This book arose out of a fascination with that elusive enigma called Jewish Christianity. I first encountered it under other names as a modern phenomenon. Many of its adherents would claim a continuity of community over the centuries in various places and forms. While this may prove to be a less-than-tenable position, it is clear that scattered across the pages of relations between Judaism and Christianity are numerous Jews who, for a wide spectrum of reasons, have attached themselves to the Christian faith. These too range widely, from the self-hating Donins and Pfefferkorns of the later middle ages to the Edersheims and Chwolsonss of more recent times, men proud of their Jewish heritage and whose scholarly contributions left no small mark on the search for Christian origins. A comprehensive study of both phenomena is still desirable.

The subject of this book was suggested to me over Christmas dinner by Randall Buth. While I was surprised to find that no comprehensive monograph had been done on the Nazarenes, the present study is only a small step in that direction.

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Introduction

In the course of the last century there has grown an ever-increasing interest among Church historians in the phenomenon known as Jewish Christianity.\textsuperscript{1} The relative newness of interest and complexity of the problem is shown by the large number of articles and chapters which have been written just attempting to establish a definition of Jewish Christianity.\textsuperscript{2} In the end it may prove fruitless to define it because it is so varied, but all should agree that needless argument over the differing concepts of “Jewish Christianity” can be avoided. To the student of Early Christianity one thing becomes quickly apparent: in the early centuries there were many offshoot sects having some connection both to New Testament and to Jewish thought.

Even in the writings of some of the Church Fathers from the third and fourth centuries and later, this proliferation of “Jewish Christian” sects led to confusion and to the confounding of different sects under the name “Ebionite.” So convenient (and subtle) was this that it has caused not a few modern scholars to make the mistake of thinking that if we can box in the phenomenon known as Ebionism we will have defined Jewish Christianity. But Ebionism was not the direct heir of the Jewish apostolic church; it was at best only third generation, and to reconcile its doctrines with those of the New Testament requires no small amount of mental gymnastics.

All of the first Christians were Jews, either by birth or by conversion, and yet within a handful of years the report that tens of thousands “from the circumcision” had believed in Jesus as Messiah, there remained only small, despised pockets of Jewish Christians, and of these a large percentage seem to have been adherents to various late-blooming hybrists of Christian teaching with that of some free-thinking individual. It has been the interest of the present writer for the past few years to trace whatever remains can be found of the heirs of that first Jewish church in Jerusalem, those who “continued in the apostles’ doctrine.” One event which would seem to provide the first link between that Jerusalem congregation and the Jewish Christianity of patristic writings is the reported flight to Pella of the Decapolis.\textsuperscript{3} This move to Pella was undertaken, according to Epiphanius, by the sect known as the Nazoraioi (Nazarenes). Or, as Epiphanius would rather express it, the Nazarenes were the descendants of those Jerusalem believers who fled to Pella. If this notice of the Bishop of Salamis is correct,\textsuperscript{4} then we have the desired link and identity of the Jewish Christian sect which we should investigate.

Curiously enough, investigative scholarship has dealt almost entirely with Ebionism,\textsuperscript{5} and to date no comprehensive monographic work has been dedicated to the Nazarenes,\textsuperscript{6} nor even to such later “Jewish Christian” sects as the Symmachians or Elkesaites. It is the aim of the present work to start filling these lacunae.

Chapter One
The Name of the Sect

The earliest documentary reference to “Nazarene” as applied to a person is in the New Testament, and refers to Jesus.\textsuperscript{1} We do not find it in Paul’s writings, which are commonly acknowledged to be the earliest of the New Testament canon, just as we do not find there the name “Christian,” (which is found only in\textsuperscript{2} Acts 11:26, 26:28, and 1 Pet. 4:16). Likewise, the earliest reference to a sect of Nazarenes occurs in Acts 24:5, when it is used by Tertullian, Paul’s “prosecutor.” While it can be argued that the lawyer Tertullus invented the name for the occasion,\textsuperscript{3} there is a tradition as early as Tertullian\textsuperscript{4} that an early name for Christians was Nazarenes, and his claim is borne out by the earliest name in the various Semitic languages. Obviously the name of the sect came from the title NAZORAIOI/-NAZARENOS, evidently applied to Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry.

