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A cure for rabies or a remedy for concupiscence? A baptism of the Elchasaites

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<abs>The author of the *Elenchos* attributes to Alcibiades of Apamea, an Elchasaite who had arrived in Rome around 220 C.E. the preaching of a baptism for the remission of sin, and of ablutions for those that had been bitten by a rabid dog, the sick with consumption and the possessed by demons. Erik Peterson has interpreted the rabid dog and the diseases as allegories of concupiscence, coming to the conclusion that the Elchasaite immersion would not have been an antidote against rabies, consumption or demonic possession but rather a remedy against concupiscence and against the proliferation of sexual passion. In my opinion, instead, such allegoric explanation is to be rejected. The symptoms of rabies—a disease which causes the infected to suffer from hydrophobia—could have been considered by the baptist Elchasaites as proof of a demonic presence within the person. Likewise, the mention of consumption and demonic possession should be interpreted literally, according to a cultural context in which disease, demonic possession and sins were considered to be strictly linked together. The *Elenchos* would therefore contain an ancient testimony of a Christian exorcistic rite performed in the water.</abs>

According to what was reported by the Roman author of the *Elenchos* in the first decades of the third century, a certain Alcibiades from Apamea in Coelestria had arrived in Rome during the episcopacy of bishop Callistus (217–222 C.E.). The author of the writings¹, being a fierce opponent of bishop Callistus, establishes a polemical link between Alcibiades' arrival at Rome and the presence of that bishop, whose description is made in a rather gloomy fashion. According to the author of the *Elenchos*, Callistus' bishopric would have constituted the fertile ground that had allowed for the propagation of Alcibiades' impious doctrine. Alcibiades—whom we know exclusively from this source²—had arrived in Rome bringing along a “book of revelations” that he associated with a “righteous man” by the name of Elchasai (whose historicity has been doubted by some scholars³). The book in question would have been given to humankind by the Son of God and the Holy Ghost. To the miraculous gift of the book would have been also added the announcement of a new remission of sins, proclaimed during the Roman–Parthian war, towards the end of Trajan's rule (circa 116). According to the narrator of the *Elenchos*, Alcibiades worked in Rome, preaching the practice of a second baptism, which was administered after the reading of the book of revelations. The character of Alcibiades is therefore linked to the religious movement of the Elchasaites, a movement that drew its doctrine from the so-called book of revelations. References to this movement—not always consistent—have also been found in Origen's writings, as well as in

¹ In this article, I only intend to give an account of the research—mostly Italian—about the identity of the author of the *Elenchos*. Currently, rather than attributing the work to the complex historical and literary personality of Hippolytus of Rome, as it was reconstructed after the studies conducted by Ignaz von Döllinger and Adolf von Harnack, it is preferable to distinguish the Roman author of the *Elenchos*, who fiercely opposed Callistus and Zephyrinus during the first decades of the second century, from Hippolytus, the writer known by Eusebius and Jerome, author of *Contra Noetum* and other exegetic writings. For an updated view of the *status quaestionis*, see Manlio Simonetti, *Ippolito. Contro Noeto*, Biblioteca patristica 35 (Bologna: EDB, 2000), 70–139; Emanuela Prinzivalli, “Ippolito,” in *Enciclopedia dei papi*, 3 vols. (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2000), 1:246–58.

² *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 9.13–17 (GCS 26:251–5).

³ For Gerard Luttikhuis, for example, ⲉⲓⲛⲉⲛⲉ is simply the transliteration of the Aramaic expression ⲉⲓⲛⲉⲛⲉ , which meaning “hidden power.” Then, it would not be the name of a person but a title given to the angel that had revealed the book. “The book of the hidden power” would have become in the Greek translation the “book of Elchasai,” leading the readers to develop the idea that Elchasai and the angel were two different individuals. Cfr. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 19.2.2 (GCS 25:219).

those of Eusebius, Epiphanius, and the Manichean tradition⁴. The movement features a typical baptist character⁵, a singular Christology, a faithfulness regarding the Jewish usages and a rejection of some parts of the Scriptures, especially Paul's letters⁶.

As for the book of revelations, which has not reached us, it is extremely difficult to determine its real contents with any degree of certainty. Some quotations or hints can be extracted from the heresiologists' records, but they can neither be verified nor accurately defined, and it is rather difficult to set them into their correct context. The author of the *Elenchos* in particular could only have been acquainted with some topics of the book through the mediation of Alcibiades' preaching: as a matter of fact, when he quotes verbatim the teachings about baptism, astrology and Jewish observances, he attributes the quoted words to Alcibiades.

Gerard Luttikhuisen's hypothesis is worthy of attention: he locates the writings within the context of the Jewish–Mesopotamian milieu that had been subjected to harsh persecution by the Romans during the Roman–Parthian war. The purpose of the book, originally written in Aramaic⁷, would have been the consolation of the Jews that had survived the Roman slaughter, thanks to the preaching of an imminent eschatological event. The book, according to Luttikhuisen, narrated the apparition of two angelic figures of massive proportions, who announced the coming of a great eschatological battle and of the Day of Judgment, and contained instructions that aimed at securing eternal peace for humankind, by teaching men a solemn statement to be uttered in the presence of seven witnesses⁸.

⁴ About Elchasai and the movement named after him, see: Wilhelm Brandt, *Elchasai, ein Religionsstifter und sein Werk* (Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1912); Georg Strecker, "Elkesai," *RAC* 4 (1959): 1171–86; Albertus F. J. Klijn and Gerrit J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish–Christian Sects*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 36 (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 54–67 (collection and translation of the texts); Luigi Cirillo, *Elchasai e gli elchasaïti* (Cosenza: Marra, 1984); Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, *The Revelation of Elchasai*, Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum 8 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985). However, the latter does not reckon that the Baptist Babylonian group described in the Manichaean sources could be identified with the Elchasaite group described in others (p. 227).

⁵ About Baptist movements, Joseph Thomas, *Le mouvement baptiste en Palestine et Syrie* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1935); Luigi Cirillo, "Fenomeni battisti," *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 23 (1993): 269–303, especially 289–96.

