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THE LIBERTINE Gnostic SECT OF THE PHIBIONITES ACCORDING TO EPIPHANIUS

BY

STEPHEN BENKO

The following study is based primarily upon the *Panarion* of Epiphanius,¹ especially the 26th chapter of it. We shall concentrate on the group which he describes generally as “Gnostics”. It is clear, however, that he has a definite group in mind which we will call, for the sake of convenience “Phibionites” although Epiphanius knew of many names for these people as appears from the Prooemium to the *Panarion* I,4,3–8 where he lists them in group #6 with the following remark: “Gnostics, also called Stratiotici, Phibionites, Secundians, Socratians, Zackheans, Coddians, Barborites, Barbeliotes.” The same general listing also occurs in the Anakephalaeosis to *Panarion*, Book 1, part 2; *Ancoratus* 13,2; *Panarion* prooem. 5,4; 25,2,1 (where the name “Levitikoi” also is included, see 26,13,1) and 26,3,6f. Epiphanius derives the origin of this sect from the Nicolaitans, whom he describes in the previous chapter 25. Following Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, and Eusebius, on whom he often depends, Epiphanius identifies the founder of the Nicolaitans as Nicolaus, one of the first seven deacons. He, Nicolaus, supposedly believed that the flesh should be held in contempt but gave a libertine interpretation of this principle. His followers practiced immorality and it is from this background that various immoral Gnostic sects developed – as fruits on a dung heap or scorpions and cobras from the egg of the snake, as Epiphanius asserts.

The purpose of our study is to give a close examination of the Phibionite sect. We shall do that in three phases. First, by examining their literature, second by describing their practices according to the presentation of Epiphanius, and thirdly by an attempt to uncover and to understand the basic principles of a possible Phibionite theology.

¹ Epiphanius, *Panarion* is quoted according to the critical edition of K. Holl, *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller*, vols. 25, 31 and 37.

I

Not only did the Phibionites attract many followers, they also had a productive mind and exerted a great literary activity. In *Panarion* 26,8,1, and the following verses we read: "Their books are many. They display a certain *Questions of Mary*, others have several books on *Ialdabaoth* and on the name of *Seth*."

Books "*eis ton Ialdabaoth*" are also mentioned in 25,3,5 where Epiphanius speaks about the Nicolaitans. Books of Seth are mentioned in 39,5,1, when he speaks about the Sethians. He says that there were seven such books. In 40,7,4 he mentions that they claim one book for Seth and one for each of his seven sons. Several of the Nag-Hammadi writings have the name Seth in the title.

"They also speak about other books called *Revelations of Adam*."²

These books are mentioned only here.

"They are also bold enough to assert that other gospels were written on the name of the *apostles*, and are not even ashamed to say that our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ himself revealed these shameful things. Because in the *Questions of Mary* which are called *Great* (for there are also *Little* ones forged by them) they say that he gave her a revelation taking her to the mountain and praying, and that he took from his side a woman and began to have intercourse with her, and thus taking his semen showed that 'we need to do the same thing in order to live', and when Mary, dismayed, fell to the ground, he at once raised her up again and said, 'Why did you doubt, o you of little faith?'"

As we see, there were two books called *Questions of Mary*, one was the *Great Questions*, and the other the *Little Questions*. Neither has been thus far discovered; as a matter of fact, nothing by that or a similar title at all. From the *Great Questions* we know only what Epiphanius here says, but from the *Little Questions* not even that much. Harnack at one time advanced an hypothesis that they may be identical with the first three books of *Pistis Sophia* and this theory has been accepted by some³ but is being rejected now by most scholars. Actually, the only basis of such an identification would be that the majority of the questions asked in the *Pistis Sophia* come from Mary Magdalene and there can be little doubt that in the books of the *Questions of Mary*, Mary Magdalene is meant.

As for the quotation itself we recognize a certain similarity with the opening verses of the Apocryphon of John. Here, too, the revelation begins with a scene on the mountain (i.e. the Mount of Olives, which is favored by the Gnostics as a place of revelation) where John sees the heavens opened. He is afraid and falls to the ground.

² A book of this title is now published in A.Böhlig and P.Labib, *Koptisch-Gnostische Apokalypsen aus Codex V von Nag Hamadi*, 1963.

³ See e.g. Hans Leisegang, *Die Gnosis* (Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag, 4. Auflage, 1955) p. 353 ff.

