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Logos and Donkey-Man
A Fragment from the History of Christian Dogmatics and Its Polemical Context

YAMASHIRO, Koji

That the new religion of the Christians was occasionally associated with the donkey-man imagery in the Roman Empire in the first centuries CE can be inferred with certainty on the basis of archaeological findings as well as Patristic (and Mandaic) evidence. What is behind this anti-Christian caricature must be a pun of sorts. As well known, the doctrine of the incarnation, whereby the heavenly savior called the Son of God took on human flesh and blood for the salvation of man, was reformulated in terms of the Logos in Johannine Christology. In response, the polytheistic enemies deemed the notion of the Logos made man as a- logos (speechless, unreasoning, irrational, absurd). Intriguingly enough, this word (in its neutral single form) means “brutes, animals”; it refers to the species of horse, especially in late Greek. Together with supplementary factors, this explains why Jesus was depicted in particular as an assine man. Apparently, the same parodic emblem was in turn applied to God the Father, Mary the Virgin and the Christian believers as well.

Preserving the residues of the daily life of the ancient Roman people, there are found on different archaeological sites numerous examples of the graffiti, i.e. writing, marks, images and drawings scribbled, scratched or engraved onto a wall and other surface. Not surprisingly, their style tends to be crude, even sexual, as typical of free expressions of the popular imagination. The subjects dealt with by those graffiti are literally diverse: greetings, poems, advertisements, declarations, dialogues, riddles, games, satires, quotations etc.. Thus, they are silent testimonies of the reality of the time, the importance of which for the historians cannot be overestimated.

The Alexamenos graffito is one of those Roman graffiti.3) It was unearthed in 1857 with the excavation of a building called the Domus Gelotiana, which is found on the Palatine Hill in Rome. Our graffito describes a man named Alexamenos prostrating a man with a donkey-head crucified on the cross. On the lower part a scrawl in Greek is recognizable. It reads: “Alexamenos sebete theon,” which means “Alexamenos worships God.” Besides, the upsilon-like shape is engraved on the upper right side. It should be noted that a retort of sorts to this obloquy was discovered in the next...

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chamber. It is written in Latin: “Alexamenos fidelis” (“Alexamenos is faithful”).

Different interpretations might be offered for the Alexamenos graffito. Yet, it is almost beyond doubt that this is a caricaturist representation of the Christian worship of Jesus: Otherwise, how can we explain the presence of the crucifixion motif? Perhaps, the Upsilon-like shape stands for the Son of God (ho hyios tou theou), the distinct Christian appellation for the Messiah, as hyios, the Greek word for “son,” begins with the letter Upsilon.

That such anti-Christian parody was fairly prevalent in the Roman Empire could be inferred from some other archaeological findings, which are summarized by Maurice Assett as follows:

The representations on a terra-cotta fragment discovered in 1881, at Naples, which dates probably from the first century, appear to belong to the same category as the caricature of the Palatine. A figure with the head of an ass and wearing the toga is seated in a chair with a roll in his hand, instructing a number of baboon-headed pupils. On an ancient gem the onocephalous teacher of two human pupils is dressed in the pallium, the form of cloak peculiar to sacred personages in early Christian art; and a Syria terra-cotta fragment represents Our Lord, book in hand, with the ears of an ass.

In other words, in all likelihood, the donkey-man imagery was normally applied both to Jesus and his followers in ancient Roman art for the purpose of ridiculing the Christian faith and satirizing its fraud.

In this connection, Patristic evidence is equally important. Thus, in Minucius Felix’ Octavius the issue of onolatry is briefly mentioned in the disputation between its two protagonists Caecillius and Octavius, respectively the representatives of paganism and Christianity: The former rebukes the latter for the adoration of “the head of an ass,” which is “the basest of creatures.” The direct retort to this blame is not given in the book, yet Octavius advocates that in general Christianity has nothing to do with the worship of an idol, whose arguments, as expected, convince Caecillius.

Tertullian, for his part, supplies additional details. In Apology for the Christians, he writes that the heathens take it that “an ass’s head” is the God of the Christians. His counterargument is roundabout: Suppose that the Christians believe the ass’ head, the pagan rivals do exactly the same, since their gods are represented in various forms of animals, and therefore the same blame must be applied to themselves. After the discussions on the repudiation of the Christian veneration of the cross and the sun, he reports a related episode: A strange picture of God, “a creature with ass’s ears, with a hoof on one foot, carrying a book, and wearing a gown” was published in the town, with the inscription: “the God of the Christians conceived of an ass.” Tertullian on his side just scornfully comments on this that the idolaters should prostrate themselves in front of this picture, as they are used to do for their own idols virtually. The same information on the pagan view of the Christian belief in the
“asinine man” is given by Tertullian in his *Ad nationes.*

The above observations must be supplemented by Mandaic literature, where Christianity is stigmatized because of its “mystery and sacrament of the she-ass with four bones.” Most probably, the Virgin Mary is meant by “the she-ass,” while the “four bones” correspond to the four segments of the cross. There is a distinct possibility that the Mandaeans borrowed this anti-Christian insult from their foreign environment; in my view, it is most implausible that they independently invented the peculiar imagery under consideration.

In short, the donkey-man emblem was customarily put on Christianity for satire in the Roman empire, and this fact was well recognized by the Christian believers. However, one crucial question remains unanswered: From whence did such an association originate?

