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Apuleius, Christianity, and Virgin Birth

*Postremo Apuleius ipse numquid apud Christianos iudices de magicis artibus accusatus est?*¹

Thus writes Augustine in the *City of God* as he rails against the cultivation of *daimones* as ineffectual if not harmful to humans. He makes reference to the famous trial of 158 or 159 A. D. in Sabratha in which the Platonic philosopher and novelist Apuleius was charged with practicing magic in order to seduce and then swindle his wife Pudentilla.² The bishop intends his audience to respond to his rhetorical question with, „No, of course Apuleius was not indicted before a jury of Christians. He came before a group of pagans.“ This admission would prove the case against *daimones*, for if the philosopher Apuleius, who extolled daimonic powers in his *De Deo Socratis*, was ashamed to argue before a jury of pagans that magic inspired by *daimones* was a noble art, but rather claimed that he did not practice magic, surely these spirits were not to be honored. Apuleius, in Augustine’s proposal, would have openly admitted that he was a user of these arts, if he thought them honest and virtuous. If even pagans as noteworthy as Apuleius are ashamed of *daimones* and their products, surely they must be a wicked power.³

Of course we do not know whether there were any closeted Christians among the judges at Apuleius’ trial. Certainly the presiding official, Claudius Maximus, seems an unlikely candidate. As one of the mentors of

¹ August. CD 8, 19. Other than Apuleius’ own works, Augustine is the best ancient source for the life of Apuleius. See M. T. Horsfall Scotti, *Apuleio tra magia e filosofia: la riscoperta di Agostino*, in: *Dicti studiosus* (FS S. Mariotti), Urbino 1990, 295–320.

² For the date of the trial, see J. Guey, *Au théâtre de Leptis Magna. Le proconsulat de Lollianus Avitus et la date de l’Apologie d’Apulée*, REL 29 (1951), 307–317.

³ Augustine’s attack on Apuleius does not seem to have been at random. Along with Apollonius of Tyana Apuleius seems to have been developing a devoted following, particularly in North Africa. See Ep. 138, 18: *quis autem vel risu dignum non putet, quod Apollonium et Apuleium ceterosque magicarum artium peritissimos conferre Christo vel etiam praeferre conantur?*

the emperor Marcus Aurelius he receives high praise in the Meditations (1, 15. 16. 17; 8, 25) from the author, who seemed to consider Christians suicidal maniacs.⁴ Yet, among the other judges or the audience assembled to hear the skilled rhetor defend himself in the biggest trial ever to be held at Sabratha, would not a Christian or two have slipped in to see what was going to happen to a famous man accused of strange religious practices?⁵ After reading Apuleius' extant works, one would probably answer that question, with a resounding, „No“, since he seems so oblivious to this growing religious/political movement. He uses neither the word Christian nor any related term. He does know something of Judaism calling the Jews *superstitiosos* at Florida 6, 1, an insult also hurled at the Christians,⁶ and in the Apology he refers to Moses and a certain Iohannes in a list of famous magicians (90, 6). Furthermore, in book nine (9, 14) of the Metamorphoses the narrator describes the wife of a baker, who „with all the divine powers trampled and spurned ... proclaimed one god only“.⁷ The soul of this woman is described as a *caenosam latrinam* into which every vice had flowed. The proclamation of a single god makes the baker's wife a candidate for either Judaism or Christianity, with Christianity being more likely since the descriptive phrases *in vicem certae religionis, praesumptione dei*, and *confictis observationibus* imply that the cult has been a recent invention.⁸ The closest Apuleius comes to an explicit reference to

⁴ See 11, 3. There are two caveats here, however. (A) It cannot be established with complete certainty that the Claudius Maximus in the Apology is the same individual mentioned in the Meditations and in HA 4, 3, 2. The argument in favor of a common identity is one of likelihood. Could there have been two Claudii Maximi under Pius, one a consul and subsequently proconsul, the other a guide and confidant to Marcus in his public life, but both holding a strong interest in philosophy? See RE 3, 2772/2773; A. Farquharson, *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius*, Oxford 1944, 2, 463; E. Champlin, *Fronto and Antonine Rome*, Cambridge, Mass. 1980, 32/33; V. Hunink, *Apuleius of Madauros Pro Se De Magia*, Amsterdam 1997, 2, 10. (B) It has been argued that Marcus' sole mention of the Christians is an interpolation. There is not a genuine textual problem here. A rather circular argument claims that Marcus would not use the vulgar term ‚Christians‘, and therefore this mention must not have been made by Marcus. See Farquharson, 2, 859.

⁵ A few have proposed that the accuser, Sicinius Aemilianus, was portrayed as a Christian by Apuleius. He is, in fact, described as an irreligious man who hides away in the dark (Apol. 16, 13; 56, 4) – a stereotypical characterization of Christians. For bibliography, see n. 62.

⁶ Plin. Ep. 10, 96, 8/9; Tac. Ann. 14, 44, 4; Suet. Nero 16, 2.

⁷ 9, 14, 4: *Tunc spretis atque calcatis divinis numinibus in vicem certae religionis mentita sacrilega praesumptione dei, quem praedicaret unicum ...*

⁸ See D. Tripp, *The baker's wife and her confidante in Apuleius Met. IX, 14ff.: some liturgical considerations*, *Emerita* 56 (1988), 245–251, esp. 251.

Christianity is found in the aforementioned list of magicians in the Apology. If we accept a proposed emendation to that locus, Jesus himself is named as well. The text there is in fact flawed and in need of an alternate reading.⁹

If, then, we wish to consider Apuleius' attitude toward Christianity, and we must do so in this piece on virgin birth in the tale of Cupid and Psyche, we are, for the most part, left arguing from silence. The argument from silence is, of course, an inherently hazardous tactic, as we can never determine certainly the cause or meaning of any silence. Yet, in the case of Apuleius and Christianity, it is a silence which cries out for explanation. Given what we know of Apuleius' life and works, it seems he should mention Christians and Christianity. That statement calls first for an explanation, and then secondly I will move on to my specific claims about virgin birth in Cupid and Psyche.

Let us go back to the trial of Apuleius and put that event in an historical context, relating it to pagan knowledge of Christian cult. At 159, Pliny's famous letter asking Trajan for direction in managing the Christian problem in Bithynia-Pontus was forty-nine years old,¹⁰ and Hadrian's response to Minicius Fundanus, proconsul of Asia, concerning the same matter was thirty-six.¹¹ The church at Rome had suffered through several crises in the 150s: Marcion and Valentinus emigrated to the city in the 140s or earlier;¹² their sects grew and flourished there despite the expulsion of the founders from the orthodox community.¹³ M. Cornelius Fronto, the

⁹ See Hunink, 2,223, for a discussion of the proposed emendations and bibliography.

¹⁰ Following A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, Oxford 1966, 691, dating the letter at 110 A.D.

¹¹ Hadrian's letter is found in *Just. Apol.* 1,68, and *Euseb. HE* 4,9. *AÉ* 1957, 17 establishes the dates of Fundanus' proconsulship by establishing for certain the dates of his successor.

¹² According to *Iren. Adv. Haer.* 3,4,3, Valentinus came to Rome under Pope Hyginus and thrived under Pius; he claims at the same locus that the teacher of Marcion, Cerdo, was also active under Hyginus. According to *Tert. Praes. Haer.* 30 both were active at Rome during the principate of Antoninus and were at first *apud ecclesiam Romanensem*, but, just as Lucius the ass, their *inquietam curiositatem* led them astray. In Tertullian's account, Marcion and Valentinus were thrown out of the church on more than one occasion. See G. Lüdemann, *Zur Geschichte des ältesten Christentums in Rom*, *ZNW* 70 (1979), 86–114, esp. 86–97; he does not, however, accept the tradition that Valentinus was excommunicated.

¹³ According to Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 3,3,4) it was up to Polycarp to reclaim Valentinus' followers when he arrived in Rome in 154/155 A.D., although we assume, given the long list of attacks from orthodox theologians through the fourth century (e. g.

tutor of Marcus Aurelius and a native of Cirta in Africa, had given a speech against the Christians, accusing them of incestuous orgies.¹⁴ Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, had visited the city in 154 or 155 but was executed soon after he returned home.¹⁵ In 156 or 157, perhaps in reaction to the execution of Polycarp and other Christian deaths, Justin Martyr published his letter(s) explaining and defending the practices and beliefs of his sodality;¹⁶ he boldly addressed these pleas to the Emperor Antoninus, his adopted sons Marcus and Lucius, and the Senate and People of Rome (Ap. 1, 1). Just previous to the writing of these apologies, the prefect of Rome, Q. Lollius Urbicus, had tried and executed the Christian teacher Ptolemaeus, an acquaintance of Justin.¹⁷ Urbicus, another Cirtan and a veteran of the Bar Kochba rebellion (CIL 8, 6706), was known to Apuleius and is praised at Apology 3, 1 as a man of *aequitas*. If Urbicus was not present at the trial in Sabratha, he had at least communicated with our defendant about past crimes of the prosecution.¹⁸ The dating of this last sequence of events requires some speculation, but, if we accept the conventional wisdom, we must acknowledge a flurry of political activity with regard to Christianity just prior to Apuleius' trial at Sabratha: Polycarp comes to Rome in 155; he returns to Smyrna and is executed in 156; at about the same the trial of Ptolemaeus is conducted by Urbicus; just

Marcellus of Ancyra), Polycarp was not entirely successful. Justin Martyr (Apol. 1, 26), writing in 156, claimed that Marcion was still active in Rome and that his doctrines had spread to all parts of the empire.