A child appears to him who looks like an old man and addresses him with the same words, "John, why do you doubt." (see *Mt.* 14,31). Let us now continue with verse 4:

"And they say that this is what was said in the gospel, that 'if we spoke to you about the earthly and you did not believe how will you believe the heavenly things?' (*Jn.* 3,12) and (the saying) 'When you see the Son of Man ascending to the place where he was before' (*Jn.* 6,62), that is to gather the seed from where it came out; and that when he said 'if you do not eat the flesh and drink my blood' (*Jn.* 6,53), and when the disciples were upset and cried, 'Who is able to listen to this?' they claim that this obscenity was meant. For this reason they were upset and withdrew from him (*Jn.* 6,66) because they were not strong in the *plēroma*. And when David said, 'He is like a tree planted by the streams of waters which will give its fruit in its time' (*Ps.* 1,3), he speaks, they claim, about the male organs. They say that the sentences 'at the *exodos* of waters' and 'which gives its fruit' mean the emission of gratification. And (the sentence), 'and its leaf shall not wither' means that we should not let it fall on the ground but eat it."

The psalm quotation 1,3 is taken from the LXX where it stands as follows: "Καὶ ἔσται ὡς τὸ ξύλον τὸ πεφυτευμένον παρὰ τὰς διεξόδους τῶν ὑδάτων, ὃ τὸν καρπὸν αὐτοῦ δώσει ἐν καιρῷ αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ φύλλον αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἀπορρυήσεται." The word *διέξοδος* is composed of *διά* and *ἐξοδος* and thus the primary meaning of the word is "a passage throughout". However, if we leave out the preposition *διά* the word that remains is *ἡ ἐξοδος* composed of the preposition *ἐξ*, and *ὁδός*, and the meaning is "a way out, going out." We notice that the Phibionite exegesis rests upon this slight alteration of the text: instead of *διέξοδος* they read *ἐξοδος* i.e. the "going out of waters", which is then easy to refer to the fluid of emission. Further, let us notice the verb *ἀπορρυήσεται*. This verb comes from *ἀπορρέω* – future *ἀπορρήσομαι*; it is not in the New Testament but we find it in the LXX and twice in Barnabas. The meaning is "to flow down", or figuratively from the leaves of a tree, "to fall down". (This is not to be confused with the verb *ἀπορέω* "to be wanting" which occurs frequently in the New Testament). The Gnostic exegetes, of course, remember that *ἀπορρέω* is behind the noun of *ἀπόρροια*, which means emission of semen, and they come to their remarkable conclusion.

Another example of such interesting exegesis is mentioned in 26,9,2ff. Here Epiphanius says of the Phibionites: "They say that when (the Scripture says that) Rahab put a red cord in the window, that does not mean real cord but the female sexual parts and the *kokkinon* (scarlet) means the blood of menstruation, and when it says, 'Drink water from your own vessel' it means the same."

The first Scripture passage here refers to *Joshua* 2,8, where the Israelite spies say to Rahab the harlot: "Behold when we come into the land, you shall bind this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down." The LXX translates the key words here as τὸ σπαρτίον τὸ κόκκινον. Our Gnostic exegetes conveniently forget about τὸ σπαρτίον and concentrate on the symbolic meaning of τὸ κόκκινον. Now, we know that red was considered a magical color and the most logical thing would be to assume that the scarlet cord given to Rahab was some kind of an amulet or

perhaps a cord on which a signet was hung. Something similar occurs also in *Gen.* 38,18. This is the story in which Judah believes Tamar to be an harlot. Then we read: "He said, 'What pledge shall I give you?' She replied, 'Your signet and your cord, and your staff is in your hand.'" The signet and cord of Judah could be the same as what the Israelite spies have worn.

In this light, the Gnostic exegesis is definitely far-fetched, but they were not the only ones to bypass the obvious for the fanciful. As a matter of fact, they may have been influenced here by some of the church fathers who were also unwilling to accept the Rahab story at its face value. For example, here is how I *Clemens* 12 explains *Joshua* 2,8: "They also gave her a signal that she should hang a piece of scarlet from her house, thus showing that all who believed and set their hope on God should have redemption through the blood of the Lord. You see, dear friends, that there was not only faith but prophecy in this woman."

Similar is the exegesis of Justin Martyr, *Dialogue* III: "For the sign of the scarlet thread, which the spies sent to Jericho by Joshua, son of Nun, gave to Rahab the harlot, telling her to bind it to the window through which she let them down to escape from their enemies, also manifested the symbol of the blood of Christ, by which those who were at one time harlots and unrighteous persons out of all nations are saved, receiving remission of sins, and continuing no longer in sin."⁴