⁶ This is not the proper occasion to dwell on the complex issue of the relationship between Elchasaite theology and the modern historiographical category of "Jewish Christianity," defined many times over and as many times discussed. Currently, the most widespread definition of Jewish Christianity—along the line of thought of Fenton J. A. Hort, Gustav Hönnicke and Marcel Simon—is based on the criterion of the observance of the Jewish Law, in a context where the mediation of Judaism is thought to have been considered necessary to achieve salvation, regardless of ethnic origins. On the other hand, Simon C. Mimouni states that the Judaeo–Christians are necessarily Jewish due to their origin, even having acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah (about the Elchasaïtes: *Le judéo christianisme ancien* [Paris: Cerf, 1998], 287–316; Id., *Les chrétiens d'origine juive dans l'antiquité* [Paris: Albin Michel, 2004], 195–230). The portrayal of the Elchasaïtes proposed by Jean Daniélou depends on his own conception of "heterodox Jewish–Christianity" and on his wide definition of Jewish Christianity, understood as a form of Christian thought contained within conceptual frames drawn from Judaism (*Théologie du Judéo–christianisme*, [Tournai: Desclée, 1958], 76–80). Following Daniélou's interpretation, the archaeological school of Jerusalem, headed by Emanuele Testa and Bellarmino Bagatti, claims to have found incontrovertible evidence of the persistence of a Judaeo–Christian church in Palestine up to the fifth century (cfr. Bagatti's summary *Alle origini della Chiesa*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. [Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1985]); in spite of the criticism (for instance the extreme opposition of Joan E. Taylor, *Christians and the Holy Places. The Myth of Jewish–Christian Origins* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993]), this approach still has its followers (recently, Igino Grego, *La Terra Santa e le origini cristiane* [Napoli: Pontificia Facoltà Teologica, 2005]). For an updating on this issue, see Jean D. Kaestli, "Où en est le débat sur le judéo–christianisme?," in *Le Déchirement. Juifs et chrétiens au premier siècle*, *Le monde de la Bible* 32, ed. Daniel Marguerat (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1996), 243–72; James C. Paget, "Jewish Christianity," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. William Horbury, William D. Davies and John Sturdy, 4 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1988–2006), 3.733–42; *Le judéo–christianisme dans tous ses états*, ed. Simon C. Mimouni and F. Stanley Jones (Paris: Cerf, 2001); Annette Yoshiko Reed, "«Jewish Christianity» after the «Parting of the Ways»," in *The Ways that Never Parted*, Texts and studies in ancient Judaism 95, ed. with Adam H. Becker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 189–231.

⁷ Among other things, the original Aramaic version explains the formation of the name Elchasai, the fact that the Holy Ghost is referred to as female in gender instead of neuter and the esoteric formula quoted by Epiphanius (*Panarion*, 19.4.3–6 [GCS 25:221–2]).

⁸ Cfr. Luttikhuisen, *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 207–9, where the hypothetical contents of the book are described; summarily, Id., "The Book of Elchasai: a Jewish Apocalypse," *Aula Orientalis* 5 (1987): 101–6.

Luigi Cirillo has argued against this attribution of the book to a Jewish environment, stating instead that the book was Christian Apocalypse⁹, while F. Stanley Jones' view is that the book of revelations ought to be seen as an ancient Church Order, dating back to the first decades of the second century¹⁰.

Whatever the origins or the nature of the book, all commentators agree that the *Elenchos* includes, to a certain extent, some quotations of this book within the part that deals with the Elchasaites. These quotations, however, are scattered amongst the violent confutations of the heresiologists. One of the parts referring to the Elchasaites, that I now set about to examine, contains the description of a baptismal ritual preached by Alcibiades, explicitly indicated as a treatment for a number of illnesses:

And they teach certain enchantments and formulae not only for those bitten by a dog, but also for the demon–possessed and for those seized with other diseases; and we shall not be silent regarding such things¹¹.

The promise is kept a few lines below:

But since we have said that they use enchantments upon those bitten by a dog and others, we shall prove this. He thus speaks: “If a rabid and furious dog, in which there is a spirit of destruction, bites, injures or touches a man, a woman, a young man or a young woman, let such one run with all (his/her) garments and, after going down to a river or fountain, wherever there might be a deep place, let (him/her) be baptized¹² with all his/her garments, and pray to the Great and Most High God in faith of heart, and then let (him/her) call to witness the seven witnesses mentioned in this book: “Behold, I call to witness the heaven, the water, the holy spirits, the angels of prayer, the oil, the salt and the earth. These seven witnesses I call to witness that I shall no longer sin, nor commit adultery, nor steal, nor be unfair, nor covet, nor hate, nor betray, nor shall I take pleasure in any wickedness.” Having uttered this, then, let such one be baptized with all his/her garments in the name of the Great and Most High God.” [Alcibiades] says many other stupid things, also teaching to utter the same things upon those afflicted with consumption, and to be baptized in cold water forty times during seven days; likewise upon the demon–possessed¹³.

What is the origin of this account? According to Gerard Luttikhuisen it was delivered by Alcibiades during his preaching in Rome, and known to the author of the *Elenchos* from a written source; only the central formula that contains the reference to the seven witnesses would have been taken right

⁹ “Elchasai e la sua «Rivelazione»,” *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 24/2 (1988): 311–30, especially 322–23, where G. P. Luttikhuisen’s reconstruction is harshly criticised. Cirillo’s opinion about the nature of the book is further explained in “L’apocalypse d’Elchasai: son rôle et son importance pour l’histoire du judaïsme,” *Apocrypha* 1 (1990): 167–79.

¹⁰ “The Genre of the Book of Elchasai: A Primitive Church Order, not an Apocalypse,” in *Historische Wahrheit und theologische Wissenschaft*, ed. Alf Özen (Geburtstag: Peter Lang, 1996), 87–104. This reading has been rejected by Luttikhuisen, who basically has reaffirmed his former position: “The Book of Elchasai: A Jewish Apocalyptic Writing, not a Christian Church Order,” in *Society of Biblical Literature. 1999 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 405–425.

¹¹ *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, 9.14.3 (GCS 26:253). I am using Paul Wendland’s edition, because Miroslav Marcovich’s edition is useless due to his *libido emendandi*: cfr. Manlio Simonetti’s review in *Aug* 27 (1987): 631–34.

¹² The passive $\text{ἐτεχνω}, \text{ωυ}\{\text{}$ can now and hereafter be translated also as “baptise himself/herself”; cfr. Kurt Rudolph, *Antike Baptisten: zu den Überlieferungen über frühjüdische und -christliche Taufsekten* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1981), 32, note 45. The fact that baptism can be administered as well as received, is deduced from the use of ἐτεχνω-ισι referring to the ministers (9.16.2) and of ἐτεχνωυσι referring to the faithful (9.15.3).

¹³ *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, 9.15.4–16.1 (GCS 26:253-4)2

from the book of revelations¹⁴. Alcibiades, therefore, would have taken from the book the invocation of the seven witnesses, depriving it of its original eschatological value. Luttikhuizen reckons that Alcibiades' preaching and baptist practice were innovative in several aspects and had been influenced, to a large extent, by Callistus. Consequently, the excerpt from the book of revelations had acquired a character distinctly independent from its remote source¹⁵. Luigi Cirillo, who gives a strong new dimension to Callistus' influence over Alcibiades, thinks that this distinction between hypothetical writings that could be traced back to Alcibiades and the book of revelations is not acceptable¹⁶, and so thinks F. Stanley Jones¹⁷: in their opinion, we are dealing with quotations drawn entirely from the book of revelations.

In the fourth century, Epiphanius of Salamis also deals with the thought of the followers of Elchasai (whom he calls Elxai). He is most probably not acquainted with the description made in the *Elenchos*—hence the inconsistencies between the latter and his own—but he is in possession of their book of revelations, or at least an intermediate source that reports some excerpts¹⁸. Epiphanius seems to know a baptismal practice that bears some similarities with the one we are studying, but he mentions it in the context of his treatment of the Ebionite heresy. In fact, he reckons that Ebion's followers, at a certain moment, had come across the teachings of Elchasai and had changed their beliefs as a result. Therefore, the Ebionites would have taken the practice of this immersion from the Elchasaites:

Should one of them fall ill or be bitten by a snake, such one goes down into the waters and invokes those names in Elxai, of the heaven and of the earth, of the salt and of the water, of the winds and of the angels of righteousness, <as> they say, of the bread and of the oil, and begins to say: “Help me, and drive the pain away from me!” I have already indicated before that Ebion did not know such things, but later on, his followers, having joined Elxai, from Ebion have kept circumcision, the Shabbat and the uses, from Elxai they have kept imagination¹⁹.

