

# Narcissistic Fraud in the Ancient World: Lucian's Account of Alexander of Abonuteichos and the Cult of Glycon

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A single, but rather detailed, account of a newly formed cult and its leader survives from the ancient world, written by a rhetorician named Lucian of Samosata (now Samsat, Turkey). He is born around the year 120 A.D., lives for periods of time in Athens and Egypt, and dies during or probably soon after 180 (see Costa 2005, vii; Edwards 1949; Jones 1986, 8, 17).<sup>1</sup> To a friend, he writes a scathing exposé of Alexander of Abonuteichos,<sup>2</sup> and this account surely ranks as among the earliest reports of sectarian malfeasance in Western civilization.

In and of itself, the account is of interest to persons who concern themselves with religious wrongdoing in the contemporary world, since Alexander's deceptions have broad parallels with those of some more recent sectarian founders. Of some importance, however, is our ability to apply contemporary psychiatric research to gain insight into the mind and motivations of this manipulative, deceitful leader. In essence, I suggest that a mental disorder quite recognizable among psychiatrists and clinicians likely is behind the

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<sup>1</sup> Lucian refers to 'the late emperor Marcus' (*Alex.* 48), and we know that Marcus Aurelius died in 180 (Sutherland 1949). I follow the standard method of citing Lucian's account of Alexander, referring to *Alexander or the False Prophet* with the abbreviation, *Alex.*, followed by a paragraph number. All quotes come from the translation by Desmond Costa (2005, 129–151).

<sup>2</sup> I also have seen this location spelled as Abonutichus, but I follow the spelling given by Jones (1986, 133ff). A request by Alexander may have been the reason why the city changes its name to Ionopolis (i.e., 'city of the Ionians,' who are Eastern Greeks who settle Asia Minor) some time after 169 (see *Alex.* 58), but now it goes by the name Ineboli. It is a Turkish port town on the Black Sea. A rather bleak description of the city around the time of Alexander and Lucian appears in Fox (1986, 241–242).

actions of this cult figure who lives some eighteen centuries ago. Since we have mounting evidence of the role that mental disorders play in sectarian formation in modern times (Kent 2006; Lys 2005; Raine 2005), we can begin to explore the possibility that these disorders have played generative roles in the creation of abusive religions for centuries if not millennia.

I contribute to this explorative possibility by first summarizing the account that Lucian provides of Alexander, followed by an interpretation of Alexander's behaviors and attitudes according to contemporary research on narcissistic personality disorder. More specifically, I argue that Lucian's account strongly suggests that Alexander is a particularly dangerous type of narcissist called a malignant narcissist, because of the way that he responds to persons who appear to threaten either his public image or his fraudulent operation. By making this argument, I place Alexander in the company of some modern sectarian leaders who share similar traits.

### *Lucian's Account*

Calling Alexander a great 'villain' and a 'quack' (the latter because of his medical claims [*Alex.* 1, see 5]),<sup>3</sup> Lucian writes a multi-page account of both his 'daring schemes and his chicaneries' (*Alex.* 1). Scholars generally agree that this account is based upon an actual figure, 'and its factual basis [is] firmly established' by various archeological finds (Branham 1989, 182; see Anderson 1976, 72; Jones 1986, 133–148). Even with these finds as support, however, the possibility always exists that Lucian spins some of his information through his favorite literary motifs (see Anderson 1976, 16–19; Jones 1986, 146).

In any case, Alexander is born sometime 'between about 105 and 115 in Abonuteichos, a small port-city on the coast of the Black Sea...' (Jones 1986, 134). In his prime, this cult leader:

was tall and good-looking, really god-like, with a fair complexion, a beard which was not very thick, hair partly natural and partly false, but so well matched that most people couldn't tell the difference. His eyes flashed like one possessed, while his voice was very clear and pleasant.... [I]n intelligence, sagacity, and shrewdness he was far ahead of everyone;

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<sup>3</sup> Readers who wish to check other translations of Lucian's account should realize that the 1905 version by Fowler and Fowler omits two crucial paragraphs (41 and 42), presumably because they wish to spare readers from the unsavory sexual content in them.

and as for an enquiring mind, a readiness to learn, memory, and a natural capacity for knowledge—every single one of these qualities he had in excess for every occasion. But he used them for the worst purposes, and, equipped with noble instruments, he lost no time in becoming the most accomplished of those who have been notorious for wickedness (*Alex.* 3–4).

His immodesty is sufficiently great that he ‘claimed to resemble Pythagoras’ (*Alex.* 4)—a comparison that Lucian scorns.<sup>4</sup>

While not considering Alexander to be anywhere near the man that Pythagoras was, Lucian nevertheless realizes that Alexander has skills—all of which he uses for evil purposes:

I ask you to imagine and carefully picture the most complex psychological temperament, consisting of lying, perjury, and malice, a temperament which is unscrupulous, daring, reckless, energetic in forwarding its own schemes, persuasive, plausible, making a pretense of virtue, and with an appearance totally opposite to its real purpose. Indeed, no one who met him for the first time failed to go away with the impression that he was the worthiest and most honest of men, and the most artless and unaffected as well. In addition to all this he had the character of a high achiever and of one who designed nothing petty, but always had his mind set on the highest things (*Alex.* 4).

As we shall see, all of the ‘highest things’ onto which he fixes his mind actually are (as Lucian portrays them) very evil, exploitative, and self-serving.

In his youth, Alexander is (according to Lucian) a male prostitute, who ‘sold his favors freely and went with anyone who would pay for his company’ (*Alex.* 5).<sup>5</sup> Among his lovers, Alexander has a man whom Lucian described as:

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<sup>4</sup> Pythagoras (ca. 580–500 B.C.) is a famous Greek philosopher and mathematician. He founds a religious society in Croton (Crotona or Crotona in southern Italy), and his followers devote themselves to arithmetic (Coxon 1949, 751).