The second Scripture passage, "Drink water from your own vessel", is taken from *Proverbs* 5,15. In the LXX: "πῖνε ὕδατα ἀπὸ ὧν ἀγγείων." The word τὸ ἀγγεῖον means first, a vessel in general, or, in a specific sense, a bucket, a reservoir, or even a coffin or urn. The secondary meaning is with respect to the human body: in classical Greek this word is used meaning the lung or the stomach or the female breast. From here it was often used in an undetermined way generally as "body", much in the same sense as σκεῦος.⁵ The Gnostic exegesis relies evidently upon the secondary meaning of the word and here again they are not without an orthodox example. For the word σκεῦος, which occurs in the New Testament 23 times, (ἀγγεῖον only once in *Mt.* 25,4), can also have a double meaning either as a "vessel, instrument" or with respect to the human body. In I *Peter* 3,7, e.g. the woman is called ἀσθενέστερον σκεῦος "weaker sex". And we have, of course, the well known passage in I *Thess.* 4,4 τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος, which is variously translated either as "one's own body" or "one's own wife".

But let us now return to the rest of the Phibionite literature. According to 26,1,3 they also possessed a so-called *Book of Noria*. This book, mentioned also by *Irenaeus* I,30, relates the story of Noria, daughter of Adam and wife of Noah. She served the "anō dunameis" but Noah served the Archon of this world. Therefore Noria set fire to the ark three times and thus "showed that what was taken from the Mother above through the Archon who made the world and the other gods with him and the angels and daimons should be collected through the male and female fluids from the power which is in the body" (26,1,8–9). The *Book of Noria* was also used by the Sethians and the Ophites and we take the word of Jean Doresse that the writing entitled *The Hypostasis*

⁴ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* I, p. 254.

⁵ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Harpers, 1883).

of the Archons in the Nag Hammadi library (#39 according to Doresse) is an abridgment of the *Book of Noria*.⁶

Next, Epiphanius mentions the *Gospel of Eve* and gives the following quotation (26,3,1): "I stood upon a high mountain and I saw a tall man and another short one and I heard something like the sound of thunder and I approached to hear and he spoke to me and said, '*ego su kai su ego*' and where you are I am there and in everything I am sown. And if you wish you can collect me and when you collect me you collect yourself."

This sounds somewhat similar to what we read in the *Pistis Sophia* 96, where Jesus says about people who shall receive the mystery of the Ineffable: "those men are I and I am they." We may also compare the saying with *Pap. Ox.* 1, lines 24–31, "Jesus says: Wherever there are two they are not without god and wherever someone is alone, I say, I am with him. Turn up the stone and you will find me there. Split the wood and there I am."

The Gospel of Thomas has this in two separate sayings, 31 and 77. Logion 31: "Jesus said: Where there are three gods they are gods. Where there are two or one, I am with him." Logion 77: "Jesus said: I am the light which is over everything. I am the All; from me the All has gone forth and to me the All has returned. Split the wood: I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."

And finally, let us recall that according to Irenaeus I,13,2ff Markos seduced several women by talking to them in complimentary words such as: "I am eager to make you a partaker of my Charis ... The place of your angel is among us; it behooves us to become one ... Adorn thyself as a bride who is expecting her bridegroom, that thou mayest be what I am, and I what you are... (ἵνα ἔσῃ ὁ ἐγὼ καὶ ἐγὼ ὁ σὺ)." ⁷

Then again we have a quotation from the *Gospel of Philip* which, however, as we will recognize at once, is a different *Gospel of Philip* than the one discovered in Nag Hammadi. This is what we have in the *Panarion* (26,13,2–3): "The Lord revealed to me what the soul has to say when it goes up to heaven and how it should answer to each of the powers above: 'I have recognized myself and I have collected myself from everywhere and I have not sown children to the Archon, but have uprooted his roots and I have gathered the scattered members and I know who you are. I am from those that are above.' And thus they say, it is freed. But if it is found to have borne a son it is kept beneath until it is able to take its children and bring them back to itself."

Such magical formulas are to be found in abundance in the *Pistis Sophia* and in the two *Books of Jeu*. Also, there is a similar quotation in Irenaeus I,21,5. We also

⁶ Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (New York, Viking, 1960) pp. 159 and 163.

⁷ For further references see K. Holl, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 278.

notice that this quotation cannot be traced in the *Gospel of Philip* that was discovered in Nag Hammadi.

Immediately after this quotation from the *Gospel of Philip*, Epiphanius relates a story with reference to the prophet Elijah. Whether this is taken from a different book – perhaps a writing that bore the name of Elijah – or whether we should think of it as coming from the same source as the preceding quotation, is difficult to decide. At any rate, it says that after Elijah “was taken up, he was immediately again thrown back into the world. Because a daimon came, took hold of him and asked him, Where are you going? I have children from you and you cannot go up and leave your children here! And he asked, How can you have children from me, when I lived in holiness? She said: Indeed, many times in your dreams when you had an emission I was the one who received the sperm from you and bore you sons”. (“Pollē de mōria tōn ta toiauta legontōn” – “Great is the foolishness of those who say such things!” adds Epiphanius disapprovingly) (26,13,5–6).