Matthew 2:23

While it is not central to the theme of this study, it will prove worthwhile to take a look at the origins of this name. The key verse is Matthew 2:23, in which it is stat-


ed that Joseph brought Jesus to live in Nazareth that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets “He shall be called a Nazarene.” The difficulty is, of course, that no particular prophet says any such thing. It is a commonplace of scriptural criticism that Matthew quotes “the prophets,” which may mean the general sense of prophecy rather than one particular reference. While this may be true, the general sense itself is based on specific prophetic statements. What passage or passages of the Old Testament are both messianic in content and somehow connected to the name of Nazareth?

The solutions which have been proffered are legion, and it is happily not necessary to go through them all here, since this has been done recently by R.H. Gundry who deals with the various solutions in their natural groupings. After treating several minor suggestions and noting their failings, he considers two major theories. First, the references in Judges 13:5, 7, and 16:17 to the naziriteship of Samson; and secondly, the recent idea that the name came from an earlier Mandaean name perhaps through John the Baptist. The first possibility was already noted and rejected by Epiphanius (Pan. 29 57), who sought a connection to the name Nazareth. As Gundry rightly notes, the most serious objection to this theory is that Jesus was not in fact a nazirite: “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say ‘Behold, a gluttonous man, and a drunkard’” (Luke 7:34).

Gundry raises several serious objections to the second suggestion, of which we need mention only a few. Neither the disciples of Jesus nor those of John the Baptist are called Nazarenes in the gospels. John himself occupies a relatively small place in Mandaean literature, and all that it does tell us could easily have been taken from New Testament tradition. And finally, at the very root of the question, a close look at Mandaean practices shows that they were probably not even a Jewish sect at all, and therefore not valid candidates for the forebears of Christianity.

As a solution to the origin of the name and the quote in Matt. 2:23, Gundry, like the present author, returns to the old but still valid reference to Isaiah 11:1, although he—like not a few ancient writers before him—prefers to see the verse as referring more to the sense of the prophets than exclusively to one prophecy.

Epiphanius provides an interesting area for speculation, in writing about the Nazarenes, saying that before the Christians were called Christians they were, for a short time, also called Jessaioi. He suggests at first—without any explanation—that the name came from Jesse, the father of David. Then he wavers, and concedes that it might have come from the name of Jesus, giving the impression that he has only the fact of the early name before him without anything but his own conjectures to explain it. Now if it is true that Nazarenes is an earlier name than Christians, as we are told by several Church fathers, we must assume that the two pre-“Christian” names were in use simultaneously, if Epiphanius is correct. The Greek name, Christian, was first applied in Antioch, probably the earliest mission to non-Jews, and it is well known that “Christian” was originally used by non-Christians to designate believers among the Gentiles, while “Nazarenes” was already used in Palestine to describe Jewish adherents to the new messianic sect.

Few passages in the Old Testament are more messianic—even in their early interpretation by Jewish exegetes—than Isa. 11:1–10. The phrase in question reads ויהיҧר מנועי יש עבור מערש יפרה.

One immediately notices the juxtaposition of the words yisha (Jesse) and nezer (branch). This, I believe, can support Epiphanius’ statement that the two names were both used before Christian. New Testament references are not lacking to indicate that this verse occupied a position of some importance in the early Church. Acts 13:22–23 reads: “He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.’ From the offspring of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus.” It is not difficult to imagine that Isa. 11:1 formed a central part of the earliest Jewish Christian polemic, and that its centrally important words gave the followers their first name or names. Neither one of these words in itself would have any meaning for the Gentile world, but since Paul decided early to “preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23, 2:2), the name Christ provided ready material from which the Greeks could give a name. And of course the name Christos—messiah—for those who knew anything of Jewish thought (and the LXX) embodied the essence of Isa. 11:1.

