

Ebionite Beliefs and Practices

Written by Administrator

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In this article I will only point out some major beliefs and practices of the Ebionites which are known from patristic writings of the early centuries and some surviving documents which apparently stem from the Ebionites themselves. In some of my other articles these beliefs and practices are vindicated. The first thing I want to point out is the fact that the Ebionites had a very peculiar attitude towards the Jewish Pentateuch and the Bible in general. They argued that the Jewish Pentateuch was falsified and that it contained many pericopes which were of diabolical origin. They likewise believed that the Old Testament as a whole was corrupted by the Jewish scribes and was not preserved in its original form. Of the canonical Gospels they only accepted Matthew in its original Hebrew form.

They outrightly rejected all the epistles of Paul. The first Ebionite doctrine therefore holds that the Bible is fallible and that not everything in the Bible is inspired or should be believed and practiced. The following references will demonstrate this fact. Church Father Epiphanius, who knew some Ebionites personally, testifies that they did not accept the entire Jewish Pentateuch but rather suppressed and rejected certain passages:

“They do not accept the whole of the Pentateuch of Moses, but suppress certain passages” [Panarion XXX, 8].

Epiphanius repeats this statement in Panarion XXX, 18. The Ebionites believed that original Pentateuch of Moses was corrupted by the lying scribes and contained many falsehoods which, according to them, were contrary to the nature and character of God. They claimed that it was the mission of Jesus to purge these falsehoods and restore the true Pentateuch. Rabbi Philip Sigal, in his book *Judaism - The Evolution of a Faith*, on p. 83, states:

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*“They [Ebionites] regarded him [Jesus] as the last and the greatest of the prophets of Israel, who restored a corrupted Torah of Moses to its original state.”*¹

Professor Ferguson, in his book *The Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, on p. 578, says of the Ebionites:

*“They removed many passages from the Old Testament as ‘false pericopes’, claiming that passages about animal sacrifice and the monarchy and offensive stories about the patriarchs were interpolations.”*²

The Jewish Encyclopedia, Art. Jewish Christian Sects, o p. 39, says:

*“Similarly discarded were all passages [of the Bible] providing for kingship - an institution which they abhorred - all anthropomorphic expressions of God, and unpraiseworthy stories about the representatives of true prophecy, .e.g., Adam’s sin, Noah’s drunkenness, Abraham and Jacob’s polygamy, etc.”*³

Catholic Cardinal Danilou, in his book *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, on p. 64, says of the Ebionites:

*“They see Jesus as a Reformer of the Law who brings it back to true ideas of Moses. As it exists in Judaism the Law seems to them to be mixed with elements of diabolical origin which are later than Moses.”*⁴

From the preachings of Apostle Peter, preserved in the *Clementine Homilies*, where many ideas and beliefs of the Ebionites are preserved, we find that Peter held a very negative opinion of the Jewish Scriptures. In Homily II, Ch. 38, Peter says:

“For the Scriptures have had joined to them many falsehoods against God...after a little the

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written law had added to it certain falsehoods contrary to the law of God.”

In Homily III, Ch. 9, Peter says:

“Worthy, therefore, of rejection is every one who is willing so much as to hear anything against the monarchy of God; but if any one dares to hear anything against God, as trusting in the Scriptures, let him first of all consider with me that if any one, as he pleases, form a dogma agreeable to himself, and then carefully search the Scriptures, he will be able to produce many testimonies from them in favour of the dogma that he has formed. How, then, can confidence be placed in them against God, when what every man wishes is found in them?”

In Homily II, Ch. 52, Peter rejects several well known passages of the Jewish Pentateuch which deal with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. Peter states that these passages which he condemns and rejects are “impious imaginations:”

“Assuredly, with good reason, I neither believe anything against God, nor against the just men recorded in the law, taking for granted that they are impious imaginations. For, as I am persuaded, 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 twelve 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 - he who set forth the law of God to all the world, and for his right judgement has been testified to as a faithful steward.”

In Homily II, Ch. 51, Peter explicitly says:

“If, therefore, some of the Scriptures are true and some false, with good reason said our Master, ‘be ye good money changers,’ inasmuch as in the Scriptures there are some true sayings and some spurious.”