Yet another writing in use by these Gnostics was something that Epiphanius identifies as the *Genna Marias* (26,12,1 ff.). “Genna” may mean here either the birth or the genealogy of Mary, and from the quotation that Epiphanius gives, it is possible to think that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is meant. If this is true, then we have here one of the very few evidences that the Gnostics had some interest in the mother of Jesus. “They have the audacity for a great number of false writings. They say that there is a certain book, the *Genna Marias*, in which they maintain many terrible and pernicious things which they put in there. For they say that Zachariah was killed in the temple because, they say, he saw a vision and from fear, when he wanted to tell the vision, his mouth was stopped. For he saw, they say, at the hour of the incense offering as he was offering, a man standing, they say, having the form of an ass. And when he came out, they say, and wished to say, Woe to you, whom are you worshipping? he who appeared to him in the temple stopped his mouth that he might not be able to speak. But when his mouth was opened that he might speak then he revealed it to them and they killed him. And so, they say, died Zachariah. They say that it was to this end that the high priest was charged by the law-giver himself to wear bells, in order that, whenever he entered to do priestly service, he who was worshipped hearing the sound might hide himself that the likeness of his form might not be discovered” (26,12,1–4).

This section and especially the problem of the god in the form of an

ass – or perhaps with the head of an ass as the object of worship among the Jews, has been examined several times. The relevant literature is listed in Hennecke⁸ and Doresse.⁹

By their title, but without giving any further detail, Epiphanius also mentions certain prophecies of *Barkabbas* and an *Euaggelion teleiōseōs* the contents of which are unknown.

An impressive list of books, indeed! And these alone would be sufficient to give us an insight into the teachings of these Phibionites. Fortunately, however, Epiphanius also gives us a good description of how this sect practiced what it taught. We turn now to this problem.

II

We read in *Panarion* 26,4 and 5: “I will now come to the place of depth in their deadly story (for they have various false teachings about pleasure). First, they have their women in common. And if someone appears for whom their teaching is strange, they have a sign, men for women and women for men. When they extend the hand for greeting at the bottom of the palm they make a sort of tickling touch and from this they ascertain whether the person who appeared is for their religion. After they have recognized each other, they go over at once to eating. They serve rich food, meat and wine even if they are poor. When they thus ate together and so to speak filled up their veins from the surplus of their strength they turn to excitements. The man leaving his wife says to his own wife: Stand up and make love with the brother (*‘Poiēson tēn agapēn meta tou adelphou’* – ‘Perform the *agapē* with the brother’). Then the unfortunates unite with each other, and as I am truly ashamed to say the shameful things that are being done by them, because according to the holy apostle the things that are happening by them are shameful even to mention (*Eph.* 5,12), nevertheless I will not be ashamed to say those things which they are not ashamed to do, in order that I may cause in every way a horror in those who hear about their shameful practices. After they have had intercourse in the passion of fornication they raise their own blasphemy toward heaven. The woman and the man take the fluid of the emission of the man into their hands, they

⁸ Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen* (3rd ed. Tübingen, 1959) vol. 1, p. 255f (E.T. by R. McL. Wilson, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963, p. 345).

⁹ Doresse, *op. cit.*, p. 41f.

stand, turn toward heaven, their hands besmeared with the uncleanness, and pray as people called '*Stratiotikoi*' and '*Gnostikoi*', bringing to the father the nature of all that which they have on their hands, and they say: 'We offer to thee this gift, the body of Christ'. And then they eat it, their own ugliness, and say: 'This is the body of Christ and this is the Passover for the sake of which our bodies suffer and are forced to confess the suffering of Christ.' Similarly also with the woman: when she happens to be in the flowing of the blood they gather the blood of menstruation of her uncleanness and eat it together and say: 'This is the blood of Christ.' Therefore, when they read in the book of Revelation, 'I saw a tree that brought twelve kinds of fruit each year and he said to me, this is the tree of life' (Epiphanius quotes very freely from *Apoc.* 22:2), they allegorize it to mean the monthly flow of the female blood. They have intercourse with each other but they teach that one may not beget children. The corruption is committed by them not for the sake of begetting children but for the sake of pleasure, because the devil plays with them and mocks the image formed by God. They bring the pleasure to its end, but they take to themselves the sperm of their uncleanness, not to place it down deep for the begetting of children, but to eat their shame themselves. And if someone from among them is detected to have let the natural emission of semen go in deeper and the woman becomes pregnant, then hear, what even worse they do: they pull out the embryo in the time when they can reach it with the hand. They take out this unborn child and in a sort of mortar pound it with the pestle and into this mix honey and pepper and other certain spices and myrrh, in order that it may not nauseate them, and then they come together, all this company of swine and dogs, and each communicates with the finger from the bruised child. And after they have finished this cannibalism finally they pray to God, saying, that we did not let the Archon of this desire play with us but collected the mistake of the brother. And this they also consider to be the perfect Passah. Many other horrible things are done by them. For when they again get into this rage among themselves, they smear their hands with their own emission. They stretch them out and pray with the besmeared hands naked in the whole body that through this practice they may find with God free conversation. But they take care of their bodies day and night, women and men, with creams, lotions and foods, and devote themselves to the bed and drunkenness. They curse the man who fasts because they say that one should not fast, for fasting is the work of the