Acts 24:5

About the year 57 Paul was brought to Caesarea and tried before Felix, then governor of Judaea. The lawyer for the prosecution was one Tertullus, who spoke on behalf of Ananias the high priest and certain “elders.” According
to the record in Acts 24, as Tertullian began to state his accusations against Paul, he said, “We have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.” This is the first time that we read the name Nazoraioi in reference to Christians as a group. As mentioned above, it is not impossible that Tertullian is in fact the author of the title. But this seems unlikely. For one thing, in his reply Paul seems to accept the title without hesitation and even to equate it with the honored term, “the Way” (v. 14, ὁδὸν Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν). Felix, who was not a term before Felix which was unknown or meaningless. It is more likely that the attorney for the prosecution would choose a somewhat derogatory term, which, like most sect names, has been given from the outside. It would seem, then, that the earliest Jewish Christians called themselves something like “disciples (or followers) of the Way,” while their opponents called them Nazarenes, most likely on the basis of some generally known (and despised) characteristic, such as their insistence on the fulfillment of a particular verse of prophecy.17

It is important to note that the name Nazarenes was at first applied to all Jewish followers of Jesus. Until the name Christian became attached to Antiochian non-Jews,18 this meant that the name signified the entire Church, not just a sect. So also in Acts 24:5 the reference is not to a sect of Christianity but rather to the entire primitive Church as a sect of Judaism. Only when the Gentile Church overtook and overshadowed the Jewish one could there be any possibility of sectarian stigma adhering to the name Nazarene within the Church itself. This should be borne in mind when considering the total absence of the name from extant Christian literature between the composition of Acts and 376, when the panarion was written. Even after the name Christianoi had been commonly accepted by Christians as the name they called themselves,19 it would require some passage of time until the earlier name would be forgotten and those who carried it condemned as heretics.

It might be objected at this point that if it is true that Nazarenes was the earliest name for Christians, then we should expect to find the name more frequently in patristic literature before Epiphanius, more often certainly than the isolated notices of Tertullian and Eusebius. To be sure, it is strange (not to say frustrating) that the name is so universally ignored. The easy answer to this, of course, is to say that there is no recollection of the name (and sect) of the Nazarenes because there was no such sect until a later one was described by Epiphanius and visited by Jerome (if indeed these two fathers were not simply exercising their fantasies). But such an answer is too easy and is precluded by the accumulated weight of evidence.

In searching for a more profound explanation, one is tempted to fall back on the lost notices of antiquity. If only we had the lost works of Papias or Hegesippus or Ariston of Pella or even Origen, two or three of whom lived in the right area and had some knowledge of Hebrew … This line of wishful thinking is not wholly without validity, but it is weakened by its vulnerability to the counter-reply that those writers whose works are extant (and voluminously) and who did still have access to now-lost treatises, should be expected to know of the name of the Nazarene sect. Of course, Tertullian and Eusebius did know the name, and as I have stated above, the single notice in Acts 24 is too flimsy to serve as the sole source for their assertions.

But perhaps the solution is simpler than this. Perhaps it is linguistic. If any early Church father wrote in Hebrew, the work is unknown to us. It is true that Eusebius tells us of Hegesippus that he knew Hebrew and even used it,20 but as far as we know his Hypomnemata were written only in Greek. The difficulty is that Hebrew, Aramaic, or any other Semitic language would have had the potential of preserving naturally the early name (as, in fact, the Talmud does);21 but for someone writing in Greek it was more natural, upon finding the name Nazarenes referring to the (early) catholic Church, to change its form to the known and accepted Christianoi. Of course the lamentable fact that precious few of those Greek fathers would have been able to read a document in a semitic language only decreases the likelihood that the name Nazarene could have been preserved in their writings.

