



Mummy portraits like those commonly found at Antinoopolis.

DID EARLY CHRISTIANS PRACTICE SAME-SEX RITUALS?

The recent publication of the *Gospel of Judas* presents the modern reader with more evidence of same-sex¹ Christian ritual behavior described in an ancient Christian primary source,² but to my knowledge so far only Jonathan Cahana has published a nuanced analysis of the implications of the text.³

¹ I have deliberately avoided the term "homosexual" which seems invariably to devolve into arguments about essentialism versus social constructionism as well as accusations of anachronism if applied to any person(s) who lived before the magic year 1870 when the term was coined. My personal view on the essentialist/constructionist controversy is the same as Steven Pinker's well-argued position (*The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, 93-94, 202).

² Kasser, et al, *The Gospel of Judas: Critical Edition*, 195, 199.

The reconstruction, translation, and interpretation of the text have been criticized as being both "unreliable" and "sensationalistic" (Turner, "The Place of the *Gospel of Judas* in

The history of Codex Tchacos, a 62-page anthology that includes the *Gospel of Judas* and several other texts, has been recounted in detail by various writers.⁴ The Coptic document, assigned by carbon-14 analysis to the 4th century, is a translation of a lost Greek original that dated from the mid-2nd century. As far as I know, no specialist has claimed that *Judas* contains "anything historically reliable about Judas or Jesus"⁵ and it is widely conceded "that the *Gospel of Judas* ultimately does not tell us anything about Jesus that we did not already know."⁶

However, the text does open a window on a heated Christian dispute about apostolic succession and the path to salvation, adding further insight into the mutually antagonistic relations between early Christian groups and "the tumultuous confusion"⁷ apparent in early christology. *Judas* has been described as representing "the peak of Sethian polemic against the christology and ritual practice of the so-called apostolic church."⁸

When first discovered in a tomb in the late 1970's the codex was likely in a nearly pristine state of preservation, but owing to the greed and incompetence of the antiquities looters⁹ into whose hands it fell, it was fragmentary and close to complete disintegration by the time a responsible party acquired it. In spite of painstaking efforts at restoration, approximately 15% of *Judas* is either missing or illegible, and the true reading of several key passages remains in doubt.

Sethian Tradition," *The Gospel of Judas in Context*, 187). See particularly De Conick's *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says*.

³ Cahana, "Gnostically Queer: Gender Trouble in Gnosticism," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* (2011) 41:24-35.

⁴ Gathercole, *The Gospel of Judas: Rewriting Early Christianity*, 6-23; Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, 1-11; Kasser, *The Gospel of Judas: Critical Edition*, 1-25.

⁵ Pagels & King, *Reading Judas*, xiii.

⁶ Gathercole, 3-4.

⁷ Pagels & King, 4.

⁸ Turner, 227.

⁹ N.T. Wright's description of the grave robbery by the "illiterate peasants" who turned up *Judas* as well as the two peasants who chanced upon the Nag Hammadi trove as "archaeological" discoveries suggests that the Bishop entertains a bizarre notion of what qualifies a person as an archaeologist. (Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus*, 13, 20, 21).

The specialists who have commented at length on the discovery appear cautious to a fault about exploring the implications of any literal reading of the portion of the text that mentions men who "sleep with men." Pagels and King, for instance, acknowledge that the author of *Judas* is charging other Christians with "same-sex relations" but conclude that the various charges are "so outrageous that they cannot be taken literally."¹⁰ Nevertheless, they consider the charge that Christians "are sacrificing their own wives and children" to reflect the proto-orthodox enthusiasm for martyrdom and cite passages from the letters of Ignatius to support their contention. According to their interpretation, the charges of sacrificing women and children are not simply empty rhetoric—those slain by the wicked priests "no doubt represent the martyrs of the author's own day whom the church leaders encouraged to die for their faith."¹¹ If the accusations of human sacrifice reflect real fatalities, might the accusations of same-sex behavior also reflect real sexual practices?