Archon who made this *aiōn*. Rather one should nourish himself in order that the bodies may be strong so that they may give the fruit in its time.”¹⁰ Later, in 26,9,6 ff. Epiphanius says that these Phibionites, or at least a group of them, dedicated their sexual unions to the names of 365 archons. The men would say to the women: “Have intercourse with me so that I can lead you to the archon.” At each intercourse they name the name of one of the archons and then pray: “I bring you to so-and-so in order that you may be brought to so-and-so.” The next intercourse they dedicate to another archon, and so forth. The meaning of this is to guarantee safe passage through the sphere ruled by each particular archon. Finally when a member had worked through the names twice (730 “offerings”; a complete ascent and descent), he would say: “I am the Christ, since I have descended through the names of the 365 archons.”

Irenaeus I,31,1–2, also mentions this later practice.

At this point we have to stop to examine the reliability of this account. Epiphanius stands accused as not being always accurate as a historian. G. R. S. Mead, in his introduction to the translation of *Pistis Sophia*, has this to say about his reports on the Gnostics: “Epiphanius in his youth had certain unfortunate experiences with the adherents of a libertine sect in Egypt and the moral shock it gave him seems to have warped his judgment as a historian in this part of his work; it led him to collect every scrap of evidence of obscenity he could lay his hand on and every gross scandal that had come to his ears, and freely to generalize therefrom.”¹¹

Perhaps we should be somewhat more lenient with Epiphanius. After all, Doresse himself admits that at least some of the accounts of Epiphanius have been confirmed by the Nag Hammadi documents;¹² and the fact that Epiphanius had first-hand knowledge of these practices underlines the credibility of his account. Indeed, reading these sections, we ourselves would ask automatically, How is it that he knows so well and intimately these things which were supposed to be done in secret and only by those who recognized each other by a certain sign when they shook hands with each other? Epiphanius himself realized that this

¹⁰ For this and the following see especially H. Leisegang, *op. cit.*

¹¹ G. R. S. Mead, *Pistis Sophia* (London, 1896). Second ed. 1921, repr. 1955, p. xxxiii f.

¹² Doresse, *op. cit.*, p. 250f.

question would come up in the mind of his readers. Therefore at the end of this chapter, i.e. 26,17,1 ff., he himself related how as a young man he frequented such a sect. He gained the confidence of several women, among whom, he says, there were many “*eumorphotérai*” and “*euprosōpótatai*” who tried zealously to save him from the hands of the archon by the techniques described above. Thus he was also able to read several of their books, too, and when he gained sufficient knowledge of them he severed his connection with them. But, he admits, their temptation of him was great, and he attributes it solely to the power of God that he escaped without succumbing. Only so was he able to praise God and say: “Let us sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea!”

Neither is Epiphanius alone in relating these practices of the Phibionites. References to them we find in at least two other Gnostic documents, the *Pistis Sophia* and *Second Book of Jeu*.¹³ To be sure, both documents condemn these practices in very strong language and this in itself proves that the Phibionites were important enough to be remembered.

This is what we read in *Pistis Sophia*, ch. 147: “Thomas said: ‘We have heard that there are some on the earth who take the male seed and the female monthly blood and make it into a lentil porridge and eat it saying: ‘We have faith in Esau and Jacob! Is this then seemly or not?’ Jesus was angry with the world in that hour and said unto Thomas: ‘Amen, I say, this sin is more heinous than all sins and iniquities. Such men will straightway be taken into the outer darkness and not be cast back anew into the sphere, but they shall perish, be destroyed in the outer darkness in a region where there is neither pity nor light, but howling and grinding of teeth. And all the souls which shall be brought into the outer darkness, will not be cast back anew, but will be destroyed and dissolved.’”