<sup>5</sup> While I am unable to pin down the attitude of men in Asia Minor who had been prostitutes in their youth, perhaps an earlier Greek attitude is instructive. Indeed, introduction of Greek ideas about male prostitution into a discussion of Lucian’s world is appropriate because ‘the area which we now call Asia Minor and the Middle East had been, since the conquests of Alexander the Great and under his successors, a Greek-speaking society, at least in its upper classes, and dominated by Greek cultural ideals and traditions’ (Costa 2005, vii). One scholar who writes on attitudes in Athens indicates that ‘a citizen who

a quack, the type who offer magic spells and marvellous incantations, charms for love affairs, afflictions for your enemies, discoveries of buried treasure, and inheritances to estates. This man saw that he was a talented lad and very well suited to assist him in his dealings, and was just as enamoured of his own villainy as he himself was of the boy's beauty. So he trained him well, and made continual use of him as his assistant, servant, and attendant (*Alex.* 5).

After his teacher dies, Alexander joins forces with 'a much more disgusting character' than even his mentor had been (*Alex.* 6). Working with this accomplice, the two 'travelled around, practising witchcraft and quackery, and fleeing the thick-headed, as charlatans usually refer to the public' (*Alex.* 6). As Lucian observes:

they easily perceived that human life is at the mercy of the two great tyrannies of hope and fear, and that anyone who could exploit both of them would very quickly get rich. For they saw that both he who fears and he who hopes regard foreknowledge as extremely necessary as well as extremely desirable... (*Alex.* 8).

Applying this insight in their quest for wealth, one of their early victims is 'a rich Macedonian woman.' As Lucian rather delicately puts it, she is 'past her prime but still wanting to be attractive, and they furnished their needs at her expense...' (*Alex.* 6). Alexander and his accomplice travel with her from Bithynia to Macedonia, where they purchase a large but tame serpent that they will use in their subsequent frauds (*Alex.* 7).

With her money in hand and after some debate amongst themselves, the two plotters initiate a scheme to establish themselves as oracles who can see the future and heal. First, they secretly bury some tablets at Apollo's temple

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could be proven to have acted as a male whore in his youth—who could, that is, be proven to have accepted money for his sexual favors and even to have enjoyed being penetrated—was forever barred from public service and from speaking in the Assembly' (Hooper 1999, 9; see Bloch, 2001, 187). Surely, Lucian does not include this information as a compliment about the man or his character. If this prostitution allegation were to have been true, then one only can wonder if his early sexual activity has any influence on his adult sexual relations with teenage boys, most particularly his 'using them offensively in every way' (*Alex.* 41, 42; see Bloch 2001, 193).

in Chalcedon, and then arrange for their discovery (*Alex.* 10).<sup>6</sup> On them are statements that the god of healing (Asclepius) and his father Apollo (a Greek god of medicine, music, flocks, etc.) are about to move to the city of Abonuteichos (where Alexander had been born). Immediately thereafter, and because of the message on the tablets, citizens of that city begin building a temple for their soon-to-arrive gods.

While his accomplice remains in Chalcedon until his death, composing oracles (presumably about Asclepius and Apollo), Alexander heads to Abonuteichos. He enters the city, now claiming to be a descendant of the Macedonian king, Perseus (r. 179–168 B.C.), revered for his (unsuccessful) resistance to the Romans (*Alex.* 11; McDonald 1949).

Back amongst the public:

Alexander became the centre of attention and admiration, as he pretended to have periodical fits of madness together with foaming of the mouth. He easily contrived this by chewing the root of soapwort, the herb used by dyers; but the sight of the foam filled the people with superstitious awe. They had also long before procured and fitted out a snake's head made of linen; it had a slightly human look to it, and was painted to look completely lifelike. Its mouth opened and closed by means of horse hairs, and the tongue, black and forked like a snake's, would shoot out, also controlled by hairs (*Alex.* 12).

Remarkably, a statue depicting such a mask was found at a site on the Black Sea, which apparently confirms Lucian's description (Jones 1986, 137).<sup>7</sup>

With the mask in readiness, Alexander initiates his grand plot. Going to the temple that is under construction, he finds an area of standing water and puts in its mud a goose egg that secretly he has emptied of fluid and replaced with a small reptile. The next day he appears in the town as a mad visionary, speaking unintelligibly except for the names of Apollo and Asclepius. After

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<sup>6</sup> On 'tablets, or (later) books, written in heaven,' which 'were said to contain either the predestined fate of mankind, or the record of the earthly actions of men,' see MacDermot (1971, 146–147, 187).

<sup>7</sup> Because of the prominent place that serpents played in various religions in the ancient world around Asia Minor, a classical scholar concludes, 'when, therefore, Alexander [of Abonuteichos] produced his new god in serpent form..., he was following a time-honoured tradition' (Rose 1949). Specifically, the identification of Apollo and his son, Asclepius, as healing gods has an ancient history in Greece, as do serpents as their symbols. For an old but still interesting discussion of these points, see Jayne (1925, 240–303).

attracting considerable attention, he runs off to the temple and, with great show ‘discovers’ the egg that he has secretly buried. Claiming that he is holding Asclepius, he breaks open the egg to reveal the small reptile. The astonished crowd ‘immediately shouted aloud, welcomed the god, congratulated their city, and proceeded each one to indulge in a surfeit of prayers, begging him for treasures, wealth, health, and all the other blessings’ (*Alex.* 14).

Now Alexander returns to his home, waiting for the crowds of worshippers to come. ‘[H]e sat himself on a couch in a small chamber, dressed in truly godlike apparel...’ (*Alex.* 15). He also wraps around himself the harmless snake that he has purchased, but which he leads people to believe is the god who has hatched from the egg. He keeps its head inside his armpit, and holds the linen snake-head beside his own (giving the impression that it is the head of the serpent/god that is wrapped around his neck). ‘Paintings then followed, and images and statues, some of bronze and some of silver, and of course a name was given to the god’—Glycon (*Alex.* 18).