Bart Ehrman, who does an admirable job of drawing attention to the ambiguity of early Christian texts in which theological considerations outweigh any pretense of historical reportage, basically collapses the charges of same-sex behavior in *Judas* into the category of "sexual immorality," while pointing out that it is "the orthodox church leaders" who are being accused of various atrocities.¹² The editors of *The Gospel of Judas* dismiss the accusation of same-sex relations as "a standard feature of polemical argumentation."¹³ Lance Jenott, who has written a meticulous analysis of *Judas* and the opinions swirling around it, notes that *Judas* "condemns the apostolic cult," or worse yet "demonizes the apostolic cult," and points out that the tract is a product of "ecclesiastical politics" that even in the 2nd century had reached an incandescent pitch. However Jenott also dismisses the charge of same-sex behavior as part of a "traditional list of slanderous tropes."¹⁴ Reading the spate of recent books on *Judas* might leave the reader with the impression that the charge of sacrificing people may reflect

¹⁰ Pagels & King, xvii, 64-65, 137.

¹¹ Ibid, 53-56, 67-68.

An argument against the sacrifice-as-martyrdom interpretation has been published by van Os ("Stop Sacrificing! The metaphor of sacrifice in the *Gospel of Judas*," *The Codex Judas Papers*, 367-379).

¹² Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed*, 112, 137.

¹³ Kasser, et al., 36.

¹⁴ Jenott, *The Gospel of Judas: Coptic Text, Translation, and Historical Interpretation*, 25, 26, 40, 58.

antiquity's most complete, not to mention most voluble, explanation of the theory of magical names.¹⁹

Celsus clearly knew a fair bit about the various Christian factions: their members formed "secret compacts with each other" (*συνθηκας κρυβδην προς αλληλων*) that were in violation of legal norms,²⁰ some sects rejected the Hebrew God and the Hebrew scriptures,²¹ some offered different interpretations of the gospels—Origen concedes the existence of Marcion, Valentinus, Lucian, the Ophites, Simonians, Marcellians, Harpocratians, Sibyllists, Ebionites, and Encratites²²—even rejecting "the doctrine of the resurrection according to scripture" (*το περι αναστασεως κατα τας γραφας δογμα*),²³ and worshiping "a god above heaven, who transcends the heaven of the Jews" (*τον υπερουρανιον θεον υπεραναβαινοντας τον Ιουδαιων ουρανον*).²⁴ Celsus also knew of a Christian diagram illustrating ten heavens represented as circles guarded by theriocephalic angels—a form of the diagram still existed in Origen's day.²⁵ Celsus compared the multiple squabbling Jewish and Christian sects to a "flight of bats" or a "swarm of ants."²⁶

Although Origen could hardly say enough about Christian magic and magical diagrams, he proved considerably more reticent about Celsus' charge that the worship of Jesus was similar to the adoration of Antinous, universally regarded (as far as we know) as the Emperor Hadrian's deified "catamite."²⁷ Only in his late teens or perhaps slightly older, Antinous drowned in the murky waters of

¹⁹ Ibid, I, 6,22,24-27,38,46,60,68,71, II, 9,32,34,48-55, III, 1,5,24,46,50,68, IV, 33-35,86,88,92-95, V, 6,9,38,42,45-46,51, VI, 38-41, VII, 4,47,59-60.

²⁰ Ibid, I, 1.

²¹ Ibid, II, 3, IV, 2.

²² Ibid, II, 27, III, 10, 13, V, 61-62, 64-65, VI, 19.

²³ Ibid, V, 12.

²⁴ Ibid, VI, 19 (compare V, 61, VI, 21, VIII, 15).

The "god above heaven" had deep magical significance. Kotansky has published an example of a spell that begins, *Ορκιζω σε τον επανω του ουρανου...* "I invoke you, the One above heaven... (Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae*, I, 276, 280).

²⁵ Ibid, VI, 21, 24-32.

²⁶ Ibid, IV, 33.