Is it the very same ritual mentioned by the author of the *Elenchos*, only described differently, or an entirely different ritual? Epiphanius agrees with the author of the *Elenchos* on the belief that the baptismal treatment is addressed to the diseased and to those who have been bitten, but while the latter refers to the bite of a rabid dog, the former refers to the bite of a snake. The seven witnesses are mentioned in both cases, but in Epiphanius, the formulation is different: there is no mention of the solemn promise to abandon sin, and there is an invocation against evil. Since we do not know the sources used by Epiphanius, it is preferable, for the time being, to consider both accounts separately, and then verify whether it is possible to combine them.

It is interesting to notice that the author of the *Elenchos* talks about “uttering” (ἐπιφασίαν) something, and about a “formula” (ἐπιφασίαν) and an “enchantment” (ἐπιφασίαν). However, the invocation of the seven witnesses does not fit this description properly, which is typical of a magic formula. Some commentators have insisted on this discrepancy, sometimes even putting forth hypothetical problems regarding the transmission of the text. To me, such discrepancy appears to be

¹⁴ Luttikhuizen, *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 69–70 and 71–72. The author of the *Elenchos* would have referred to this written source about Alcibiades with the words $\alpha\lambda\epsilon\chi\alpha\iota\sigma\tau\alpha\iota$ (9.13.6 and 14.3 [GCS 26:252 and 253]).

¹⁵ In particular, Luttikhuizen believes that the initiator of the practice of the second baptism was Callistus, who would have led Alcibiades into the temptation of following this path. Against this reading see Cirillo, “Elchasai e la sua «Rivelazione»,” 311–30.

¹⁶ Cirillo had already acknowledged a possible identity between the writings of Alcibiades and the book of Elchasai (see *Elchasai e gli elchasaiti*, 20). See now “Elchasai e la sua «Rivelazione»,” 320–22.

¹⁷ Stanley Jones is the author of a harsh review of the whole book of Luttikhuizen, published in *JbAC* 30 (1987): 200–9.

¹⁸ This is Luttikhuizen's opinion, *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 127. Instead, Cirillo simply believes that Epiphanius had “a copy of the Apocalypse of Elxai” (“Elchasai e la sua «Rivelazione»,” 326).

¹⁹ *Panarion*, 30.17.4–5 (GCS 25:356)2

more seeming than real: in fact, it is easily solved if Alcibiades' words are accurately separated from those belonging to the author of the *Elenchos* that act as a frame. It is not Alcibiades who qualifies his own invocations as magic formulae and enchantments, but his commentator. The attempt to circumscribe the cultic practices of others within the vilified sphere of magic, thus undermining their value, is a very common practice within the context of strident religious competition. Most certainly, it is impossible to expect an unbiased and dispassionate analysis of the Elchasaite doctrine from the author of the *Elenchos*, while it is very likely to come across promptly-made accusations of witchcraft. Therefore, Alcibiades' words are not to be read through the lens of the malevolent judgments of his detractor, who willingly associates the Elchasaite with the hated Bishop Callistus, of whom he would share the wickedness²⁰. It would be harder to try to justify the contents that seem to drift away from the premise: the bath that should heal disease, deliver from demonic possession or work as an antidote for rabies, is accompanied by a formula that clearly constitutes an oath not to sin anymore. But, how could an oath of this kind be reconciled with healing or deliverance? Gerard Luttikhuisen solves the problem by suggesting that the part concerning rabies could have originally ended with the call to pray "to the Great and Most High God in faith of heart." The following invocation of the seven witnesses would have been wrongly attached to the previous section²¹. In any case, reading the passage as it has come down to us, one wonders which would be its overall meaning: remission of sins or healing from diseases and obsessions?

Back in 1912, Wilhelm Brandt suggested a strictly literal reading of the text: the diseases would have been considered a consequence of sin, and the remission of sin would therefore have also implied the healing of the body. Besides, the ones to blame for the disease would be the evil spirits that the baths should have driven off along with the disease²².

The symbolic interpretation subsequently proposed by Erik Peterson has been widely accepted: according to this great scholar, in this case we are not before "an antidote for rabies, but a purification from sin, symbolized by the image of the bite produced by a rabid dog or a snake."²³ The proof of this could be derived from a comparison between the passages of the *Elenchos* and some passages of the pseudo-Clementine literature, which precisely in those days was the object of considerable attention by the scholars that studied the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in ancient times²⁴. To begin with, Peterson interprets the reference to the bite of the rabid dog in an allegorical sense, defining it as a metaphor for the sin of concupiscence. To prove this he draws on a passage of the *Pseudoclementine Homilies*:

As the rabid dog destroys the things he touches, transmitting an invisible rage, so also the hidden evil of adultery, even if unknown, causes the cutting off (ζοοστῦ) of progeny²⁵.

²⁰ *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, 9.13.1 (GCS 26:251): "After his teachings (Callistus') were spread all over the world, a cunning man, full of shamelessness, called Alcibiades who dwelled in Apamea in Syria, examining this doctrine and considering himself more skilled and more ingenious than Callistus in such tricks, came to Rome bringing along a book."

²¹ Luttikhuisen, *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 75–77.

²² Brandt, *Elchasai*, 28–30.

²³ Erik Peterson, "Die Behandlung der Tollwut bei den Elchasaiten nach Hippolyt," in *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis. Studien und Untersuchungen* (Rom: Herder, 1959), 221-35 (quotation from 227).

²⁴ I especially recall Hans J. Schoeps' work, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1949) and Georg Strecker's, *Das Judenchristentum in den Pseudoklementinen*, TU 70, (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958). In any case, Peterson does not seem to agree with Schoeps' interpretation, which states that the *Pseudoclementines* would constitute the main source to reconstruct Judaeo-Christian thought—which he identified mainly with that of the Ebionites. In Peterson's belief, Judaeo-Christianity was a much more complex set of ideologies, tightly linked to Gnosticism: cfr. Franco Bolgiani, "Erik Peterson e il giudeocristianesimo," in *Verus Israel. Nuove prospettive sul giudeocristianesimo*, ed. Giovanni Filoramo and Claudio Gianotto (Brescia: Paideia, 2001), 339–74.

²⁵ *Homiliae*, 4.21.4 (GCS 42:91)2

This passage is preceded by some considerations about the adulterous woman: when in the absence of her husband she conceives a child with another man, she often turns to abortion to prevent her sin from being unmasked, whereas the adulterous woman who lives with her husband, generally accepts the upbringing of the lover's offspring at home, inducing the husband to believe that she has given him a legitimate heir to whom all his riches are to be left. Peterson resumes the reference to abortion and interprets the term ζοοστῦ as its synonym: adultery turns the woman into a child murderer. There would be two motives for linking this text with the baptism of the Elchasaites: the reference that both of them make to the rabid dog and the issue of the "spirit of destruction" (τρι²qe h̄r̄ejusvª n) that dwells in it. Peterson in fact favors a secondary meaning for the word h̄r̄ejusv, , which in the medical jargon might also mean "abortion," and interprets "the spirit of destruction" as "the spirit that provokes abortion." Thus, it would be easier to understand why Alcibiades talks about "a man, a woman, a young man and a young woman." If it was merely a dog's bite, such specifications would be inexplicable; but if the bite was interpreted as a symbol of sexual passion, then we would be able to understand why he mentions men and women, young and mature, but not children, whose nature is innocent and free from concupiscence.