So on the one hand it seems likely that the name was preserved somewhere between Acts and Tertullian, but on the other it is equally likely that it was infrequently mentioned in non-Semitic script, which may be accounted for by the predominance of Greek in early Church writing. It is no less important to keep in mind that any sect that did persist after the year 70 would almost certainly have been small, and given its basic orthodoxy of theology (including its acceptance of Paul),
it posed little threat. Since it also preserved one of the several names attested to in the New Testament at a time when the greater Church itself had not settled on its own name, there would have been small reason to attack it; no more reason, at least, than an essentially orthodox small group known as “brethren” or “disciples of the Way.”

Pliny’s Nazerini

While treating the name of the sect, we may deal here with a short notice by Pliny the Elder which has caused some confusion among scholars. In his Historia Naturalis, Book V,22 he says: Nunc interiora dicantur. Coele habet Apameam Marysa amne divisam a Nazerinorum23 tetrarchia, Bambycen quae alio nomino Hierapolis vocatur, Syris vero Mabog.24 This was written before 77 A.D., when the work was dedicated to Titus. The similarity of the name with the Nazareni has led many to conclude, erroneously, that this is an early (perhaps the earliest) witness to Christians (or Nazarenes) by a pagan writer. Other than this, be it noted, there is no pagan notice of Nazarenes.

The area described is quite specifically located by Pliny. It is south of Antioch and east of Laodicea (Latakiya) on the River Marysa (Orontes) below the mountains known today as Jebel el Ansariye (a name which may preserve a memory of this sect). The town of Apamea was a bishopric in the time of Sozomen and an archbishopric in the medieval period. A fortress was erected there during the first Crusade. Today the region is inhabited by the Nušairi Moslem sect (which believes that women will not be resurrected, since they do not have souls).

If to the Nazerini and Nušairi and Nazoraioi/Nazareni we add the Nasaraioi of Epiphanius and the Nazorei of Flaster, we have all the ingredients for a scholastic free-for-all.

The confusions may have started quite early. At the turn of this century, R. Dussaud27 noted a passage in the Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen (VII 15) in which he tells of some “Galileans” who helped the pagans of Apamea against the local bishop and the Christians.28 Dussaud rightly called into question the likelihood that the Galileans—that is, Jewish Christians—would side with the pagans in a dispute over the keeping of idols, and he suggested that the people referred to were “certainly neither Nušairi or Nazerini, whom Sozomen has confused with the Nazarenes.”29 Sozomen’s source here is unknown. Dussaud further suggested30 that the writer Greg. Aboufaradj (Chron. Syr. I 173) in the year 891 confused the Nušairi with the Mandaean Naṣuraite and was followed by others.

Can Pliny’s Nazerini be early Christians? The answer depends very much on the identification of his sources, and on this basis the answer must be an unequivocal No. It is generally acknowledged that Pliny drew heavily on official records and most likely on those drawn up for Augustus by Marcus Agrippa (d. 12 B.C.).31 Jones has shown that this survey was accomplished between 30 and 20 B.C.32 Any connection between the Nazerini and the Nazareni must, therefore, be ruled out, and we must not attempt to line this up with Epiphanius’ Nazoraioi.33 One may, however, be allowed to see the Nazerini as the ancestors of today’s Nušairi, the inhabitants of the ethnic region captured some seven centuries later by the Moslems.

Chapter Two

Christian Sources before Epiphanius

In setting the literary background for the notices of Epiphanius and Jerome by determining earlier patristic knowledge of the Nazarene sect, we must first note that no source mentions the Nazarenes by name as a distinct group. Necessarily, then, any evidence will be derived or inferred and not obtained from direct testimony. In light of this, it is best to state at the outset that the aim of this chapter is to establish the fact of the Nazarenes’ continued existence into or near the fourth century. We shall be able to work from two directions: Firstly, from references where a Jewish Christian sect is described but not named, we can compare the description with what is known to us of Nazarene doctrine, and then try to identify a Nazarene presence. Secondly, we can find use or knowledge of the Gospel according to the Hebrews. This latter path, of course, depends on a positive identification of the Gospel according to the Hebrews with the Nazarene sect and is taken up separately in Chapter Six.