²⁷ That was clearly Origen's opinion; he describes Antinous as Hadrian's *παιδικα*, *favorite* or *darling boy*, mentions Hadrian's "unnatural lust" and attributes the healing and prophecy that allegedly occurred at Antinous' shrines to the work of demons and sorcerers. (*Contra Celsum* III, 36).

the Nile under equally murky circumstances and "was automatically identified with that other young god of myth," Osiris, likewise drowned in the sacred Nile. Dead before his time, deified, reputed to grant healing miracles and foretell the future, pagans noted similarities "between Antinous, the young, sacrificial and resurrected god from Bithynion, and Christ, the young, sacrificial and resurrected go from Nazareth." From the Roman point of view the cults of Jesus and Antinous were simply more imports of "eastern gods of mystery, salvation, and ectasy." But the story of Antinous has one other point in common with the story of Jesus: "We do not have a single word about [Antinous] or a single image of him which can be indubitably dated to his own lifetime."²⁸

Origen quotes Celsus as claiming that "other [Christians], *invented another guardian* (ευραντο προστατην) for themselves by wickedly conceiving of a *master and tutelary spirit* (διδασκαλον τε και δαιμονα), and wallow about in utter darkness more lawless and more depraved than [the rites] of those devoted²⁹ (των Αντινου του κατ' Αιγυπτον θιασωτων) to the Egyptian Antinous...³⁰ It seems clear that the rites of Antinous, particularly his "sacred nights," scandalized Christians and were, by implication at least, "flagrant and uninhibited homosexual orgies."³¹ That Celsus' charge of same-sex debauchery even more depraved than the "sacred nights" of Antinous applied to some *Christian* sect(s) known to him is secure. The context makes clear that *Christian factions* are the subject of discussion; the Simonians, Marcellians and Harpocratians are specifically mentioned and Origen's reply, which avoids specifically addressing charges of lawless and depraved behavior, quotes 1 Timothy 4:1-3 which "foretold" that "in the last times *some will apostatize* (αποστησονται τινες) from the faith" by following "the teachings of demons" (διδασκαλιας δαιμονιων) and "forbidding marriage."³² It is possible that 1 Timothy addresses a late first century Christian gnosticism with tutelary spirits—"daemons"—similar in character to the deified Antinous.

²⁸ Lambert, *Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous*, 2, 6, 17, 47.

Lambert's book, finished by a co-author after his death by suicide, is an exhaustively researched, well-written and accessible account of the life and cultic afterlife of Antinous.

²⁹ "of those devoted," from *θιασωτης*, a member of a *θιασος*, a cult or religious brotherhood, particularly of the ecstatic god Bacchus to whom Antinous was assimilated.

³⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* V, 63.

³¹ Lambert, 186-187. Compare *Contra Celsum* III, 36.

³² Origen, *Contra Celsum* V, 62-64.

There is at least one other ancient source that brings specific charges of same-sex ritual against early Christian sects, the "heresiologist" Epiphanius (c.310-403), a monk and later bishop of Salamis (Cyprus) who traveled extensively around the eastern Mediterranean. Epiphanius spent much of his career attacking pagans and vandalizing their temples, as well as waging internecine war on other Christians, which included a sustained posthumous attack on Origen (c.182-254)³³ and persecution of his followers.

Just how much credit for veracity can be given Epiphanius is debatable. His polemic will confirm to the disinterested reader a widely read man of narrow mind, a reactionary, dogmatic, intolerant disposition, unwilling and likely unable to penetrate the thoughts of others.³⁴ It is therefore not impossible that his accusations against his opponents are wildly off the mark, reflecting the sort of malicious mythomania typically associated in the present day with evangelical figures of the far right. Epiphanius, a master of scorched earth ecclesiastical politics, exhibits a highly developed low cunning.

That said, it must also be noted that Epiphanius' descriptions of sexually oriented rituals are both detailed and specific to particular Christian sects, contradicting the expectation of a vaguely defined scattershot approach from a shallow writer given to invective, and he repeatedly cites the theology and scriptural exegesis advanced to justify sexual rituals. If his claims about other Christians are simply lies, they nevertheless betray a saint with a fervid, not to mention intensely perverse, imagination. It is nearly certain that Epiphanius drew much, if not most, of his information from earlier sources, particularly Irenaeus,³⁵ However, the carbon-14 date for *Judas* indicates that gnostic sects were active during Epiphanius' lifetime and deeply antagonistic to the emerging orthodoxy. It is unlikely that the heresy hunter had no interactions with them and knew nothing firsthand about their ritual practices. Indeed, he claims to

³³ The "Church Father" Origen, anathematized by the Second Council of Constantinople (553 CE), is considered heretical by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

³⁴ Osburn, *The Text of the Apostolos in Epiphanius of Salamis*, 13-14.

