

Gospel of the Ebionites

The Gospel of the Ebionites is known only by the quotations from Epiphanius in these passages of his *Panarion*: 30.13.1-8, 30.14.5, 30.16.4-5, and 30.22.4.

The following selection is excerpted from Montague Rhode James in *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1924), pp. 8-10.

All our knowledge of this is derived from Epiphanius, and he uses very confusing language about it (as about many other things). The passages are as follows:

And they (the Ebionites) receive the Gospel according to Matthew. For this they too, like the followers of Cerinthus and Merinthus, use to the exclusion of others. And they call it according to the Hebrews, as the truth is, that Matthew alone of New Testament writers made his exposition and preaching of the Gospel in Hebrew and in Hebrew letters.

Epiphanius goes on to say that he had heard of Hebrew versions of *John* and *Acts* kept privately in the treasuries (Geniza?) at Tiberias, and continues:

In the Gospel they have, called according to Matthew, but not wholly complete, but falsified and mutilated (they call it the Hebrew *Gospel*), it is contained that "There was a certain man named Jesus, and he was about thirty years old, who chose us. And coming unto Capernaum he entered into the house of Simon who was surnamed Peter, and opened his mouth and said: As I passed by the lake of Tiberias, I chose John and James the sons of Zebedee, and Simon and Andrew and <Philip and Bartholomew, James *the son* of Alphaeus and Thomas> Thaddaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the Iscariot: and thee, Matthew, as thou satest as the receipt of custom I called, and thou followedst me. You therefore I will to be twelve apostles for a testimony unto (of) Israel.

And:

John was baptizing, and there went out unto him Pharisees and were baptized, and all Jerusalem. And John had raiment of camel's hair and a leathern girdle about his loins: and his meat (it saith) was wild honey, whereof the taste is the *taste* of manna, as a cake *dipped* in oil. That, forsooth, they may pervert the word of truth into a lie and for locusts put a cake *dipped* in honey (sic).

These Ebionites were vegetarians and objected to the idea of eating locusts. A locust in Greek is *akris*, and the word they used for cake is *enkris*, so the change is slight. We shall meet with this tendency again.

And the beginning of their Gospel says that: It came to pass in the days of Herod the king of Judaea <when Caiaphas was high priest> that there came <a certain man> John <by name>, baptizing with the baptism of repentance in the river Jordan, who was said to be of the lineage of Aaron the priest, child of Zecharias and Elisabeth, and all went out unto him.

The borrowing from St. Luke is very evident here. He goes on:

And after a good deal more it continues that:

After the people were baptized, Jesus also came and was baptized by John; and as he came up from the water, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Holy Ghost in the likeness of a dove that descended and entered into him: and a voice from heaven saying: Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased: and again: This day have I begotten thee. And straightway there shone about the place a great light. Which when John saw (it saith) he saith unto him: Who art thou, Lord? and again *there was a*

voice from heaven saying unto him: This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. And then (it saith) John fell down before him and said: I beseech thee, Lord, baptize thou me. But he prevented him saying: Suffer it (*or* let it go): for thus it behoveth that all things should be fulfilled.

And on this account they say that Jesus was begotten of the seed of a man, and was chosen; and so by the choice *of God* he was called the Son of God from the Christ that came into him from above in the likeness of a dove. And they deny that he was begotten of God the Father, but say that he was created as one of the archangels, yet greater, and that he is Lord of the angels and of all things made by the Almighty, and that he came and taught, as the Gospel (so called) current among them contains, that, 'I came to destroy the sacrifices, and if ye cease not from sacrificing, the wrath *of God* will not cease from you'.

(With reference to the Passover and the evasion of the idea that Jesus partook of flesh:)

They have changed the saying, as is plain to all from the combination of phrases, and have made the disciples say: Where wilt thou that we make ready for thee to eat the Passover? and him, forsooth, say Have I desired with desire to eat this flesh *of* the Passover with you?

These fragments show clearly that the Gospel was designed to support a particular set of views. They enable us also to distinguish it from the Gospel according to the Hebrews, for, among other things, the accounts of the Baptism in the two are quite different. Epiphanius is only confusing the issue when he talks of it as the Hebrew Gospel - or rather, the Ebionites may be guilty of the confusion, for he attributes the name to them.

The Gospel according to the Twelve, or 'of the Twelve', mentioned by Origen (Ambrose and Jerome) is identified by Zahn with the Ebionite Gospel. He makes a good case for the identification. If the two are not identical, it can only be said that we know nothing of the Gospel according to the Twelve.

Revillout, indeed, claims the title for certain Coptic fragments of narratives of the Passion which are described in their proper place in this collection: but no one has been found to follow his lead.