Chapter Three

Epiphanius

Epiphanius was born about 315 near Eleutheropolis (Beit Guvrin) in Judea and died in 402 or 403 at sea.¹ His native language was Syrian, and besides Greek and Latin he also had limited knowledge of Coptic and Hebrew.² He studied in Egypt and then returned home where, in about 335, he set up a monastery which he governed for 30 years. In 367 the bishops of Cyprus elected him Bishop of Constantia (Salamis), which made him effectively the metropolitan of the island. His life was dedicated to the fighting of heresy, particularly Origenism, and in 374 he began writing the panarion (generally known as the Refutation of All Heresies), which he completed in just over two years. It included some eighty heresies, twenty of them pre-Christian. While the panarion preserves for us many traditions that would have otherwise been lost, the work as a whole is tendentious in its use of its sources, citing only what supports his own unbending orthodoxy. This quality, of course, presents the investigator with frequent difficulties and demands extra caution in approaching the facts proffered by Epiphanius.

Before the year 428³ there appeared a kind of summary of the panarion, known as the anacephalaiosis. This work is almost certainly not by Epiphanius himself, but it is not impossible that it was compiled by someone not far removed from him.⁴ In 382 Epiphanius met Jerome in Rome and from that time the two joined forces against Origenism.⁵

The question of Epiphanius’ sources for the panarion is an important one in our investigation.⁶ Generally he was dependent on earlier heresiological lists, notably those of Irenaeus and Hippolytus. However, when we come specifically to his chapter on the Nazarenes, we must start from scratch: the Nazarenes are named in no extant work before Epiphanius. First let us bring the chapter in full.⁷
Chapter Four
Jerome

At least as important for our study as Epiphanius is his younger contemporary Jerome. This most learned and prolific of the Church Fathers has left us fully a third of our testimonies and fragments of the Gospel according to the Hebrews as well as other information about the Nazarenes in some detail and valuable excerpts from one of their own works. However, more than any other of our sources, Jerome is surrounded by controversy. For this reason it will be useful to set the chronology of his life and writings insofar as it touches on the subject of the Nazarenes.
Chapter Five

Patristic Evidence after Jerome

While it is true that Epiphanius and Jerome form the core of our study, useful information about the Nazarenes, and particularly about their place in early Church thought, can be gained from a consideration of their treatment by later Christian writers. We shall be led into a valuable path of investigation if we move chronologically and first consider a heresiographer who made no mention of the sect.
Although Eusebius does mention GH by name, it is a moot point whether he actually saw the gospel. Epiphanius only once (pan. 30 37) gives us the name κατὰ Ἑβραίους (“according to the Hebrews”), as does Didymus the Blind. This takes us up to Jerome, who mentions GH (secundum or juxta Hebraeos) frequently. If he saw it, he was the only Latin writer to have done so.

We have focused here on specific mentions of the “Gospel according to the Hebrews” for two reasons which will serve to highlight the complications involved. First of all, let us note that while the gospel may have been recorded in a Semitic language even before the end of the first century, we do not find the name “Gospel according to the Hebrews” until the third century, and before Jerome at the end of the fourth century it is mentioned by name less than ten times. Elsewhere we find references to a nameless gospel written in Hebrew characters. The general impression is that this gospel did not have a specific, known name until fairly late, and that this name designated its users rather than its author. However—and this is our second point—the period during which the designation appeared was a time, as we have seen, when there was general unfamiliarity in the Gentile Church with the finer distinctions existing in Jewish Christianity. The name “Ebionite” was used for Nazarenes as well as for Ebionites, and more generally, they were all thought of as those Christians from among the Jews or Hebrews who still adhered to the Law and read the Bible in Hebrew. If there were few Christians from among the Gentiles who had actually seen a gospel written in Hebrew letters, they were even fewer who would have been able to tell if it was in Hebrew or Aramaic much less to discern textual and doctrinal differences between two such gospels.