The *Second Book of Jeu*, ch. 43 says this: “As he (i.e. Jesus) said this he spoke again to his disciples: ‘These mysteries, which I am about to give to you, keep and give to no men except when they are worthy of them. Do not give them to father, or mother, neither brother, nor sister ... Do not give them to any female or to any man who stands in any kind of faith to these 72 archons or serves them, nor give them

¹³ *Pistis Sophia* and the *Two Books of Jeu* are quoted according to the edition of C. Schmidt, *Koptisch-Gnostische Schriften* I. Second ed. revised by W. Till. GCS vol. 45 (Berlin, 1954).

to those who serve the eight *dunamis* of the great *archon*, i.e. those who eat the blood of menstruation of their uncleanness and the semen, as they say: "We recognized the true knowledge and we pray to the true God." But their God is evil. Listen to me that I may declare to you his position. He is the third *dunamis* of the great *archon* and his name is Taricheas, son of Sabaoth of Adamas; he is the enemy of the kingdom of heavens, and his face is that of a wild boar, his teeth protrude from his mouth and another face, that of a lion is on the back.'"

The *Pistis Sophia* was written around 250–300 AD and the two *Books of Jeu* were composed sometime in the first half of the third century, which puts us back about one hundred years from the time when Epiphanius wrote. Without doubt, our sect existed already at that time, and this is borne out by Origen (about 185–253/54 AD), who in *Contra Celsum* VI,27, says as follows: (Celsus) "appears to me, indeed, to have acted like those Jews who, when Christianity began to be first preached, scattered abroad false reports of the Gospel, such as that Christians offered up an infant in sacrifice, and partook of its flesh; and again, that the professors of Christianity, wishing to do the works of darkness, used to extinguish the lights in their meetings, and each one to have sexual intercourse with any woman whom he chanced to meet."¹⁴ A surprisingly correct rumor of what the Phibionites actually did in their meetings!

Clement of Alexandria (died 215 AD), in the *Stromateis* II,2, also describes these sexual aberrations as practices of the Carpocratians. There is also a very interesting section by Minucius Felix in the dialogue *Octavius*, IX (around 200 AD). Here the pagan Caecilius says about the Christians: "Assuredly, this confederacy ought to be rooted out and execrated. They know one another by secret marks and insignia, and they love one another almost before they know one another. Everywhere also there is mingled among them a certain religion of lust, and they call one another promiscuously brothers and sisters, that even a not unusual debauchery may by the intervention of that sacred name become incestuous ... Now the story about the initiation of young novices is as much to be detested as it is well known. An infant covered over with meal, that it may deceive the unwary, is placed before him who is to be stained with their rites: this infant is slain by the young pupil, who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of

¹⁴ ANF 4, 585.

the meal, with dark and secret wounds. Thirstily – O horror! – they lick up its blood; eagerly they divide its limbs. By this victim they are pledged together; with this consciousness of wickedness they are covenanted to mutual silence. Such sacred rites as these are more foul than any sacrileges. And of their banqueting it is well known, all men speak of it everywhere... On a solemn day they assemble at the feast with all their children, sisters, mothers, people of every sex and of every age. There, after much feasting, when the fellowship has grown warm and the fervor of incestuous lust grown hot with drunkenness, a dog that has been tied to the chandelier is provoked by throwing a small piece of offal beyond the length of a line by which he is bound, to rush and spring; and thus the conscious light being overturned and extinguished in the shameless darkness, the connections of abominable lust involve them in the uncertainty of faith...”¹⁵

The description by Epiphanius of the Phibionite meals is again, essentially, the same as we read here. We must come to the painful recognition of the fact that the charges of the pagans against Christians involving immoral sexual rites and murdering of children were not at all unfounded. We must remember that the Gnostic sects posed as Christians and e.g., in Alexandria, the Phibionites were expelled from the church only after Epiphanius denounced them and individually identified them. A non-Christian quite naturally could not make any distinction between orthodox Christianity and Gnosticism and the malpractices of the libertine Gnostics were held against all Christians indiscriminately. In the light of all these supporting evidences there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of Epiphanius’ description.

III

But what was behind all that? Can we settle the whole question by simply branding these people as immoral who would find satisfaction in weird sexual practices? Irenaeus says (1,31,1–2) that the Cainites, Sodomites and Carpocratians practiced sinful things because by doing them they throw into confusion the entire present order of the world which is the work of the creator. This they call “*solvere opera hysterae*”, i.e. “to dissolve the works of Hystera” (the creator-god), and for a

¹⁵ ANF 4, 177f.

Gnostic this is the primary concern and obligation. Already this statement of Irenaeus shows that we cannot simply put aside libertine Gnostics as sexual deviates. This is especially true concerning the Phibionites. The Phibionites were a religious group and in Alexandria one did not have to pose as a religious person in order to be able to commit acts of immorality. Besides, some of their ceremonies were so nauseating that they had to use artificial means (strong spices, etc.) to be able to partake in them.