The snake appears to answer people’s questions, but actually an accomplice in an adjoining chamber is speaking through “cranes’ windpipes” that Alexander has fastened together (*Alex.* 26).<sup>8</sup> His performance quickly expands to supposedly channeling answers from the god, with people’s questions remaining in unopened, sealed packets, but ones that he secretly has opened, read, and resealed (*Alex.* 21). He shows no empathy for the ill or dying, seeing them merely as opportunities to exploit:

This was one of his bright ideas—retrospective oracles to correct those in which he had predicted falsely and missed the mark. Often he promised a full recovery to sick people before their death, and when they died he had another oracle ready in recantation: ‘No longer look for assistance in your bitter disease: Death stands before you and now there’s no way to escape’ (*Alex.* 28).

Of course, by the time that they die, they already have paid handsomely for the hope-filled initial oracles.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Apparently, other ‘magicians’ during this period use cranes’ windpipes for similar purposes (Jones 1986, 137).

<sup>9</sup> According to Lucian, another oracle of the period charges ‘two obols for each prediction’ while Alexander charges ‘a drachma and two obols’ (*Alex.* 19, 23). Calculating that there are six obols to a drachma (see Harmon [trans.] 1925, 243 n.3), Alexander is charging eight obols per oracle—four times higher than the other seer. Since a day-laborer receives about four obols a day (Harmon [trans.] 1925, 206–207 n.1), he is charging twice

Soon he is pulling in a substantial amount of money, but also having to pay a sizeable staff that has grown around him to support his endeavors (*Alex.* 23).<sup>10</sup> His envoys spread his fame throughout much of the Roman world, even attracting the attention of an important Roman official, Rutilianus, who soon becomes a devout supporter who marries Alexander's daughter (*Alex.* 30). He does so after Alexander convinces him that he has conceived her with the moon-god, Selene, which means that through marriage Rutilianus is 'imagining that he himself had joined the dwellers of heaven' (*Alex.* 35). As increasing numbers of prominent persons ask the snake-oracle questions that reveal compromising information about themselves, Alexander sets those questions aside and soon is pulling in additional revenue through blackmail (*Alex.* 32). Moreover:

Alexander set up a great many of his confederates as spies in Rome itself, who reported back to him everyone's opinions, and gave him forewarning of the questions and the particular wishes of the questioners, so that the messengers would find him ready with his answers even before they arrived (*Alex.* 37).

As this intelligence operation in Rome indicates, Alexander truly is running an international scam.

At some point, however, followers of a particular philosophical school, Epicureanism, 'gradually see through the trickery and contrivances' (*Alex.* 25).<sup>11</sup> In response, when Alexander directs, and stars in, elaborate, multi-day performances supposedly reenacting divine events (such as the births of

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the daily wage for his 'services.' Also keep in mind that Alexander 'collected up to seventy or eighty thousand [drachmas] a year, as people were so avid they handed in ten or fifteen questions each at a time' (*Alex.* 23).

<sup>10</sup> Jones (1986, 140) estimates that Alexander's annual income likely is 'ample to maintain a hundred or so persons in comfort.'

<sup>11</sup> As Pamela Gordon indicates, second century Epicureans 'did not need to quote any particular Epicurean text to protest against the revival [of oracles]; Epicurus' teachings about the nature of divinity and the Epicurean belief that all phenomena can be explained rationally were enough' (Gordon 1996, 115). In essence, the gods exist, but in their divine realm they are "sundered and separated from our world of care. Free from all grief, free from danger, lacking naught that we could give, it is neither won by our well-doing nor angered when we do ill" (Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* [II, 646 ff.], quoted in Farrington 1967, 117). Also indicative of Epicureans' attitude toward worship of gods in this era is the message chiseled in a huge stone text as a gift by Diogenes to the citizens of Oenoanda in southwestern Asia Minor. A recovered portion of it warns that citizens must "realize what disasters have befallen others through the ambiguity and intricacy of oracles' replies" (quoted in Fox 1986, 169).

Asclepius and Glycon), his followers ban Christians along with members of the critical philosophical school. The series of plays culminates in a ritual reenactment of Alexander's reputed impregnation of Selene (the moon-goddess) and the birth of their child, who grows up to be Rutilianus' wife. Playing himself, Alexander has 'a very attractive girl named Rutilia c[o]me down to him from the ceiling, like Selene from heaven.' Of course, the scene involves much hugging and kissing as if they are divine lovers. In fact, they are lovers in real life, even though she is married to a local Roman official (*Alex.* 39).

Immediately after the play is over, Alexander 'came back wearing his priestly robes and amid total silence, and then intoned in a loud voice, "Hail Glycon!", while his retinue...gave the response, "Hail Alexander!"' (*Alex.* 39). In the torch ceremony that followed, amidst the flickering lights 'his thigh was exposed deliberately and seen to be golden, probably because he was wearing gilded leather which reflected the light of the torches' (*Alex.* 40).

All the while, the critics refuse to be silent. In one instance, Alexander orders his followers to kill an Epicurean critic who tries to expose him in a public meeting. Only the intervention of an outside party saves the critic's life from an angry mob of devotees (*Alex.* 44–45). In another instance, Lucian himself meets with Alexander and insists upon calling the religious figure by name instead of the title, 'Prophet.' Moreover, when Alexander offers his hand for Lucian to kiss, Lucian bites it instead. Alexander's attendants are outraged and begin 'strangling me and beating me,' but Alexander gets them to desist and then dismisses them from the room. One-on-one, Alexander focuses his energies on trying to convert Lucian, his opponent. Rather soon, Lucian becomes worried because he is in the presence of Alexander alone, so he departs as quickly as he can, pretending that Alexander has won his friendship (*Alex.* 55).

Not long afterward, however, Lucian learns how vengeful Alexander is. Lucian has to complete a move across a body of water. Alexander has arranged a ship and crew for the journey, and he also sends Lucian many parting gifts. Lucian thinks that Alexander simply is being 'decent and kindly' toward him. Only when Lucian is in open water does he learn that Alexander has contracted with the crew to throw him overboard, which would have happened if not for the pleadings of the captain, who is proud of his blameless life and does not then want to blemish it with murder (*Alex.* 56–57).

Lucian reflects upon the impact of his brush with death:



After that I began to arm myself against him, and to use every effort in my desire to get my own back [i.e., revenge]. Even before his plot against me I loathed him and regarded him as a bitter enemy because of his foul character. So I set out to prosecute him, in which I was joined by many others...(*Alex.* 57).