For indeed it is clear that there was not just one “authorized version” of GH. The fragments which have come to us ascribed to some Hebrew gospel will not all fit neatly into one consistent, contiguous work. All of this is significant for our study of the Nazarenes and their doctrines. No writer before Epiphanius mentions the Nazarenes by name, but Epiphanius, by his own admission (pan. 29 9 4), never saw a copy of their gospel, and so could not have compared it with that used by the Ebionites, from which he quotes. There is, therefore, no reason for us to assume that every patristic reference to a gospel written in Hebrew letters speaks of the same gospel. Nor should we be too quick to take all such references and use them as pieces in the Nazarene puzzle.
It is our position, then, that the one earliest Urschrift (if there was only one) or collection of logia was variously adapted, expanded, edited, and used by the different streams of Jewish Christianity.⁹ By this view there was only one so-called GH, but it made its appearance as the GH of the Ebionites, the GH of the Nazarenes, and perhaps the GH used by Egyptian Jewish Christians, called “the Gospel according to the Egyptians.” From the earliest times the name assigned to the basic writing was Matthew’s, and it was probably by that name that each group knew its own recension of GH, if they did not simply call it “the gospel.” Some groups had their gospel in a Greek translation, and it would seem that additions to the basic translation may have been made in Greek.

Here we must make some observations on the name “The Gospel of the Nazarenes.” In most dictionaries and encyclopedias of Christianity, as well as in other scholarly work, this gospel is presented as an attested title for a known ancient work. The fact is that the earliest appearances of the name “Gospel of the Nazarenes” are in the ninth century, within a very few years of each other. Haimo of Auxerre (d. 855) in his commentary on Isaiah¹⁰ makes an indirect quotation from an evangeliunum Nazarenorum. Whether he actually saw a manuscript with that title we cannot say for sure, but it seems most likely that he was influenced in his use of the name by Jerome.¹¹ As we have noted, Jerome repeatedly mentions the Gospel of (or according to) the Hebrews “which is read by the Nazarenes.” While he himself never uses the title evangeliunum Nazarenorum, it is a natural step from his words, a step that Haimo evidently took.

The other ninth-century appearance of this derived name we have already seen in the previous chapter. It is by Paschasius Radbertus around the year 860.¹² We have already noted his dependence on Jerome. There is no reason to look for any connection between these two medieval authors in this matter; the derivation of the name “Gospel of the Nazarenes” from Jerome’s words is so natural that many have done it and are doing it even until today.¹³

The name “Gospel of the Nazarenes” (GN), then, is a later hybrid, derived from Jerome. Jerome himself only knew the name “Gospel according to the Hebrews” or “Matthew.” However, as Vielhauer has observed, Jerome had only one work in mind when he wrote of this Hebrew gospel.¹⁴ The designations GH and GN may be only a convenient way of differentiating recensions of the same basic work. But if we are to use them in that way, let us be clear that we are doing so and not think that we are speaking of two works independent of each other, composed separately and in different languages.

Chapter Seven

Jewish Sources

No investigation of the history of a phenomenon as Jewish as early Jewish Christianity can safely ignore the wealth of potential data available in Jewish written sources. Any wide study of Jewish Christianity will find much that is useful there, and indeed the renewed interest in the field in the last generation of scholarship has only lately begun to tap this well. In a work as narrowly defined as the present one, however, we shall find the talmudic material of only small help. We have chosen to restrict this study to that which can be identified as “Nazarene” with a minimum of speculation, because a structure built on a foundation of speculation and guesswork will be easily undermined. Hence we have kept our focus only on those places where the name Nazarene specifically appears, or where the sect can with reasonable certainty be identified from descriptions of its peculiar doctrines.

With this limitation, we may note that the name Nazarene(s) (נוצרי, נוצרים) appears only some dozen times in all extant talmudic literature.¹ In all but two of these cases it is found in the name ישו הנוצרי (yešu ha-nôzrî), Jesus the Nazarene. It must be noted that half of these passages were censored during the Middle Ages, either by Christian censors or by Jewish editors in fear of them.² Almost certainly, numerous other mentions of yešu ha-nôzrî or nôzirim were cut out of our extant texts and remain unrestorable, replaced in centuries past by אפיקורסין (ʾeʾpiqôrsîn) or צדוקים (ḏdûqîm) or similar harmless substitutes, or simply omitted altogether.

