

## The Phibionites

St. Epiphanius (c. 315–403) was Bishop of Salamis and the author of *Panarion*, or *Refutation of All Heresies*. Book 26 of the *Panarion* is entitled “Against Gnostics,” and describes a libertine secret sect of Christians which Epiphanius says he was recruited for, but resisted the temptation to join. Some scholars are dubious about his account and whether there ever was in fact such a group. These excerpts are taken from *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book I (Sects 1-46)*. Frank Williams, translator. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987)

1,1 In turn these Gnostics have emerged in the world....(3,1) They base their teachings on foolish visions and testimonies in what they maintain is a Gospel. For they make the following allegation: “I stood upon a lofty mount, and saw a man who was tall, and another, little of stature. And I heard as it were the sound of thunder and drew nigh to hear, and he spake with me and said, I am thou and thou art I, and wheresoever thou art, there am I; and I am sown in all things. And from wheresoever thou wilt gatherest thou me, but in gathering me, thou gatherest thyself.” ....

3,5 But I am afraid of revealing the whole of this potent poison...to the reader’s harm rather than his correction. For it does pollute the ears, the blasphemous assembly with its great audacity, its gathering and description of its dirt, the filthy (βορβορώδης) ill-will of its scummy obscenity. (7)...in Egypt the same people are known as Stratiotics and Phibionites, as I said in part earlier. But some call them Zacchaeans, others, Barbelites.

4,1 But I shall pass to the substance of their deadly story...because in the first place, they hold their wives in common. (2) And if a guest who is of their persuasion arrives, they have a sign that men give women and women give men, the tickling of the palm as they clasp hands in pretended greeting, to show that the visitor is of their religion.

4,3 And now that they know each other from this, the next thing they do is feast—and though they may be poor, they set the table with lavish provisions for eating meat and drinking wine. But then, after a drinking bout and practically filling the boy’s veins, they next go crazy for each other. (4) And the husband will withdraw from his wife and tell her— speaking to his own wife! — “Get up, perform the Agape with the brother.” And when the wretched couple has made love—and I am truly [86] ashamed to mention the vile things they do, for as the holy apostle says, “It is a shame even to speak” (Eph. 5:12) of what goes on among them. Still, I shall not be ashamed to say what they are not ashamed to do, to arouse horror by every method in those who hear what obscenities they are prepared to perform. (5) For besides, to

extend their blasphemy to heaven after making love in a state of fornication, the woman and man receive the male emission on their own hands. And they stand with their eyes raised heavenward but the filth on their hands, and pray, if you please—(6)...and offer that stuff on their hands to the actual Father of all, and say, “We offer thee this gift, the body of Christ.” (7) And then they eat it and partake of their own dirt, and they say, “This is the body of Christ; and this is the Pascha, because of which our bodies suffer and are made to acknowledge the passion of Christ.”

4,8 And so with the woman’s emission when she happens to be having her period—they likewise take the unclean menstrual blood they gather from her, and eat it in common. And “This,” they say, “is the blood of Christ.” (5,1) And thus, when they read, “I saw a tree bearing twelve manner of fruits every year, and he said unto me, This is the tree of life,” in apocryphal writings, they interpret this allegorically of the menses.

5,2 But though they copulate they forbid procreation. Their eager pursuit of seduction is for enjoyment, not procreation.... (3) They come to climax but absorb the seeds in their dirt—not by implanting them for procreation, but by eating the dirt themselves.

5,4 But even though one of them gets caught and implants the start of the normal emission, and the woman becomes pregnant, let me tell you what more dreadful thing such people venture to do. (5) They extract the fetus at the stage appropriate for their enterprise, take this aborted infant, and cut it up in a trough shaped like a pestle. And they mix honey, pepper, and certain other perfumes and spices with it to keep from getting sick, and then all the revellers in this < herd > of swine and dogs assemble, and each eats a piece of the child with his fingers. (6) And now, after this cannibalism, they pray to God and say, “We were [87] not mocked by the archon of lust, but have gathered the brother’s blunder up!” And this, if you please, is their idea of the “perfect Passover.”

5,7 And they will do any number of other dreadful things. Again, whenever they go wild for themselves, they soil their own hands with their own ejaculated dirt, get up, and pray stark naked with their hands defiled. The idea is that they < can > obtain ready access to God through such a practice.

5,8 Man and woman, they pamper their bodies night and day, anointing themselves, bathing, feasting, spending their time in whoring and drunkenness. And they curse whoever fasts and say, “Fasting is wrong; fasting belongs to this archon who made the world. We must take nourishment to make our bodies strong, and able to render their fruit in its season.”

6,1 They use both Old and New Testaments, but renounce the Speaker in the Old Testament. And whenever they find a saying which might be intended against them, they say this is an utterance of the spirit of the world.