Peter repeats this assertion in Homily III, Ch. 50:

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“And also, inasmuch He [Jesus] said, ‘Be ye prudent money-changers,’ it is because there are genuine and spurious words.”

And, finally, Peter repeats this in Homily XVIII, Ch. 20, in more elaborate form:

“But one might with good reason maintain that it was with reference to those who thought Him to be such that the statement was made, ‘No one knoweth the Father but the Son, as no one knoweth even the Son, but the Father.’ And reasonably. For if they had known, they would not have sinned, by trusting to the books written against God, for the purpose of trying. But somewhere also He says, wishing to exhibit the cause of their error more distinctly to them, ‘On this account ye do err, not knowing the true things of the Scriptures, on which account ye are ignorant also of the power of God.’ Wherefore every man who wishes to be saved must become, as the Teacher said, a judge of the books written to try us. For thus He spake: ‘Become experienced bankers.’ Now the need of bankers arises from the circumstance that the spurious is mixed with the genuine.”

The statement of Jesus concerning “experienced bankers” was also known to Church Father Origen who quotes it in his *Commentary on John* 19:7. As the Paulinist Christianity was slowly emerging into Catholic Christianity, its predominantly gentile adherents began to believe and teach that Jesus was eternal and almighty God - co-equal with his Father. At the same time they taught the virgin birth concept and soon afterwards they added the doctrine of

Mary’s perpetual virginity. The Ebionites vigorously repudiated and condemned these teachings which, for them, were blasphemous doctrines. Catholic Cardinal Danilou, in his book *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, on p. 63, points out:

“By combining the evidence from the Fathers and from the Ebionite documents it is possible to form some idea of Ebionite theology... They believe in Jesus, and that distinguishes them radically from the Jews. But they regard Jesus simply as a man chosen by God. They deny his virgin birth - a point they make very clear. It was at his baptism that a power from God descended on him. The Ebionites are radically anti-trinitarian.”

Church historian Eusebius, who lived and wrote in the 4th century, testified that Ebionites did not believe in the virgin birth of Jesus and that they denied his deity:

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“The heresy of the Ebionites as it is called, asserts that Christ was born of Joseph and Mary, and supposes him to be a mere man.”□

Rabbi Philip Sigal, in his book *Judaism - Evolution of a Faith*, on p. 82, says:

“Ebionites believed that Jesus was the human son of the sexual union of Joseph and Mary. Moreover, they regarded him as the last and the greatest of the prophets of Israel, who restored a corrupted Torah of Moses to its original state.”□

The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. 4, on p. 576, states:

“They [Ebionites] saw Jesus as a prophet, an exceptional□ man in the line of Jewish prophets [as described in Deuteronomy 18:15] and denied the virgin birth.”

□

Professor James Dunn, in his book *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, on pp. 241-242, expressly states:

“One of the most frequently attested features of Ebionite christology is their affirmation that Jesus’s birth was wholly natural - he was the natural son of Joseph and Mary.”□

Apostle Peter in the *Clementine Homilies*, Homily XVI, Chps. 15-17, says:

“Our Lord neither asserted that there were gods except the Creator of all, nor did he proclaim himself to be God, but He with reason pronounced blessed him who called Him the Son of the God who has arranged the universe...It is the peculiarity of the Father not to have been begotten, but of the Son to have been begotten...he who is not the same in all respects as some one, cannot have all the same appellations applied to him as that person...if the one happens to be self-begotten or unbegotten, they cannot be called the same; nor can it be asserted of him who has been begotten that he is of the same substance as he is who has

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begotten him. Learn this also: The bodies of men have immortal souls, which have been clothed with the breath of God; and having come forth from God, they are of the same substance, but they are not gods. But if they are gods, then in this way the souls of men, both those who have died, and those who are alive, and those who shall come into being, are gods. But if in the spirit of controversy you maintain that these are also gods, what great matter is it, then, for Christ to be called God? For He has only what all have. We call Him God who peculiar attributes cannot belong to the nature of any other; for, as He is called the Unbounded because He is boundless on every side, it must of necessity be the case that it is no other one's peculiar attribute to be called unbounded, as another cannot in like manner be boundless. But if any one says that it is possible, he is wrong; for two things boundless on every side cannot co-exist, for the one is bounded by the other. Thus it is in the nature of things that the unbegotten is one."

