PEREGRINUS’ CHRISTIAN CAREER
by
JAN N. BREMMER

One of the more fascinating figures for the history of Christianity and Judaism in the middle of the second century undoubtedly is the pagan philosopher Peregrinus of Parion, a port situated in Mysia on the eastern entrance of the Hellespont.¹ His spectacular suicide in AD 165 led the ancient social satirist Lucian to dedicate a ‘debunking’ pamphlet, De morte Peregrini, to his life. As Peregrinus stayed for a while in Palestine where he joined a Christian congregation, this ‘biography’ may be also of some interest to my esteemed colleague, as he himself, more recently, also has started to work on the crossroads of Judaism and Christianity. It would transcend the available space to write a commentary on the whole of the pamphlet, however interesting that would be, and therefore I will mainly limit myself to the chapters that discuss Peregrinus’ career as a Christian (11-13, 16) or that suggest a Christian influence (40). My principal aim is to ask what Lucian’s views, if taken seriously, tell us about the nature of Peregrinus’ congregation and Lucian’s knowledge thereof. Lucian had traveled widely between Greece and Samosata in Commagene, where he was born around AD 120. He was also well read and had a keen eye for the more outrageous figures of his time. He thus may be an interesting case by which to ascertain what knowledge a contemporary pagan intellectual had of the new religion.²

Lucian starts his treatise with a description of Peregrinus’ suicide, which the latter staged himself during the Olympian Games of AD 165. In this beginning we already hear different voices: there is praise by a fellow Cynic, Theagenes (4), but also blame by an

¹ For all testimonia see P. Frisch, Die Inschriften von Parion (Bonn, 1983) 47-96.
unknown bystander who related that, in his youth, Peregrinus had been caught *in flagrante* ‘in Armenia’ (9), had committed himself to paederasty (9), and had even strangled his father (10), parricide being perhaps the worst crime in Greek culture. Consequently, he had to leave Parion and to wander from city to city. This is of course information from Lucian, which has to be taken with a pinch of salt, as Parion erected a statue for Peregrinus, presumably shortly after his death.

It is immediately after this introduction, which clearly suggests an extremely roguish and criminal character, that Lucian continues in Chapter 11 with Peregrinus’ conversion to Christianity. It is interesting to see that Lucian already calls the followers of Jesus by the name of ‘Christians’, as this particular name was not yet generally accepted at his time. Apparently, Peregrinus was one of those contemporary wandering philosophers, who moved through the Mediterranean. Wandering was especially a well-known characteristic of Cynicism, and Peregrinus may already have been attracted to that movement before his conversion, as he became a Cynic later. However that may be, it is in the aftermath of his parricide that he became attracted to, as Lucian ironically remarks, the ‘wondrous wisdom of the Christians’ in Palestine by associating himself with τοῖς ἱερεῖσιν καὶ γραµµατεῖσιν αὐτὗν, ‘their priests and scribes’. Although these titles do occur separately in pagan associations, their combination is not attested there: pagan examples of these titles therefore hardly provide a persuasive parallel. Betz notes that priests may be assumed for early Christianity and that Christian scribes are already mentioned in *Matthew* (13.52, 23.34), but neither category is

---

3 Is this a mistake made by Lucian, whose town of birth, Samosata, was not that far from ancient Armenia, whereas Parion was nowhere near? Cf. K.J. Rigsby, ‘Peregrinus in Armenia’, *Class. Quart.*, 54 (2004) 317f.
4 In the course of time, paederasty had become less and less accepted, see Lucian, *Amores*, 28.
9 Jones, *Culture and Society*, 121 note 19.
10 *Contra Pilhofer, Lukian*, 59.
mentioned in second-century Christianity, whereas the New Testament always uses the combination οἱ ἱερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραµµατεῖς. It is only once that we find οἱ ἱερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραµµατεῖς τοῖς ἱεροῖς in an enumeration of Jewish offices in Flavius Josephus. In fact, we know that, at the time, the scribes functioned as copyists of Torah scrolls and as teachers of children, whereas the priests remained authorities on Jewish law also after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. It is perhaps their contemporary relevance that makes that these titles were apparently taken over by the leaders of the Christian congregation. In any case, it strongly suggests that Peregrinus had joined one of the Judaeo-Christian congregations that existed, not surprisingly, in Palestine and Syria.