¹⁴ The speech is no longer extant, but an excerpt has been preserved in the Octavius of Minucius Felix. See Champlin, 64–66, who cautions against the assumption of an entire speech against the Christians.

¹⁵ For the trip to Rome, see Iren. Haer. 3, 4, 3, Euseb. HE 5, 24, 16/17, and A. v. Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, repr. Leipzig 1958, 345. For the date of the execution, see the discussions in H. Musurillo (ed. and transl.), *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford 1972, XIII–XV, and J. Stevenson (ed.), *A New Eusebius*, W. H. C. Frend (rev. and ed.), Cambridge²1987, 29; alternatively, T. D. Barnes, *A Note on Polycarp*, JTS 18 (1967), 433–437.

¹⁶ R. M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, Philadelphia 1988, 52–54, suggests that the apologies were published soon after the death of Polycarp in 156 because of Justin's insistence on a fiery punishment for the wicked in fulfillment of a curse of Polycarp. It seems that the two extant apologies were originally part of the same document.

¹⁷ The martyrdom is recounted at the beginning of Justin's so-called Second Apology and is described as *καὶ τὰ χθὲς δὲ καὶ πρῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει ὑμῶν γινόμενα ἐπὶ Οὐρβίκου, ὧ Ῥωμαῖοι, καὶ ...*

¹⁸ Apol. 2/3. See B. Baldwin, *Apuleius and the Christians*, LCM 14 (1989), 55; Champlin, 14/15; Hunink, 1, 18; 2, 17. Urbicus may have been a proconsul of Africa, since his past judicial authority in Africa is implied by Apuleius.

after the trial in 156 or 157 Justin publishes his defense; meanwhile, Apuleius communicates with Urbicus some time prior to his trial of 158 or 159. Through conversations with any of the above individuals, particularly his fellow Africans, or the gossip for which Roman elite are infamous, or the public disputes between the various Christian sects, Apuleius must have been aware of the rise of the new movement. He himself spent some portion of late 140s or early 150s in Rome¹⁹ and cultivated the connections he had or made there, as the example of Urbicus demonstrates.²⁰

What's more, at 159, Apuleius' trial was just on the temporal edge of the explosion of the Christian movement in the philosopher's own beloved Africa. Although the tradition that the first African martyrs were from his hometown, Madaura, has proven false,²¹ Apuleius still should have encountered Christians there or at numerous other sites in the province or its neighbors. Alexandria would have been a likely site for such an encounter, had Apuleius made it there in 156 or 157, had his trip not been interrupted at Oea by the courtship and marriage of Pudentilla (Apol. 72, 1). In Alexandria, he might have heard Basilides or his son Isidore, offering instruction in one of the oldest schools of Christo-Platonic Gnosticism.²² Basilides himself recounts a tale of a Light-Virgin, whose curiosity, much as that of Psyche, compels her to look into the darkness.²³ We must imagine that Apuleius made other successful trips to that city of learning.²⁴ In twenty years from 159, the Scillitan martyrs would be tried and executed at Carthage before the proconsul Vigellius Saturninus,²⁵ where, in

¹⁹ V. Hunink, *Apuleius, Pudentilla, and Christianity*, VC 54 (2000), 80–94, esp. 88. K. Dowden, *The Roman Audience of the Golden Ass*, in: J. Tatum (ed.), *The Search for the Ancient Novel*, Baltimore 1994, 422–425; P.G. Walsh, *The Roman Novel*, Cambridge 1970, 248–251.

²⁰ See also Fl. 17, 4 where Apuleius brags of his reputation among the friends of the proconsul Scipio Orfitus both in Africa and at Rome.

²¹ See J.H. Baxter, *The Martyrs of Madaura, A. D. 180*, JTS 26 (1925), 21–37; T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian*, Oxford 1971, 261/262. The tradition arose from a misinterpretation of August., Epp. 16 and 17.

²² According to Clem. Strom. 1, 17, 106, Basilides flourished under Hadrian and Antoninus; his son succeeded him as head of the school. See REA 1, 1217–1225, and K. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, P. W. Cox et alii (transl.), San Francisco 1983, 309–313.

²³ See the addendum (67) to the *Acta Archelai of Hegemonius*, C.H. Beeson (ed.), Leipzig 1906, 95–97. The similarity in the two tales was noted by G. Quispel, *Gnostic Studies I*, Istanbul 1974, 107.

²⁴ Apol. 57 implies that traveling to Alexandria was a common practice among the elite of N. Africa.

²⁵ The *Passio Sanctorum Scillitanorum* provides its own date; the proconsul is also named by Tertullian at Scap. 3,4. See Musurillo, xxii/xxiii and 87–89.

fact, Apuleius spent the 160s as a famous orator and an acquaintance of proconsuls.²⁶ The document which records the death of these twelve men and women from a small African town also reveals a well-developed church with a Latin Bible (Scil. 6, 7) and adherents who can cite it at memory (Scil. 12). The lines of conflict with the traditional religion have already been drawn as well: neither the proconsul nor the accused consider the Christians to be Roman, despite their conservative, Latin names.²⁷ Such a separation of a single ethnic, religious, and/or political group into two distinct bodies would take years to occur, and the fact that the proconsul assumes the distinction implies it has been the status quo for some time. Forty years after the trial of Apuleius, the Christians and the imperial government would come into open conflict in Africa and Egypt. In 203,²⁸ Perpetua and her companions would be arrested at Thuburbo; Origen's mother would be hiding his clothes at Alexandria, and Clement would flee the same city soon afterwards.²⁹ Writing in 212 to the proconsul Scapula, Tertullian claims that if the Christians are to be punished, the proconsul will have to decimate the city of Carthage. If the phrase *Carthago ipsa ...*

²⁶ See Fl. 9 and RE 2, 2, 1929, for Cocceius Severianus Honorinus and his son; see Fl. 16 and RE 4, 1, 75/76, for Strabo Aemilianus, a consular and potential proconsul of Africa who was instrumental in the erection of a statue to Apuleius in Carthage; see Fl. 17 and RE 4, 1507–1509, for Ser. Cornelius Scipio Salvidienus Orfitus, by whom *cives ... servati* (17, 22). The latter expression is intriguing but unexplained. As there were no military actions in Africa in the 160s to what does it allude? A Christian persecution? At Fl. 9, 31 and 15, 27 Apuleius claims to have been praised by all the consuls he has known: *Non hercules penuria laudis, quae mihi dudum integra et florens per omnes antecessores tuos ad te reservata est* (9, 31).

²⁷ Note the *nos* vs. *vos* language used by the proconsul in sections 2–5: *nos religiosi sumus ... per genium domini nostri ... supplicamus, quod et vos quoque facere debetis*. The Christians simply keep repeating the phrase *Christiana/us sum* (9, 10, 13), when asked to accept traditional Roman beliefs.

²⁸ 203 is the traditional date and not fully proven. The martyrdom text (7, 9) claims that the martyrs were executed during games celebrating the birthday of the Caesar Geta. See Barnes, Tertullian, 263–267.

²⁹ These events, as recounted in Euseb. HE 6, 2, 4/5, 3, 1, 6, 1, occurred during the Severan persecution, but 203 may not be the exact date; see T. D. Barnes, Legislation against the Christians, JRS 58 (1968), 32–50, esp. 40/41. Origen's mother hid his clothes to keep him from leaving the house and thereby save him from martyrdom. Clement and the other church leaders left the city during the persecution. The veracity of Eusebius regarding Origen is defended by Barnes, Constantine and Eusebius, Cambridge, Mass. 1981, 82/83, and H. Crouzel, Origen, A. S. Worrall (transl.), San Francisco 1989, 6/7. Greater skepticism should be used in evaluating Eusebius' accounts of Clement. See A. v. d. Hoek, The 'Catechetical' School of Early Christian Alexandria and its Philonic Heritage, HThR 90 (1997), 59–87.

decimanda a te (Scap. 5, 4) is taken literally, and that verb generally should be, Tertullian is alleging the population of the city to be one-tenth Christian.³⁰ Just after the Decian persecution (249/ 250), Cyprian (Laps. 8) laments the number of lapsed Christians in the same city; apparently, there were so many Christians that the apostates could not all sacrifice in one day when commanded to do so. Although both bishops have reason to exaggerate the relevant numbers, we can have confidence that Christianity was a recognized institution in N. Africa by the beginning of the third century whose identifiable formative stages must have occurred within Apuleius' lifetime.³¹

Several of Apuleius' colleagues in the Second Sophistic had in fact put forth their views regarding the Jesus cult by the second half of the second century. By 159, the philosopher and doctor Galen had studied in Alexandria, had returned to his home Pergamum with its magnificent Asclepieum, where he was a frequent and interested visitor, and was soon to leave for Rome.³² Galen considered Moses and Jesus to be leaders of sects which accepted doctrines without evidentiary proof, and, just as his patron Marcus Aurelius,³³ he thought Christians were quick to die.³⁴ Apuleius, as an orator, hymnist,³⁵ and priest of Asclepius³⁶ and *medicinae neque instudiosus neque imperitus* (Apol. 40, 1), might have encountered Galen at any of the above locations. Apuleius certainly spent time in Rome, almost certainly went to Alexandria, and probably visited Pergamum.³⁷ Moreover, since both men were Platonists, often working on similar if not identical subjects, such as their treatments of the *Phaedo* and *Republic*,³⁸ they might have come to know each other through their

³⁰ See Barnes, Tertullian, 69/70, for the evidence to be gleaned from this letter for the numbers of Christians in Africa.