A possible answer to this question might be sought in the episode of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, which is said to have taken place exactly before his Passion began. According to the canonical Gospels (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19), and as the Church Fathers frequently relate, Jesus rode upon an ass and/or a colt on this occasion. The Messianic connotation of this act is quite obvious, as the whole scene is built upon the famous prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 on the coming of the Messiah: “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Indeed, it is quite possible that the whole story was intentionally distorted by hostile polytheists for making a parody of the Messiahship of Jesus. And yet, the supposed distortion could not essentially explain why the Christian Messiah was represented as an asinine man; such identification in itself is, in my view, not quite necessary.

The episode of the birth of Jesus, as told in the Gospel of Luke 2:1-17 and repeated time and time again in early Christian writings, might have some relevance. The story is well known: Jesus was born, when Joseph and Mary went up from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census under the reign of Tiberius Caesar; however, there was no guest room available for them, so the new baby was wrapped in cloths and placed in a manger; on the same night, the shepherds visited him, guided by a sign from God. It is not impossible to imagine that this narrative setting prompted the anti-Christian contemporaries to associate biologically Jesus to the livestock. In so far as I can see, however, there is no strong reason for the choice of donkey from among different domestic animals here.

As a matter of fact, Tertullian gives his own explanation about why the pagans connect Christianity to the donkey figure. His reasoning is as follows. According to the report of Cornelius Tacitus, when the Jews, after having been banished from Egypt, were about to extinguish in the deserts of Arabia out of the lack of water, they found a group of wild asses;
the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

This proclamation should be compared with the Johannine description of the death of Jesus: \(^\text{16}\)

Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken,” and, as another scripture says, “They will look on the one they have pierced.”

The aim of this passage is quite clear: It explicitly shows that as the possessor of a real body, Jesus died a human death, although he was at the same time a heavenly being, as confirmed by the episode of the resurrection. The beginning of 1 John also deserves special mention in this connection: \(^\text{17}\)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our
eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Logos of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.

In other words, only the Son of God (= the Logos) incarnated assures the eternal life for the believers.

Needless to say, the doctrine of the incarnation formed one of the doctrinal columns for the Church Fathers from the very beginning, by whom Jesus Christ was coherently identified as the Son of Man (=the Logos). Here suffice it to mention one of the earliest examples from Patristic writings. According to Ignatius of Antioch, the Christian believers “have also as a Physician the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ, the only-begotten Son and Logos, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin.”

Now, the word logos is rich in connotation in classical Greek, yet it might be rendered “word, speech, reason, thought,” without losing its essential semantical value. Meanwhile, the adjective alogos, which means “speechless, unreasoning, irrational, absurd,” is formed by the addition of the negative prefix a- to the word in question. Curiously enough, the same word (in its neutral single form) denotes “brutes and animals”; especially in late usage, it refers to the species of horse, for which hyppos is in standard use. In fact, in Byzantine Greek alogan regularly means horse (and the same word eventually transformed into alogo in modern Greek). Thus, it is fairly possible that alogan had already acquired the meaning under consideration in the first centuries CE, at least at the level of daily usage.

Then, the following scenario is conceivable. The idea of the incarnation of the Son of God (=the Logos), which must have been well known to the anti-Christian polytheists active in the Roman empire, appeared so senseless that they simply deemed it alogos, i.e. speechless, unreasoning, irrational, absurd. And for the purpose of deriding the very core of the Christian faith, they depicted Jesus in the image of alogan made man. The particular choice of donkey (onos in classical Greek) from the family of horse in this context is not quite surprising, since this animal is usually characterized by its stubbornness, inaptitude, triviality and trouble among the Greeks. It might be added that in Latin this semantic load is even more conspicuous: Asinus (donkey), which belongs to the family of equus (horse), bears a negative nuance, as it means “blockhead, dolt, simpleton.” Not surprisingly, such an ingenious parody might have easily been associated with the above-mentioned episodes of Jesus’ birth (“manger”) and entry into Jerusalem (“ass, colt”). By the same token, the assine stemma could have most naturally been inferred as to Mary the Virgin as well as the Christian believers. Last but not least, there
would have been no obstacle to transferring the malevolent allegation of the Jewish worship of the ass-head to their erstwhile co-religionists. Most probably, the original setting for the formation of the anti-Christian emblem was forgotten very soon, yet even thereafter the imagery itself remained in use for some time as a polemical weapon. Obviously, after the Christianization of Rome, no place for such satire existed, and if any, must have been suppressed.

In short, the donkey-man caricature is, as it were, a monstrous fossil embedded in an old stratum of the proto-historical memories, through which we the archaeologists of the religious imagination could vaguely look into a lost scenery in the Roman Empire, where a new faith held among the followers of Jesus was seen by the hostile outsiders with both curiosity and repulsion - a voiceless relic left by the pagan gods to be vanquished not before long.

notes

* Below biblical verses are cited according to NIV with occasional slight modifications.


7) Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 16.

8) The Latin word in the original is onokoetes. Another possible rendering is “ass-priest.”


11) *TDNT*, “onos, onarion.”


14) This is evinced, for example, by the view of Celsus in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V. 33. Cf. the so-
called *Testimonium Flavianum* in Josephus, *Antiquitates Iudaicae*, XVIII. 3.3.

17) 1 John 1:1.


19) *LS*, “alogos.”

20) *LBG*, “alogos.”


22) *LS*, “asinus.”

23) Incidentally, Irenaeus, Fragment 23, gives a peculiar interpretation on Numbers 22:22-23: The ass upon which Balaam mounted is in parallel to the body of Christ, while the angel who appeared to him corresponds to the Logos itself. Whether and how this passage is relevant to our thesis is a difficult question, to which I cannot give a definite answer for now, though, to my mind, Irenaeus seems to bear in mind the contrast between *logos* and *alogon* here.