The association with the Christians was clearly a success, as in no time Peregrinus became an important person in the congregation: προφῖτης καὶ θιασῖρχης καὶ ξυναγωγεῖς (11). How do we analyse these terms? Betz suggests a certain hierarchy in these terms, but this is hardly obvious. Moreover, like Plooij&Koopman, Schwartz and Jones, he is inclined to see a Christian phenomenon behind this mention of a ‘prophet’. However, the term should not be taken out of context but looked at as part of the enumeration. When we approach the problem from that angle, it is immediately clear that Lucian uses prophêtês in the meaning of ‘manager of an oracle’, as the other two terms also suggest the leadership of a religious institution. A thiasarchês was the head of a thiasos, a term most often used for a Dionysiac association, but not necessarily so:

---

12 Matthew 2.4, 16.21, 20.18 etc.
13 Jos. AJ 12.142; note also ἤγερεν καὶ τοῖς ἱερεῖς καὶ τοῖς γραµµατεῖς in Protevangelium Jacobi 6.
14 C. Hezser, The social structure of the rabbinic movement in Roman Palestine (Stuttgart, 1994) 467-75 (scribes), 480-89 (priests).
16 Contra Plooij&Koopman, Lucianus, 67; Schwartz and Jones, Culture and Society, 122.
thiasoi of Jews,\textsuperscript{19} of Heracles,\textsuperscript{20} of the Mater Oureia (\textit{Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum} [= \textit{SEG}] 41.1329A.4), of the Agathodaimôn (\textit{SEG} 48.1120), and of the Theos Hypsistos (\textit{CIRB} 1259) are well attested. Curiously, \textit{thiasarchês} seems to be a \textit{hapax legomenon} and occurring only here, and also the related verb \textit{thiasarcheô} seems to occur only once.\textsuperscript{21} Finally, a \textit{synagôgeus} was the founder or chairperson of a religious or professional association.\textsuperscript{22} The term can be used in a context of affinity to Judaism, but not necessarily so.\textsuperscript{23} Jones states that Lucian sees ‘Christianity through Greek eyes’ and points out that these terms have no place in early Christianity.\textsuperscript{24} That is certainly true, but Lucian is not concerned here with an exact description of the structure of a Christian congregation. He evidently wants to show Peregrinus’ prominent position within the Christian community by quoting prominent positions in religious institutions familiar to his readership.\textsuperscript{25}

It is highly interesting that Peregrinus uses his position to interpret and explain some of the books of the Christians as well as to write many himself. The interpretation will have taken place in the Sunday services, as Justin Martyr (\textit{Apol.} 1.67) relates: ‘On the day called the day of the sun there is an assembly of all those who live in the towns or in the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time permits. Then the reader ceases, and the president speaks, admonishing and exhorting us to imitate these excellent examples’. This reading of the Scriptures and early authoritative followers of Christ, such as Paul, is attested in the earliest Christian writings, as the apostle Paul already says in the \textit{First Letter to the Thessalonians} (5.27): ‘I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brothers and sisters’. We can


\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Orientis Graeci inscriptiones selectae} 529.5 = \textit{Inscriptiones antiquae orae septemtrionalis Ponti Euxini} L2 425.11.

\textsuperscript{22} F. Poland, ‘Synagogaeus’, in \textit{RE} IVA.2 (1932) 1316-22.

\textsuperscript{23} F. Sokolowski, \textit{Lois sacrées de l’Asie Mineure} (Paris, 1955) no. 80.10 (Sabbatistai), but see also \textit{I. Delos} 1641 b 6; \textit{I. Istrus} 193 (= \textit{SEG} 1.330); \textit{SEG} 24.1055 (Moesia), 34.695 (Tomis).

\textsuperscript{24} Jones, \textit{Culture and Society}, 122.