³¹ See R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton 1996, for a social scientist's attempt to chart the growth rate of the early Christian church. His progression (7) posits that 0.36% of the population of the empire would have been Christian in the year 200, although the percentage would be higher in certain urban areas (129–145). Tertullian's number is obviously significantly higher.

³² V. Nutton, *The Chronology of Galen's Early Career*, CQ 23 (1973), 158–171.

³³ Praen. 9, 5–7; 11, 1–10; 12, 1–9; Lib. Prop. 2.

³⁴ UP 11, 14; Puls. 2, 4; 3, 3. The other pertinent passages survive only in Arabic; see R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians*, Oxford 1949.

³⁵ See Apol. 55, 10 for the speech at Oea and Fl. 18, 37–43 for the bilingual hymn and dialogue presented at Carthage.

³⁶ J. B. Rives, *The Priesthood of Apuleius*, AJPh 115 (1994), 273–290.

³⁷ For Rome and Alexandria, see n. 19 and n. 24; for Pergamum, S. J. Harrison, *Apuleius: a Latin Sophist*, Oxford 2000, 6.

³⁸ Walzer, 15, 89–96; Harrison, 23–25.

writings. The tendency toward suicide, or a willingness to die needlessly, is perhaps the most frequent criticism made against the Christians by intellectuals of the period.³⁹ Epictetus, following Stoic doctrine and perhaps influencing Marcus' opinion on the subject,⁴⁰ implied that the Christians pursued death not according to the divine Logos but „out of habit“ and even a certain madness (Arr. Epict. 4, 7, 6). Lucian, in typically satirical fashion, creates a caricature of the erstwhile Christian Peregrinus who immolated himself after the Olympic games of 165.⁴¹ The final scene in Lucian's tale (Pere. 39–41) is striking for its thematic connections to the death of Jesus as told in the gospels.⁴² The narrator fabricates a resurrection of Peregrinus and recounts it to the martyr's gullible followers; he claims that at the death there was a shaking of the earth and that a vulture rose from the pyre into the heavens proclaiming, in a human voice, to be bound for Olympus. Soon after the fictive details have been related, individuals report seeing the transfigured Peregrinus dressed all in white.⁴³

The most extensive extant, or nearly-extant, critique of Christianity of the second century comes from another Middle Platonic philosopher, Celsus.⁴⁴ His Ἀληθῆς Λόγος was published at about the same time as the *Metamorphoses*⁴⁵ and shares two points with Apuleius' subtle critique:

³⁹ See additionally Or. Cels. 8, 65, and for a discussion, see V. Schmidt, *Reaktionen auf das Christentum in den Metamorphosen des Apuleius*, VC 51 (1997), 51–71, esp. 59–64.

⁴⁰ See 11, 34–38 for Marcus' account of Epictetus' attitude toward death.

⁴¹ See C. P. Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian*, Cambridge, Mass. 1986, 124/125, for the date.

⁴² H. Dieter Betz, *Lukian von Samosata und das Neue Testament*, Berlin 1961, 118–126. Note that contemporary Christian sources consider Peregrinus a pagan. M. J. Edwards, *Satire and Verisimilitude: Christianity in Lucian's Peregrinus*, *Historia* 38 (1989), 89–98, esp. 92–93.

⁴³ The white or brilliant dress is found in the accounts of the resurrection in all four gospels (Matt. 28, 3; Mark 16, 5; Luke 24, 7; John 20, 12), and earthquakes accompany the death and resurrection of Jesus in Matthew (27, 51; 28, 2). Celsus (2, 55) also knows of a version of the resurrection with an earthquake. I read the vulture, although it certainly resonates with the traditional pagan mythology of the phoenix, as an inversion of the dove descending on Jesus at his baptism; a voice accompanies both miracles (Matt. 13, 16/17; Mark 1, 10/11; Luke 3, 21/22; John 1, 32/33). See also Or. Cels. 1, 40.

⁴⁴ The work of Celsus is quoted extensively in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, but even Origen is uncertain of the basic facts of his opponent's biography. H. Chadwick (ed. and transl.), *Origen: Contra Celsum*, Cambridge 1965, xxiv–xxix; R. J. Hoffmann (ed. and transl.), *Celsus On the True Doctrine*, Oxford 1987, 29–33; M. Frede, *Celsus philosophicus Platonicus*, in: ANRW 2, 36, 7 (1994), 5183–5213.

⁴⁵ Determining the dates of both works requires some speculation. The *Metamorphoses* is generally viewed as written after the *Apology*, but not all agree. See P. G.

first, Celsus explains Jesus' miracles as an effect of magic (1, 28. 38. 68; 2, 30. 32. 48. 55, etc.), in keeping with the list of magicians given in the Apology, and secondly, he believes the virgin birth to be a lie invented to sanitize the adultery of the mother of Jesus (1, 28. 32. 39). Apuleius' notion of virgin birth will be discussed below; for now, note that the story was accessible to an educated, non-Christian of the second century. In fact, Celsus and/or Origen⁴⁶ claim it to be one of the most famous doctrines of the new cult: „Who has not heard of the birth of Jesus from a virgin and his crucifixion and resurrection, believed by many ...“⁴⁷

So, in sum, matters involving and concerning Christians must have been happening all around Apuleius. Perhaps, however, he was just the sort of person simply not interested in novelties in general or new religious phenomena specifically. The evidence is strongly to the contrary. Apuleius was a man of immense curiosity, even as he warned his characters against it. This was a man who „gave an assignment not only to fishermen but even to (his) friends, so that, anyone who came upon an obscure species of fish, would either describe the form of it or show it (to him), if possible, alive or dead.“⁴⁸

With regard to religion, this was a man who was not only a devotee of Asclepius and knew intimately the cult of Isis as described in the last book of the *Metamorphoses*, but who was also familiar with the Galli of Cybele (Met. 8, 25–30; 9, 8–10), the magi of Persia (Apol. 25/26), and the Brahmins of India beyond (Fl. 15, 16–18), who seems to have carried a small statue of Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus with him wherever he went,⁴⁹ and who wrote that each individual has a daimon which „dwells in

Walsh (ed. and transl.), *Apuleius. The Golden Ass*, Oxford 1994, xix/xx; Harrison, 9/10, 250–252; for the counterarguments, see Dowden, *Roman Audience* (n. 19 above). For the dating of the *True Account*, see H.-U. Rosenbaum, *Zur Datierung von Celsus' ΑΛΗΘΗΣ ΛΟΓΟΣ*, VC 26 (1972), 102–111. A date in the 170s is reasonable for both.

⁴⁶ Chadwick, 10, attributes the statement to Origen, while Hoffmann, 54, believes it to have originally been Celsus'.

⁴⁷ 1, 7: τίνα γὰρ λανθάνει ἢ ἐκ παρθένου γέννησις Ἰησοῦ καὶ ὁ ἐσταυρωμένος καὶ ἡ παρὰ πολλοῖς πεπιστευμένη ἀνάστασις αὐτοῦ ...;

⁴⁸ Apol. 33, 3: ... *non piscatoribus modo, verum etiam amicis meis negotio dato, quicumque minus cogniti generis piscis inciderit, ut eius mihi aut formam commemorent aut ipsum vivum, si id nequierint, vel mortuum ostendant.*

⁴⁹ See Apol. 63/64, and the discussion of H. Münstermann, *Apuleius: Metamorphosen literarischer Vorlagen*, Stuttgart 1995, 196–200. Interestingly, R. Merkelbach, *Eros und Psyche*, *Philologus* 102 (1958), 103–116, esp. 103/104, and *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike*, Munich 1962, 4/5, believes Cupid in the *Metamorphoses* represents Egyptian Harpocrates/Horos.

the deepest recesses of the mind as a conscience.⁵⁰ Of course, there is some question as to what category Apuleius would have assigned the Christians and their new movement. If he held an opinion similar to other pagan intellectuals, he may have considered Christians to be members of a secret cult or political association, albeit a perverse and politically dangerous one.⁵¹ To the extent he thought their association a religious one, it is likely that he knew of and evaluated Christianity, for our philosopher was a fanatic of mystery cults:

„I have participated in several mysteries of the sacred in Greece, and I guard carefully certain symbols and tokens of these given to me by the priests. I am saying nothing unusual or unknown. Those of you who are present, who are initiates of Bacchus only, know what you have hidden at home and worship apart from all the uninitiated. I, however, as I said, out of a desire for truth and duty to the gods, have learned complex mysteries, very many rites, and various ceremonies.“⁵²

Remarkably, Apuleius mentions by name the cult of Bacchus, the classic example given by scholars as the organization which set the precedent for the treatment of and attitude toward Christianity on the part of the Roman elite.