³⁵ Epiphanius' description of the magical practices of the Carpocratians is very like Irenaeus—he may have been quoting it or reproducing it from memory (Harvey, *Against Heresies*, I, 206).

have had a near miss encounter with Gnostic seductresses and to have met Sethians in Egypt.³⁶

Epiphanius characterized the multitude of sects in competition with the orthodox as "like a swarm of insects, infecting us with diseases."³⁷ He claims the "so-called Gnostics"³⁸ "avoid intercourse with women" (*γυναιξι μη πλησιαζοντες*) and ejaculate onto their own hands, "and even the rest who have promiscuous intercourse with women do not achieve satiety, *becoming inflamed* [with passion] *for one another* (*εις αλληλους εκκαιονται*), *men with men* (*ανδρες εν ανδρασι*)."³⁹

Regarding those the Gnostics call "Levites," Epiphanius bluntly states, "Those they call 'Levites' *do not have intercourse with women, but have intercourse with each other* (*ου μισγονται γυναιξι αλλα αλληλοις μισγονται*), and those persons they regard as *the elect, indeed, the exalted ones* (*οι προκριτεοι παρ' αυτοις δηθεν και επαινετοι*)."⁴⁰ Concerning the sect of the Carpocratians, he says, "The [disciples] of this wicked sect put their hand to every kind of hideous and destructive practice. They have contrived various magical *devices* (*μηχανην*) and *charms* (*επωδασ*), concocted *philtres* (*φιλτρα*) and *attraction spells* (*αγωγιμα*), and not only that, they conjure *familiar spirits* (*παρεδρους δαιμονας*) for their use to exert great power over many *by magical arts* (*δια...μαγγανειας*)...and besides that, every lewdness and wicked act—which it is not even decent to utter with one's mouth—these people perform every kind of pederasty⁴¹ and the most salacious sexual intercourse with women in every part of the body, and carry out magic (*μαγαιας*) and witchery (*φαρμακειας*)⁴² and idolatry."⁴³

³⁶ *Panarion*, Book I, XXVI, 17, 4-8; XXXIX, 1, 2.

³⁷ Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Book I (Sects 1-46)*, 2nd edition, 90 (*Panarion*, Book I, XXVI, 1.1).

I have followed Williams' numbering system for the sections, but have produced a more explicit translation of the text.

³⁸ *Κατα των λεγομενων γουστικων*, "Against the so-called Gnostics", *Panarion* Book I, XXVI.

³⁹ Epiphanius, *Panarion*, Book I, XXVI, 11.1, 11.7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, Book I, XXVI, 13.1.

⁴¹ Epiphanius employs a late and uncommon word, *ανδροβασια*, a synonym of *παιδεραστια*, *boy love* (See Sophocles, *Greek-English Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, 158). His choice of words may reflect the fact that the latter still carried positive connotations among pagans and that the sexual relations he describes were between adults of equal age and status.

⁴² *Potions* or *poisons*, likely including abortifacients.

⁴³ *Panarion*, Book I, XXVII, 3, 1; 4, 6-7.

Whatever one may make of the accusations of sexual license, it is certain that both orthodox and heterodox Christian groups practiced magic, the orthodox in the form of exorcism and healing, cursing, and prophecy by spirit possession,⁴⁴ and the heterodox by more typically pagan means.⁴⁵ According to the best evidence, the charge that the Christian "gnostics" practiced magic is sustained. Both pagan critics and Christian opponents accused certain gnostic sects of orgiastic sexual rituals and the possibility that the accusations of sexual rites were also true must at the very least be seriously entertained.

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⁴⁴ Conner, *Magic in the New Testament: A Survey and Appraisal of the Evidence*, 149-312.

⁴⁵ The writer Porphyry preserves the pagan Plotinus' attack on the magic of the gnostics (Προς τους γνωστικούς) in the *Enneads* (II, 9, 15). Preisendanz' collection of magical spells (*Papyri Graecae Magicae*) preserves at least one recognized to have a gnostic orientation (XIII, 139-213, 442-563).

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