I have a few objections to this reading. To begin with, I don't believe that ζοοστῦ stands for abortion in the *Homilies*. The context, instead, lends itself to a generic, less contrived reading: both abortion and the choice to bring up with the husband the child conceived with the lover cause a "cut," an "interruption" of the progeny. For a father to bring up someone else's child believing to be bringing up his own, constitutes an interruption of his own biological descent which is—albeit unintentionally—equal in nature to a feticide. "How many other evils naturally spring from adultery! And the secret evils we do not know!" wrote the compiler of the *Homilies*. The link between the two texts seems to be rather conjectural: rabies is used as an example of the danger of transmitting a hidden evil, as hidden as the adultery unknown by the adulteress' husband: it is not an identification between rabies and adultery but a comparison between the two evils. Moreover, adultery is a sin willingly and consciously committed, while the dog's bite might occur without the will, and therefore the fault, of the damaged person.

Peterson thought that the *Pseudoclementine Homilies* could also explain the mention of the "enchantment" (ζτεσμηῦ) made by the author of the *Elenchos*: the interpretation would be drawn from Epiphanius, in a passage in which he talks about a snake's bite. In the *Homilies*, the serpent lurks in the human heart and must be fought with enchantments.

Therefore you shall be able to persuade yourselves about the things that are beneficial, if, like charmers, you say to the horrible serpent that lurks in your heart: "The Lord God you shall fear, and Him alone you shall serve."²⁶

How then shall we charm that wicked serpent that lurks in your heart, and cunningly sows inside you suspicions hostile to God?²⁷

The enchantment, then, would be the action of the believer upon the serpent that represents evil. But even in this case I find the comparison to be less than convincing: it is not Alcibiades who talks about ζτεσμηῦ, but the author of the *Elenchos*. Moreover, it is only Epiphanius, in his turn, who introduces the issue of the serpent. I would argue that to come to a conclusion that is a compromise between elements taken from three different authors seems to be a risky business.

Peterson continues by trying to demonstrate how the rabies (p̄Éwwe) that he has identified with sexual passion is connected with the immersion in water; again the answer is to be found in the *Pseudoclementine Homilies*:

²⁶ *Homiliae*, 10.5.1 (GCS 42:143)2

²⁷ *Homiliae*, 11.11.4 (GCS 42:159); cfr. also 11.18.1 (GCS 42:163).

Therefore flee to the water, for this alone can quench the violence of fire. He who does not want to come to it still bears the spirit of rage, on account of which he does not wish to approach the living water for his own salvation²⁸.

Peterson therefore concludes that “the *pĕwwe* or the *oĕrin pywws² rxin* are, for the Elchasaites, sexual desire, and the immersion in water is not an antidote for rabies, but rather a remedy against concupiscence and against the proliferation of sexual passion”²⁹; a passion that is steadily fought against in the *Pseudoclementine Homilies*³⁰. The Elchasaite texts would then be an extension of the speculations of late Judaism about the *tsvriĕ*, which constitutes not only an action but also a reality present in human beings: a spirit of immodesty, the first amongst the seven spirits of deception and the cause of evil and impurity³¹. Nevertheless, in my opinion, neither the connection with the *tsvriĕ* nor the connection with the issue of abortion have been satisfactorily proved. It is precisely the passage quoted above which I think demonstrates the fallacy of all this interpretation, as we shall see below.

Peterson’s hypothesis has been quite fortunate, notwithstanding some interesting objections as the ones put forth by Georg Strecker. He observed that whenever Epiphanius mentions immersions in water, he does not seem to further an allegoric interpretation, inasmuch as he openly qualifies them as a remedy for whoever might “fall ill or be bitten by a snake.”³² Moreover, he wondered why should one hypothesize the usage of symbolic language by Alcibiades in order to indicate the sins of concupiscence, when the same sins are explicitly named in another passage of the very same text³³. For instance, a few lines above, the remission of sins of *qsmgiĕ* is overtly mentioned in Alcibiades’ own words:

If therefore, children, anyone has had intercourse with any sort of animal whatsoever, with a male, or a sister, or a daughter, or has committed adultery or fornication, and wishes to obtain remission of his sins, from the moment in which he has listened from this book let him be baptized a second time . . . Again I say, O adulterers, adulteresses, and false prophets, if you wish to convert so that your sins may be forgiven . . . be baptized a second time with your garments on³⁴.

If rabies was understood as a metaphor for concupiscence, a useless metaphoric duplicate would be created, as pointed out also by Gerard Luttikhuisen³⁵. In my opinion, the aim of Elchasaite baptisms is the remission of all sins, not just those that are sexual in nature. The formula uttered by the person who is baptized certainly includes a reference to adultery, but is more generically a solemn oath to “no longer sin, nor commit adultery, nor steal, nor be unfair, nor covet, nor hate, nor betray,

²⁸ *Homiliae*, 11.26.4 (GCS 42:167)2

²⁹ Peterson, *Die Behandlung der Tollwut*, 230.

³⁰ Cfr. *Homiliae*, 3.68.2 (GCS 42:81): “For, above every other sin, the wickedness of adultery is hated by God”; 13.19.3 (GCS 42:202): “By adultery alone is the breath of God polluted”; *Epistola Clementis ad Iacobum*, 7.5 (GCS 42:11): “Adultery is a very terrible thing.” Trans. Thomas Smith (*ANF* 8:250, 304 and 219).

³¹ Cfr. *Testamentum Ruben*, 4.6 (ed. M. De Jonge, *Testamenta XII patriarcharum*, 2nd. ed. [Leiden: Brill, 1970], 4): “The sin of immodesty is the grave of the soul, inasmuch as it drives us away from God and next to the idols”; 3.3 (p. 2): “The first is the spirit of immodesty, which dwells in nature and in the senses.” About this matter see Liliana Rosso, “Alcuni aspetti della concezione della porneia nel tardo giudaismo,” *Henoah* 1 (1979): 201–45.

³² Cirillo, *Elchasai e gli elchasaiti*, 72, reckons that in the re-reading of Epiphanius “the idea of physical evil prevails . . . maybe, as time went by, Elchasai’s words lost their original meaning and thus the snake left behind its allegorical meaning to become the real animal that attacks humanity.”

³³ G. Strecker, “Zum Problem des Judenchristentums,” in *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 10, ed. Walter Bauer, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964), 245–87.

³⁴ *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, 9.15.1–3 (GCS 26:253)2

³⁵ Luttikhuisen *The Revelation of Elchasai*, 76–77.

nor take pleasure in any wickedness.”³⁶ The same formula—in case of being also used in a therapeutic immersion—would keep the meaning of the ritual from being narrowed.

I am rather convinced that the dog’s bite (and probably the snake’s bite as well) has to be interpreted literally. The animal’s bite causes the transmission of a *spirit of destruction* (τρι²γε ηρε³ jusv^a n), that is, a devilish spirit.