Eventually Lucian curbs his efforts, however, after the governor says that, because of Alexander's connections with Rutilianus, 'he could not punish Alexander, however clearly his guilt was proved' (*Alex.* 57). Through his daughter's marriage to the important Roman official, and because of the interest that several prominent politicians pay to the Glycon cult, Alexander is simply too well-connected to be prosecuted.

All the while, Alexander's self-promotion continues. He even attempts to get the state to mint a coin with his image on it (*Alex.* 58).<sup>12</sup> At least Lucian lives to see his enemy die a painful and undignified death (which occurred no later than 175 but probably earlier [Jones 1986, 134 n. 6]), with his leg fatally putrefying and doctors having to remove his wig in order to attempt their unsuccessful treatment (*Alex.* 59). After his death, however, Alexander's accomplices fight over who will continue their late master's practices and possess the oracle (*Alex.* 60).

### *Alexander the Narcissist*

At the conclusion of his chapter on Lucian's description of Alexander, C.P. Jones seemingly throws up his hands and relates, 'The question whether Alexander was "really" fraudulent or sincere is unanswerable, and perhaps beside the point' (Jones 1986, 148).<sup>13</sup> Then again, perhaps it is not. The introduction of psychological and psychiatric research into the historical re-

<sup>12</sup> While we do not know if any such coin ever is minted, coins survive containing the head of Glycon. Most extraordinary is that a surviving inscription 'seems to be a dedication to the snake, its otherwise unknown mate, and Alexander himself' (Jones 1986, 138).

<sup>13</sup> A somewhat similar sentiment appears earlier in the article on Alexander in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*: 'to what extent, if any, he believed his own doctrine can hardly be determined in the absence of any description of him other than Lucian's, which represents him as a thorough impostor' (Ross 1949). In his now-classic study on conversion in the ancient world, A.D. Nock expresses similar uncertainty about Alexander's sincerity: 'If we cannot estimate the exact measure of honesty in the leaders of certain movements in our own times, how can we judge precisely how far Alexander of [Abonuteichos] was charlatan and how far by his own lights prophet?' (Nock 1933, 240; see Jones 1986, 148 n. 61).

cord allows us to suggest that he most likely believes his own embellishments and self-glorifications because he is afflicted with a particular form of narcissism. Research on narcissists in general and some specific sectarian narcissists in particular (Anderson 1999; Clark 1988) indicate that they most likely believe in their own grandiosity, so it is entirely probable that Alexander does, too. Bold (and admittedly unverifiable) as this claim may be, its logic will become clear as we examine Alexander through the lens of contemporary research on narcissistic personality disorder.

Three features sum up Alexander, as Lucian portrays him: ‘a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy...’ (American Psychiatric Association 2000), which also happen to be the features that characterize people with narcissistic personality disorder. Indeed, Alexander appears to be a textbook case of a narcissistic cult leader, meeting most of the criteria set out in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* and many of the criteria identified in the definitive analysis and synthesis of existing research findings about the disorder as presented by Elsa F. Ronningstam (2005). Ronningstam offers a categorization of pathological narcissistic traits that incorporates the items listed in the *DSM*, and this categorization provides a useful framework through which to evaluate Alexander.

#### *A. Self-Esteem (Dys)Regulation*

As Ronningstam observes, ‘defects in self esteem regulation, usually described in terms of inflated or vulnerable self-esteem, is one of the core disturbances in narcissistic disorder’ (2005, 76). Within this category fall four of the eight diagnostic criteria that the *DSM* offers. They include: ‘a grandiose sense of self-importance;’ a preoccupation ‘with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love;’ a belief that ‘he or she is “special” and unique...;’ and a requirement of ‘excessive admiration’ (American Psychiatric Association 2000). Ronningstam’s list of narcissistic dysregulation includes a few other traits, such as a narcissist exhibiting a ‘boastful and pretentious attitude;’ holding ‘grandiose fantasies;’ and feeling ‘strong reactions to criticism and defeat’ (Ronningstam 2005, 83). As I outline below, Alexander embodies most of these traits.

Alexander’s sense of self-importance seems boundless. He creates a god, Glycon, and establishes himself as its prophet. His personality seems to have become inseparable from his own prophetic role, since he designs a series of plays that culminate with his impregnation of a goddess. He then places himself before a worshipful audience whose members hail him as a sacred

figure exactly as he hails the god, after which he flashes his golden (that is, gold-covered) thigh in a manner to heighten the perception that he is no mere mortal. He sees himself the equal of the venerated Greek figure, Pythagoras, and in the blood-line with a cherished king. Neither delusion has basis in reality. Nor do his performances at prophecy. Despite his participation in elaborate ruses and obvious inaccuracies, he thinks so highly of himself that he sends emissaries throughout much of the Roman world.

Certainly his ‘grandiose sense of self-importance’ is fuelled by his reach into the realm of Roman officialdom, and among them he has ‘a great many influential friends’ (*Alex.* 31). But he has the hubris to send envoys carrying prophecies to cities across the region, promising their leaders and citizenry that he can protect them from ‘plagues and conflagrations and earthquakes’ (*Alex.* 36).<sup>14</sup> His grandiosity even goes so far as to give a prominent Roman consular, Marcus Sedatius Severianus, advice through the ‘speaking’ oracle that encourages him to invade Armenia, which he then does in 161 A.D., only to have his army massacred by the Parthians (*Alex.* 27; see Jones 1986, 141; Sutherland 1949, 125). Undeterred by his prophetic failure, Alexander subsequently sends the Roman emperor and commander, Marcus Aurelius, directions on performing a sacrifice before a major battle. He follows Alexander’s oracular directive, then loses (according to Lucian) ‘something like twenty thousand’ soldiers in battle (*Alex.* 48).<sup>15</sup> Unabashed by his apparently deadly prophetic disconfirmation, the waffling Alexander then adjusts his previous prophecy to mean that ‘the god had predicted victory, but without indicating whether it was the Romans or their enemies’ (*Alex.* 48).