To take up an earlier matter, in the few appearances of נוצרי (nôzrî), there are no etymological data given. The town of Nazareth never appears in Talmudic literature, and Jewish sources have nothing to tell us of the provenance of the name Nazarene.


Summary and Conclusions

There emerges from our considerations an entity, a viable entity of Law-keeping Christians of Jewish background. These were direct descendants of the first Jewish believers in Jesus. They survived the destruction of Jerusalem in part because they fled successfully to Pella of the Decapolis, and in part because they had roots also in the Galilee. These Jewish Christians were called Nazarenes after Jesus, and probably received the title on the basis of early Christian interpretation of certain Old Testament passages (e.g. Isa. 11:1) as referring to the Messiah and specifically to Jesus himself. The Nazarenes were distinct from the Ebionites and prior to them. In fact, we have found that it is possible that there was a split in Nazarene ranks around the turn of the first century. This split was either over a matter of christological doctrine or over leadership of the community. Out of this split came the Ebionites, who can scarcely be separated from the Nazarenes on the basis of geography, but who can be easily distinguished from the standpoint of Christology.

The continued existence of this Nazarene entity can be traced with reasonable certainty through the fourth century, contingent upon the credence we give to the evidence of Epiphanius and Jerome at the end of that century. While their corroborating testimonies cannot fairly be dismissed, even without them we must allow for the continuation of the Nazarenes at least to the third century. The sect numbered only a few members, no doubt. Geographically they were limited to pockets of settlement along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, mostly just east of the Jordan rift. They were to be found in the Galilee and probably in Jerusalem until 115, when all Jews were expelled from the city. It would seem that members of the sect moved northward at a somewhat later date and were to be found also in the area of Beroea of Coele Syria near the end of the fourth century. There is no firm evidence of any Nazarene presence in the West, in Africa, or even further to the East. Their numbers stayed as limited as their geographical presence.

What we have seen of their doctrines lines up well with the developing christological doctrines of the greater catholic Church. The sect seems to have been basically trinitarian. They accepted the virgin birth and affirmed the deity of Jesus. They also seem to have had an embryonic, developing doctrine of the Holy Spirit, one which was no more nor indeed less developed than that of the greater Church at a comparable stage. Contrary to other Jewish Christian groups of the time (and also to current scholarly opinion) they did not reject the apostleship of Paul. They recognized his commission from God to preach to the gentiles, and they seem fully to have accepted the fruit of his labors: the “Church from the Gentiles.” Those fathers of the fourth century who wrote against them could find nothing in their beliefs to condemn; their objections were to matters of praxis. The Nazarenes, as Jews, continued to observe certain aspects of Mosaic Law, including circumcision and the Sabbath, and it was this which brought about their exclusion from the Church. This rejection and exclusion was, however, gradual. For this reason—and because Nazarene numbers remained small throughout—Church writers do not mention Nazarenes by name until such a time as the Church was free from persecution and began to refine its own narrowed orthodoxy. The Nazarenes were not included in the earlier heresy lists because they were simply not considered heretical enough or a threat to “orthodoxy.” While there may have been very little intercommunal contact, individual Nazarenes seem to have had sporadic visits with certain Church leaders. We have found it unlikely that either Epiphanius or Jerome had any direct contact with the community of the Nazarenes, although the latter may just possibly have met individuals from the sect.

On the Jewish side, the exclusion of the Nazarenes was not nearly so gradual. At the end of the first century, the birkat ha-míním was formulated with the sect specifically named. This is recorded in both patristic and Jewish sources. Nonetheless, we have found it possible that there was some limited synagogue attendance by Nazarenes into the early decades of the second century. In addition to this, we find continued contact between the two communities in the form of a polemic or dialogue. Such contact should not surprise us, since the Nazarenes lived in the same geographical areas with predominantly Jewish communities. However, as the polemic and distrust grew, the separation and isolation from the Jewish community were increased. Different steps along the way effected this separation: the flight to Pella, the birkat ha-míním, the refusal of the Nazarenes to recognize and support Bar Kochba. By the middle of the second century, the rift was probably complete.

