

## THE PRE-CHRISTIAN NASAREANS.

BY A. KAMPMEIER.

IT is the merit of Dr. W. B. Smith to have called attention in his work on the pre-Christian Jesus (*Der vorchristliche Jesus*) to the pre-Christian Nasareans<sup>1</sup> of Epiphanius, whom he assumes to have been the same as the Nazoreans or Nazarenes of the New Testament, the first followers of Jesus.

Now what are the facts concerning these Nasareans?

Epiphanius in his works on heresies classifies them under several main heads. I. Pre-Christian heresies: (1) Those of the Greeks; (2) of the Jews; (3) of the Samaritans. II. The post-Christian heresies of Christianity.

Among the pre-Christian heresies of Judaism he places that of the Nasareans in proximity to the Hemerobaptists, "who practise daily washings in order to free themselves from every guilt," and the Osseans, called by him once Ossenes (*Anakephalaios* 134 B. ed. Dindorf), and once Esseans (*Ankyrotos*, 12), "who follow the Jewish law in everything but also use other writings besides the law and reject most of the prophets" (*Anakeph.* 134 B et Proemium. Panarii).

Like the Osseans, who lived on the east side of the Jordan in Iturea and Moabitis near the Dead Sea (*Panarion* XIX), the Nasareans also originated east of the Jordan in Gilead and Bashan (*Pan.* XVIII). Of their beliefs Epiphanius speaks in four places.

In *Anakeph.* 134 C he says: "The Nasareans (interpreted, 'those who have cast off the reins') forbid all flesh-eating; they do not partake of that in which there is life generally; previous to Moses and Joshua the son of Nun they make use of the holy names of the patriarchs in the Pentateuch and believe in them, I mean Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and those before them, as also Moses himself and Aaron and Joshua. But they teach that the writings of the Penta-

<sup>1</sup> *Νασαραῖοι.*

teuch are not of Moses and affirm to have others besides these." The same passage is repeated in *Proem*.

In the *Epitome* he says: "Concerning Nasareans. These accept the patriarchs contained in the Pentateuch and Moses. That Moses received a law, they say. However, the law itself and the whole Pentateuch they do not accept, but believe that another law had been given him. They do not partake of that in which there is life, nor do they offer sacrifices. They say that the books have been falsified and that none of them took their origin from the fathers. 'Nasareans' is interpreted to mean 'Destroyers.'" With what Epiphanius connects his interpretation it is difficult to say. Perhaps with *nassar*,<sup>2</sup> "to saw, cut, divide"?

In *Panar.* XVIII he says: "The Nasareans are of Jewish race, have circumcision, observe the Sabbath and the same feasts, but they do not admit fate and astronomy [astronomy of course used here in the sense of astrology]. They accept the fathers in the Pentateuch from Adam to Moses, those glorious in the deeds of fearing God, I mean Adam, Seth, Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Aaron, Moses and Joshua, the son of Nun. But the Pentateuch itself they do not accept; yet they confess Moses and believe that he received the law though not this one but another. Wherefore they observe everything of the Jews, being Jews, but they do not offer sacrifice, nor partake of that in which there is life, but it is considered unlawful with them to eat flesh or that they sacrifice. They say that these books are falsified and that nothing of them has originated from the fathers. This is the difference between the Nasareans and others, and the reproach against them is also evident not only in one point but in many." After this follows a refutation of the Nasareans regarding their rejection of the Pentateuch, of sacrifices and of meat-eating, but which does not interest us here.

Epiphanius mentions the sect not only, as we see, in the passage to which we will come later, adduced by Dr. Smith (*Panar.* XXIX, 6) to support his theory, but more fully in the places cited.

Epiphanius always writes *Nasaraioi* (in *Anakeph.* 134 C, *Nasaraioi*), in one place (*Panar.* XX) *Nasarenoi*, just as we have seen that he uses once *Ossenoï* and once *Essaioi*, but he clearly distinguishes the Nasareans from the Nazoreans of the New Testament, the first Christians. This is to be noticed, for while he is forced to make a clear distinction between the pre-Christian Jewish sect, on account of their diversity of opinion in weighty matters, and the

<sup>2</sup> נשר chald. נכר

orthodox Jews as also the first Christians, who likewise accepted the Old Testament fully as a divine revelation, he in his love for monastic life considers the Therapeutae of the *Via contemplativa*, ascribed to Philo, as Christians converted by Mark when preaching in Egypt, and classes them with the *Jessaioi*, though these are not a sect with him but simply another name for the followers of Jesus. After having shown in *Panar.* XXIX, 5 the difference between the word *Nazoraïos* and *Nazirciôs* (Nazirite), Epiphanius goes on to say in the next paragraph: "But they (the Nazoreans) did not call themselves *Nasaraïoi*, for the heresy of the Nasareans existed before Christ and did not know Christ. But all men called the Christians Nazoreans."