\textsuperscript{25} This is not understood by Pilhofer, \textit{Lukian}, 58-60, 102.
follow these exhortations to read in the *Letter to the Colossians* (4.16), the *Book of Revelation* (1.3) and the *First Letter to Timothy* (4.13) where the congregation is admonished ‘to give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching’. Apparently, it was the most important person in the congregation who commented on the Scriptures, which is exactly the position ascribed to Peregrinus by Lucian. The fact that Peregrinus also wrote books can have only added to his prominence. These need not have been big books, but perhaps more like the many letters written by people like Paul, pseudo-Pauls and Ignatius. Another possibility would be apologies, as a fragmentary papyrus may still preserve a reference to ‘*[Pere]grinus’ Apologies’.*26 However this may be, unfortunately, none of these writings has survived.

Peregrinus’ prominent position went so far that ‘they looked at him like a god and used him as a lawgiver and called him *prostatēs*, thus after him whom they also worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced that new mystery cult into the world’. It is, I think, absolutely unthinkable that a Christian community could have worshipped Peregrinus as a god.27 Lucian possibly uses the expression here to indicate that the faithful saw him in the line of the great philosophers, such as Plato and Pythagoras, who attracted the term ‘divine’ in the course of time.28 On the other hand, and perhaps more likely, we know that some sophists could elicit from the audience strong emotions, and in the case of the sophist Prohairesios the public licked his chest (!), kissed his hands and feet but also called him ‘god’ after a successful performance.29 Perhaps Lucian’s ‘report’ has to be seen in this light. It is certainly more difficult to see why Peregrinus should have been made use of as a ‘lawgiver’, but, perhaps, he received the title in imitation of Christ (below). *Prostatēs* is a title that occurs in several Jewish communities,30 and it seems not improbable that Lucian refers here to the fact that the

Jewish priests of this period still could have an important legal function in society before being displaced by the rabbis in this respect in later antiquity.\textsuperscript{31}

Yet however important Peregrinus was, he was only second after Jesus, ‘whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced that new cult into the world’. The concluding part of the first ‘Christian’ chapter shows that Lucian knew of Jesus and his crucifixion, but it also gives an insight as to how he looked at Christianity. He calls Christianity a ‘new cult (kainên teletên)’, which means that he considers it a type of mystery cult. This terminology is not totally strange, as Celsus too compared Christianity to ‘the other teletai’ (Origen, C. Cels. 3.59). And indeed, several Christians, orthodox and heterodox, had been struck by the similarity of some elements of the Christian ritual, such as baptism and the Eucharist, with those of the mysteries.\textsuperscript{32}

Undoubtedly, it is this resemblance that made early Christians inveigh against the mysteries, those of Eleusis of course but also less famous ones.\textsuperscript{33} It is somewhat surprising that Lucian considers Christianity still new, although it had been around for at least a century. Does this suggest that his knowledge of it was still fresh?

In Chapter 12 we hear that Peregrinus’ prominence attracted the attention of the Roman authorities: ‘Then he became arrested for that reason and was thrown into prison’. Which ‘reason’ is not quite clear, and it is not excluded that some Christians have censored the text, as has happened also in some other passages.\textsuperscript{34} As attempts to liberate Peregrinus from prison proved to be unsuccessful, he was well looked after in prison. He was visited by γρῖδια, χῖρας καὶ παιδῖα, ‘old women, some widows and orphaned children’.\textsuperscript{35} The combination of old women and widows also occurs in the Apocryphal Acts of John, where the apostle is pictured being surrounded by widows and old women, who lived off alms from the church and accused John of keeping back the

\textsuperscript{31} Heszer, \textit{Social structure}, 482f.
\textsuperscript{32} Ignatius, \textit{Ephes.} 12.2; Justin, \textit{Apol.} I.29.2; Irenaeus, \textit{Haer.} 1.21.3; Clement Alex. \textit{Strom}. 3.27.1.5. C. Auffarth, ‘Licht vom Osten’: Die antiken Mysterienkulte als Vorläufer, Gegenmodell oder katholisches Gift zum Christentum’, \textit{Arch. f. Religionsgesch.} 8 (2006) 206-26 interestingly studies some of the consequences of this relationship.
\textsuperscript{34} Cf. Plooij and Koopman \textit{ad loc}.
\textsuperscript{35} Like Harmon in the Loeb translation, Pilhofer, \textit{Lukian}, 23 translates with ‘alte Witwen und Waisenkinder’, and sees these as deaconesses (62-3).
majority of the gifts he had received and of enriching himself at their expense.\textsuperscript{36} Widows and old women were important groups in the early Church, and Lucian’s information is a welcome confirmation of the Christian sources in this respect.\textsuperscript{37}