Rabies was a well-known disease in ancient times³⁷; its first description dates back to Democritus (fifth century B.C.E.), but it has been also mentioned by Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Xenophon, Aristotle, Soranus of Ephesus, Plinius the Old, Virgil, Horace, Ovid and Lucianus³⁸ among others. The contagious nature of the disease was not entirely ignored, and some even came up with theories about a transmission carried out by a kind of germ, although this explanation was not the most popular one³⁹. In the first half of the first century CE, Cornelius Celsus, for instance, shows a clear recognition of the link between rabies and dog’s bites. The dog would then be the carrier of a poison (*virus*)⁴⁰. In the following century, Galen also recognized that rabies was transmitted by the saliva of the biting animal⁴¹. Celsus compares the poison of the rabid dog to that of the snake, and this particular characteristic makes the task of comparing the account of the author of the *Elenchos* and that of Epiphanius easier. Tuberculosis (phthisis or consumption) was another disease with which the ancients were well acquainted (Hippocrates, Galen, Aristotle, Herodotus, Aretaeus of Cappadocia)⁴², and its contagious and infectious aspect was generally observed and known, though not correctly understood⁴³.

Both rabies and tuberculosis are infectious diseases, and therefore due to the infection of the human body by microorganisms. But, for a long time, there was no awareness of the potential virulence of such microorganisms; as a matter of fact, the founder of the parasitical theory was the Italian bacteriologist Agostino Bassi (1773–1856) in the nineteenth century⁴⁴. Only then the discovery of

³⁶ It would be interesting to study the possible relations between these baptismal pledges and other late texts that conceive baptism as a pact (*sacramentum*): Pliny, Tertullian, and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Enrico Mazza has claimed to be able to demonstrate that the ancient baptismal liturgy knew some kind of oath regarding the responsibilities of Christian life: “L’uso di «sacramentum» nella lettera 10,96 di Plinio il Giovane. Un confronto con la liturgia battesimale,” *EL* 113 (1999): 466–80.

³⁷ There is a monographic work regarding this issue: Jean Théodoridès, *Histoire de la rage* (Paris: Masson, 1986).

³⁸ On the study of these sources and further information, cfr. also Lise Wilkinson, “The Development of the Virus Concept as Reflected in Corpora of Studies on Individual Pathogens. 4. Rabies. Two Millennia of Ideas and Conjecture on the Aetiology of a Virus Disease,” *Medical History* 21 (1977): 15–31; Id., “Understanding the Nature of Rabies: an Historical Perspective,” in *Rabies*, ed. James Campbell (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 1–24; James H. Steele–Peter J. Fernandez, “History of Rabies and Global Aspects,” in *The Natural History of Rabies*, ed. George M. Baer, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: CRC Press, 1991), 1–26.

³⁹ This interpretation, a result of Democritean atomism, was adopted by the so-called “methodic school,” but could not defeat the opposing Hippocratean theory. See Vivian Nutton’s observations in: “The Seeds of Disease: An Explanation of Contagion and Infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance,” *Medical History* 27 (1983): 1–34. According to Nutton, among all infectious diseases known to the ancients, rabies was the most readily recognized as being contagious.

⁴⁰ *De medicina*, 5.27.1-2 (ed. Walter Spencer, *LCL* 336:111-15).

⁴¹ *De locis affectis*, 6.5 (ed. Karl G. Kühn, *Claudii Galeni opera omnia*, 22 vols. [Leipzig: Knobloch, 1824], 8:423–24): “One can easily observe even in dogs the functional predisposition to a certain kind of disease. No other animal is susceptible to rabies, which attacks only dogs and destroys their humors so powerfully that even the rabid dog’s saliva causes rabies on contact with the human body. This condition (rabies) can be recognized when the initially–small quantity of poison in the dog’s saliva that infected the person has increased and achieved considerable strength within the human body, usually after six months. Sometimes this affection is unrecognizable at an earlier time. In a similar manner every principal organ of the body is gradually affected through sympathy by a noxious humor developing in the living organism; in due course the whole body will be changed.” Trans. Rudolph E. Siegel, *Galen on the Affected Parts* (London: Wiley, 1976).

⁴² Cfr. Arturo Castiglioni, “Storia della tubercolosi,” in *Trattato sulla tubercolosi*, ed. Luigi Devoto, 5 vols. (Milano: Vallardi, 1931), 1:3–74.

⁴³ Bruno Meinecke, “Consumption (Tuberculosis) in Classical Antiquity,” *Annals of Medical History* 9 (1927): 379–402. The article contains a useful collection of ancient sources.

⁴⁴ His studies were further developed by Louis Pasteur, Joseph Lister and Robert Koch.

the germs that carried the disease finally allowed for the elucidation of the real causes of the illness. The ancients' limited means had led to the development of various theoretical explanations for the onset of a disease. Basically, such explanations can be reduced to two models: either the disease was represented as an independent entity, endowed with an autonomous existence (ontological etiology) that seized the person from the outside (exogenous), or it was explained as the consequence of a decompensation within the human body (physiological etiology) caused by the breaking of harmony between the body and its surroundings, or between some components of the body itself (endogenous)⁴⁵. After the birth of Greek medicine, the second explanation (physiological) had prevailed⁴⁶; but the rival etiology, seasoned with persistent religious convictions, was still widespread within society⁴⁷. In any case, outside the schools of medicine, the interpretation of the pathological phenomena and the effort to fight them was often framed in a magical–religious context. Thus, the diseases were seen as a punishment, as the effect of God's wrath, or even personified as mysterious entities, invisible but perceptible in their sad results⁴⁸. Physicians were aware of this twofold interpretation. The Hippocratic refusal of divine intervention in the process of the disease, as well as the subsequent refusal of any magic therapy aimed at appeasing the anger of the gods are obvious; not even epilepsy, the sacred disease *par excellence*, was thought to be the result of the will of the gods. However, official medicine never succeeded in convincing the entire population; the higher classes, educated as they were, accepted the new physiological explanations for the diseases quite eagerly, but it was impossible to undermine the deeply rooted beliefs about the external origins of the diseases, or the “supernatural intervention” explanation. Lucian of Samosata—who lived some decades before Alcibiades—in his *Philopseudes*, mocked those who persisted in such conviction, a conviction that, nevertheless, proved to be impossible to uproot. To each of these different ways of representing disease corresponded a different conception of the needed therapy.

Rabies and tuberculosis, recognized as contagious diseases, were even more likely to be interpreted through exogenous and ontological explanations. The evident link between the onset of the disease and the contact with infected persons or animals could rule out the possibility of finding the cause within the person. The infected person or animals were the obvious vehicles of the infection, carriers of some kind of “poison.” I believe that the Elchasaites, who were aware of the contagious nature of rabies, could have developed a demonological conception of the disease where the transmission of the illness was considered the result of the invasion of the body by an evil spirit: in

⁴⁵ Martin Dale has dealt with the concept of disease with in relation to the concept of body in ancient societies: *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 139–62.