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<sup>14</sup> Soldiers returning from the east in 165 and 166 A.D. bring back plague with them, and soon afterward the Empire is threatened by Marcomannic (i.e., German) invaders against whom Marcus Aurelius battles. The Marcomannic Wars take place between 166 and 172, and 177 to 180 A.D. (Schehl 1949, 538; although see Costa 2005, 262 n. 139 for a slightly different date [i.e., 168–174]). Alexander takes advantage of these social traumas to expand the reach of his prophecies (Jones 1986, 142).

<sup>15</sup> Marcus Aurelius (121–180 A.D.) is a Stoic philosopher and Roman Emperor (r. 161–180 A.D.). ‘The oracle advised that two lions should be thrown alive in the Danube, with a lot of spies and splendid offerings’ (*Alex.* 48). As far as I can tell, Lucian is the sole contemporary written source for the failed sacrifice (see Birley 1987, 250), so I was unable to verify his claim independently. On, however, ‘the column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, one of the scenes depicts two animals swimming across a river, near a boat. These have been thought to be the lions of the oracle...’ (Harmon [trans.] 1925, 236–237 n.1), although disagreement exists over this interpretation. While I possess no expertise in the subject of ancient warfare, the figure of twenty thousand dead seems unlikely.

Another indicator of Alexander's likely narcissism is his 'need for admiring attention' (Ronningstam 2005, 83). We get a glimpse of this need when Lucian meets him, at which time Alexander 'offered me his right hand to kiss, as he did to most people...' (*Alex.* 55). Even more telling are Alexander's 'strong reactions to criticism and defeat' (Ronningstam 2005, 83), which are important for my argument about Alexander's malignant form of narcissism and to which I return shortly.

### *B. Affect (Dys)Regulation*

Research on narcissists demonstrates that they 'are challenged both by the presence of strong affects [i.e., emotions], especially rage, shame, and envy, and by the low tolerance of the nature and intensity of such feelings' (Ronningstam 2005, 83; see American Psychological Association 2000). While Lucian's account gives no indication that Alexander feels any shame or envy, he does demonstrate 'intense aggressive reactions to threats to self-esteem' (Ronningstam 2005, 92). In essence, after being both assailed and insulted by Lucian's quite serious hand-bite upon their meeting, Alexander launches a plot to kill him. I will return to this plot in a moment.

### *C. Interpersonal Relationships*

Narcissism hinders and often prevents those who are afflicted with it from establishing lasting and meaningful social relationships. These people 'are usually identified by their specific interpersonal pattern with a more or less overtly arrogant and haughty attitude, and entitled and controlling behavior' (Ronningstam 2005, 99; see American Psychiatric Association 2000). They have a sense of entitlement, either an impaired ability to feel empathy or no ability to feel it at all. They also demonstrate 'interpersonal control and hostility' or are 'interpersonally exploitative' (Ronningstam 2005, 99–100; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Again, glimpses into Alexander's life indicate that he has dramatic issues regarding his interpersonal relationships.

One pronouncement from the oracle sums up Alexander's sense of entitlement. In a message for the crowds that are swarming to Glycon and its 'prophet', the snake-god reputedly tells them: "I care not so much for possessions, but I care for my prophet" (*Alex.* 24). To be clear on the point, Alexander uses the scam of the talking god-snake to instruct worshippers to give him gifts and money. This drive for gifts regardless of worshippers'

financial situation suggests lack of empathy, but his blatant exploitation of the sick confirms it (*Alex.* 28). So, too, does his exploitation of the rich Macedonian woman, whom he and his initial co-conspirator drain financially by playing to her vanity (*Alex.* 6). Not surprisingly, he thinks of the ordinary (and not so ordinary) people whom he bamboozles as ‘the thick-headed and simple minded’—a phrase that appears in one translation simply as the ‘fat-heads and simpletons’ (*Alex.* 9; see Fowler and Fowler [trans.] 1905).

The sixth characteristic of narcissistic personality disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* states that a person with it ‘is interpersonally exploitative’ (American Psychiatric Association 2000). From Lucian’s account, it is clear that Alexander bases his entire career upon exploiting people, through fake tablets, a fabricated god-birth, and elaborately deceptive oracular processes. For scholarly reasons, however, it is worth focusing for a moment on the act of burying tablets that contained a message about the gods, Apollo and Asclepius, moving to Abonuteichos (*Alex.* 10). C.P. Jones was rather easy on Alexander (and, by extension, Alexander’s accomplice) regarding this act, offering: ‘The device of buried tablets is a well-known one, though it is not necessary to suppose with Lucian that it was a cold-blooded forgery. It may rather have been self-delusion, or a fabrication designed to serve higher ends’ (Jones 1986, 136). He then cites another scholar who adduces ‘the parallel of Joseph Smith and the *Book of Mormon*’ (Jones 1986, 136 n. 15). It turns out, however, that Smith himself probably suffered from the same disorder as does Alexander—malignant narcissism.

#### *D. Malignant Narcissism*

The psychiatrist, Robert D. Anderson, who identifies this disorder in Smith, draws conclusions about Mormonism’s founder that bear strong resemblance to traits in the account about Alexander. Indicating that ‘lesser forms of malignant narcissism may be characterized by sexual promiscuity and/or financial exploitation of followers’ (Anderson 1999, 230), Anderson then focuses his comments directly on the American ‘prophet’ himself:

In the case of Joseph Smith, the theme of deceiving self and others is not a thread, but a steel cable. It began with money-digging and seer stone peeping...; after the *Book of Mormon* was published, it continued with his sexual conquests under the guise of religious practice (Anderson 1999, 230–231).

Money digging was a fraud in which a person claimed to use magic in order to uncover buried treasure (Anderson 1999, 21, see 62 n. 87), and seer stone peeping was a related fraud in which a person claimed to have special rocks through which one looked in order to find 'desired objects' (Anderson 1999, 21, see 79). He supposedly used a seer stone to find the gold plates on which were written the *Book of Mormon* (Anderson 1999, 70, 81). (Worth mentioning is that Alexander, like Smith, claims that he can help people find buried treasure [*Alex.* 24]). Consequently, the pattern of interpersonal exploitation exists with each of the two religious leaders, but the forms that the exploitation takes are culturally and historically specific.