(2) But if a statement can be given a form resembling their lust—not as the matter is, but in accordance with their deluded minds— they give this a new twist and claim it is spoken of their lust by the Spirit of truth....

8,1 And they too have many books. They exhibit certain “Questions of Mary;” but others proffer many books about the laldabaoth we spoke of, and in the name of Seth. They call others “Apocalypses of Adam.” And they have ventured to compose other Gospels in the names of the disciples, and are not ashamed to say that our Savior and Lord himself, Jesus Christ, revealed this obscenity. (2) For in the so-called “Greater Questions of Mary”—they have forged “Lesser” ones too—they suggest that he revealed it to her after taking her aside on the mountain, praying, producing a woman from his side, beginning to have intercourse with her, and then partaking of his emission, if you please, to show that “Thus we must do, that we may live.” (3) And when Mary was alarmed and fell to the ground, he raised her up and said to her, “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” (Matt. 14:31)

8,4 And they say that this is the meaning of the saying in the Gospel, “If I have told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe the heavenly things?” (Cf. John 3:12) and so with, “When ye see the Son of Man ascending up where he was before” (John 6:62)—in other words, when you see the [89] emission partaken of where it came from. (5) And when Christ said, “Except ye eat my flesh and drink my blood,” (John 6:53) and the disciples were disturbed and replied, “Who can hear this?” (John 6:60) they say the statement was about the dirt. (6) And this is why they were disturbed and fell away; they were not entirely stable yet, they say.

8,7 And by the words, “He shall be like a tree planted by the outgoings of water that will bring forth its fruit in due season” (Ps. 1:3). David means the man’s dirt. “By the outgoing of water,” and, “that will bring forth his fruit,” means the emission at climax. And “Its leaf shall not fall off” means, “We do not allow it to fall to the ground, but eat it ourselves.”

9,1 And I am going to omit most of their proof-texts, lest I do more harm than good by making them public—otherwise I would give all their mis statements here in explicit detail. (2) When it says that Rahab put a scarlet thread in her window, this was not scarlet thread, they tell us, but the female organs. And the scarlet thread means the menstrual blood, and “Drink water from your cisterns” (Prov. 5:15) means the same.

9,3 They say that the flesh must perish and cannot be raised, but belongs to the archon. (4) But the power in the menses and semen, they say, is soul “which we gather and eat. And whatever we eat—meat, vegetables, bread or anything else—we do creatures a favor by gathering the soul from them all and taking it to the heavens with us.” Hence they eat meat of all kinds and

say that this is “to show mercy to our race.” (5) But they claim that soul is the same, and has been implanted in animals, vermin, fish, snakes, men—and in vegetation, trees, and the products of the soil.

9,6 Those of them who are called Phibionites offer their vile sacrifices of fornication, which I have already mentioned here, in 365 names which they themselves have invented for archons, if you please. They thus make fools of their female partners and say, “Lie with me, that I may offer you to the archon.” (7) And at each sexual act they pronounce an outlandish name of one of their fictitious archons, and pray, if you please, and say, “I offer this to thee, So-and-so, that thou mayest offer it to So-and-so.” But at the next he again proposes a similar offering to another archon, so that he too may offer it to a different one. (8) And [90] until he progresses, or rather, regresses, through 365 instances of copulation, he calls on some name at each, and does the same sort of thing. Then he starts back down through the same series, by performing the same obscenities and making fools of his female victims. (9) Now when he reaches a total as great as 730 instances—I mean of unnatural unions and the names they make up—then, after that, a man of this sort has the courage to say, “I am Christ, for I have descended from on high through the names of the 365 archons!”

10,4 But in the eighth heaven they put the so-called Barbelo; and the “Father and Lord of all,” the same Self-begetter; and another Christ, a self-engendered one; and our Christ, who descended and revealed this knowledge to men, and whom they also identify as Jesus. (5) But he is not “born of Mary,” he is “revealed through Mary.” And he has not taken flesh; he is merely an apparition....

10,7 In departing this world the soul makes its way through these archons, but no < one > can get through them unless he is perfect in this “knowledge”—or rather, this contemptibility—and escapes the archons and authorities because he is “filled.”

10,8 The archon who holds this world captive looks like a dragon. He swallows souls that are not in the know, and returns them to the [91] world through his phallus, here < to be implanted > in pigs and other animals, and brought up again by those.

10,9 But, say they, if one becomes privy to this knowledge and gathers himself from the world through the menses and semen, he is detained here no longer; he gets up above these archons. (10) They say that he passes Sabaoth by and—with impudent blasphemy—that he treads on his head. And thus he mounts above him to the height, where the Mother of all living, Barbero or Barbelo, is; and thus the soul is saved.

