

Epiphanius and the Nazoraeans

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In his Panarion or “Medicine Chest” (374-377), Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, addresses two sects associated with the legend of the Flight to Pella: the Nazoraeans and the Ebionites. Of the former, he writes,

This sect of Nazoraeans is to be found in Beroea near Coelesyria, in the Decapolis near Pella, and in Bashanitis at the place called Cocabe – Khokhabe in Hebrew. For that was its place of origin, since all the disciples (pánton tōn mathētōn) had settled in Pella after their remove from Jerusalem – Christ having told them to abandon Jerusalem and withdraw from it because of the siege it was about to undergo. And they settled in Peraea for this reason and, as I said, lived their lives there. It was from this that the Nazoraean sect had its origin (29/7:7-8).

The meaning of the term “Nazoraean” is a notorious crux, beginning with the early church fathers. Epiphanius (drawing on Mt 2:22-23) is among those who explicitly derive the name Nazoraean (ho nazōraios) from the name of the town Nazareth,¹ a derivation which has withstood the test of time, despite some powerful objections.² At some point, a distinction arose between communities that identified themselves as “Christians,” or followers of Jesus Christ, and those that identified themselves as “Nazoraean.” This is reflected already in the third-century inscription of the Sassanian priest Kirdīr at Naqš-i-Rustam. Kirdīr mentions seven religious communities that he has suppressed, among them Christians and Nazoraeans.³

Since the days of William Whiston, the pioneer translator of Josephus, it has been fashionable in academic circles to identify these two groups as “Jewish Christians,” on the basis of one of the only elements in their theology that Epiphanius shares with us (29/5:4). This term does not appear in English letters before 1684,⁴ and is unparalleled in the classical tongues (Christianus Iudæorum, or Hebraíos-Christianós). It is a distinction that would not make much sense to Epiphanius or to his 1c subjects.

¹“He had been conceived at Nazareth and brought up in Joseph’s home, and for this reason is called ‘Jesus the Nazoraean’ in the Gospel” (29/5:6).

²eg Lidzbarski 1925, ix. Of the underlying Aramaic form, W F Albright (1946, 401) notes that Greek nazōraios likely derives from a gentilic form nāšōrāyā (from Nāšeraṭ or Nazareth), and that later Aramaic forms such as Christian Palestinian Aramaic nāšōrāyā or Mandaic našuraia reflect an assimilation to the productive actant noun pattern qātol, perhaps under the influence of such forms as nāšōrayyā “crickets” (literally “chirpers”).

³Inscription of Kirdīr KKZ 9-10 (MacKenzie 1989).

⁴Patrick Mensa 34. Whiston (**Testimonies** 58) is the first to apply the term specifically to the Nazoraean and Ebionite communities.

Epiphanius classifies the Nazoraeans among sixty groups that identify themselves as Christians, of whom thirteen were in the intellectual lineage of Simon Magus; of these, five were “contemporary with each other and had ideas similar to each other’s” (29/1:1) – the Gnostics, the Carpocratians, the Cerinthians, the Nazoraeans, and the Ebionites. For the Nazoraeans, Epiphanius offers only these sparse details:⁵

- They were contemporary with these other sects and had similar ideas (29/1:1),
- They lived in the regions of Peraea, the Decapolis, and Bashan (29/7:7-8), that is, within the Hauran region of southern Syria and northern Jordan,
- They were apparently Jewish, followed a nomistic faith, and practiced circumcision (29/5:4), but are rejected by the Jews (29/9:2),
- They possessed a copy of the Gospel according to Matthew in Hebrew, which Epiphanius considers to be the original version (29/9:2),
- They may have viewed Jesus as a normal human being who was divinely empowered. Epiphanius confesses uncertainty on this point (29/7:6).

Epiphanius does not elaborate on this last point, but refers his readers to his chapter on the Cerinthians, who maintained that the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove in the Jordan, and revealed the “unknowable father” (ágnōston patéra) to Jesus (28/1:5). For the other alleged similarities of their beliefs to the other groups such as the Jews and the Gnostics, he refers the reader to his previous chapters. In these, he describes their cosmogony, beginning with a “first principle” (mían archēn), the “unknowable and unnameable father of everything” (patéra tōn hólōn ágnōston kai akatonómaston) who dwells in heaven. The material world, on the other hand, was constructed by angels who have rebelled against the Higher Power (apostántas apò tēs dunámeōs), and policed by principalities (archaí) and authorities (eksousía) who hinder the progress of the soul to its original home in the highest heaven (ho hūperthen ouranòs, 2:7), which he identifies as the rotating vault of heaven (periphora, 27/2:3).

It needs to be noted here that this cosmogony is not at all characteristic of Jews or Christians, but fairly typical of the congeries of groups conventionally described as “Gnostic,” and particularly of the Mandaeans, who formerly lived in the marsh lands immediately to the north of the Gulf, until they were displaced after 2003. As the only surviving Gnostic religion from Late Antiquity, the Mandaeans are unique among the religions of the world. Their sacred texts and liturgy are recorded in a dialect of Aramaic, and compose one of that language’s largest corpora. The contemporary community has preserved both spoken and written forms of their language, as well as a complex body of rituals and a developed commentarial tradition. It is therefore reasonable that we would turn to the Mandaeans for a closer understanding of the “Gnostic” cosmogony underlying Epiphanius’ description.

In the Mandaean cosmogony, the first principle is variously named the “King of Light,” the “Lord of Greatness,” and the “Great Soul,” who dwells in the highest heaven or the “World of Light,” and is completely aloof from the material world, having absolutely no direct role in its creation or governance.

⁵In a passage of 2,558 words, 1,754 (69%) are a digression on the Davidic line and the use of “Nazoraean” for the early followers of Jesus before the term “Christian” became current.

From him a series of emanations proceed, known as the First Life, the Second Life, and so on.⁶ They are most often described as the creators of the material world, often in concert with the “Excellencies,” who fill the role of angels. Mandaean accounts of the creation are contradictory, presenting it as a positive, negative, or ambivalent act; in some accounts it is presented as a rebellious act of one or the other emanation against his superiors.⁷ While the Life and the Excellencies dwell in the World of Light, the material world is policed by the Seven (visible heavenly bodies) and the Twelve (signs of the zodiac), who trap the souls of the departed in celestial “purgatories” and hinder them in their progress back to their original homes in the World of Light.

In short, in their cosmogonies, at least, the Mandaeans correspond to those described for the Nazoraeans and other affiliated groups by Epiphanius.⁸

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Confusion about groups and their names was widespread in antiquity. Suetonius speaks of Jews expelled from Rome by Claudius (r 41-54), but since the cause was unrest “at the instigation of Chrestus,” it may be that only the Jesus sect was involved. The Baptist and Jesus sects shared much, including the rite of baptism, and may also have been confused. One place they are distinguished is in the *Birkat ha-Minim* (c85), which expelled both Nozrim (usually thought to be Nazarenes, or Christians, but in light of the present argument, perhaps more likely the Baptist sectarians) and *minim* (probably the Jesus sectarians) from synagogue fellowship (see Brooks **Five**).

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⁶Drower **Mandaeans** 73

⁷Buckley **Mandaeans** 38

⁸de Blois **Naṣrānī** 4 proposes that the Mandaeans are a synthesis of two different religious traditions: that of Nazoraean Jewish Christianity and that of the non-Christian, non-Jewish, Babylonian, semi-Iranized and quasi-gnostic complex of authentic Mandaism,” although Epiphanius conflates his Nazoraeans with the Gnostics already in the 4th century.