It is here where I charge Dr. Smith with having misled his readers by his inexact translation. He closes his extract from Epiphanius, composed of parts of §§ 1, 2 and 6 of *Panar.* XXIX and speaking of the first names of the Christians, with the translation: "But others called themselves *Nasaraïoi*." The rest of the quotation as above. This translation gives the impression that some Christians called themselves thus. But Epiphanius says nothing of the kind. He distinctly says: "But they (the Nazoreans) did not call themselves *Nasaraïoi*."

Dr. Smith must also have entirely overlooked the reason that Epiphanius does not say more in the chapter on the Nazoreans about the Nasareans. The fact is he had previously discussed the latter more fully in the separate chapter on them. He only mentions them again with the clear intent that they have nothing whatever to do with the Christian Nazoreans and must not be confounded with them. Ought not Dr. Smith to have consulted the previous descriptions of the Nasareans before making use of the short mention of them in the chapter on the Nazoreans in support of his theory?

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Now what kind of people were the Nasareans?

I have two conjectures to make:

1. They may have been a remnant of an earlier stage of Hebrew religious development and civilization like the sect of the Rechabites in the Old Testament. These, belonging to the people of the Kenites a member of which, Hobab, was a brother-in-law of Moses, had kept up their nomadic habits even to the times of Jeremiah long after the conquest of Canaan, in which they had joined with the Israelites. According to Jer. xxxv, they drank no wine, just as the Arabs had been averse to it even before Mohammed; they built no houses, sowed no seed, planted no vineyard, but lived in tents,

strictly following the commands of one Jonadab, a Rechabite.<sup>3</sup> Very probably the Kenites and Rechabites claimed to follow an older law than that developed among the Hebrews since the conquest under the influence of the higher civilization of the conquered Canaanites. They could trace back their law to Moses, who was related by marriage to the Kenites and had been guided as law-giver by Jethro, a Kenite.

The Kenites and Rechabites kept up their nomadic habits not only in the south of Palestine where they first had settled, but even as far north as the lake of Merom, where they had offshoots—this not far west from Gilead and Bashan, where the Nasareans arose, according to Epiphanius. The Nasareans, probably like the Rechabites, claimed to have the genuine Mosaic law, declaring the later law as developed in the Pentateuch a falsification. Living beyond the Jordan they could more easily keep their old organizations and customs intact. There the invading Israelitish tribes had first settled, and those tribes remaining there had never kept up a very close connection with their brothers across the Jordan anyhow. (Passages referring to the Kenites besides that of Jeremiah are Judg. i. 16; iv. 11; 2 Kings x. 15; 1 Chron. ii. 55.) By the way, it is interesting to see that one of the most uncompromising zealots against Canaanitish cults, Elijah, was a sojourner of Gilead (the Septuagint reads: "of Thisbe, Gilead"), while Jonadab, a Rechabite, assists Jehu in his treacherous butchery of the worshipers of Baal. Furthermore Elijah would have scorned the command of Deuteronomy to worship Yahveh only in one place as being Mosaic. The fact stands out that the legislation as represented in the Pentateuch was never accepted during Hebrew history by all Israelites, though they were one in the worship of the national Yahveh, of which in recent years we again have received a proof through the discoveries in Elephantine,<sup>4</sup> and the Nasareans of Epiphanius seem to have belonged to those protesting against the Pentateuch.

2. This sect in rejecting sacrifices and flesh-eating must have had many things in common with some of the Essenes and other oriental gnostic sects. The vegetarian life was practised for religious reasons at the time of Christ by more Jews than we think. Witness the ascetic Banus, of whom Josephus tells in his life that he stayed with him three years, "who used no other clothing than what grew upon trees and had no other food than what grew of its own accord;"

<sup>3</sup> Compare the opposition to the acceptance of a higher civilization among North American Indians and other peoples, as being a great sin against the simpler life and laws of the forefathers.