11,1 ...Some have nothing to do with women, if you please, but bring themselves to climax with their own hands, receive their own dirt on their

hands, and then eat it. (2) For this they cite a quibblingly interpreted text, “These hands sufficed, not only for me, but also for them that were with me” (Acts 20:34)—and again, “Working with your hands, that ye may have to give also to them that need” (Eph. 4:28).... (4) For they dispose of their corruption like dogs and pigs. Dogs and pigs, and other animals as well, come to climax in this way and eat the discharge of their bodies.

(6) ...For they blaspheme the holiest of holy things, bestowed on us with sanctification, by turning them into dirt.

(11,8)... these persons who debauch themselves with their own hands—and not just they, but the ones who consort with women too—finally get their fill of promiscuous relations with women and grow ardent for each other, men for men....

11,9 Moreover they deceive the womenfolk, “laden with sins and led away with divers lusts” (2 Tim. 3:6), who put their trust in them, and tell their female victims, “So-and-so is a virgin.” And she has been debauched for years, and is being debauched daily! For they never have their fill of copulation; the more indecent one of their men is, the more praiseworthy they consider him. (10) They say that virgins are women who have never gone on to the point of insemination in normal marital relations of the customary kind. They are always having intercourse and committing fornication, but before the pleasure of their union is consummated they push their villainous seducer away and take the dirt we spoke of for food—(11) ...They boast of virginity >, but instead of virginity have adopted this profession of being seduced without accepting the union of seduction, and the seminal discharge....

13,1 The ones they call “Levites” have nothing to do with women, but with each other. And these are their persons of distinction, if you please, and the objects of their praise! But after that they make fun of those who practice asceticism, chastity and celibacy, as having taken the trouble for nothing.

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13,2 They cite a fictitious Gospel in the name of the holy disciple, Philip, as follows. “The Lord hath shown me what my soul must say on its ascent to heaven, and how it must answer each of the powers on high. ‘I have recognized myself,’ it saith, ‘and gathered myself from every quarter, and have sown no children for the archon. But I have pulled up his roots, and gathered my scattered members, and I know who thou art. For I,’ it saith, ‘am of those on high.’” And so, they say, it is set free. (3) But if it turns out to have fathered a son, it is detained below until it can take its own children up and restore them to itself.

(15,2)... They are in covert error and have lost the truth, and neither believe in judgment nor acknowledge resurrection.

17,4 For I happened on this sect myself, beloved, and was actually taught these things in person, out of the mouths of practicing Gnostics. Not only did women under this delusion offer me this line of talk, and divulge this sort of thing to me. With impudent boldness moreover, they tried to seduce me themselves—like that murderous, villainous Egyptian wife of the chief cook—because they wanted me in my youth. (5) But he who stood by the holy Joseph then, stood by me as well....

17,6 For I was pitied and rescued by my groaning to God, not by a power like that of Joseph's righteousness. Though I was reproached by the baneful women themselves, I for my part laughed to hear women like that whispering to each other, scornfully if you please, "We cannot save the youngster; we leave him in the hands of the archon to perish!" (7) (For whichever is prettiest displays herself as bait, so that they claim they "save"—instead of destroy—the suckers through her. And then the plain one gets blamed by the more attractive ones, and they say, "I am an elect vessel since I am able to save the suckers while you could not!")

17,8 Now the women who taught this trivial myth were very lovely to look at, but in their wicked minds they had all the devil's ugliness. But the merciful God rescued me from their wickedness, and thus—after reading them and their books, understanding their true intent and not being carried away with them, and after escaping without taking the bait—(9) I lost no time reporting them to the bishops there, and finding out which ones were hidden in the church. < Thus > they were expelled from the city, about eighty persons, and the city was cleared of their tare-like, thorny growth.

18,1 Perhaps someone will commend me if he remembers my earlier promise. I have already indicated that I have met with some of the sects—though I know others from documentary sources, and some from the instruction and testimony of men who were trustworthy and could tell me the truth. So here too, in all frankness, I have not let the opportunity pass, but have shown what this one of the sects which came my way is like. (2) And I can speak plainly of it because of things which I did not do—heaven forbid!—but of which < my knowledge is > accurate because I learned them from people who tried to convert me to this and could not.... (5) But if you should ever happen on any of this school of snake-like people, may you pick the cudgel the Lord has readied for us right up, the one on which our Lord Christ was nailed. < And > may you hurl it at the serpent's head at once, and say, "Christ has been crucified for us, 'leaving us an example' (1 Pet. 2:21) of salvation. (6) For he would not have been crucified if he had not had flesh. But since he had flesh and was crucified, he crucified our sins. I am held fast by faith in the truth, not carried off by the serpent's false imposture and the seductive whisper of his teaching."