We have reviewed the many and significant reasons why Apuleius should have known of Christianity, and yet we are still left with his ostensible silence on the matter. What are we to do with this silence? If the silence is not one of ignorance or brought about by chance through the loss of Apuleius' works, we are left with the conclusion that the silence is intentional, but to what intent? The determination of authorial intent is, of course, as problematic as the argument from silence, but the starting point in the discussion of Apuleius' agenda with regard to Christianity must be a proof that his silence about that cult is only ostensible not actual. The possibility that Apuleius at times covertly and mockingly criticizes Christianity has been suggested by several scholars using various means of proof. P. G. Walsh, for example, has suggested on several occasions that

⁵⁰ Soc. 16 (156): *in ipsis penitissimis mentibus vice conscientiae deversetur.*

⁵¹ The classic work (of the modern era) on pagan perceptions of early Christian cult is S. Benko, *Pagan Criticism of Christianity during the first two centuries A.D.*, in: ANRW 2, 23, 2 (1980), 1055–1118; see, in particular, 1108/1109.

⁵² Apol. 55, 8: *Sacrorum pleraque initia in Graecia participavi. Eorum quaedam signa et monumenta tradita mihi a sacerdotibus sedulo conservo. Nihil insolitum, nihil incognitum dico. Vel unius Liberi patris mystae qui adestis, scitis quid domi conditum celetis et absque omnibus profanis tacite veneremini. At ego, ut dixi, multiuga sacra et plurimos ritus et varias ceremonias studio veri et officio erga deos didici.*

one of the foremost goals of the *Metamorphoses* was to promote Isiac cult over a growing Christian movement in Africa. According to Walsh, the ass of the *Metamorphoses* is to be connected to Christianity by a common misconception among pagans: many pagans believed that Christians worshipped an ass's head.⁵³ Most studies which posit a secret Apuleian agenda against Christianity have focused on the language used in the characterization of the baker's wife at *Met.* 9, 14.⁵⁴ The religion of the woman can be established definitely by comparing the vocabulary of the locus with that of other pagan critiques of Christians, and thereby, because of the vile character of this representative adherent to the cult, Christianity is humorously and bitinglly ridiculed. Léon Herrmann, despite his bold claim elsewhere that Apuleius himself was suspected of Christian sympathies,⁵⁵ first pointed out that the passage shares several derogatory terms with Tacitus' account of Nero's persecution (*Ann.* 15, 44) and Pliny's letter to Trajan.⁵⁶ Marcel Simon, in response to Herrmann, proposed that the list of the woman's vices corresponded to those listed by Paul at 1 *Cor.* 5, 11.⁵⁷ Barry Baldwin advanced the discussion by providing a more definite reason to select a source from which to search for verbal resonance. He noted the presence of the prefect Urbicus (for whom, see above) in both Apuleius' *Apology* and the *Martyrdom of SS. Ptolemaeus and Lucius*. The primary female character in the latter text is a Roman matron who, before her conversion to Christianity, shares many of the vices of the baker's wife.⁵⁸ David Tripp, emphasizing the role of the wife's female accomplice in the baker's tale, believes that their shared drunken binges might be a reference to the early Christian practice of bringing the Eucharist to absentees.⁵⁹ Viktor Schmidt has made the most extensive

⁵³ P. G. Walsh, *Lucius Madaurensis*, *Phoenix* 22 (1968), 143–157, esp. 151–153; *Roman Novel* (n. 19 above), 186–189; *The Golden Ass* (n. 45), xxxvi–xxxix. He uses *Tert. Apol.* 16 as evidence for the misconception.

⁵⁴ See Barnes, *Tertullian*, 60, 272/273; Benko, 1090/1091, in addition to those studies discussed herein.

⁵⁵ L. Herrmann, *Le procès d'Apulée fut-il un procès de christianisme?*, *Revue de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles* 4 (1952), 339–350; *Le dieu-roi d'Apulée*, *Latomus* 18 (1959), 110–116.

⁵⁶ L. Herrmann, *L'Ane d'or et le christianisme*, *Latomus* 12 (1953), 188–191. He reconciled the seemingly contradictory claims by alleging the criticism of Christianity to have come from Apuleius' source.

⁵⁷ M. Simon, *Apulée et le christianisme*, in: *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech*, Paris 1974, 299–305.

⁵⁸ B. Baldwin, *Apuleius, Tacitus, and the Christians*, *Emerita* 52 (1984), 1–3 and *Apuleius* (n. 18 above), 55. Musurillo (n. 15), 38, for the martyrdom.

⁵⁹ Tripp (n. 8 above), 251–254.

linguistic analysis of the passage to date. Tracing such rare terms as *obstinatio*, *praedicare*, *unicus*, and *inreligiosus* from Apuleius to their later adoption by Christian authors, Schmidt posits a „religiöses Streitgespräch“ from which the philosopher drew and thereby implied a critique of Christianity.⁶⁰ Recently Vincent Hunink, convinced that the matter of the baker’s wife has been decided, has applied Schmidt’s methodology to Apuleius’ minor works. Although he finds no definite allusions to Christianity in the rest of the corpus, he calls Apuleius’ language „consciously non-Christian.“⁶¹ Hunink has, moreover, revived the proposal that Apuleius intends his audience to suspect the primary accuser in the trial at Sabratha, Sicinius Aemilianus, to be a Christian, for Apuleius describes him as both atheistic and secretive (Ap. 16, 13; 56, 3–7).⁶²

There are a few outliers among the works concerning Apuleius and Christianity. Two scholars have noted Gnostic themes and characters in the story of Cupid and Psyche. Ken Dowden, describing the various schools of philosophy and theology active in Rome in the 150s, detects an intentional resemblance between Apuleius’ tale and the myth of Sophia Achamoth, attributed to Valentinus’ student Ptolemaeus.⁶³ M. J. Edwards, as Dowden, emphasizes the multiple possible readings of Cupid and Psyche—Middle Platonic, Near Eastern, as well as Gnostic.⁶⁴ Notably, among Gnostic texts, the Origin of the World, found at Nag Hammadi, recounts the birth of Eros from the blood of the virgin (NH II, 5, 108/109) and the parallel presence of Love, the Soul, and a lamp.⁶⁵ Neither of these authors claim that Apuleius condemns Gnosticism but view that movement as closely related to Middle Platonism.

Danuta Shanzer, who also focuses on the tale of Cupid and Psyche but does not take up Gnostic themes, has provided the foundation for our proposal. In a 1990 article in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* Shanzer argued that Apuleius was familiar with the content of the Prot-

⁶⁰ Schmidt (n. 39).

⁶¹ Hunink, Apuleius, Pudentilla (n. 19), 80–86.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 88/89, 92/93, and earlier E. Griste, *Un christiano di Sabratha*, RSC (1957), 35–39; A. Birley, Apuleius: Roman Provincial Life, *History Today* 18 (1968), 629–636, esp. 636; Benko, 1090/1091; Tripp, 246/247; Barnes, Tertullian, 271/272, disagrees.

⁶³ See K. Dowden, Psyche and the Gnostics, in: B. L. Hijmans Jr. and V. Schmidt (edd.), *Symposium Apuleianum Groningenum*, Groningen 1981, 157–164; and Cupid and Psyche: A Question of the Vision of Apuleius, in: M. Zimmerman, V. Hunink, et alii (edd.), *Aspects of Apuleius’ Golden Ass II*, Groningen 1998, 1–22.

