

Nazarene Jewish Christianity
by Ray Pritz

A Book Review by Paul Sumner ¹

Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity (From the End of the New Testament Period Until its Disappearance in the Fourth Century)* Jerusalem: Magnes Press; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988, 153 pages, with bibliography.

Purpose of the Book: To alleviate a confusion created by the Church Fathers over the composition and concepts of Jewish Christianity. The Fathers—and not a few modern scholars—have tended to “box in” all Jewish believers under the name *Ebionite*. “But Ebionism was not the direct heir of the Jewish apostolic church; it was at best only third generation” (p. 9). Other groups existed among ethnic Jews, but most scholarship has focused only on the Ebionites. Before this book, no comprehensive monograph had been done on the group known as the “Nazarenes.”

The book is extensively footnoted, with references to primary literature in the original languages and to ancient and modern secondary discussions of the documents and issues involved.

Chapter Contents

In Chapter 1, Pritz discusses the use of the name “Nazarene” for Jesus,² and concludes that it probably derived not from the term Nazirite but from the Hebrew word for “branch” in Isaiah 11:1 [נֶצֶר, *netser*]. The term “Nazarene” [Ναζωραίου] is applied first to Jesus’ followers in Acts 24:5, where Tertullus accuses Paul of being “a ringleader [NRSV: agitator] of the sect of Nazarenes.” This in fact is the only time the word is used in the NT for the disciples. Pritz argues that this designation signified the *Jewish* disciples, while the Latinized term “Christians” [Χριστιανοί] designated *Gentile* believers, beginning in Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:26; cf. Acts 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16) (pp. 13-17).

In Chapter 2, Pritz discusses passages from various Church Fathers on Jewish Christian sects. Included are statements from Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*, Hippolytus’ *Refutation of All Heresies*, Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue*

¹ Paul B. Sumner (Pepperdine University, July 19, 1991). Edited July 13, 2019.

² Jesus is referred to as “Nazarene” in Matt 2:23, 26:71; Luke 18:37; John 18:5, 7; Acts 2:22, 3:6, 4:10, 6:14 [9:5 in some MSS], 22:8, 26:9.

with *Trypho the Jew*, Origen's *Contra Celsum*, and Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. Pritz shows how the sources show awareness of two kinds of Christians from the Jewish people based on Christology. But the Fathers label both kinds as Ebionites, thus confusing the issue. Most Fathers also classify them as "heretics." Eusebius seems to be most confused about them (cf. *Ecclesiastical History* III, 27, 2-6).

Chapter 3 focuses on the 4th century Father Epiphanius. In his *Panarion* 29, 1-9 ("Refutation of All Heresies"), Epiphanius is the first known writer to mention a separate Jewish Christian group called the "Nazarenes," noting that all Christians were once called by this epithet (1,3). He says that the Jewish Christians were also called "Iessians" [Ἰεσσαίους], apparently after David's father Jesse,³ although he is uncertain of this derivation, and attempts to somehow connect the term with Philo's "Essaioi" or *Therapeutae*.

Chapter 4 discusses statements by Jerome on the Nazarenes found in his various biblical commentaries. Chapter 5 next outlines patristic evidence after Jerome; most all of which draws on the earlier sources. Among them, Augustine always has a negative opinion of the "born heretics" who circumcise "in a Jewish way" (pp. 76-77).

Then in Chapter 6, Pritz discusses the existence of the "Gospel of the Hebrews" and its ties to Jewish Christians. Apparently, both the Nazarenes and the Ebionites had a Hebrew version of the sayings of Jesus, and each one is called "[The Gospel of] Matthew." Numerous Church Fathers attest to the existence of a Hebrew Gospel, but no extant copy has been found. Fragmentary quotations from such a gospel are found in patristic works. These quotes reveal a text with elements of both Nazarene and Ebionite theology.