The sectarians themselves kept up their knowledge of Hebrew, and in this we may perhaps see an indication that they maintained (as one would expect) some inter-


nal system of education. They read the Old Testament and at least one gospel in Hebrew. What we can clearly isolate from this gospel as being appropriate to the Nazarene sect confirms what we find elsewhere about their doctrines, although the inherently uncertain nature of fragment isolation and gospel exegesis yields relatively little by way of fresh information about the group.

Of particular interest is the Nazarene commentary on Isaiah. This work shows clearly that the rejection was not solely from the Jewish side. The Nazarenes refused to accept the authority established by the Pharisaic camp after the destruction of Jerusalem, and in so refusing they adjudicated their own isolation from the converging flow of what we call Judaism. Just as they rejected the Church’s setting aside of the Law of Moses, so also they refused the rabbis’ expansive interpretations of it. In other words, they rejected halakah as it was developing in rabbinic Judaism. It is not far wrong to say that the demise of the Nazarenes resulted from their own restrictive approach to the Law. Such a spurning of rabbinic authority could not, of course, be tolerated by that authority.

There is another factor in this separation from Judaism, one of perhaps greater importance than the rejection of halakah. It is the person of Jesus. With their acceptance and proclamation of the deity of Jesus, the Nazarenes went beyond allowable limits for a Judaism of ever stricter monotheism. Either one of these—their non-acceptance of rabbinic halakah and even more their belief in Jesus—would have been sufficient to consign them to the category of apostates. From talmudic sources we have seen that the Nazarenes may have conducted an active program of evangelism among Jews. The Isaiah commentary confirms that they never relinquished hope that Jews would one day turn away from tradition and towards Jesus: “O Sons of Israel, who deny the Son of God with such hurtful resolution, return to him and to his apostles.”

APPENDIXES


List of Abbreviations

Altaner B. Altaner and A. Stuiber, Patrologie (1966)
ANCL Ante-Nicene Christian Library
Av. Zar. Avodah Zarah
Bardenhewer O. Bardenhewer, Geschichte der altkirchlichen Literatur (1913–1932)
BJRL Bulletin of the John Rylands Library
Brach. Brachot
BZ Biblische Zeitschrift
CC Corpus Christianorum
CSEL Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiastorunm Latinorum
DTC Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique
Epiph. Epiphanius
ERE Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (Hastings)
Eus. Eusebius
GCS Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller
GenR Midrash Genesis
GH Gospel according to the Hebrews
GN Gospel according to the Nazarenes
HE Historia Ecclesiastica
H-S E. Hennecke (W. Schneemelcher), New Testament Apocrypha (1963)
HTR Harvard Theological Review
HUCA Hebrew Union College Annual
Hull. Hullin
j Palestinian (Jerusalem) Talmud
JBL Journal of Biblical Literature
JJS Journal of Jewish Studies
JQR Jewish Quarterly Review
JTS Journal of Theological Studies
LA Liber Annuus
Liddell-Scott H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, H.S. Jones, Greek-English Lexicon (1968)
M Mishnah
NovTest Novum Testamentum
NT New Testament
NTS New Testament Studies
ODCC Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church
OT Old Testament
pan. panarion
PG J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Graeca
PL J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina
RAC Reallekikon für Antike und Christentum
RB Revue Biblique
REJ Revue des Études Juives
RGG Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart
RSR Recherches de Science Religieuse
Sanh. Sanhedrin
Shabb. Shabbat
T Tosefta
ThDNT Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
ThZ Theologische Zeitschrift
TLZ Theologische Literaturzeitung
TU Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
VC Vigiliae Christianae
ZATW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZNTW Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde des Urchristentums

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