⁶⁴ M. J. Edwards, The Tale of Cupid and Psyche, *ZPE* 94 (1992), 77–94.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

evangelium Jacobi, an apocryphal work of the mid-to-late second century concerned with the conception, birth, and infancy of both Mary and Jesus.⁶⁶ I stress content for two reasons: (1) the dates for both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Protevangelium* have not been established definitively, although they are surely near contemporaries in the late second century,⁶⁷ and (2) we cannot determine Apuleius' other sources of information (Gnostic, most notably) or the means by which he would have been exposed to these sources.⁶⁸

With these cautions given, let us turn to Shanzer's argument. She points to two references in the story of the maiden Charite, which frames the tale of Cupid and Psyche in the *Metamorphoses*, as evidence of the connection between it and the *Protevangelium*. In the framing story, Charite attempts to use Lucius the ass as a means of escaping a gang of thugs. When in the end she does escape, she rides into town on Lucius, and the narrator describes the event as a *novum et hercules memorandum spectamen, virginem asino triumphantem* (7, 13, 3). The escape at one point in the narrative was to be commemorated by a painting hung in the atrium of the maiden's home, and it was to be similarly entitled *Asino Vectore Virgo Regia Fugiens Captivitatem* (6, 29, 3). The use of the title *regia* is curious and perhaps significant, for Charite is not named as royalty in the novel. The allusions here, according to Shanzer and others, are complex: Jesus' triumphal and regal entry into Jerusalem, the flight into Egypt of Joseph, Mary, and the baby, and, of course, the conveyance to Bethlehem for the birth. These references in combination with a phrase in pseudo-Lucian's version of the tale, where the triumphant ass brays the good news, εὐαγγέλιον in the

⁶⁶ D. Shanzer, *Asino vectore virgo regia fugiens captivitatem*: Apuleius and the Tradition of the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, ZPE 84 (1990), 221–229. For the *Protevangelium*, see O. Cullmann, *Infancy Gospels: the Protevangelium of James*, in: E. Hennecke (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha I*, W. Schneemelcher (ed.) and R. McL. Wilson (transl.), Philadelphia 1963, 370–388; P. A. v. Stempvoort, *The Protevangelium Jacobi, the Sources of its Theme and Style and their Bearing on its Date*, in: F. L. Cross (ed.), *Studia Evangelica III*, Berlin 1964, 410–426; H. R. Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, Assen 1965; J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford 1993, 48–67; R. F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, Santa Rosa, Ca. 1995, and P. Sellew, *Heroic Biography, Continent Marriage, and the Protevangelium Jacobi* (unpublished).

⁶⁷ For dating the *Metamorphoses*, see n. 45; for the date of the *Protevangelium*, see G. T. Zervos, *Dating the Protevangelium of James: The Justin Martyr Connection*, SBLSP 33 (1994), 415–434.

⁶⁸ Both Edwards, *Cupid and Psyche*, 88–90, and Dowden, *Vision of Apuleius*, 5, note the presence of important virginal characters in Gnostic texts. Celsus, moreover, knew of the Valentinian myth of the virgin Prunicus (6, 34).

Greek (Asin. 26,5: εὐαγγέλιον αὐτοῖς ἐμοῦ προογκησαμένου), leads Shanzer to the conclusion that a satire of the early church may have been found in the source from which both Apuleius and the Lucianic author took the story of a man changed into an ass. Apuleius magnified the satire by his description of the heroine as a royal virgin, thus linking her to Mary.

Before advancing my own complementary argument, let me first attempt to confirm the connection to the Protevangelium by noting two important details of the story in Apuleius. The name of the heroine Charite (7, 12, 2) would derive from Greek χάρις ‚grace, favor‘, and thus, Charite is the ‚graceful‘ or ‚favorable‘ woman. ‚Highly favored one‘ is, of course, the most famous epithet of Mary in the Western tradition. That designation originated in the prominent use of χάρις and related terms in the announcement to Mary by the angel in the Gospel of Luke. These terms were subsequently repeated and amplified in the Protevangelium: Luke 1, 28 and Prot. 11, 1: χαίρε, κεχαριτωμένη, Luke 1, 30: χάριν παρὰ τῷ θεῷ, Prot. 11, 2: χάριν ἐνώπιον τοῦ πάντων δεσπότου. By the use of a significant name in combination with the significant epithet *regia*, Apuleius seems to have left an obvious clue to a connection between the two myths.⁶⁹ Secondly, as Shanzer points out,⁷⁰ the imprisonment of Charite in Apuleius (4, 6. 23) and the birth of Jesus in the Protevangelium (18, 1; 19, 2. 3; 21, 3) both occur in a cave. That fact is significant because the cave is not an element of the birth story in the canonical gospels but is found in the Protevangelium. The cave was the acknowledged setting for Jesus' birth in the second century.⁷¹ Origen knew of it (Cels. 1, 51), and Celsus, who knew of the virgin birth and the star of the *magi* (Cels. 1, 34; 1, 58), was likely to have known of the cave as well. If this information was accessible to Celsus, it is likely also to have been accessible to Apuleius.

Starting from Shanzer's work, I will suggest another means by which Apuleius engages in a covert criticism of Christianity, but it is my intention to move from the frame to the story within, to the tale of Cupid and Psyche itself.⁷² The distinct manner in which the author describes the sexual

⁶⁹ B. L. Hijmans Jr., Significant Names and their Function in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, in: Hijmans and R. Th. van der Paardt (edd.), *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass*, Groningen 1978, 107–122, dismisses the possibility of contemporary realistic allusions (114); he does, however, seem to accept the name of the priest Mithras as religiously significant (113).

⁷⁰ Shanzer, 228.

⁷¹ See Chadwick (n. 44 above), 47 n.5.

⁷² Connections between the two feminine heroines should not be surprising; it has been often noted that Charite and Psyche are of a similar character, to the point of being termed *doppelgänger*s. Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium* (n. 49 above), 2/3, 72–79;

relationship between Cupid and Psyche and the consequences of that union provides another critical allusion to the Christian movement. The lack of physicality in the initial encounter and the interpretation of the conception of Psyche's child as a mystery are aspects shared with the conception of Jesus in early Christian documents, the Protevangelium most notably.

Most voices in the *Metamorphoses* are not shrinking violets where sex is concerned. Take, for example, the first night of lovemaking between human Lucius and the slave girl Photis, where terms from wrestling and the military are used to describe the event. The naked Photis, with one hand covering her genitalia, shouts at her lover, „Attack ... full frontal, hand-to-hand, stretch it out, if you're a man ...“⁷³ In contrast, the first coupling between Cupid and Psyche is not described directly; in fact the narrator seems to avoid mention of the actual event by recounting it in the pluperfect tense. The events in the bedroom are first told in the historical present: *Tunc virginitati suae pro tanta solitudine metuens et pavet et horrescit et quovis malo plus timet quod ignorat* (5,4,2). The narrative then abruptly switches to the pluperfect, with the unknown groom already having mounted the bed, having made Psyche his wife, and having left the room before sunrise: ... *inscenderat ... fecerat ... discesserat* (5,4,3).⁷⁴ Thus she fears and then he had made her his wife; the sex act itself has no existence as an event in present or even historical time; it happens, if at all, outside the narrative.

The use of the verb *ignorat* in this passage is also intriguing given its semantic connection to Greek γι(γ)νώσκω and the sexual connotation of that verb in biblical Greek. According to J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, Latin words connoting knowledge could be used to imply carnal knowledge well before the translation of the Bible. Adams cites

R. Th. van der Paardt, *The Story of Mr. ‚Overbold‘ as specimen historiae* (on Apul. Met. VIII 1–14), in: B. L. Hijmans Jr. and V. Schmidt (edd.), *Symposium Apuleianum Groningianum*, Groningen 1981, 19–28, esp. 22–25; J. J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' the Golden Ass*, Berkeley 1985, 50–56; S. Frangoulidis, *Intratextuality in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*, CB 73 (1997), 15–21; S. Papaioannou, *Charite's Rape, Psyche on the Rock, and the Parallel Function of Marriage in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*, *Mnemosyne* 51 (1998), 302–324.

⁷³ Met. 2, 17, 1/2: ‚*Proeliare*‘, *inquit*, ... *comminus in aspectum, si vir es, derige*‘. The wrestling theme is more developed at Lucian. *Asin.* 8/9.

⁷⁴ 5,4,3: *Iamque aderat ignobilis maritus et torum inscenderat et uxorem sibi Psychem fecerat et ante lucis exortum propere discesserat*. See E. J. Kenney, *Apuleius Cupid and Psyche*, Cambridge 1990, 143/144, and H. Pinkster, *The use of narrative tense in Apuleius' Amor and Psyche*, in: M. Zimmerman, V. Hunink (n. 63 above), 103–112, esp. 106. Kenney and Pinkster account for the change of tense as a means to accelerate the action.

authors such as Catullus, Caesar, and Ovid to support this claim. Apuleius himself uses the euphemism at 5, 28, 9, where Venus rages that her son must have thought her a madam (*lena*) who showed him a girl so that he could get to know her (*cuius monstratu puellam illam cognosceret*). Although carnal knowledge is generally represented in Latin by *cognoscere*, there do exist examples of semantically-related terms (*scio*, *nescio*, *notitia*, e. g.) that imply a sexual union.⁷⁵ According to the TLL, the verb *ignorare* is used in the erotic sense only in the Vulgate at Iudices 11, 39, but the adjective *ignarus* provides several examples of the specialized meaning.⁷⁶ The close linguistic connection between *ignarus* and *ignorare* would make a carnal usage of *ignorare* in this passage recognizable. If an allusion to the carnal meaning of ‚to know‘ is accepted, an alternative, striking translation of the phrase, *quovis malo plus timet quod ignorat* is possible. Straightforwardly, I would render the phrase, „She fears more than any evil what she does not know“, but by using the alternate meaning of *quod* as ‚because‘ and applying a different function of the ablative, the phrase might also read, „She fears more from any evil because she does not know.“ Then with the euphemistic meaning of *ignorat*, we transform that statement to „She fears more from any evil because she is a virgin.“

Strikingly, just after this non-event, Psyche is labeled *novam nuptam interfectae virginitatis* (5, 4, 4). „Slain virginity“ seems a harsh characterization of an apparently consensual union without struggle, without force, without even physicality. Indeed, if one compares similar language from poetry, the phrase cannot in any way be seen as joyful.⁷⁷ The use of *interficio* with abstract concepts is unusual, and this phrase is the earliest example of such a combination noted in the TLL. Yet, with the Christian writers, this and similar expressions of slaying virginity flourish.⁷⁸ Perhaps we find here an example of Schmidt’s Streitgespräch, with Apuleius again as the starting point. In other words, Apuleius chooses a ‚buzzword‘ from the strident debates over religion so as to mark the similar context and criticize other supposed instances of virginal conception. In Schmidt’s findings, it is often Tertullian who adopts or at least also uses the critical phrases of Apuleius, and when we turn to Tertullian in search of this

⁷⁵ J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, Baltimore 1982, 190. For *notitia*, see *Caes. Gall.* 6, 21, 5; for *nescius*, see *CIL* 6, 9499; for *scio*, see *CIL* 4, 4971.