On sexual matters, both religious founders seem to have used their status as religious figures to gain access to members of the opposite sex. Indeed, both seem to have practiced polygamy. Smith's practice was, of course, well known, having at least thirty-three wives and possibly as many as forty-one. Even when he was in his late thirties, one of his polygamous wives was fourteen years old, another was either fourteen or fifteen, and two were sixteen (Compton 1997, 4–8, 486–534). Neither the numbers of Alexander's partners nor their ages are known, since Lucian only says that the 'prophet' was 'ruining women promiscuously.... Many women even boasted that they had borne children by Alexander, and their husbands confirmed the truth of their claims' (*Alex.* 42).<sup>16</sup> Alexander also has a sexual habit, however, that Smith did not: pederasty. Once again, such a habit is in line with existing research on malignant narcissists.

Summarizing issues of sexuality among these types of narcissists, Ronningstam reports that:

manifestations of malignant narcissism can involve sexual perversions where aggression and interpersonal sadism infuse with sexual desire and excitement. Such perverse behaviors are also characterized by non-differentiation or mixture of sexual aims, zones, organs, and gender (Ronningstam 2005, 107).

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<sup>16</sup> Remarkably, an archeological finding seems to substantiate Lucian's account. The supporting item is 'an inscription from Caesarea Troketta in northwestern Lydia.... It records an oracle of Apollo of Claros and a statue of Apollo the Savior paid for by his priest, a Paphlagonian named Miletos son of Glycon. The conjunction of Glycon, Paphlagonia, and Apollo of Claros, whom Alexander assiduously cultivated, suggests that the man's alleged father was not a human one, but the snake-god of Abonuteichos' (Jones 1986, 143).

This summary of sexuality among many malignant narcissists provides a context for Lucian's description of Alexander's activities with boys:

Though he warned everyone to abstain from having sex with boys as being an unholy practice, this prince of virtue had an artful scheme for his own advantage. He used to order the cities of Pontus and Paphlagonia to send him choirboys for a three-year period, to serve him by singing hymns to the god. They had to examine, choose, and send the noblest born, the most youthful and the handsomest. He then kept them locked up and treated them like bought slaves, sleeping with them and using them offensively in every way. It was his habit never to welcome and embrace anyone over 18 with a kiss on the lips; he gave his hand to others to be kissed, and kissed only those in the bloom of youth, who were said to be 'within the kiss' (*Alex.* 41).

Thus, according to Lucian's account, Alexander establishes a regional homosexual child and teenage procurement ring around towns near the Black Sea, using religion as his guise.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between malignant narcissism and pedophilia demands further research, especially since it may be that some narcissists have sex with young people for a number of reasons. First, these youths are not likely

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<sup>17</sup> While pederasty does not have the wide acceptance in the Roman Empire that it does in ancient Greece, '[b]oys at Rome were still objects of sexual aggression' (Hooper 1999, 14). Indeed, '[a] real man (*vir*) in Rome was a full citizen who was free to penetrate anyone of lower social status than himself, whether a woman, a boy, or a slave or either sex' (Hooper 1999, 14–15). Still, pederasty is far from universally accepted, with the Romans passing a little-enforced law some time before 50 B.C. that 'outlawed...the sexual violation of freeborn boys' (Hooper 1999, 14). In the case of Alexander, Lucian certainly is scornful of his opponent's hypocrisy, but he also implies that the sex Alexander was having with boys was more appropriate for a man's relationship with slaves. As Bloch reported about the Greeks, 'Slave boys, of course, enjoyed no protection at all from their masters, who could use them or female slaves at will' (Bloch 2001, 186). We simply cannot know whether Alexander stops his sexual actions with the young men when they reach eighteen because he is an ephephophile, or because the males have reached an age where they were men and no longer social inferiors to him (see Bloch 2001, 185). For many Greek pederasts, for example, 'The boy himself was thought to be at the peak of his attractiveness between the ages of 12 and 16, though he might have been used by the man when he was even younger. The boy remained beautiful as long as his body seemed sexually immature. Once he passed through puberty and began to grow bodily hair, the man usually would replace him with a younger child' (Bloch 2001, 186).

to present personal challenges to the frail self-concepts that narcissists have, being younger, less experienced, and neither emotionally, physically, or (in the case of the ancient Greco-Romans) socially threatening. Second, the unbounded grandiosity of some narcissists may lead them to believe that anyone, if not everyone, would value and benefit from having sex with them. Third, the devious nature of narcissists to get what they want would manifest in them using or creating structures within their organizations to procure sexual partners.

Narcissism as a contributor to religiously based pedophilia has not been the subject of a major study, and it should. The condition has appeared as a significant factor in abuses that a number of priests have committed against children and teens (Sipe 1990, 135; 1995, 19; 2003, 166, 221, 254) and that one male Pentecostal minister (Mario Ivan ‘Tony’ Leyva) perpetrated against hundreds of young boys (Echols 1996, 268). Likewise, the Canadian leader (Ivon Shearing) of a numerological sect called the Kabalarians was convicted of twelve counts of sexually related crimes against females as young as twelve years old (*Gazette* 1997), and the psychologist who interviewed him for possible parole concluded that his ‘presentation [w]as remarkably selfish, egocentric, and narcissistic’ (National Parole Board 2003, 3; Court of Appeal for British Columbia 2000, 19). Alexander is by no means the clearest example on which to build theory about the relationship between religion, sexuality, and child sexual abuse, since fundamental differences on these topics exist between the Greco-Roman world and ours. His actions, however, suggest that (homosexual) pedophilia within cults possibly has a history of almost two millennia in the West (see also Doyle, Sipe, and Wall 2006).

While Alexander’s sexual behaviour toward boys is exploitative and probably violent, degrading, or both (‘sleeping with them and using them offensively in every way’ [*Alex.* 41]), the clearest indicators of his malignant narcissism are his violent reactions toward people and groups who oppose him. On various occasions, Alexander tries to kill people whom he sees as opponents, one of whom is Lucian himself. Previously I had postponed discussing ‘strong reactions to criticism and defeat’ and ‘intense aggressive reactions to threats to self esteem’ (Ronningstam 2005, 83, 92) as narcissistic traits that Alexander shares. Now I place them within the context of Alexander’s narcissistic rage.