Those in charge in the gregation even had bribed the guards to let them sleep inside with Peregrinus. Betz has some doubts about this bribery,\textsuperscript{38} but bribing wardens was very normal in antiquity,\textsuperscript{39} as it still is in many a poor country. In fact, visits of imprisoned fellow Christians are well attested in the \textit{Acta martyrum}.\textsuperscript{40} In addition, ‘all kinds of foods were brought to him, their holy scriptures were read, and ... he was called a new Socrates by them’. Material help to the imprisoned was quite common among the early Christians and must have been one of the means to keep up morale. We hear of this charity already in the \textit{Letters} of Ignatius, in Tertullian and in the \textit{Letters} of Cyprian. Tertullian even warned against too great a care, as apparently some people preferred to go to jail in order to be well looked after.\textsuperscript{41} As the Roman government hardly provided food to its prisoners,\textsuperscript{42} it is natural that the Christians made up for this deficiency. In the \textit{Passio Perpetuae} (17.1) the prisoners celebrated the \textit{agape}, a special meal that enhanced early

\textsuperscript{36} Cf. E. Junod and J.D. Kaestli, \textit{Acta Iohannis} I (Turnhout, 1983) 114f.


\textsuperscript{38} Betz, ‘\textit{Lukian}’, 231.


\textsuperscript{40} P. Pavón, ‘Régimen de vida y tratamiento del preso durante los tres primeros siglos del Imperio’, in C. Bertrand-Dagenbach \textit{et al}. (eds), \textit{Carcere. Prison et privation de liberté dans l’Antiquité classique} (Paris, 1999) 105-13 at 111-12 (‘Las visitas’).


\textsuperscript{42} Pavón, ‘Régimen de vida’, 110-11 (‘La alimentación’).
Christian sociability, but that was already on the way out in Perpetua’s time. Lucian’s mention of food may well have included such a special meal.

In addition to this material assistance, the Christians read *logoi hieroi* to him. In Philo, these refer to the Torah and divinely inspired words or thoughts, whereas in the Church Fathers they refer to the Old and New Testament. In the case of Peregrinus we probably have to think of the Scriptures too. The late Keith Hopkins (1934-2004) suggested that early Christianity spread at an amazing rate despite the fact that ‘many or most Christian communities (and *a fortiori* even more house cult-groups) simply did not have among them a single sophisticated reader or writer’. Yet this passage is one more argument against this assumption. Everything we know seems to point to Christianity being a movement connected and maintained by the written word. This use of the written word must go back to the earliest times of Christianity, as appears from the many exhortations to read from the Scriptures, which we quoted above. And it is highly interesting that Peregrinus himself wrote letters to ‘almost all the famous cities’ (41) before his death. He called these letters and their carriers ‘underworld messengers’ and ‘underworld runners’, a terminology that seems to have been inspired by the *Letters* of Ignatius, which Peregrinus probably read during the Christian phase of his life.

Hopkins also takes too little account of the Jewish contribution to early Christianity, which must have positively influenced the level of early Christian literacy.

---

44 Betz, ‘Lukian’, 14 also refers to *Acts* 16.34, but that is a different meal.
48 Ignatius, *Smyrn.11 and Polyc. 7*, cf. K. Waldner, ‘Ignatius’ Reise von Antiochia nach Rom: Zentralität und lokale Vernetzung im christlichen Diskurs des 2. Jahrhunderts’, in H. Cancik et al. (eds), *Zentralität und Religion* (Tübingen, 2006) 95-121 at 118. Pilhofer (*ad loc.*) objects that Lucian hardly will have read the letters of Ignatius. This is certainly true, but Peregrinus will have done so, as he must have familiarised himself with important Christian writings.
It is true that the Dead Sea Scrolls are the main surviving texts from the period before the destruction of the Temple, but it seems highly unlikely that the Qumran community was the only one or the only religious movement that put its thoughts and ideals into writing: \(^{50}\) we only need to think of the Second Temple Jewish literature that was written in the same time as the New Testament. Moreover, the reading of the Torah and the Septuagint will have required a certain amount of literacy as well. Christian literacy, then, will have been more widespread than Hopkins suggests. In fact, Christian literacy and its pervasive use of letter writing must have been an important contribution to the rise of orthodoxy, \(^{51}\) as only in this way could a certain standard of unanimity be maintained.\(^{52}\)