Who but a religiously fanatic would do such things? But, again, for a fanatic, nothing is prohibitively abominable that serves a supposedly religious end. And this was the case with the Phibionites. As L. Fendt¹⁶ has shown, even the unfriendly way in which Epiphanius describes their dinner fellowship displays certain liturgical characteristics, among which the following four are especially important: (1) first, the idea of eating together itself; (2) second, the phrase “Perform the *agapē* with the brother”; (3) the prayer of dedication after the act; and (4) finally the closing confession.

Now, about (1) we know that the idea of eating together was already alive in the pagan sacrificial meals but more prominently in the Christian practice of “breaking bread together” which may have been a pre-Pauline predecessor of the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁷ It is indeed possible that the fellowship dinner of the Phibionites was for them a eucharistic meal in which the basic element was the “*unio mystica*” with the deity. This was achieved, as the climax of the meeting, with the producing and offering of the sperm, which is that life-giving element in man that is divine, indeed a part of God himself.

(2) The phrase, “Perform the agape with the brother” — “Ποίησον τὴν ἀγάπην μετὰ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ” sounds very much like a fixed liturgical formula and Epiphanius has it between quotation marks too, giving the impression that it was always used in the same way. Whether it has anything to do with the primitive Christian practice of the *φίλημα ἀγάπης* mentioned in I *Pt.* 5,14 and in the form *φίλημα ἁγιον Rom.* 16,16; I *Cor.* 16,20; II *Cor.* 13,12; I *Thess.* 5,26, would be interesting to see.

Yet already in the New Testament we see that the “holy kiss” of Paul

¹⁶ L. Fendt, *Gnostische Mysterien* (München, Kaiser Verlag, 1922).

¹⁷ Oscar Cullmann, *The Meaning of the Lord's Supper in Primitive Christianity*. Ecumenical Studies in Worship, No. 1. Essays on the Lord's Supper (Richmond, Va., John Knox Press, 1958) p. 16.

changes into the “kiss of love” in I *Pt.* in which one could find without difficulty a scriptural basis for abuse. We read in Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6,14, that already Simon’s followers advocated promiscuous intercourse, with the argument that “all earth is earth, and there is no difference where anyone sows provided he does sow”. Then Hippolytus adds these words: “But even they congratulate themselves on account of this indiscriminate intercourse asserting that this is perfect love (ταύτην εἶναι λέγοντες τὴν τελείαν ἀγάπην) and employing the expressions ‘holy of holies’ and ‘sanctify one another’.”¹⁸ Scornfully Clemens in the *Stromateis* III,4,27, calls this sort of love πάνδημος Ἀφροδίτη (“street-walker”), but we have no reason to doubt that for a Phibionite Gnostic this was a religious function. It was “perfect” love, too, in the sense that it was not directed toward the end of generating children to the partners or for any other selfish end but exclusively for the purpose of leading and being led to God in the strictest sense of what the man said to the woman: “Have intercourse with me so that I can lead you to the archon.”

(3) The prayer of dedication “We offer to thee this gift, the body of Christ” and the (4) confession “This is the body of Christ... etc.” show beyond doubt that this was a liturgical act and the Phibionites considered this to be the perfect form of celebrating the Eucharist. The words are strikingly similar to the ones we use even today in many Protestant eucharistic services. (The Presbyterian: “And here we offer and present unto Thee ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice; and we beseech Thee, mercifully to accept this our sacrifice... etc.”). Here is also the idea of offering up the body of Christ each time this Eucharist is celebrated. The object of the dedicated sacrifice is identified with the body of Christ in a realistical, physical sense. Only, there is no bread, the substance of which is transformed: it is the life-substance of man, the sperm, which is identified with Christ.

All this comes naturally from the Phibionite world-view, and once a person accepted this world-view the rest will not be difficult to follow. According to this world-view, which is basically that of the Nicolaitans, the primordial Spirit brought forth Barbelo, who is also called Prounikos. Barbelo brought forth Ialdabaoth, or Sabaoth, who is the creator of the lower world. (See Epiphanius 25,2,2f., where all this is described). This means that not only the archons of the lower world but everything

¹⁸ ANF 5, 80.

created and living has a spark of Barbelo's power, which is thus scattered all over. When Barbelo herself heard Ialdabaoth saying "I am the Lord and there is no other, besides me there is no other" (*Is.* 45,5) she at once realized that the creation of the world was an error. She set out, therefore to regain as much of her power as she could. She appeared to the archons in a beautiful form, seduced them, and when they had an emission she took their sperm, which contained the power originally belonging to her. On the basis of this story we could easily conclude in what salvation would consist: it is the gathering and collecting of the power of Barbelo and leading it back to its original condition. Since this power is physically available in the generating substances of men, it is clear that the collecting and offering of these serve salvation in the most perfect way.