⁷⁶ For *ignarus* as carnal knowledge, see *Sil.* 2, 68, *Stat. Sil.* 4, 6, 91, *CIL* 6, 12853.

⁷⁷ See D. Fowler, *Vergil on Killing Virgins*, in: M. Whitby et alii (edd.), *Homo Viator* (Festschrift John Bramble), Bristol 1987, 185–198.

⁷⁸ Kenney, 144; C. Moreschini, *Il mito di Amore e Psiche in Apuleio*, Naples 1994, 195; Fowler, 186/187, 196.

phrase, although we do not find the exact vocabulary, we do find some noteworthy points of comparison. In *De Pallio* (4, 7), prostitutes (*lupae*) are the ones who are victims of slain chastity (*occisa castitas*). Obviously, if the semantic phrase ‚slain virginity‘ is associated with prostitution or at least promiscuity, its application to Psyche in this context would have a disturbing effect on the audience. Contrarily, in *De Spectaculis*, Tertullian provides the counter-example to slain chastity, the means by which chastity may be victorious. There he encourages his flock to avoid the games and pursue contests in their own lives, contests wherein „immodesty is overthrown by chastity, dishonesty slain by honesty ...“⁷⁹

In keeping with the initial lack of physicality in the union of Cupid and Psyche, the text undermines the act that logically leads to Psyche’s pregnancy. When the young girl, seemingly unaware of human and godly anatomy, recognizes that she is carrying a child, she is unable to determine its source or origin: *Crescentes dies et menses exeuntes anxia numerat et sarcinae nesciae rudimento miratur de brevi punctulo tantum incrementulum locupletis uteri* (5, 12, 2). (Psyche) „anxiously counted the growing and passing days and months, and with the experience of an unfamiliar burden, she wondered that so great a growth of a fertile womb came from so short a pinprick.“

Instead of emphasizing the virility of the god Cupid, Apuleius seems to make a joke at the god’s expense by implying that Psyche was barely aware that sexual intercourse had even occurred. One would think that sex with a god would be a more memorable experience, and in every other instance in classical myth it is. Semele, in the most infamous example, was burnt to death by her union with Zeus! *De brevi punctulo* ‚so short a pinprick‘ may be a reference to brevity of time and the tenuous nature of the sexual union, but it also seems very likely that a joke about the size of the god’s member is intended. In classical Latin, the diminutive *punctulum* is limited to Apuleius and within Apuleius to the story of Cupid and Psyche;⁸⁰ the noun *punctum* ‚puncture‘, however, refers to the mark or hole produced from an act of piercing, not the tool used to make that puncture.⁸¹ Yet, the phrase *de brevi punctulo* is problematic because of the difficulty of the sense of a ‚small pricking‘, and even if we grant that phrase can be understood in terms of length of time, the preposition *de* should not be used for temporal expressions in classical Latin.⁸² I would suggest here we

⁷⁹ 29, 10: *Aspice impudicitiam deiectam a castitate, perfidiam caesam a fide ...*

⁸⁰ W. A. Oldfather et alii, *Index Apuleianus*, Middletown, Conn. 1934.

⁸¹ Cf. OLD.

⁸² Kenney, 156.

find the implied transference of the adjective from the hole to the tool. In any event, a small pricking does not come from a great implement. In this same passage Apuleius again seems to be playing with the sexual connotations of the verb ‚to know‘. The most common sense of the adjective *nescius*, according to the OLD, is active ‚not knowing, ignorant‘, but here applied to Psyche’s unborn child or womb, the less common passive sense, ‚unknown‘ or ‚unfamiliar‘ seems necessary. If, however, we apply the alternate sexual meaning of ‚not knowing‘ we can translate *sarcinae nesciae rudimento* as ‚from the experience of an unknowing burden‘ or ‚virginal burden‘.⁸³

Before moving on to interpret the lack of obvious physicality between Cupid and Psyche, let me point out that it is only in the initial stages of the relationship that physical contact is not directly described. In later encounters Psyche is more willing to participate. When she attempts to convince her unseen husband to allow a visit from her sisters, she is described as *imprimens oscula suasoria*, and *ingerens verba mulcentia*, and *inserens membra cogentia* (5, 6, 9). It is only in the initial encounter and the pregnancy that results from the initial encounter that the carnality is slight or absent.

Psyche’s ignorance of biological reproduction and the ethereal nature of her husband should be related to the interpretation of the conception as a mystery. I do not mean to imply by that statement that the mysterious impregnation of Psyche is an allegory to be deciphered by initiates of a specific mystery cult⁸⁴ but instead intend a much more general claim: the conception is portrayed as an inexplicable, ineffable event, subject to strict secrecy, which brings salvation through revealed knowledge. We have already reviewed an unusual pregnancy; it is simply a matter of linking that strange event to secrecy. Using the language of mystery cult, Psyche’s invisible husband warns her against discovering and discussing his nature and closely ties this warning to the child conceived marvelously, *de brevi punctulo: Nam et familiam nostram iam propagabimus, et hic adhuc infantilis uterus gestat nobis infantem alium. Si texeris nostra secreta silentio, divinum, si profanaveris, mortalem* (5, 11, 6). „For soon we will increase our family, and this womb, still a child, bears another child for us, a divine child, if you (Psyche) will conceal our secrets in silence, a mortal child, if you reveal them.“

⁸³ See 5, 11, 3 for another instance where a word of knowing may refer to carnal knowledge: *interea Psychen maritus ille quem nescit rursus suis illis nocturnis sermonibus sic commovet.*

⁸⁴ As in the case of Merkelbach, *Eros und Psyche* (n. 49 above), 114–116.

The references to divine and mortal are ostensibly to the fetus that Psyche carries but could equally apply to an initiate to the mysteries, who would gain a more favorable place after death by learning and keeping the secrets of the cult. As has been noted, Lucius himself experiences this exchange in the last book of the novel, when he is initiated into the cult of Isis, and the goddess promises that he will dwell in the *campi Elysii*, if he keeps *sedula obsequia, religiosa ministeria, and tenacia castimonia* (11, 6, 8).⁸⁵ The last of these three prescriptions recalls the scarcely physical nature of the union of Cupid and Psyche. The importance of the secrecy or mystery is further emphasized in the above passage by the word play on the Latin root *for, fari*, 'to speak'; words derived from this root are spaced in the cited text. The literal meaning of *infans* 'child' is, of course, 'not speaking' or 'unable to speak'. Thus Psyche's womb is described as both a child's womb and an unspeaking womb. Pushing the analysis a bit farther, we interpret the womb as virginal, in that it is a child's, and mysterious, in that it neither speaks nor reveals secrets.

The associations to salvation through mystery are further called to mind by word play on the name Psyche 'Soul' itself.⁸⁶ There are several instances where Psyche calls her invisible husband her soul or spirit, in Latin *spiritus* or *anima* (5, 6, 7, 9; 5, 13, 4), but more significantly for this study, there are several instances where the husband addresses Psyche (5, 12, 4. 5; 5, 22, 1), in which, if the literal meaning of Psyche's name is understood, warnings to the young maiden become admonitions to the spirit against the dangers of the flesh. Consider Cupid's words of warning to Psyche regarding her sisters: *Tunc sic iterum momentarius maritus suam Psychen admonet: „En dies ultima et casus extremus! Sexus infestus et sanguis inimicus iam sumpsit arma et castra commovit et aciem derexit et classicum personavit.*' (5, 12, 4). „So then again the periodic husband warned his Psyche/his own soul: Look the last day and chance! The dangerous sex and hostile blood have already taken up arms and struck the camp and set the battle line and sounded the trumpet!“

Instead of a warning against the evil sisters the words can be read as a prophecy of the final battle between flesh and spirit. They seem more in keeping with the warnings of Paul in 1st Corinthians concerning the last

⁸⁵ Ibid., 109–111; Roman und Mysterium (n. 49), 16–23; Edwards, Cupid and Psyche (n. 64), 83–86; R. Beck, Mystery Religions, Aretalogy and the Ancient Novel, in: G. Schmeling (ed.), The Novel in the Ancient World, Leiden 1996, 149/150.