⁴⁶ The naturalistic interpretation of biological and physio–pathological phenomena began in the sixth century B.C.E., in the Italian schools, especially with the works of Alemaeon of Croton and Empledocles of Agrigentum. These are the origins of the biological law of isonomy, which establishes that the foundations of health are to be found in the harmony and proportion existing in the constituent parts of the body. The birth of the humoral theory took place at the school of Cos, of which Hippocrates (fifth century) is the most emblematic figure. According to this theory, the health condition is determined by the *crasis*, that is, the balance between four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. In Alexandria, Herophilus of Chalcedon and Erasistratus of Chios founded two schools, devoted mainly to the study of anatomy and physiology. The practice of dissecting corpses was common in both schools. As a reaction to those schools, Philinus of Cos and Serapion of Alexandria founded the empirical school. In the third century B.C.E. the spreading of Greek medicine reached Rome. By the first century C.E. three schools had developed: the Methodic, based on atomic, anti–Hippocratean principles; the Pneumatic–humoral and Hippocratean, and the Eclectic. The most remarkable treatises of Roman medicine are the works of Cornelius Celsus and Galen of Pergamum (first and second centuries C.E.). Find further information in: Plinio Pioreschi, *A History of Medicine*, 2nd ed., 7 vols. (Omaha: Horatius Press, 1995–2007), especially vols. 2 and 3 (I thank the author for the useful material he sent me regarding this issue); Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁴⁷ Currently, these two models of explanation of the disease still have their followers: cfr. François Laplantine, *Anthropologie de la maladie: étude ethnologique des systèmes de représentations étiologiques et thérapeutiques dans la société occidentale contemporaine* (Paris: Payot, 1992), 53–163.

⁴⁸ Since the origins of Greek literature, several testimonies have been put forward (cfr. for instance *Odyssea*, 10.64; Hesiod, *Opera et dies*, 90–105). See the discussion about this topic in Giuliana Lanata, *Medicina magica e religione popolare in Grecia fino all'età di Ippocrate* (Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1967).

fact, the *Elenchos* explicitly mentions a “rabid and furious dog, in which there is a spirit of destruction.”

Alcibiades prescribes a therapeutic bath, along with a solemn statement of refusal of sin, as soon as the first signs of the disease appear. Therefore, is there a link between the disease—understood as the devil’s influence on a person—and sin? The tight relationship between the demons and sin has a long tradition in ancient Christian thought; John’s Gospel, for example, portrays the betrayal of Judas not only as the fruit of a devilish temptation but also as the result of Satan’s presence in him⁴⁹. This interpretation has been subsequently strengthened, to the extent of believing that every severe transgression resulted in the devil’s entry into the human heart. This is evident in the *Epistle of Barnabas*⁵⁰: the link between idolatry, sin and Satan turns the heathen’s heart into a dwelling of demons⁵¹—a concept shared by Irenaeus of Lyon⁵². In the first half of the second century, the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* describes a world populated by good and evil spirits; the traditional teaching of the two ways is thus given a concrete form in the two orders of spirits that fight each other for the possession of the human heart⁵³. Satan, the tempter, tries to sneak into the hearts of men to possess them and lead them into sin⁵⁴, and his presence in the human body drives off the Spirit of God because it is impossible for both spirits to live together⁵⁵. This theology has its roots in the branch of Judaism that produced the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*⁵⁶, traces of which

⁴⁹ John 13.2: “The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, that he should betray Jesus”; 13.27: “After Judas took the piece of bread, Satan entered into him.”

⁵⁰ *Barnabae epistula*, 4.10 (ed. Francesco Scorza Barcellona, *Epistola di Barnaba*, Corona Patrum 1 [Torino, SEI, 1975], 86): “That the Black One may find no means of entrance, let us flee from every vanity, let us utterly hate the works of the way of wickedness”; 2.10: “We ought therefore, brothers, carefully to inquire concerning our salvation, lest the wicked one, having made his entrance by deceit, should huff us forth from our [true] life.” Trans. Alexander Robert (*ANF* 1:139).

⁵¹ *Barnabae epistula*, 16.7 (ed. Scorza Barcellona, 118): “Before we believed in God, the habitation of our heart was corrupt and weak, as being indeed like a temple made with hands. For it was full of idolatry, and was a habitation of demons, through our doing such things as were opposed to God” (*ANF* 1:147).

⁵² *Adversus haereses*, 3.8.2 (SC 211:92): “Back then we were the vessels and the house of the devil, when we were in a state of apostasy; for he put us to whatever use he pleased, and the unclean spirit dwelt within us.” Trans. Alexander Robert (*ANF* 1:421).

⁵³ *Mandata*, 6.2(36).1–5 (GCS 48:32): “There are two angels with a man, one of righteousness, and the other of iniquity . . . The angel of righteousness is gentle and modest, meek and peaceful. When, therefore, he ascends into your heart, forthwith he talks to you of righteousness, purity, chastity, contentment, and of every righteous deed and glorious virtue . . . Look now at the works of the angel of iniquity. First, he is wrathful, and bitter, and foolish, and his works are evil, and ruin the servants of God. When, then, he ascends into your heart, know him by his works . . . When anger comes upon you, or harshness, know that he is in you; and you will know this to be the case also, when you are attacked by a longing after many transactions, and the richest delicacies, and drunken revels, and divers luxuries, and things improper, and by a hankering after women, and by overreaching, and pride, and blustering, and by whatever is like to these. When these ascend into your heart, know that the angel of iniquity is in you.” Trans. Philip Schaff (*ANF* 2:24).

⁵⁴ *Mandata*, 12.5(48).4 (GCS 48:45–46): “The devil goes to all the servants of God to try them. Those who are full in the faith resist him strongly, and he withdraws from them, not finding any place to enter. He goes, then, to those partially empty, finds room to enter and so he produces in them whatever he wishes, and they become his servants” (*ANF* 2:29–30).

⁵⁵ *Mandata*, 5.2(34).5–7 (GCS 48:31): “When all these spirits dwell in one vessel in which the Holy Spirit also dwells, the vessel cannot contain them, but overflows. The tender Spirit, then, not being accustomed to dwell with the wicked spirit, nor with hardness, withdraws from such a man, and seeks to dwell with meekness and peacefulness. Then, when he withdraws from the man in whom he dwelt, the man is emptied of the righteous Spirit; and being henceforward filled with evil spirits, he is in a state of anarchy in every action, being dragged hither and thither by the evil spirits, and there is a complete darkness in his mind as to everything good” (*ANF* 2:23). Cfr. also *Mandata*, 5.1(33).2–4 (GCS 48:29).

⁵⁶ *Testamentum Dan*, 4.7 (ed. De Jonge, 49): “Wrath with lying is a twofold mischief; and they speak one with another that they may disturb the mind; and when the soul is continually, disturbed, the Lord departs from it, and Beliar rules over it” (*ANF* 8:26); *Testamentum Nephthalim*, 8.6 (p. 57): “Who does not that which is good . . . the devil make him his own as his peculiar vessel” (*ANF* 8:28); *Testamentum Benjamin*, 5.2 (p. 81): “If you do well, even the unclean spirits shall flee from you” (*ANF* 8:36).

can also be found in Qumran⁵⁷. This “ethical possession” has not always been portrayed with such harsh features, although there are several references to this realistic interpretation of sin as Satan’s dwelling inside a human being in sources that date from the first centuries of the Christian era. Clement of Alexandria put forth great effort to fight this interpretation, qualifying it as a Gnostic aberration, and making a figurative reading of the demonology of the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, in those passages that deal with the link between sin and the dwelling of the demons in a human being. The fact that Clement acknowledged this realistic reading—in spite of his belonging to a school inclined to allegory himself—is worthy of attention. Clement’s position, however, did not enjoy complete success: for instance, just a few years later, Origen shows dissent. In his opinion, the difference between a sinner, tempted by the devil, and a person who is *possessed* by the devil is not essential⁵⁸ and sinning persistently favors the dwelling of Satan within the human heart in an increasingly dominant fashion⁵⁹. The tight link that many had established between sin and demonic possession has turned out to be one of the main reasons why the practice of pre-baptismal exorcisms became so popular⁶⁰. The concept of a close relationship between the sin of men and the devil’s possession of their hearts, which could become absolute, fitted perfectly the interpretation of rabies and tuberculosis as the effects of the devil’s presence in the diseased.

