, nor the mention by both St. Paul and Petronius of a woman named

⁴Philip Carrington, *The Early Christian Church, I: The First Christian Century* (Cambridge 1957) 67.

⁵*ibid.* 72.

⁶*ibid.* 130, 439f.

⁷Bagnani, *op.cit.* 48.

⁸M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford 1950) 90.

Tryphaena,⁹ but, contrary to my former statement, I now assert that the remark in *Satiricon* 74, "haec dicente eo gallus gallicinaceus cantavit," is significant in view of the identical sentiment and a number of similar words in Luke 22:60: *καὶ παραχρῆμα ἔτι λαλοῦντος αὐτοῦ ἐφώνησεν ἀλέκτωρ*.

There are six other places where Biblical allusions spring immediately to mind. First, there is the statement near the end of *Satiricon* 63, that witches (*mulieres plussciae . . . nocturnae*) exist who "turn downward what is upward" (*quod sursum est, deorsum faciunt*). Similarly at Thessalonica the early Christians (who were also people of the nighttime¹⁰) were said (Acts 17:6), about 49 or 50, to be those who "upset the world" (*οἱ τὴν οἰκουμένην ἀναστατώσαντες*).

Secondly, near the beginning of *Satiricon* 75, Habinnas reminds Trimalchio that "we are men, not gods" (*homines sumus, non dei*). So about 46-49 St. Paul at Lystra had to defend himself against divine worship as an apparition of Hermes by crying out (Acts 14:15), "We are indeed men like you" (*καὶ ἡμεῖς ὁμοιοπαθεῖς ἐσμεν ὑμῖν ἄνθρωποι*).

Third, toward the beginning of *Satiricon* 78 occurs the remark by Trimalchio of his graveclothes, "See to it, Stichus, that neither mice nor moths touch them" (*Vide tu . . ., Stiche, ne ista mures tangant aut tineae*). Surely this is an echo of the original which lies beneath Matt. 6:20, "but lay up treasures for yourselves in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys" (*θησαυρίζετε δὲ ὑμῖν θησαυροὺς ἐν οὐρανῷ ὅπου οὔτε σὴς οὔτε βρῶσις ἀφανίζει*).

Fourth, in the middle of *Satiricon* 105, it was decided that to appease the guardian-deity of the ship "forty stripes be inflicted on each one" (*placuit quadragenas utrique plagas imponi*). Perhaps of no great significance, but nonetheless, the Apostle records (II Cor. 11:24) that five times he received from the Jews stripes to the number of "forty less one" (*τεσσαεράκοντα παρὰ μίαν*).

Fifth, the first line of a metrical passage in *Satiricon* 109 states: "Fallen are the hairs — that which alone is the glory of the body" (*Quod solum formae decus est, cecidere capilli*). In like manner

⁹Cabaniss, *op.cit.*

¹⁰Cabaniss, "Early Christian Nighttime Worship," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 25 (1957) 30-33.

St. Paul believes (I Cor. 11:15) that for a woman her hair "is her glory" (δόξα αὐτῆ ἐστίν). There is here also a faint reminiscence of the Lord's declaration (Matt. 10:30), "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered" (ὕμῶν δὲ καὶ αἱ τρίχες τῆς κεφαλῆς πᾶσαι ἡριθμημένοι εἰσίν).

Sixth, midway through *Satiricon* 131 an old woman performs a spell thus: "she soon took up on her middle finger dust mixed with spittle and signed the forehead" (mox turbatum sputo pulverem medio sustulit digito frontemque . . . signavit) of a man who protested all the while. So when Christ healed the blind man at the pool of Siloam (John 9:6), "He spat upon the ground and made clay out of the spittle, and put the clay upon his eyes" (ἔπτυσεν χαμαὶ καὶ ἐποίησεν πηλὸν ἐκ τοῦ πτύσματος καὶ ἐπέθηκεν αὐτοῦ τὸν πηλὸν ἐπὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς). This, of course, is a folk-pattern that can be frequently discovered.

In addition to these six points we may also add a certain cynical commendation of celibacy (qui vero nec uxores unquam duxerunt . . . ad summos honores perveniunt, id est soli militares, soli fortissimi atque etiam innocentes habentur [*Sat.* 116, *ad fin.*]), which agrees in part with some tendencies in primitive Christianity. And we should perhaps also add the account of the shipwreck (*Sat.* 113-115) which in many ways parallels the account of St. Paul's adventures in Acts 27.

Let us admit that each of these points singly is not very impressive, but the cumulative effect is quite strong. To me it seems quite apparent that Petronius had heard some oral accounts of the Christian message and mission and that he employed many words, phrases, and situations from it to give a certain piquant flavor to his romance.