⁸⁶ See Kenney, 16, for a complete list of instances of this word play and further bibliography.

trumpet than with the tone of the light-hearted predecessor of the tale of Beauty and the Beast.

The elements of parody in the tale are perhaps best summarized by Psyche's evil sister, who plots her demise. She uses a very strange logic to guess the nature of the relationship between divine husband and mortal wife: *Nil aliud reperies, mi soror, quam vel mendacia istam pessimam feminam confingere vel formam mariti sui nescire ... Quodsi viri sui faciem ignorat, deo profecto denupsit et deum nobis praegnatione ista gerit.* (5, 16, 3/4). „You will discover nothing other than this, my sister: either that awful woman is fabricating lies or she does not know the form of her own husband ... If she does not know the appearance of her husband, then surely she has married a god, and she carries a god for us in that pregnancy.“

The sister picks up on the language of knowledge and sex used earlier by the authorial voice. Particularly striking is the formulation *formam nescire*, as *forma* is often used in sexual contexts. The form or shape or even body is what attracts the lover, as in Ovid *Ars* 1, 623: *delectant etiam castas praeconia formae*. It is alleged that Psyche does not know the body of her husband. Yet, more striking than the language is the sister's deductive process. How is it that the husband must be a god, if he is unknown, and how is it that the child must be divine? These are not conclusions which could be reached from a traditional Roman perspective on the divine. The Graeco-Roman deities never have invisible sex; they certainly never marry mortal women, and finally their offsprings are only rarely divine. These restrictions are, in fact, a point of dramatic tension in the story itself. Cupid cannot marry Psyche because she is a mortal!⁸⁷ Humor comes from the improbability that the sister could guess the true nature of the situation, and the humor points to the absurdity of these hypotheses. The parody comes from the fact that Apuleius' Christian neighbors were just starting to accept similar hypotheses as doctrine.

Before moving on to compare the union of Cupid and Psyche to the conception of Jesus in Christian texts, we must note a curious incongruity in the fable. Psyche's child, when mentioned in the earlier portions of the fable (5, 11, 6; 12, 5; 6, 9, 5. 6), is always given in the male gender; to some extent these references can be understood simply as grammatical gender and not natural gender, but since in two of the instances the speaker is a god (Cupid or Venus), the natural gender may be intended. In one instance Venus does use the words *filius* and *nepos* to refer to the unborn child

⁸⁷ Jupiter changes Psyche into a goddess before the marriage (6, 23, 5).

(6, 9, 5. 6). What is strange is that, in the end, the child unexpectedly turns out to be a girl, the goddess Pleasure (6, 24, 4). This outcome is very striking, since no other union of a god and a mortal female in classical myth results in a single female progeny,⁸⁸ although it must be admitted that, by the time of the birth, Psyche herself has been deified. E. J. Kenney explains the surprise ending as a narrative tactic relating to the intent of the narrator to cheer the listeners and distract their attention from their pressing difficulties.⁸⁹ Alternatively, I would propose that we find in the male child a remnant of the original source from which Apuleius borrowed the tale and/or, as we have been suggesting, Apuleius may be consciously but covertly calling his audience's attention to another similar conception, that of Jesus, by supposing Psyche's child to be of the same gender. It is Venus' reference to her son and grandson that raises the latter possibility in particular: the goddess claims that the child will be *vilis ancillae filius* and *spurius iste nascetur* (6, 9, 5. 6). Psyche's status as *ancilla* is, on the elementary level of the narrative, a result of her recent enslavement to Venus. Yet, in this instance also, we find one of the most famous epithets of the mother of Jesus, as given in the Magnificat of the Vulgate and elsewhere in Luke (1, 38. 48). Although the entire Magnificat is not found in the Protevangelium, the Greek term δούλη, which *ancilla* translates, is (Prot. 11, 3). Secondly, Venus' claim about the status of the child (*spurius*) reminds us of Celsus' explanation that the virgin birth was an attempt by Mary to conceal her adultery. These proposals are necessarily speculative, but given the inconsistency in the text itself regarding the gender of Psyche's child, such speculation is called for.

The connection between the conception of Jesus and the child of Cupid and Psyche can be rather simply summarized. In both cases, we find a complex of virgin birth and mystery. In Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, it is Mary who keeps secrets about her child, or at least „guards“ and „considers“ what she is told about the child in 2, 19 and 2, 51.⁹⁰ The Protevangelium gives an exegesis of Mary's secrets by terming the conception and annunciation as μυστήρια (12, 2). These are doubly secrets, in that they are irretrievable, since Mary „forgets“ them after they have been announced to her (12, 3). As one would expect with a mystery, the actual conception of Jesus is not described clearly; in Matthew and Luke

⁸⁸ In the obvious counter-example of Zeus and Leda both a male and a female child are born.

⁸⁹ Kenney, 224/225.

⁹⁰ ἡ δὲ Μαριάμ πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα συμβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς.

reference is made to a „holy spirit“ (πνεῦμα ἅγιον) which „comes upon“ (ἐπέρχεται) Mary,⁹¹ and in Luke „the power of highest“ (δύναμις ὑψίστου) „overshadows“ (ἐπισκιάζει) her.⁹² Here again, the Protevangelium exegizes this vague terminology by assuring its audience that Jesus will not be conceived in the customary, natural manner. Mary asks the angel whether she will conceive and bear her child in the way all women do. The angel responds with an emphatic, „Οὐχ οὕτως“ (11, 2/3). The Protevangelium does argue strongly, nonetheless, for the virgin birth of Jesus in a very literal, physical sense, with Mary remaining intact even after the birth of her child. When the midwife Salome sticks her finger into the vagina of Mary to test the hymen after the birth, she is punished for her unbelief by losing her hands in a blaze of fire (Prot. 20).

With regard to narrative structure, in Luke, Mary uses the verb γινώσκω to express her virginity (1, 34), and this claim is made just after an expression of her fear (1, 29), in a sequence similar to that of Psyche’s first sexual encounter – fear followed by conception. In the elaboration of this passage in the Protevangelium, Mary is not able to explain the source of her pregnancy. When questioned by Joseph about the child in her womb, Mary wonders just as Psyche did about her growing womb: Ἡ δὲ ἔκλαυσε πικρῶς λέγουσα ὅτι καθάρᾳ εἰμι ἐγὼ καὶ ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω. καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ Ἰωσήφ· Πόθεν οὖν ἐστὶ τὸ ἐν τῇ γαστρὶ σου; ἡ δὲ εἶπεν Ζῆ κύριος ὁ θεός μου καθότι οὐ γινώσκω πόθεν ἐστὶ μοι. (13, 3; also 15, 3). „She (Mary) cried sharply saying, ‚I am pure and have not known a man.‘ And Joseph said to her, ‚From where then did that come from in your womb?‘ And she said, ‚As my Lord God lives, I do not know from where it has come.‘“

The ignorance is portrayed quite differently in the two traditions, despite the structural similarities. Apuleius’ characterization of Psyche must be seen as humorous, with its use of the newly-coined diminutives *punctulum* and *incrementulum*,⁹³ the counting of days, and the awe over the size of her stomach. We might imagine Psyche, finger in the dimple of her cheek, saying, „Well, gosh, my belly-welly is getting bigger and bigger every day – how did that happen?“ Mary, by contrast, cannot know the source of her pregnancy because of a supposed divine intervention, and, unlike Psyche, she is not ignorant of the means by which women conceive and give birth, for she asked the angel about those very matters. Nonetheless, despite the difference in generic context, a basic similarity

⁹¹ Matt. 1, 18. 20; Luke 1, 35.

⁹² Luke 1, 35.

⁹³ Both are hapax legomena as well. See Oldfather and the OLD.

between the conception of Jesus and the conception of Psyche's child is evident. An invisible spirit comes to a fearing maiden alone; some near ethereal means of conception takes place, and a male child, whose divine status is uncertain, is conceived.