Now, let us turn to the way in which people get infected with the virus of rabies: it nests in the infected animal’s saliva, and its transmission takes place primarily through biting. However, a bite is not always necessary for the infection to occur, since being licked by an infected dog on a patch of skin with the tiniest wound, or on a mucosa, would be enough. Even indirect contact with the dog’s saliva would do. Perhaps experience with such transmission stands behind Alcibiades’ instructions to perform the baptism not only upon the one bitten by a dog, but also upon whoever has been injured or touched by “a rabid and furious dog,” meaning literally “furious,” as canine rabies causes the dog to have violent fits and continuous attempts to bite every human being or animal that it comes across. The symptoms shown by a human being infected with canine rabies are equally interesting: the diseased becomes feverish, agitated and hyperactive, very easily irritated, suffers from hyperesthesia, swinging moods and occasional delusions. In advanced stages, the most hideous characteristics of the disease appear: hydrophobia and aerophobia. As soon as the sick person attempts to drink water, the throat closes up with a painful spasm: it is an involuntary contraction of the diaphragm and the respiratory muscles. Even at the sight of water or when hearing a noise that reminds one of running water, the painful sensation will emerge. People infected with rabies sometimes behave in the oddest and most unpredictable ways: they try to scratch or bite like a dog, they yell and often attempt suicide. They run away from home and wander like stray dogs. They feel that death hangs over them and that they might die at any

⁵⁷ *Community Rule (IQS)*, 4.23 (ed. C. Martone, *La Regola della Comunità: edizione critica* [Torino: Zamorani, 1995], 97): “Until then the spirits of Truth and Wickedness will fight within the heart of men.” Further references in José P. Martín, “Espíritu y dualismo de espíritus en el Pastor de Hermas y su relación con el judaísmo,” *VetC* 15 (1978): 295–345.

⁵⁸ Cfr. for example *De principiis*, 3.3.4 (SC 268:192): “The soul of man . . . it may admit different energies, that is operations, from a diversity of good and evil spirits. Now, of wicked spirits there is a twofold mode of operation: that is when they either take complete and entire possession of the mind . . . as, for instance, is the case with those commonly called possessed . . . or when by their wicked suggestions they deprave a sentient and intelligent soul with thoughts of various kinds, persuading it to evil.” Trans. Philip Schaff (*ANF* 4:336).

⁵⁹ *In librum Iudicum homiliae*, 3.4 (SC 389:108): “The devil would not prevail at all upon us, if we did not provide him with strength from our vices; he would be weak against us, if we did not strengthen him by sinning and if he, by means of our sins, did not find within us the space to fit in and dominate.”

⁶⁰ Cfr. Franz J. Dölger, *Der Exorzismus im altchristlichen Taufritual*, Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums 3 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1909); Henry A. Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 1985).

moment; that is why they cannot calm down and live in a continuous state of anguish until death arrives by cardiac arrest or paralysis of the breathing muscles⁶¹.

One cannot help noticing that the symptoms of rabies can be easily identified with the typical symptoms of demonic possession: restlessness, violence, yelling, feeling of suffocation and physical exhaustion. It is possible that the patient, once recovered from the most serious crisis (often as short as they are intense) cannot remember anything about them: this might lead people to come to the conclusion that the person has temporarily surrendered the control of mind and body to the spirit that possesses him or her. Moreover, I think that the fact that rabies causes repulsion towards water should not be disregarded. Within the Elchasaïtes' group, where baptism was of the utmost importance, the aversion to water could have easily been interpreted as proof of the presence of an evil spirit within the person. Such a spirit would have tried all means to avoid the bath of purification and remission of sins, by which it would have been forced to leave the body of the possessed person.

Therefore, the bite or the contact with the dog that causes the infection would have been interpreted as the transmission of an evil spirit from a living being into another. The fact that the depiction of demons as dogs or other animals is quite frequent could be added as further proof⁶². The passage from the *Pseudoclementine Homilies* quoted by Peterson demonstrates a perfect knowledge of the symptoms of rabies, when it says that a man can be afflicted with the "spirit of rage, on account of which he does not wish to approach the living water for his own salvation." The repulsion towards water, interpreted as a rejection of the salvation of the soul, is thought to be precisely the consequence of the influence of a "spirit of rage," which I think that can be identified with the "spirit of destruction" mentioned by Alcibiades⁶³. Hence the call to dip in water immediately after having been bitten: it is an attempt to hinder the progression of hydrophobia and therefore—according to Alcibiades' views—to prevent the evil spirit from taking hold of the person, thus avoiding an eventual contact with the baptismal water. On the other hand, some ancient physicians would prescribe baths in water as a way to cure rabies⁶⁴; in the fifth century, Caelius Aurelianus even advised that the hydrophobic should be put into sacks and lowered into water pits to force them to drink⁶⁵.

As it has been already said, the baptismal wash is prescribed in the *Elenchos*, not only for the rabid but also for the consumptive and the demon-possessed (ἡμεῖς ἰσχυροὶ ἰσχυροί). Peterson suggested: "It is also possible that consumption and obsession were nothing but the image of sin"⁶⁶; however, it is

⁶¹ Cfr. *Guida medica*, 2nd ed., 14 vols., (Milano: Fabbri, 1968), 1:480; *Harrison. Principi di medicina interna*, ed. Eugene Braunwald, 11th ed. (Milano: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 916–17; Thiravat Hemachudha and Charles E. Rupprecht, "Rabies," in *Principles of Neurologic Infectious Diseases*, ed. Karen L Roos (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 151–76.

⁶² The comparison with Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistula ad Ephesios*, 7.1 (SC 10:74), might be of use: "For some are in the habit of carrying about the Name in wicked guile, while yet they practise things unworthy of God, whom ye must flee as ye would wild beasts. For they are rabid dogs (οἱ ἐν ἰσχυρῶ ἰσχυροί) who bite secretly." Trans. Alexander Roberts (*ANF* 1:52). In the *Oracula chaldaica* (90-91 and 135-136, ed. Édouard Des Places, *Oracles chaldaïques* [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971], 88 and 89) the demons are called *dogs*; in the *Pistis sophia* (126, ed. Carl Schmidt, *Pistis sophia*, Nag Hammadi Studies 9 [Leiden: Brill, 1978], 317) one of the archons of the outer darkness has the features of a dog; in the *Testamentum Salomonis* (10.1–4, ed. Chester C. McCown, *The Testament of Solomon* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1922], 37-38), a demon appears as a dog with a thundering voice. Further documentation in Hans J. Loth, "Hund," *RAC* 16 (1994): 773–828, especially 822–23.