<sup>4</sup> Compare "The Jahu Temple in Elephantine," *Open Court*, June, 1908.

and also those members of Christian circles, of whom Paul speaks in the epistles to the Romans and Colossians, who had scruples about the use of meat and certain foods. Whether the Nasareans brought their rejection of sacrifices and flesh-eating in connection with the revelation they laid claim to, Epiphanius does not say; these things may have been later developed. Still their simpler customs both as regards religious ritual and the mode of living in contrast to a more developed elaborate worship as at Jerusalem and the luxuries of civilization may have been, in part at least, survivals from an earlier stage.

What was the meaning of the name "Nasareans"? Here we can only conjecture again. Perhaps it had a very natural origin. The Old Testament often makes a distinction between fenced cities and the solitary "towers of watchers" (*migdal nošrim*) in the country and desert for watching herds and products of husbandry.<sup>5</sup> The Nasareans, probably from living a pastoral and country life (Gilead and Bashan were preeminently pastoral countries) may have originally taken their name from their natural occupation (*našar*, "to watch, protect"). The original meaning may have later taken a transferred meaning. This verb is often used in the Old Testament for observing the covenant and commands of God (Deut. xxxiii. 9; Ps. xxv. 10; cv. 45). The Nasareans claimed to observe the genuine law of Moses, just as the Rechabites, as we are told in Jeremiah xxxv, observed strictly the commands of their forefather Jonadab. The word used for "observe" in that chapter is *shamar* and has exactly the same meaning, both original and transferred, as *našar*. The Talmud applies the latter verb in the same sense as *shamar* to the Rechabites. Reading in 1 Chron. iv. 23 *nošrim* instead of *jošrim* (potters), the version from which the English translation is taken, "who dwelt in the plantations and corrals of the king," and identifying these *nošrim* with the Rechabites, it says: "They were so called because they observed (*she našeru*) the commandment of their father" (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, article "Rechabites").

The Greek form *Nasaraioi* may have been from a later Hebrew form *našaraim*, just as we have the *Amoraim* (from *amar*, "speak,") "interpreters," and *Tanaim* (*tana*, "repeat,") "teachers," of the Talmud. All this is conjecture, but I deem as well founded, if not better, than the conjecture of Professor Smith, who on the simple similarity of sound of *Nasaraioi* and *Nazaraioi* builds the theory

<sup>5</sup> Compare 2 Kings xvii. 9; xviii. 8; 2 Chron. xxvi. 10; compare also "the herd tower" (*migdal eder*) Gen. xxxv. 21.

that they were identical, without in the least taking into consideration the facts given of the Nasareans, which place them in an entirely different category from the Jewish Nazoreans, who accepted the whole Jewish dispensation as laid down in the Old Testament.

NOTE BY DR. SMITH.

At the time of publication of the essay on the "Meaning of the Epithet Nazorean" and still later, at the publication of *Der vorchristliche Jesus* (1906) the accepted text of the Epiphianian passage was this:

Ἄλλοι δὲ Νασσαράϊους ἑαυτοὺς ἐκάλεσαν.

Of this the only possible translation is the one that is so sharply criticized above, namely, "But others called themselves Nasareans," or as the learned Jesuit Petavius renders it in Migne's *Patrology*, XLI, 400, "Sed alii Nazaræos seipsos appellant." In a footnote on the same page we read: "γρ. Ἄλλ' οὐ δὲ Νασοραίους." This text would of course be translated, "But they did not call themselves Nasoreans." This secondary text is not disregarded in *Der vorchristliche Jesus*, but is mentioned, on page 228, as probably a purposeful modification of the original. Since 1906, and engendered by the aforementioned essay, a dense growth of controversial literature has sprung up around this Epiphianian passage (particularly the continuation, "For the heresy of the Nasarees was before Christ and knew not Christ"), and the text-critical question has been minutely studied, but not settled, for the opinions of scholars seem almost evenly and hopelessly divided as to which form is the older. In the second edition of *Der vorchristliche Jesus* I have touched again upon the matter and have shown both there and elsewhere that the text-question is rather curious than important (and in this judgment some of the highest German authorities concur), seeing that the main fact is the *pre-Christian existence of the Nasarees*. It matters little that Epiphanius in his "tremendous zeal for orthodoxy" (Case) should strive hard to make a distinction without a difference. All this I have set forth so fully and so repeatedly as to make further elaboration superfluous. It is enough to remark that in October, 1911, a learned and determined opponent, Professor Bousset, on the first page of the *Theologische Rundschau*, rejecting Wernle's appeal to the secondary text (ἀλλ' οὐ), declared that "all theological attempts thus far [to explain away the Epiphianian testimony] must be accounted failures." When something new is brought forward, I shall be glad to reopen the discussion, but not sooner.

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