The agenda of the Protevangelium is complex, but one goal which has often been proposed for the text is the defense of Mary against the criticisms of Celsus in particular and Jewish sources generally.⁹⁴ We can now tentatively add Apuleius' surreptitious critique to Celsus'. It is not adultery, however, which concerns the authorial voice in the case of Psyche, although he is certainly perturbed by that vice elsewhere in the novel. Sex outside of marriage is not in question, for Psyche's consort is indeed called her *maritus* as he enters the bedchamber (5, 4, 3). The lack of physicality between Cupid and Psyche reveals another criticism, which would apply to the conception of Jesus through the allusions and similarities we have noted above. The shortness of the pinprick and Psyche's amazement at the size of her womb seem humorous, intended to mock a sublime, intangible conception, or perhaps belief in such a conception. In contrast, a non-physical conception is the heroic accomplishment that distinguishes the mother of Jesus.⁹⁵ Thus we find a common quality of satire: that which one claims as distinction, the satirist mocks as vanity.⁹⁶

The question that Apuleius seems to be asking his audience to consider and the issue he thereby uses for his satire is this: „How can a conception be a conception without the sex act?“ In essence, the Protevangelium responds to that question by explaining the conception of Jesus as non-physical. It defends God from the kind of locker-room jibes that Cupid is subjected to in Apuleius. Mary does not remain a virgin out of some lack of virility on the part of the Divine Father but because the conception of

⁹⁴ Stempvoort (n. 66 above), 413–415; Smid, 15–17; J.L. Allen Jr., *The Protevangelium of James as an Historia*, SBLSP 30 (1991), 508–517, esp. 515–517; and Elliott, 49/50, argue that the Protevangelium is a response to Celsus. Sellev (n. 66 above) reviews the diverse proposals for the genre and goals of the work.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*: „But it is Mary's steady maintenance of her virginity through marriage and childbirth (Prot. 16, 20) that most fully displays her embodiment of the virtues of self-mastery (σωφροσύνη), purity (ἀγνεία) and courage (ἀνδρεία).“

⁹⁶ For another satire of a supposed union between a god and a mortal woman, see A. A. Bell, *Josephus the Satirist? A Clue to the Original Form of the Testimonium Flavianum*, JQ 67 (1976), 16–22. The author of *De Excidio Hierosolymitanae Urbis* recasts the story of Paulina and Mundus found at Jos. AJ 18, 3, 4. Mundus, dressed as Anubis, takes advantage of the matron Paulina at night in the temple of Isis. He convinces her that she will conceive a divine child in a sacred mystery. See PL 15, 2040/2041, for the text. Bell alleges that the satire explains why the story of Paulina follows the Testimonium Flavianum: Josephus originally mocked Mary's claim of virginity.

Jesus is of a wholly different nature. If such a vulgar exchange seems inappropriate to the genres of literature and thinkers involved, note that Celsus and Origen engaged in a similar tussle. Celsus wryly asks, „So, was Jesus’ mother so fine that the god hooked up with her (1, 39)?“⁹⁷ Origen replies that this sort of discussion is best left to those who curse in the streets (οἱ ἐν ταῖς τριόδοις λοιδορούμενοι). Celsus, as Apuleius, forces us to consider just how sexual intercourse between an ineffable being and a young maiden can be accomplished. Such ridicule of the god would be in keeping with the attitudes of second-century intellectuals who saw the Christians as remarkably gullible⁹⁸ and with the doctrines of Middle Platonists who could not accept a union between the spiritual and the corporeal as possible in any way.⁹⁹ The critique would furthermore harmonize with the strict celibacy prescribed by the Isis cult in book eleven of the novel and even explain why Psyche, although initially pure, becomes a sexual animal and fails in the test of her lover, by searching for his identity. Sex, no matter how quick or slight, is sex and thus a sin of the body, and even a little physical pleasure will always result in a quest for more.

The diminished physicality, the mystery, the spiritual, invisible father – there are a number of intriguing similarities between the conception of Psyche’s child in Apuleius and the conception of Jesus. In the end, Apuleius’ silence, even if only an ostensible one, cannot be resolved absolutely. This failing was acknowledged from the outset. I have, however, tried to describe a number of items in Apuleius whose relation to the Christian cult is so direct that an intentional reference seems likely: the significant name Charite and the significant title *ancilla*, the confusion of the sex of Psyche’s child, the use of the euphemistic meaning of verbs of knowing. These are direct references to Christian texts, doctrines, or mythology, albeit cryptic ones. If a direct link to the Protevangelium is impossible to prove, these references in the *Metamorphoses*, if accepted as such, must demonstrate that Apuleius had access to some Christian source.

The key would seem to be Celsus: his outward criticisms of the doctrine of the virgin birth are remarkably similar to the hidden ones implied in Apuleius. If we accept Celsus, why not Apuleius? Celsus is renowned for his investigation of the Christian sources,¹⁰⁰ and Apuleius, given his

⁹⁷ εἰ ἄρα καλὴ ἦν ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, καὶ ὡς καλῆ ἐμίγνυτο ὁ θεός ...;

⁹⁸ Lucian. *Peregr.* 5, for example.

⁹⁹ See Or. *Cels.* 4, 14. 18; 6, 60–80; et al.

¹⁰⁰ Chadwick (n. 44 above), xxviii/xxix; Benko (n. 51), 1101; M. Frede, Origen’s *Treatise Against Celsus*, in: M. Edwards et alii (edd.), *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, Oxford 1999, 133–135.

interest in religion, would be likely to read the work of another Middle Platonic philosopher on the topic of a new and dangerous cult. Could Celsus have served as the intermediary between the Protevangelium and the *Metamorphoses*? Or is it more likely that Apuleius and Celsus came upon the Protevangelium or another similar source independently? Unfortunately, a relative chronology among Celsus, Apuleius, and the Protevangelium is difficult to determine, as we have mentioned,¹⁰¹ and, in order to arrange the three texts chronologically and prove borrowing among them, a thorough comparison of specific language should be completed. Such a linguistic comparison would require an independent inquiry. Of course, even the results of such an inquiry might be inconclusive, as we no longer have all of Celsus' masterpiece. We, in the end, may only find hints and possibilities.

In conclusion, let us review two more tantalizing points of correlation between the *Metamorphoses* and the True Account. First, if my suggestion is correct about Apuleius' puns on the sexual meaning of verbs of knowing, we may be able to explain a strange phrase in Celsus by applying the same euphemistic meaning. Actually, in fact, Celsus' ignorance of the euphemism may explain the phrase. In the passage discussed above (1, 39), where the philosopher raises the question of the beauty of Mary or the qualities that would have led God to lust after her, he claims that she was neither wealthy (εὐδαίμων) nor royal (βασιλική), for „no one knew her, not even the neighbors.“¹⁰² In the Protevangelium she is in fact well known, for the high priest calls an assembly of all the widowers of Judea in order to determine how to dispose of her (9), and she reappears at the temple later in an assembly of virgins (10). I suggest that Celsus has misunderstood the famous οὐ γινώσκω statements of Mary in his source. Although the verb used is not γινώσκω, the common sexual euphemism, but οἶδα, as I am alleging a misunderstanding of the euphemism, the difference in vocabulary is not problematic. The fact that Apuleius understood the sexual euphemism but Celsus did not would argue that Apuleius is not dependent upon Celsus for his information on Christianity. Turning to the second point of correlation between the two authors, let us consider the narrative voice of Apuleius' tale. According to Celsus, the resurrection of the body, the virgin Prunicus and the Gnostic emanations, and the crucifixion are the sort of stories that even drunken old women are ashamed to

¹⁰¹ For such a scenario to be possible, one would have to accept an early date for the Protevangelium, in keeping with Zervos (n. 67), and a late date for the *Metamorphoses*, in keeping with Harrison (n. 45).

¹⁰² ... ἐπεὶ μηδεὶς αὐτήν ᾔδει μηδὲ τῶν γειτόνων ...

tell young children.¹⁰³ And, of course, it is just that character, a drunken, crazy old woman,¹⁰⁴ who is the fictive narrator for the tale of Cupid and Psyche. The story itself is termed as *aniles fabulae* (4, 27, 7). Origen's response to Celsus? Not even „the creators of the ass-headed powers“ (οἱ τοὺς ὄνοκεφάλους ἀναπλάσαντες) would tell such tales (6, 37). Apuleius, by making Lucius the ass his chief narrator and an old woman an internal narrator, put the story of Cupid and Psyche in the voice of both of Origen's nemeses. If we accept that Apuleius' narrators are also cryptic references to Christianity, we should posit a connection between Celsus and Apuleius independent of the Protevangelium, as the ass-headed powers are clearly from Gnostic mythology.

The point at which the similarities become so striking that a reader accepts an intentional, direct connection between Apuleius and the Protevangelium, or Apuleius and Celsus, will necessarily vary according to predisposition. Let us not underestimate the skill of Apuleius, however. Philosopher, poet, storyteller, theologian, rhetorician – he could lay claim to all of these titles. By admitting that the growth of Christianity was a minor concern of his novel, we do not reject the other agenda of that complex work, particularly since his discussion of the matter was not forthright but hidden. If Apuleius was mocking Christian beliefs, he was content to do so only while accomplishing other goals. Why even in listing the vices of the baker's wife and choosing vocabulary from the religious debates, he managed to create a rhetorical, rhyming tour de force: *saeva scaeva, virosa ebriosa, pervicax pertinax*. If our author can rhyme significant terms and itemize the conventional list of Christian vices, certainly he can include some allusions to the conception of Jesus in the tale of the conception of another divine child. In believing that Apuleius' tale of Cupid and Psyche contains such cryptic criticisms, we need not reject either psychological readings of the work such as Neumann's¹⁰⁵ nor philosophical ones such as Schlam's.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ 6,37: γραῦς ἐπὶ τῷ βαυκαλήσαι παιδίον μεθύουσα μῦθον ἐπάδειν τοιοῦτον ... ἐπηρεχύνθη. See also 6,34.

¹⁰⁴ 6,25,1: ... *delira et temulenta illa narrabat anicula*.

¹⁰⁵ E. Neumann, *Apuleius und Psyche: Ein Beitrag zur seelischen Entwicklung des Weiblichen*, Zürich 1952.

¹⁰⁶ C. C. Schlam, *Platonica in the Metamorphoses of Apuleius*, TAPA 101 (1970), 477–487.