It is most remarkable that the Christians even called Peregrinus a ‘new Socrates’. The bestowing of this title has been doubted by Plooij & Koopman, but they overlooked the fact that Christian martyrs are more often associated with Socrates. In fact, the Smyrnean martyr Pionius compared himself not only to Socrates but also to Aristides and Anaxarchus, other pagan ‘saints’. \(^{53}\) Socrates was of course not only innocently condemned to death but also a famous philosopher. We can see here one of the stratagems of the early Church in regards to the pagan opposition: by relating its own martyrs to pagan examples of virtue they removed them from the criminal sphere and claimed the moral high ground.\(^{54}\)


\(^{52}\) For interesting reflections on Christian literacy see also G. Stroumsa, ‘Early Christianity – A Religion of the Book?’, in M. Finkelberg and G. Stroumsa (eds), *Homer, the Bible and Beyond* (Leiden, 2003) 153-73.


\(^{54}\) See most recently E. Benz, ‘Christus und Socrates in der alten Kirche’, *ZNW* 43 (1950/1) 195-224; K. Döring, *Exemplum Socratis* (Wiesbaden, 1979) 143-61; Th. Baumeister, ‘“Anytus und Meletus können mich zwar töten, schaden jedoch können sie mir nicht”’, Platon, Apologie des Sokrates 30c/d bei Plutarch, Epiktet, Justin Martyr und Clemens Alexandrinus’, in H.-D. Blume...
In prison, Peregrinus was visited not only by the members of his congregation, but, as Chapter 13 relates, people came even ‘from the cities of Asia Minor’, and all contributed substantial amounts of money. Lucian is clearly impressed by these signs of compassion and interest. He adds that the Christians immediately come into action in such a case. We may perhaps speculate that such imprisonments were still fairly uncommon and therefore the cause of such a focus of people and means on one particular person. On the other hand, Lucian won’t overlook the possibility to slander Peregrinus and thus adds that he was making quite an income from his imprisonment.

It is more interesting that he continues with: ‘these poor creatures have convinced themselves that they will be completely immortal and live for ever, which is the reason why most of them despise death and voluntarily give them themselves up’. It is clear from these words that Lucian himself had little sympathy for the Christian point of view. At the same time, though, he shows himself reasonably well informed about Christian doctrine and practice. It is not surprising that he had noted the Christian belief in the ‘life ever after’, as the persecutions had promoted the belief in immortality. Moreover, the reactions of philosophers, such as Marcus Aurelius and Celsus, and the Greek novels show that empty tombs and the resurrection exerted great fascination on pagan intellectuals, as Glen Bowersock has argued in an innovative study. In other words, many pagans had noted that the Christians believed in the immortality of the soul and the body, which was a revolutionary Christian innovation. This new belief probably contributed to the Christian proclivity for voluntarily martyrdom, and the available evidence seems to show that indeed a considerable number of Christians became martyrs of their own accord.

Lucian continues with the observation that ‘their first lawgiver persuaded them that they would be all brothers from one another ’ after having rejected the Greek gods