That is what the Nicolaitans already said: "We gather the *dunamis* of Prounikos from the bodies through the fluids of the begetting power (*gonē*) and the menstrual blood" (25,3,2). This will also explain the view of the Phibionites about other *living* matter. Let us hear how Epiphanius describes them: "They also say that the flesh is perishable and will not rise because it is the archon's. And the power which is in menstruation and in the sperm they call *psyche*, which would be gathered and eaten. And whatever we eat, flesh or vegetables or bread or anything else, we do a favor to the creatures because we gather the psyche from everything and we take it with us '*eis ta epourania*'. Therefore, when they receive all kinds of meat they say, 'Let us save our race'. And they say that it is the same *psyche* which is dispersed in animals and beasts, fishes, snakes, men, vegetables, trees and anything that is produced" (26,9,3-4). Procreation is wrong because it only divides this psyche and prolongs the time the psyche must spend in this world. A person who has children must wait until he can gather his children to himself; this is the reason why Elijah was thrown back into the world. What man must do therefore is to collect himself, "and thus he will go over into the upper part, where the mother of the living, Barbero or Barbelo is, and thus the soul is saved" (26,10,10).

We can call this a theology of σύλλησις. Using now an orthodox Christian terminology this theology may be reduced to one basic principle: In every man there is a spark of the living spirit of God. Salvation is to liberate this spiritual substance from the prison of the material and bring it back to its place of origin. As Leisegang has pointed out, this thesis is not very far from primitive Christian thinking. We read

in I *John* 3,9 the following statement: “πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ, ὅτι σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ μένει.” That the “sperm of God” is in the believer is certainly not far removed from the idea that the place of the point of connection between God and man is to be found in the sperm. Furthermore, the idea that salvation of the universe is a great work of collection lies hidden in texts such as *Ephesians* 1,9–10: “For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to *unite all things in him*, things in heaven and things on earth.”

In the same manner, Irenaeus held that universal salvation is *recapitulation*, *anakephalaiosis*, a work of summing up, bringing together. In *adv. Haer.* V,1,2 he says: “For He would not have been one truly possessing flesh and blood, by which He redeemed us, unless He had summed up in Himself the ancient formation of Adam.” The idea returns with Augustine in an almost painfully realistic interpretation of *Mark* 13,27: “He shall gather together his elect from the four winds.” Augustine has this to say about this verse: “He gathereth all his elect from the four winds: therefore, from the whole world. For Adam himself (this I had said before) signifieth in Greek the whole world; for there are four letters A, D, A and M. But as the Greeks speak, the four quarters of the world have these initial letters, Ἀνατολή they call the East; Δύσις the West; Ἀρκτος the North; Μεσημβρία the South: thou hast the word Adam. Adam therefore has been scattered over the whole world. He was in one place and fell, and as in a manner broken small, he filled the whole world: but the mercy of God gathered together the fragments from every side, and forged them by the fire of love, and made one that was broken. The Artist knew how to do this; let no one despair: it is indeed a great thing, but reflect who that Artist was. He who made restored: He who formed reformed. What are righteousness and truth? He will gather together His elect with Him... etc.”¹⁹

Our Gnostics certainly did not have to look too far for parallels of their own theology of *syllaxis*. They probably considered these statements of the fathers as old-fashioned opinions which they had superseded and perfected. And this was probably the case with the celebration of the Eucharist. The idea of the “*unio mystica*” with Christ is an integral part of the Christian celebration of the Eucharist to which

¹⁹ In *Ps.* 96,15; *NPNF* 8,474f. See also in *Joh. Tractate* 10,12 and *Tractate* 9,14.

comes the idea of the gathering together of the believers who become one body by partaking of the one bread. The participant of the Christian Eucharist also looked forward to an eschatological consummation and thus we see that even in this respect Gnostic deviations have built upon, or perhaps just simply absorbed, basically Christian principles. According to the *Didache* 9,4 the following was part of an eucharistic prayer: "Just as this piece of bread was scattered over the mountains and then was gathered together and became one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom." Similarly also *Didache* 10,4 "Remember, Lord, your church, to save it from all evil and to make it perfect in your love, and gather it together in its holiness from the four winds, into your kingdom..." With the same ideas in mind a Gnostic may have said the prayer which was preserved for us at the end of the *Second Book of Jeu*: "Hear me, as I praise Thee O First Mystery ... Save all my parts which are scattered since the creation of the cosmos in the archons, δεκανοί and λειτουργοί of the ninth Aeon: gather them in and take them up into the Light."²⁰

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²⁰ C.Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 330f.