Finally, Chapter 7 investigates Rabbinic statements about "Yeshu the Nazarene" and his "Nazarene" disciples. This section also analyzes the *Birkat haMinim*, the so-called "curse" inserted into the synagogue liturgy around 80 AD that exposed Jewish Christians.⁴

³ Cp. Isa 11:1—"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch [*netser*] shall grow out of his roots." Here the LXX spelling for "Jesse" is Ἰεσσαί.

⁴ This *Birkat* is the 12th Benediction of the *Shemonah Esreh* (or "Amidah"): "May the *Notsrim* [Nazarenes] and the *Minim* [heretics, sectarians] perish in a moment." By inserting this into the public worship service, the rabbis hoped to discover which Jews in their meetings were followers of Jesus, assuming that no true disciple would voice a curse such as this against himself. This curse against the *Notsrim* and *Minim* has

The book contains three appendixes: (1) Greek text of Epiphanius' *Panarion* 29 on the Nazarenes; (2) geographical locations of the Nazarenes; and (3) the historicity of the Pella tradition (Jewish Christians supposedly fled to Pella in Jordan before the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD).

What the Nazarenes Believed

The various comments by the Fathers give us a brief summary of what the Nazarenes practiced and believed (e.g., pp. 35, 55).

- 1) They used both portions of Scripture, including Paul
- 2) They read the Scripture in Hebrew and used a Hebrew gospel
- 3) They believed in the resurrection of the dead
- 4) They believed that God is the creator
- 5) They believed in one God and in his son Jesus Christ
- 6) They observed the Law of Moses (including Sabbath, circumcision, and the appointed feasts) ⁵
- 7) They were to be found "in all the synagogues of the East among the Jews" (Jerome) ⁶

Authority. Unlike the Ebionites, the Nazarenes apparently used and quoted the writings of Paul. But their continued observance of the Torah generally offended the Fathers, who were typically anti-Judaic. However, even Epiphanius (who thought the Law was taboo) had to admit about the Nazarenes: "Only in this respect [Jewish observance] they differ from the . . . Christians" (p. 45). On the other hand, the Nazarenes refused to accept the authority of the Pharisees after the Fall of Jerusalem and rejected the Oral Law (Halakhah), the rabbinic interpretations of the Torah (pp. 62-68).

Christology. Of greater concern to the Church Fathers was Nazarene *Christology*. Unlike the Ebionites who believed that Jesus was the son of Mary and Joseph, the Nazarenes believed he was God's son, born of the virgin Mary. This "higher" Christology probably kept them within the Christian camp. They did, however, exhibit what Pritz calls "a

since been removed from modern versions. [Joseph Hertz, *Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1948), 143-144]

⁵ Jewish believers in Jerusalem were "zealots for the Torah" (Acts 21:20).

⁶ Notice that Jewish believers in Damascus attend the synagogues (plural), where Paul finds and arrests them (Acts 9:2, 22:19, 26:11).

less developed" or "embryonic" doctrine of the Holy Spirit. That is, they did not clearly worship the Spirit as a co-member of the Godhead.⁷

Conclusion

For all their adherence to both the Old and New Covenants, the Nazarenes actually lived outside the camps of both Catholic Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. The Church Fathers usually ridiculed them as heretics of some stripe (p. 74); the Synagogue hated them as rebellious traitors. Whether the Nazarenes were direct descendants of the original Jewish apostolic church cannot be finally determined. (Pritz seems to think they were.) The similarities between them are quite striking and the differences are not apparent. Eventually, all mention of the Nazarenes ceases. This may or may *not* be an indication that they died out (contra Pritz), but they certainly did not fit into the evolving definitions of what it meant to be either "Jew" or "Christian." Thus they represent a third *path*.

Paul B. Sumner

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⁷ This is consonant with the New Testament itself, where worship is directed to God and to Jesus alone. Significantly, the Rabbinic references to the Nazarenes indicate that the *Minim* believed in *Two Powers in Heaven*, not three. See discussion in Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven (Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), and R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Ktav, orig. 1903).