---

and worshiped aneskolopismon ekeinon sophistên, ‘that crucified sophist’. The
‘lawgiver’ clearly is Christ, whose transmission of the law is often portrayed in early
Christianity. The designation ‘brother’ is also defended by Tertullian in his Apology
(39.8-10), and the somewhat later Octavius by Minucius Felix has the opponent of
Christianity state that: ‘… hardly have they met when they love each other, throughout
the world uniting in the practice of a veritable religion of lusts. Indiscriminately they call
each other brother and sister, thus turning even ordinary fornication into incest by the
intervention of these hallowed names’ (9.2, tr. G.W. Clarke). Although accusations of
Christian atheism are still relatively rare at the time, the rejection of the Greek gods
well fits the fact that in the same years we already see the Christians called ‘atheists’ in
the descriptions of the deaths of Polycarp and the Lyonean martyrs. However, it is
rather surprising that Lucian calls Christ a ‘sophist’. Unfortunately, we cannot be certain
about the exact connotation of the term in this context, as it is sometimes used favourably
and sometimes unfavourably by Lucian. If we look at the contemporary sophists, who
were rhetors and teachers of younger pupils, often moving from one place to the next,
it is not difficult to see that Lucian could have interpreted Jesus’ activities in this
particular manner.

Lucian concludes Chapter 13 with noting that they have all things in common and
that their gullibility leads them to be robbed by charlatans. In Acts (2.42-47, 4.32-37) Luke

59 For some observations, if not always plausible, on aneskolopismon (the verb is also used in
60 Contra Pilhofer ad loc., cf. R. Hvalvik, ‘Christ Proclaiming His Law to the Apostles: The
Atheism (Cambridge, 2006) 11-26 at 21f.
63 On the sophists see most recently G.W. Dobrov, ‘The Sophist on his Craft: Art, Text, and Self-
inscriptions d’époque impériale (Paris, 2002); B.E. Borg (ed.), Paideia: The World of the Second
64 C. Lüth, ‘Anstößige Intellektuelle: Die Sophisten als Fremde und Wanderlehrer’, in Ulrike
Riemer und Peter Riemer (eds), Xenophobie, Philoxenie: vom Umgang mit Fremden in der Antike
(Stuttgart, 2005) 157-76.
65 See also L. Pernot, ‘Christianisme et sophistique’, in L.C. Montefusco (ed.), Papers on
de Grieken’? Christus en Herakles in de antieke opiniepeilingen (Groningen, 2006) 15.
presents the same image, and this *Brüderlichkeitsethik* confirms one of Max Weber’s insights, viz. that when people first come together on the basis of religious views, they are more closely associated with one another than with their ‘normal’ associates, such as relatives or neighbours, and thus will help each other in case of material needs. Yet none of our sources points to such a sharing of goods in the later second century. As Lucian seems quite well informed about the Christians, as we have seen so far, it is not impossible that, directly or indirectly, he had received some idealising information about the Christians. However this may be, Lucian clearly intends to mock the Christians because of their gullibility and he notes that they fall victim to any ‘charlatan and huckster’ that comes among them. From the *Didache* (12) we learn that the Christians themselves were also aware of this risk and even had coined the word *Christemporos*, ‘he who uses Christ to make a gain’.

This first phase of Peregrinus’ Christianity is concluded with his release from prison by ‘the governor of Syria, a man who enjoyed philosophy’ (14). Pilhofer (*ad loc.*) wonders how a Syrian governor can free a prisoner in Palestine, but the answer is simple: the Roman province was called *Syria Palaestina* (Samaria, Judea, Idumea) since Hadrian. Unfortunately, Lucian does not provide a name for the governor. An excellent candidate would have been T. Flavius Boethus, who was consul in, probably, 161 and a good friend of Galen. However, Lucian’s chronology of Peregrinus makes this less plausible, as Boethus can hardly have been in Palestine before the second half of 163. On the other hand, Lucian’s chronology is demonstrably incorrect, as he lets Peregrinus return to Paros as a Cynic before his apostasy from Christianity. Without further information or new discoveries this particular event in Peregrinus’ career cannot be completely clarified, just as we cannot locate his Christian episode in a specific period of time. The mention of the ‘priests and scribes’ as well as all the help from Asia Minor probably suggest a time around AD 150 or earlier rather than later in the second century.