The Ebionites were strict unitarians and vigorously opposed the Trinity dogma. They believed that there is only one supreme and sovereign God Who is truly and genuinely God. They argued that even Jesus who was the greatest of all the prophets acknowledged Him as God and prayed to Him and worshipped Him. The Almighty God and Father of Jesus never prayed to Jesus or ever bowed down in worship before him. The Ebionites also rejected the Jewish sacrificial cultus and practiced vegetarianism. They also abstained from wine and other intoxicating beverages. They insisted that Adam was a true prophet and therefore rejected the "original sin" dogma of Catholic Christianity. They maintained that Jesus's mission was strictly to teach and it had nothing to do with Christian dogma of atonement.

They believed and dogmatically taught that Jesus was murdered by the Jews simply because they could not accept his views and doctrines and that it had nothing to do with atonement or paying the penalty for a supposed sin of Adam or that of his posterity. When the Ebionites observed the so-called "Lord's Supper" or "Eucharist," commemorating Jesus's death, they did not use wine but only water - proving that they did not believe in the blood atonement. Cardinal Danilou, in his book *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, on pp. 63-64, writes of Ebionites:

"They also reject any aspect of Christianity which makes it a religion of salvation. For them Christ's mission is simply of teaching... They see Jesus as a reformer of the Law who brings it back to the true ideas of Moses. As it exists in Judaism the Law seems to them to be mixed with elements of diabolical origin which are of later date than Moses. The elements to be rejected are primarily the Temple worship and, in particular, bloody sacrifices."

Great scholar Dr. Larsen, in his book *The Essene Heritage*, points out:

"It was the basic Essene doctrine that sin did not derive from Adam but from the activities of the

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fallen angels known as Watchers...Some of the lower angels came to this earth to give instruction...They became degenerate and could no more ascend to heaven. This was the Fall, precisely as we learn in Enoch and Jubilees...This, according to Essene-Ebionite doctrine, was the origin of that dreadful impiety, the eating of meat. Blood thus shed, polluted the air with noxious vapors; mankind was filled with diseases; and death came prematurely and in agony."

□

The Dictionary of Historical Theology, Art. Ebionites, on p. 167, points out that the Ebionites rejected Paul's teaching concerning soteriology and blood atonement:

"He [Jesus] was the 'true prophet' [cf. Deut. 18:15-22], a second Moses, a teacher and reformer...He was not a priest, rather, he came to abolish the sacrificial cultus and to restore the true, spiritual meaning of the Mosaic code. The Pauline construal of the death of Jesus as sacrifice was therefore wrong. The name 'Christ' was given to Jesus at his baptism, when God adopted him as his messianic prophet. The Ebionites maintained a strong eschatological hope: the Son of Man, transfigured into supra-angelic form, would return in glory. The twin foci of Ebionite Christology were thus baptism and parousia, not incarnation and atonement."□

The Ebionites maintained that living water and not the blood of the sacrificial victim purified the convert and was administered for the remission of sins. They therefore focused on two major doctrines: BAPTISM and PAROUSIA [the return of Jesus in glory]. The Catholic Christianity [and later also the Protestant Christianity] focussed on INCARNATION [God in the flesh theory] and ATONEMENT [human sacrifice of Jesus in order to appease the wrath of God and atone for the sin of Adam]. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 2, Art. Ebionites, on p. 10, says:*

"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...Christianity□ for them was 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."

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Man, Myth and Magic - The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion and the Unknown, Art. St. Paul, on p. 2152, points out:

“He [Paul] imagines that before a series of world-ages [aiones], of which present is the last, God planned to save mankind from their subjection to the archontes. The plan took the form of deceiving the archontes by sending into the world a pre-existent divine being, designated the ‘Lord of Glory’, who was incarnated in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Not recognizing his true nature, the archontes crucified Jesus, and thereby forfeited their hold over mankind. The implications of Paul’s brief but pregnant statements were worked out by later Christian theologians into what became the classic form of the doctrine of salvation. Paul thus identified Jesus as the incarnation of the “Lord of Glory”, and he interpreted his crucifixion as the climax of God’s plan of salvation. He makes the archontes responsible for his crucifixion...By so doing, Paul transformed the original belief in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel into an esoteric doctrine of a divine saviour, whose death had delivered mankind from their enslavement to the planetary powers. Such a presentation of Jesus was intelligible to Graeco-Roman society...In thus interpreting Christianity, Paul believed, as we have seen, that he was inspired by God for the salvation of the Gentiles, to whom the ‘gospel to the circumcised’ was both unintelligible and offensive. When, however, the original Jewish Christians at Jerusalem realized the nature of Paul’s teaching they were shocked and vigorously repudiated it. They refused to recognize Paul as an apostle [he had never been an original disciple of Jesus], and they sent emissaries to Paul’s converts to present their own ‘gospel’ as the authentic version of faith.”

