

Ebionites

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Ebionites -A Jewish-Christian heretical sect flourishing in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th cents a.d.

I. Origin

The name Ebionite seems to be derived from Heb *ebyôn*, "poor." It first appears in the writings of Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* i.26.2), who gave no explanation of the term. Other writers in antiquity, however, variously explained why the Ebionites were so called. Origen in his commentary on Mt. 12:2 said that their name came from the poverty of their faith in Jesus. In *Contra Celsum* ii.1 he stated that they were named for the poverty of their interpretation of the law. Eusebius reiterated the sentiment of Origen by saying that "from these practices [observing the law, rejecting Paul, and using exclusively the Gospel according to the Hebrews] they have obtained their name, for their name means 'poor' in Hebrew" (*HE* iii.27.2). He also said they got their name from the first Christians because they held such poor and lowly opinions of Jesus Christ. None of these polemical explanations of the origin of the name is taken seriously by scholars today.

About two hundred years after Irenaeus's first mention of the Ebionites by name, Epiphanius wrote extensively of them in his *Panarion* (*Haer.*). He derived their name from Ebion, the alleged founder of the sect, and traced their history back to the period immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70. This explanation, too, is highly unlikely, although there is some evidence that there was a historical person named Ebion. Some scholars think that certain fragments of *Doctrina patrum de incarnatione Verbi* are by him.

A. Fitzmyer suggested that the name *Ebionaioi* grew out of the practice of referring to the first Christians in Jerusalem as "the poor," especially after the destruction of the city in a.d. 70. "At some time during the first two centuries ... this designation was restricted to those who lived in Palestine and Syria, and who continued to observe the Mosaic Law. It seems likely that the original use

of the word was in no way connected with a heretical sect" (Fitzmyer, p. 210). This group of Jewish Christians is usually associated with James the brother of Jesus, the head of the Jerusalem church. "It is not unlikely that remnants of this group, after the destruction of Jerusalem, developed into the Ebionite sect, acquiring heterodox notions in time from other sources, such as Cerinthus and the Elchesaites" (p. 210). How long the Ebionites existed before Irenaeus' explicit mention of them is not known, but that there was such a group by his time is clear. He calls them heretical (*Adv. haer.* i.26.2) and classifies them among the Gnostics.

L. E. Keck proposed a similar explanation of their origin: "After the refugees [either from the Jewish War of a.d. 66–70 or the Hadrianic War in a.d. 135] from Jerusalem found themselves destitute, they cherished more than ever the words of Jesus about the poor and the threat of possessions, and so made of their poverty a virtue and probably named themselves 'the Poor.' In the region where they now lived, they came into contact with dualistic and syncretistic movements which provided a cosmological rationale of their poverty and intensified certain elements of their theology in general. The link with the practice of the primitive church in sharing wealth came much later as an apologetic device and cannot be taken at face value" (ZNW, 57 [1966], 65f).

II. Sources

A. Gospel of the Ebionites This is an abridged and falsified Gospel of Matthew known only through the accounts and quotations of Epiphanius. Since it presupposes the Synoptics, the earliest it could have been written is the 2nd century. The Gospel begins not with the Nativity narrative but with the appearance of John the Baptist. This is followed by the Call of the Disciples and the Baptism of Jesus. It also contains parallels to Mt. 5:17; 12:46–50; 26:17ff; and Lk. 22:15 (SQE). Epiphanius said that it included the story of the Last Supper, the Passion of Christ, and the Resurrection, but we have no details.

B. Pseudo-Clementine Literature Apart from the Ebionite Gospel, there is little agreement among scholars about authentic Ebionite sources. The nineteenth-century Tübingen scholars isolated a source — *Kerygmata Petrou* (Sermons of Peter)— in the Pseudo-Clementine literature and identified it as Ebionite. This reconstruction has been followed by more recent scholars. H. J. Schoeps bases his reconstruction of the history and theology of early Jewish Christianity on the *Kerygmata Petrou*, and both O. Cullmann and J. A. Fitzmyer use the *Kerygmata* as a primary source to compare the beliefs of the Qumrân community with those of the Ebionites. Considerable doubt exists, however, about the genuineness of the *Kerygmata Petrou* as an Ebionite source. Keck points out that even though the Pseudo-Clementine literature has been subjected for more than a hundred years to discussion and analysis, “there is still little agreement on the elemental point of whether or not there is any relation whatsoever between this pot-pourri of tradition and the Ebionites” (p. 60).