‘Murder as an act of malignant narcissism’ (Ronningstam 2005, 107) is among the most serious manifestations of the disorder. Research indicates that some malignant narcissists ‘associated murderous feelings with the pain



of being chronically humiliated or feeling like a nobody, or with the experience of being rejected and abruptly losing status' (Ronningstam 2005, 107). For them, 'narcissistic killing [is] a righteous act of retaliation, a desperate effort to gain control, and to protect and raise self-esteem' (Ronningstam 2005, 107). Lucian provides three examples of Alexander attempting to seriously hurt or kill opponents, which include Alexander's failed plot to drown him.

When 'a number of sensible people' began seeing through Alexander's 'impotence with all its theatrical accessories' (*Alex.* 25), Alexander retaliates with a proclamation that the Roman province of 'Pontus was overrun with atheists and Christians, who presumed to spread the most scandalous reports concerning him.' If the citizens of Pontus 'value the God's favour,' then they will 'stone these men' (*Alex.* 25). The record does not say whether the citizens of Pontus act upon the proclamation, but in another instance a crowd begins to act on Alexander's order to stone a critic.

In this instance, an Epicurean attempts to expose Alexander at a 'great gathering' over which the 'prophet' presides. '[I]n a loud voice,' the Epicurean recounts an incident where Alexander had directed a father to take his slaves before the governor because the man's son had gone missing while returning from Alexandria. Alexander had told the man that the slaves had killed the boy. Subsequently, the governor had the slaves 'cast to the beasts,' only to have the boy return home, late but unharmed (having made an unexpected, but lengthy, unplanned journey). In essence, Alexander's oracular interpretation of events cost the slaves their lives, and it is completely, factually, wrong (*Alex.* 44).

Alexander responds as one might expect a malignant narcissist would, and even Lucian picks up on the reason why: 'Alexander was much annoyed by the exposure, and could not stomach so well deserved an affront' (*Alex.* 45). In what now we might call narcissistic rage, Alexander 'ordered the bystanders to stone him, or they themselves would be put under a curse and be called Epicureans' (*Alex.* 45). The crowd turns on the man and would kill him if it were not for the brave actions of a distinguished citizen who places his body between the crowd and its target. Scorning the reaction of the infatuated crowd with Alexander, Lucian adds, 'he was very nearly stoned to death, and quite right too! What need had he to be the only sane man among such lunatics, and be on the receiving end of Paphlagonian stupidity?' (*Alex.* 45).

Malignant narcissists sometimes kill in order to either 'protect and raise their self esteem' (Ronningstam 2005, 107) or 'restore their sense of undi-

minished power' (Malmquist 2005, 165), and Alexander appears to be no different. From various sections of Lucian's rendition, it is very clear that Alexander feeds off the adulation and attention of crowds (*Alex.* 12, 14–15, 39). Certainly for him to see a crowd turn against a critic is exhilarating, and gives him a sense of regaining control over the public image that he presents.

The third attempted murder is very personal. Alexander knows of Lucian's opposition to him. When, for example, Alexander's supporter and (soon to be) elderly son-in-law, Rutilianus, asks Alexander about Lucian, the 'prophet' responds with an oracle implying that he is a sexual degenerate (*Alex.* 54). Then, when Lucian has a personal visit with Alexander, Lucian refuses to call him by the title, 'Prophet,' and insists upon using his name. More dramatically, in the presence of the prophet's followers, Lucian bites Alexander's hand rather than kiss it when Alexander offers it to him. Indeed, Lucian indicates that he gives 'him a hearty bite...., which very nearly crippled his hand' (*Alex.* 55).

Whatever physical pain Lucian causes Alexander, it likely is nothing compared to the affront to Alexander's pride. At the time, however, Alexander's response to the affront is very measured, calling off his assaulting entourage and then ostensibly trying to win over his opponent. This initially measured reaction, however, subsequently festers into a murder plot in a manner consistent with narcissistic rage. Current research on homicidal narcissists indicates that 'narcissistic individuals may develop an indifferent or cool exterior as an initial response to threats to their self esteem. However, when their composure gives way, it is striking to see the intensity of their anger and need for revenge' (Malmquist 2005, 168). While it is true that Lucian feigns friendship with Alexander in order to escape his presence, his act likely has not fooled the 'prophet,' since even 'the onlookers were quite astonished at how easily my feelings had changed' (or at least appeared to [*Alex.* 55]).

Lucian is caught completely off guard by Alexander's murderous retaliation. After accepting from Alexander a ship for his travels, Lucian is at sea when 'I noticed the skipper in tears and arguing with the sailors, and I thought my future prospects were not hopeful. They had had instructions from Alexander to seize and fling us [i.e., Lucian and his traveling companion] into the sea, which would have ended his war with me then and there' (*Alex.* 56). Only the captain's pleadings with the crew saves his life. It is speculative, but certainly in accordance with events, to say that Alexander would see Lucian's 'killing as a righteous act of retaliation' (Ronningstam 2005, 107).

*Conclusion: Narcissism and Sectarian Religious Formation*

In records from the ancient world, Alexander is unique. ‘There is no known instance in the pagan world in which a single “religious genius” achieved success equal to that of Alexander. He appeared from nowhere and convinced people throughout much of the Mediterranean basin that he was, in some sense, intimate with the divine’ (Branham 1989, 186). And so we are left wondering if others in his era express narcissism through non-religious channels, or if the condition was even rarer then than it is now (currently at less than one percent of the population [American Psychiatric Association 2000]). To these questions, we will never have answers. Certainly the ancient world—Jewish, Christian, and pagan—witnessed some remarkable sectarian expressions (see, for example, Horsley and Hanson 1985; Hultgren and Haggmark [eds.] 1996; Kraemer 2004; MacDermot 1971), but we simply lack the biographical detail about their founders that exists about Alexander.