⁶³ I have always translated τριῖς as "spirit," but I wonder whether "breath" would not be a more accurate translation. As a matter of fact, the physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia, in the second century C.E. (*De causis et signis acutorum morborum*, 1.7.2; ed. Karl Hude, *Aretaeus*, 2nd ed., *Corpus medicorum Graecorum* 2 [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958], 8) says that rabies can be transmitted by inhaling from the mouth of a breathing dog (οὐρανὸν ἰσχυροῦ ἰσχυροῦ). However, the context of our sources seems to rule out this material interpretation of τριῖς.

⁶⁴ For example Celsus, *De medicina*, 5.27.2b (ed. Spencer, *LCL* 336:112).

⁶⁵ *Acutae passionum*, 3.16.133 (ed. Gerhard Bendz, *Caelii Aureliani Celerum passionum libri III*, *Corpus medicorum Latinorum* 6 [Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1990], 372).

⁶⁶ E. Peterson, *Die Behandlung der Tollwut*, 227.

difficult to reconcile his interpretation of the rabid dog's bite as symbol of sexual desire with the mention of consumption and demonic possession.

And they teach certain enchantments and formulae not only for those bitten by a dog, but also for the demon–possessed and for those seized with other diseases . . . also teaching to utter the same things upon those afflicted with consumption, and to be baptized in cold water forty times during seven days; likewise upon the demon–possessed⁶⁷.

What could be said about consumption? It is transmitted by air between individuals, by means of the tiny drops expelled when coughing, sneezing or simply talking. The symptoms of consumption can be fever, sweat, weight loss, cough, pain located between the shoulder–blades and behind the breastbone, and a feeling of weariness and irritability, along with face–pallor. In critical cases, the symptoms worsen and there is blood spitting, lack of appetite, shallow breathing, bluish complexion and mucosa⁶⁸. This disease could also be considered a consequence of the evil action of a spirit of destruction, due especially to widespread malaise, pallor, cyanotic complexion and the person's irritability. Why then—it could be asked—does the text seem to make a distinction between rabid and consumptive, on the one hand, and demon–possessed, on the other? Possibly because the difference between the three ailments was clear, and therefore their causes were considered to be different? It is important to bear in mind that the reference to consumption and to demonic possession comes from the author of the *Elenchos* and it is not found in the words of Alcibiades (whether they come from the book of revelations or not). I believe that it is essential not to underestimate this fact, in order to avoid the risk of coming up with a simplistic reconciliation of data collected from two different sources. The distinction between rabid and demon–possessed could be the work of the compiler, who intended that all those ill with rabies or consumption, as well as the demon–possessed were invited to join in the baptismal immersion. But if the mere quotation of Alcibiades' words refers exclusively to the baptism of people sick with rabies, there is no absolute certainty about the fact that the baptism of those sick with consumption and those possessed by demons was the same one, or that the same invocation was uttered in both cases.

Moreover, the mere quotation of the three different categories of ailment (rabies, tuberculosis and possession) does not necessarily imply that the Elcasaites meant to propose a different aetiological explanation for the phenomena. Furthermore, even if it was possible to demonstrate that all three designations go back to Alcibiades' work, I think that this would not necessarily mean that the explicit mention of the demon possessed could rule out a demonic explanation also for the rabid and the consumptive. It is possible that the term “demon possessed” referred only to the so–called *energoumenoi*, that is, those possessed in whom the presence of the devil and its activity are evident, showing the typical symptoms of possession (among which we can recall an abnormal motor restlessness, violence, lack of conscience, illness, manifestations of a supernatural nature). This does not rule out the fact that both rabies and consumption could be attributed to demonic intervention, manifested in a different fashion. In this case, the different designations that are traditionally used for each disease would only have the purpose of making a distinction between the symptoms shown by the diseased. The cause of the symptoms, however, could be conceptually reduced to one and only efficient cause: the devil. Last but not least, the indication to repeat baptism for forty times does not necessarily apply to those sick with rabies too. The number forty is a puzzling choice: given that it is not divisible by seven, are we to assume that the immersions amounted to forty a day? Possibly, this number is related to some biblical episodes of penitence,

⁶⁷ *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, 9.14.3–16.1 (GCS 26:253–54).

⁶⁸ *Guida medica*, 4:704–7; 736–38; 752–56; *Harrison. Principi di medicina interna*, 798–803; Juan C. García–Monco, “NS Tuberculosis and Mycobacteriosis,” in *Principles of Neurologic Infectious Diseases*, 195–214.

punishment or purification: the forty days of rain of the flood, the days that Moses spent on the sacred mountain, the years that Israel spent wandering in the wilderness, Jesus' forty days in the desert⁶⁹.

In conclusion: Alcibiades (and maybe the author of the book of revelations) prescribes a baptism for those who had been bitten by a rabid dog; the author of the *Elenchos*, on the other hand, reports that he used to prescribe a series of immersions in water also for those afflicted with consumption and those possessed by demons. It is possible that rabies was thought to be a manifestation of possession by an evil spirit that could be transmitted through the bite of an animal. A similar conclusion could be reached also in the case of consumption. We would then be dealing with an ancient record of a Christian ritual of exorcism, practiced in Rome during the first half of the third century, in which ritual ablutions were performed on account of the belief that illness and demonic possession were simply different aspects of the same reality⁷⁰.

It would also be possible to conjecture that this practice was in use elsewhere before, for example in the region of Caelesyria–Alcibiades' homeland. In that case it would be an ancient practice that could be traced back to the first half of the second century. But the available sources do not allow us to state this beyond doubt. In fact, the author of the *Elenchos* is a direct witness only of Alcibiades' practices. In the following century, Epiphanius mentions a ritual immersion that the Ebionites would have taken from the Elchasaites, prescribed for those that were ill or that had been bitten by a snake, but it does not mention explicitly either consumption or rabies or demonic possession. Is this the same ritual described by the *Elenchos*? There are some differences between the two descriptions. Most certainly, the disease transmitted by the serpent's bite, that can cause death, allows for a demonological interpretation as well, but since Epiphanius' description does not include elements that might lead to the establishment of a firm link between the concept of demonic possession and the disease caused by the bite, I think that it is wiser not to state this as a certainty. Notwithstanding the possible accuracy or inaccuracy of this demonological interpretation of rabies and consumption, it is my belief that none of these diseases is to be understood in an allegoric sense, as a simple symbol of sin or concupiscence.

I devoted myself to the analysis of this ritual while I was working on a comprehensive study of the history of Christian exorcism in the second and third centuries; this book will soon be published in Italian. The decision to develop some arguments present in this contribution is due to the encouragement and suggestions given to me by Professor Adele Monaci, of the University of Turin. I want to thank Hilaría María Olivera de Sánchez-Varela who helped me with the English translation, and Nicholas V. Russo for the revision of the manuscript.

⁶⁹ Gen 7.12; Exod 24.18; Num 14.34; Mark 1.3.

⁷⁰ The practice of repeating a number of purifying immersions even in the event of animal bites and sinful deeds is still common amongst the Mandeans; cfr. Edmondo Lupieri, *I Mande'i. Gli ultimi gnostici* (Brescia: Paideia, 1993), 31–39 (engl. transl. *The Mandaean. The Last Gnostics*, Italian Texts and Studies on Religion and Society [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 13–19).