III. Theology Origen was the first to distinguish between two types of Ebionites theologically: those who believed in the Virgin Birth and those who rejected it (*Contra Celsum* v 61). Eusebius also distinguished between two groups, describing them as follows (*HE* iii.27):

They held him [Christ] to be a plain and ordinary man who had achieved righteousness merely by the progress of his character and had been born naturally from Mary and her husband. They insisted on the complete observation of the Law, and did not think that they would be saved by faith in Christ alone and by a life in accordance with it. But there were others besides these who have the same name. These escaped the absurd folly of the first mentioned, and did not deny that the Lord was born of a Virgin and the Holy Spirit, but nevertheless agreed with them in not confessing his pre-existence as God, being the Logos and Wisdom. Thus they shared in the impiety of the former class, especially in that they were equally zealous to insist on the literal observance of the Law. They thought that the letters of the Apostle ought to be wholly rejected and called him an apostate from the Law. They used only the Gospel called according to the Hebrews and made little account of the rest. Like the former they used to observe the sabbath and the rest of the Jewish ceremonial, but on Sundays celebrated rites like ours in commemoration of the Saviour’s resurrection. Epiphanius likewise differentiated between a more orthodox group (those

who believed in the Virgin Birth) and a more herodox group. The former he called Nazoreans and the latter Ebionites (*Haer.* 29f). The Ebionites, he said, were influenced by the Elchasaites, an early heretical group with certain Gnostic ideas. It is also possible that the Ebionites came under the influence of the Essenes.

Although strict observance of the law was enjoined, not all of the law of Moses was accepted as valid. They held that the true law had been adulterated by the addition of certain falsehoods, post-Mosaic in origin. These had to be purged, because they contained doctrines that were actually inimical to Moses’ teaching. By means of this approach to the Pentateuch the Ebionites were able to eliminate concepts of God contrary to their own. In the *Pseudo-Clementines* (Homily 2.52) the apostle says, “Neither was Adam a transgressor, who was fashioned by the hands of God; nor was Noah drunken, who was found righteous above all the world; nor did Abraham live with three wives at once, who, on account of his sobriety, was thought worthy of a numerous posterity; nor did Jacob associate with four — of whom two were sisters — who was the father of the ten tribes, and who intimated the coming of the presence of our Master; nor was Moses a murderer, nor did he learn to judge from an idolatrous priest” Jesus was for them the great reformer of the law, whereas Paul was its distorter.

The Ebionites also believed that the grace of baptism put an end to all sacrifices. The destruction of the temple was brought about by God because of the Jews’ refusal to discontinue the temple sacrificial system. The priesthood, too, was considered no longer valid, since sacrifices were at an end.

Christianity was for them not a religion of salvation. Jesus came not to save but to teach. He stood in a direct line with the great prophets — prophetism climaxed in Him. He came after Adam and Moses to reform and purify Judaism.

Ebionism’s most important deviations from orthodox Christianity were in the realm of Christology. Although, as seen from the above quotations from Origen and statements in Epiphanius, there was no unanimity among them in their christological beliefs, they generally rejected the orthodox doctrine of the Virgin Birth. They also denied the Incarnation. Although they believed in Jesus (this distinguished them from the orthodox Jews), they regarded Him simply as a man chosen by God, who at His baptism received a power from God. It is generally believed that the christological tenets of

the Ebionites showed Cerinthian influence.

IV. Ebionites and Qumrân

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, vigorous discussions have been carried on about the relationship of the Ebionites to the people of the Scrolls. J. L. Teicher maintained that the Qumrân sect was Ebionite, that Christ was the “Teacher of Righteousness,” and the apostle Paul was the “Man of Lies.” Teicher’s theory faces several difficulties, the most telling of which are: (1) the Ebionites appear too late to be identified with the Qumrân sect (the earliest mention of the Ebionites is ca a.d. 175); and (2) the religious background of the Ebionites, though heretical, is definitely Christian, whereas that of the people of Qumrân is pre-Christian and oriented to the OT, not the NT.

Although Cullmann did not identify the Qumrân sect with the Ebionites, he argued for a connection between the two: what was left of the Qumrân sect (which he identified with the Essenes) went over to the Ebionites. This theory, of course, would necessitate the conversion of the Essenes to Christianity. While this is not impossible, there seems to be little evidence to support it.

Fitzmyer, after a careful comparison of the theological beliefs and practices of the two groups,

found too great a divergence between them to accept either Teicher’s or Cullmann’s theories. He concluded: “It seems that the most we can say is that the sect of Qumran influenced the Ebionites in many ways; Essene tenets and practices were undoubtedly adopted or adapted into the Ebionite way of life. To try to state more than this is to overstep the limits set by the evidence we have at our disposal” (p. 231). This appears to be a more tenable view of the relationship between Qumrân and the Ebionites.

Bibliography.— O. Cullmann, “Die neuentdeckten Qumrantexte und das Judenchristentum der Pseudo-klementinen,” in *NT Studien für Rudolf Bultmann* (BZNW, 21, 1954), 35–51; “Significance of the Qumran Texts for Research into the Beginnings of Christianity,” in K. Stendahl, ed, *The Scrolls and the NT* (1957), pp. 18–32; J. A. Fitzmyer, “The Qumran Scrolls, the Ebionites and their Literature,” in Stendahl, pp. 208–231 (= *Theological Studies*, 16 [1955], 335–372); H-S, I, 153–58; F. J. A. Hort, *Judaistic Christianity* (1898); L. E. Keck, *ZNW*, 57 (1966), 54–78; H. J. Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (1949); *JTS*, 4 (1953), 223ff; J. L. Teicher, *JJS*, 2 (1951), 67–99.

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