Church Father Epiphanius, in his *Panarion* XXX, 16, points out that the Ebionites did not use wine when they observed the memorial of Yahshua’s death:

“They have a baptism of initiation and each year they celebrate certain mysteries in imitation of the Church of the Christians. In these mysteries they use unleavened bread and, for the other part, pure water.”

Catholic Cardinal Jean Danilou, in his book *The Theology of the Jewish Christianity*, on p. 57, comments on the statement of Epiphanius:

“The reference to mysteries is evidently concerned with the Eucharist, and one detail in

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particular should be noticed, the exclusion of the wine.”

Church Father Epiphanius also testified that the Ebionites rejected the Jewish sacrificial cultus and that they were in fact vegetarian. He points out that the Ebionites rejected the biblical passages where it was said that any holy patriarch and therefore a true prophet of God ever offered a bloody sacrifice or ate the flesh of an animal:

“They do not accept the whole of the Pentateuch of Moses, but suppress certain passages. If in regard to the eating of meat you raise the objection that Abraham offered a calf to the angels they say that they do not believe that” [Panarion XXX, 8].

“They do not accept the entire Pentateuch of Moses, but suppress certain passages, that Abraham, for example, offered a calf with milk to the angels, or that Noah, Isaac, Jacob or Moses made sacrifice” [Panarion XXX, 18].

Rev. Findlay, in his book *The Apocryphal Gospels from History of Christianity in the Light of Modern Knowledge*, says of the Ebionites:

“In practice they were vegetarians, looking with abhorrence on flesh as food and slaying of animals for sacrifice.”

In his book *Byways in Early Christian Literature*, on p. 38, Rev. Findlay says that the Ebionites:

“had an abhorrence of all bloody sacrifices and the eating of flesh.”

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, on p. 184, says of the Ebionites:

“They rejected the Old Testament sacrificial laws and were vegetarians.”

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The Catholic Encyclopedia, Art. Ebionites, on p. 29, says of the Ebionites: “Devoted to a life of strictest poverty and community of goods, they practiced vegetarianism.”

From the above references it is clear that the Ebionites rejected the sacrificial cultus and that they condemned those who killed animals for either sacrifice or in order to feast on their flesh. It is also apparent that they rejected the Christian view on soteriology and blood atonement and the use of wine as an emblem of Jesus’s blood, since in their view the fall did not originate with Adam but rather with the Watchers who corrupted all flesh and introduced men to sacrificial orgies and the eating of animal flesh. There was another major doctrinal difference between the Ebionites and the Paulinist or Catholic Christianity. The Church Fathers and later the bishops of the Catholic Christianity discarded God’s Law and taught that Jesus abolished and abrogated the Mosaic Law altogether.

They maintained that Jesus nailed God’s Law to a cross and therefore we are no longer obligated to observe it. In fact, the Catholic Christianity and even its offshoots - Protestant denominations - insist that those who obey God’s Law revealed to Moses on Sinai are legalists and in bondage. The Ebionites however maintained that every precept God originally revealed to Moses must be observed and that those who reject and nullify the commands revealed to Moses are apostates from the Law and therefore are not and cannot be God’s children. There seems to be a contradiction in the Ebionite stance towards the Law of God. On one hand they rejected many commands of the Jewish Pentateuch as uninspired and in fact of diabolical origin while on the other they maintained that every single precept of God’s Law given on Sinai must not be abrogated or discarded.