---

67 The same combination in Lucian, *Dialogues of the Dead*, 5.
70 Thus, rightly, Jones, *Culture and Society*, 123.
The action of the governor does suggest, however, that Peregrinus had been imprisoned in Caesarea Maritima, the capital of the province and the seat of the Roman governor’s praetorium. In fact, this city could well have been the place where Peregrinus had settled. It was big, prosperous and typically the place where a person like Peregrinus might have expected an audience for his teachings.⁷¹ We virtually have no information about its Christian congregation(s?) in the middle of the second century, but in the third century there (still?) was a lot of contact between a scholar like Origen and the Jewish rabbis. We do not, though, get the impression of the existence of a Judaeo-Christian type of church in Caesarea in that time.⁷²

After his release from prison Peregrinus returned to Parion, where he appeared as a Cynic in front of the local assembly: ‘He wore his hair long by now, had dressed himself in a dirty cloak, had slung a satchel over his shoulder and had a walking stick in his hand’ (15). Subsequently, he acted as a philosophe provocateur in Egypt, Rome and Greece – a worthy imitator of the Cynic Diogenes. Several scholars have seen a close connection between the Cynics and Jesus,⁷³ but that debate need not detain us here. In fact, there is little indication that in the middle of the second century Christians converted to Cynicism or vice versa.⁷⁴ Peregrinus is our only example.⁷⁵ It is true that both groups had a negative view of worldly wealth, but the Christians had a negative image of the Cynics,⁷⁶ and we know of the

---

⁷¹ L.I. Levine, Caesarea under Roman Rule (Leiden, 1975); K.G. Holum et al. (eds), Caesarea papers 2: Herod’s temple, the provincial governor’s praetorium and granaries, the later harbor, a gold coin hoard, and other studies (Portsmouth, R.I., 1999); Y. Turnheim and A. Ovadiyah, Art in the Public and Private Spheres in Roman Caesarea Maritima: Temples, Architectural Decoration and Tesserae (Rome, 2002).
⁷² See the studies of M. Murray (Jews), R.S. Ascough (Christians) and R.A. Clements (Origen and the Jews) in T.L Donaldson (ed), Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima (Waterloo, 2000).
persecution of Christians by Cynics, such as Justin by the Cynic Crescens. In the end we cannot get into the mind of Peregrinus, however much we would have liked that.

In his report of Peregrinus’ philosophic career, Lucian locates his apostasy after the renunciation of his goods. In fact, he suggests a certain connection between the two, as Peregrinus now needed the Christians to live a prosperous life. This period of his career seems to have come to an abrupt halt when it was discovered that he ate from forbidden food (16). The nature of this food has been variously explained. Some suggest that Peregrinus had eaten from the food of Hekate on the crossroads. This is very unlikely, as it would imply a Cynic type of acting during his enjoying of Christian support. Others think of the eating of sacrificial meat, which was already a bone of contention in the time of Paul. As a third possibility, it has been suggested that the reference may be ‘to non-kosher food, the more so since the Christians with whom he had been in contact in Palestine may well have been Judaeo-Christians who kept the Jewish laws, a phenomenon that was still very common in the second century’. This suggestion would well fit our conclusion that Peregrinus joined a kind of Judaeo-Christian congregation, but, unfortunately, Lucian does not offer a certain clue, and we have to leave the precise reason open.

With Peregrinus’ apostasy we have come to the end of his Christian episode. However, there is perhaps one more connection with Christianity. After Peregrinus’ spectacular self-immolation at the stake during the Olympic Games of 165 AD, Lucian continues as follows his report: ‘As I was going away to the panegyris, I met a grey man, who, by Zeus, looked reliable with his beard and dignified appearance. About Proteus (as Peregrinus was called later in his career) he told, among other things, that after his cremation he saw him in white clothing only a short time before and that he had

just now left him walking cheerfully about the Echo Colonnade, wearing a wreath of wild olive.’ And he continued: ‘To top it off, he added the vulture, swearing that he himself had seen it flying up from the pyre, which I myself had only just let fly, while it was laughing about the stupidity and foolishness of the people’ (40).

This is a fascinating and sophisticated passage, in which Lucian seems to make fun of more than one group of people. Just before this encounter, in Chapter 39, he had told that after Peregrinus’ death he had helped to spread some false rumours to those people who seemed stupid enough to believe them: ‘that when the pyre was lit and Proteus had thrown himself upon it, there first happened a big earthquake while the ground bellowed. Then a vulture flew up from the midst of the flames and went off to heaven, loudly saying with a human voice: “I left the earth, but I go to the Olympus”.’