What we can answer, however, are questions about whether narcissism often plays a role in the origins of religion or in the motivation for religious leaders within existing traditions. To both of these questions, we can answer affirmatively. In the context of religious origins, we have two well-documented faiths whose creators were narcissists—Joseph Smith of Mormonism and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh of the Rajneeshees.<sup>18</sup> As I pointed out, Smith likely was a malignant narcissist himself, and it is also worth noting that his rage at an institution that had criticized him ultimately led to his death. A mob dragged him out of a jail and murdered him in 1844, ‘after he destroyed a printing press that had published the *Nauvoo Expositor* which spoke negatively about him, polygamy, and a theocratic monarchy’ (Anderson 1999, 242). The religion that he founded, however, has flourished, and it has ‘become the only truly successful American religion, now international in scope and capable of wielding social and political power’ (Anderson 1999, 242). In its day, the Glycon cult also is successful, reaching into the upper ranks of Roman society and apparently surviving well into the century following the death of its founder (Jones 1986, 138).

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<sup>18</sup> I first became aware of Lucian’s account about Alexander when reading an article that discusses the child sexual abuse that occurred in another contemporary sect, the Children of God (Freckelton 1998, 3). While the founder of that group, David Berg (d. 1994), certainly demonstrated narcissistic characteristics, the obvious disorder that likely afflicted him was nonexclusive pedophilia complicated by alcohol abuse (Kent 2006, 347; see Kent 1994).

Rajneesh's religion has not fared nearly as well as Mormonism, with its main community in America dissolving after the guru's conviction (and resultant deportation in 1985) for making false statements to a government official, followed by his deportation (Carter 1990, 236–237). When flourishing in 1983, the commune in Oregon attracted some 15,000 people to a particular celebration (Carter 1990, 166, 183), and some 1,500 to 2,500 lived in the facility in 1984 (Carter 1990, 207). Despite Rajneesh's death in 1990, however, hundreds of centers still operate in countries around the world.

Although the religious and psychotherapeutic message of Rajneesh is very different from the prophetic oracular directives and reputed healings that Alexander produces, the personalities of the two men are very similar. Like Alexander, 'Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's sense of self-importance and uniqueness seem[ed] to possess no limits' (Clark 1988, 33). He 'clearly consider[ed] himself to be a man of world-historical significance' (Clark 1988, 34), although he never developed the political contacts that Alexander does. Reminiscent of Alexander's willingness to reinterpret failed prophecies, Rajneesh, too, had a 'narcissistic penchant for transforming failures into successes' (Clark 1988, 35). Just as Alexander feeds off the energy and support of crowds, 'Rajneesh thoroughly delight[ed] in being the sole focus of attention of his thousands of adoring fans' (Clark 1988, 38). Moreover, both religious figures were "'master[s]" at manipulating and exploiting other people' (Clark 1988, 40). Surely, however, the most remarkable, and disturbing, parallel between the two narcissists was the large organizations that operated fraudulently if not criminally to further the leaders' respective deceptions.

In his prime, Rajneesh, along with a trusted assistant, oversaw an international corporate structure with major financial concerns in the United States, India, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (see Carter 1990, 86, see 83–96), with small centers throughout most of the industrialized world. In fact, an academic who studied the group concluded that one could view it 'as a multilevel marketing device with central control in a charismatic core' (Carter 1990, 97). Broadly speaking, Alexander's operation has parallels. His bureaucracy of 'helpers, servants, questioners, oracle-writers, oracle-keepers, secretaries, sealers, interpreters...' (*Alex.* 23) includes missionaries who travel 'abroad to spread reports of the oracle among other nations, and to announce that he gave prophecies, found runaway slaves, detected thieves and robbers, showed the way to buried treasure, healed the sick, and sometimes even raised the dead' (*Alex.* 24, see 30). He even establishes what one set of translators called 'an intelligence bureau' in Rome (see *Alex.* 37 in the Fowler and Fowler [trans.] 1905), whose 'spies' act as both monitors of pub-

lic (and presumably political) opinion, providing ‘forewarning of the questions and the particular wishes of the questioners...’ coming from that important city (*Alex.* 37). In varying degrees, however, both Rajneesh’s and Alexander’s operations used fraud, deception, and attempted murder as standard procedures.

With the collapse of Rajneesh’s Oregon community, at least sixty-three individuals were charged with criminal offences, and an unspecified number of followers (including the leader himself) were convicted and sentenced. The offences included lying to federal officials, criminal conspiracy, racketeering, first- and second-degree assault, and attempted murder (Carter 1990, 236). Looking at these offences within a comparative perspective, what is so striking is how many of them resemble activities that Alexander and his bureaucracy also perpetrate almost two thousand years earlier. He uses trickery and deception to establish a new religion that offers the public fraudulent prophecies, ineffectual protection from a serious public health crisis (i.e., the plague [*Alex.* 36]), and questionable medical cures (*Alex.* 25; cf. 22). It also interferes in the justice system of the era by claiming to detect ‘thieves and robbers’ and even identifies murderers who turn out to be innocent (*Alex.* 44). It runs an extortion ring against influential citizens (*Alex.* 32), and—much like the Rajneesh organization—tries to assassinate its critics.

Among others, attorneys working against the Rajneeshes were targets of the Rajneesh organization, which used poisoning and a planned (but never enacted) ambush (Carter 1990, 222). In two instances, Alexander’s techniques are cruder, simply using (or trying to incite) mobs to kill critical Epicureans, but the murder plot against Lucian involves a conspiracy between the leader and hired thugs that fails only because of the conscience of a sea captain.

What these similarities suggest, however, is that narcissists creating and running religious organizations can be dangerous, and the plans that they initiate can be deadly. These insights transcend time, location, and culture, since persons with mental disorders often find ways to create mischief, if not outright harm, in whichever societies or eras they live.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> I presented an early version of this article as the keynote address at the 2006 Family Action, Information, and Resource (F.A.I.R.) Conference (London, England), entitled, “Mechanisms of Control: How Cults Exploit Human Weakness.” Thanks go to Paul Joosse for his editorial comments.

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