The contradiction altogether disappears once we realise that the Ebionites maintained that the Law which God gave through Moses did not contain all the diabolical commands against which they so vigorously argued. They maintained that the Law which God revealed to Moses was the same and identical spiritual and universal Law which God originally gave through Adam, the true prophet, for all humanity. The Ebionites insisted that neither God changes nor His perfect and universal Law. As far as they are concerned, only the corrupted commands and forgeries in the Jewish Pentateuch must be rejected and discarded. All the true and original precepts which originate with God must be observed out of love and respect towards God and His will revealed through His eternal and holy Law. Christian historian Eusebius, of the 4th century, confirmed the fact that the Ebionites of his day emphasised the so-called Mosaic Law - insisting that those who reject and therefore keep on transgressing God’s Law are apostates:

“With them [Ebionites] the observance of the law was altogether necessary, as if they could not

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be saved, only by faith in Christ and a corresponding life.” Church Father Hippolytus wrote: *“But the Ebionaeans assert that the world is made by the true God... They live, however, in all respects according to the Law of Moses, alleging that they are thus justified”*

[The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 5, p. 147].

When Hippolytus says that the Ebionites lived in all respects according to the Law of Moses he does not mean that they offered sacrifices and killed animals in order to eat their flesh. Nor does he mean that they practiced slavery or did some other Mosaic practices which in fact they abhorred and condemned. He simply means that the Ebionites embraced the Mosaic Law - all the commands - which they believed and argued originated with God and are therefore binding on all humanity. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Art. Ebionites, on pp. 9-10, clearly explains Ebionite position towards the Mosaic Law:

“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 of Moses’ teaching.”

Apostle Peter, in *Clementine Homilies*, Homily III, Chps. 51-52, explains the Ebionite position on the Law which is based on the teachings of Yahshua: □

“And also that He [Yahshua] said, I am not come to destroy the law,’ and yet that he appeared to be destroying it, is the part of one intimating that the things which He destroyed did not belong to the law. And His saying, ‘The heaven and the earth shall pass away, but one jot or one tittle shall not pass from the law,’ intimated that things which pass away before the heaven and the earth do not belong to the law in reality. Since, then, while the heaven and the earth still stand, sacrifices have passed away, and kingdoms, and prophecies among those who are born of woman, and such like, as not being ordinances of God.”

Peter clearly explains that Jesus believed in and in fact upheld the TRUE LAW which Moses originally gave and insisted that his followers must obey every single command of that Law - even those very least [Matthew 5:17-20]. Jesus only condemned and discarded the commands which did not originate with God his Father but were rather of diabolical origin, written by the “lying pen of the scribes” [Jeremiah 8:8]. In Homily VIII, Ch. 10, Peter says of Adam and the

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original Law:

“But thus the matter stands. The only good God having made all things well, and having handed them over to man, who was made after His image, he who had been made breathing of the divinity of Him who made him, being a true Prophet and knowing all things, for the honour of the Father who had given all things to him, and for the salvation of the sons born of him, as a genuine father preserving his affection towards the children born of him, and wishing them, for their advantage, to love God and be loved of Him, showed them the way which leads to his friendship, teaching them by what deeds of men the one God and Lord of all is pleased; and having exhibited to them the things that are pleasing to Him, appointed a perpetual law to all, which neither can be abrogated by enemies, nor is vitiated by any impious one, nor is concealed in any place, but which can be read by all.”□

The Ebionites maintained that the true and eternal Law - with universal implications - was originally given through Adam. This Law was generally observed by the first seven generations. In the days of Enoch the fallen Watchers introduced wicked and lewd practices and they influenced vast majority of humanity to follow in their steps. The true Law was rejected and the whole earth was filled with violence. All flesh corrupted their original ordinances and began to kill each other and eat one another. Noah eventually restored the true and eternal Law which was later again rejected. At Mt. Sinai this true and universal Law was once again restored through Moses. However, the Law was rejected by the Jews and Israelites and they walked in the ways of the pagans. Jesus finally came as the last and the greatest prophet - the Prophet promised in Deuteronomy 18 - who once again restored the true and original spiritual Law.

This was the Law which the Ebionites observed and maintained that all humans are obligated to obey - especially those who claimed to be the followers of Jesus. Paul was the one who rejected this Law and claimed that Jesus abolished this Law and that he nailed it to his cross. He argued that salvation was now apart from the Law and was possible only and solely through faith in Jesus and his atoning blood. This was the position of Catholic Christianity and virtually all Protestant Christians.