These fictitious details clearly draw on traditional motifs. Caesar’s and Jesus’ death were also accompanied by an earthquake, of which bellowing is a standard part, and oaths regarding the trustworthiness of the ascension are attested in the cases of Augustus and Drusilla. The vulture, already in antiquity an unpleasant bird, is clearly a way of making fun of the custom of releasing an eagle from the flames of an imperial cremation in the case of emperors and, albeit somewhat later, of peacocks in the case of empresses. This is contested by Christopher Jones, who argues that the eagle was also associated with the souls of private persons. Yet we do not hear of such a custom in the case of private cremations, and there can be little doubt that the imperial ascension was by far the most impressive version of this tradition. Lucian was clearly not the only one who had his thoughts about the imperial deification, which was still practised in his time: his contemporary Justin Martyr too questions the witness that saw ‘the burning Caesar’ rise to heaven from the flames of his pyre. The words spoken by the vulture have long been recognised as probably coming from a lost tragedy. But it is important to note that

---

82 Caesar: Virgil, Georg. 1.475; Ovid, Met. 15.798. Jesus: Matthew 27.51.
83 Suetonius, Augustus, 100; Cassius Dio 56.45.2, 59.11.4 (Drusilla).
85 Jones, Culture and Society, 129.
86 For the imperial apotheosis see now, with extensive bibliography, I. Gradel and P. Karanastassi, ‘B. Roman apotheosis’, in Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum II (Los Angeles, 2004) 186-212 at 196-7, 203 (eagle and peacock).
87 Justin Martyr, I Apol. 21.3.
the most likely speaker of these lines is Heracles,\(^{88}\) and this is the more fitting as Peregrinus himself had said that ‘one who has lived like Heracles should die as Heracles’ (33).\(^{89}\)

Yet by stating that he himself had made up all these details Lucian also undercuts the testimony of the old man that he had seen Peregrinus walking around. Like with Jesus and Mohamed, the deceased was not met on the place of his death or disappearance but at some, sometimes considerable, distance.\(^{90}\) Christopher Jones has argued that the material is fully pagan and should be explained in reference to the appearance of ‘Plutarch’s description of Romulus appearing after his death in shining armor and with cheerful face’.\(^{91}\) Although the ‘cheerful face’ is not in Plutarch’s text,\(^{92}\) the wreath is clearly derived from the wreath of the Olympic victors, and the Roman model of Julius Proculus, who claimed to have met Romulus after his death,\(^{93}\) is not impossible. On the other hand, it is difficult to see why Lucian would have wanted to make fun of the return of Romulus, who hardly played a role in the contemporary world of the Second Sophistic. That is why influence of the New Testament seems more likely. In his already mentioned fascinating discussion of the attraction of the resurrection in contemporary society, Glen Bowersock also included Lucian’s description of Peregrinus’ resurrection, which, as he notes, perfectly fits this interest.\(^{94}\) Lucian’s description, then, not only mocked Roman imperial practice but also Christian belief in the resurrection.

It is time to come to a conclusion. It seems clear that Lucian was not uninformed about Christianity, as he demonstrates knowledge of a number of details about its doctrines and its practices. He probably knew just as much, if not more, about


\(^{89}\) For the Cynic canonisation of Heracles see R. Höistad, *Cynic hero and cynic king: studies in the cynic conception of man* (Uppsala, 1948).


\(^{92}\) It has indeed disappeared in Jones, ‘Cynisme’, 315.


Christianity as many modern intellectuals about, say, Mormons, Pentecostals or Christianity itself. That is all we can reasonably ask of him. Unfortunately, we do not know anything about his knowledge of the Jews. He may have encountered them in his home city Samosata, or elsewhere, but he clearly did not find them interesting enough to write about. **There is then no reason to doubt him when he mentions that the Palestinian Christians had ‘priests and scribes’, which suggests, as we have seen, a Judaeo-Christian congregation. These communities have recently attracted much attention, as contemporary Jews and Christians reflect about the parting of the ways with its fateful consequences.** The Christian career of Peregrinus will be looked for in vain in these studies. Perhaps it deserves a place.

---


98 I am most grateful to Werner Eck and Ton Hilhorst for information and comments, and to Kristina Meinking for correcting my English.