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# EHRMAN AND IRENAEUS: A COMPARISON OF THEIR VIEWS ON THE EBIONITIES

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Bart Ehrman and Irenaeus of Lyon both have interesting similarities. In each, one is hard-pressed not to find a likeable author. With classic style and lucidity, Ehrman presents readers of *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*<sup>1</sup> with an insightful picture of the diversity of 'Christianities' in the second and third centuries. Throughout this work, Ehrman persistently raises questions about the nature of our understanding of Christianity in the early church that are difficult to ignore. Indeed, Ehrman may even be hesitant to use the term 'early church' at all. Given the plethora of Christological perspectives among early writers who would claim Christ, how can one honestly refer to Christianity as a unified whole prior to the Council of Nicaea?

Irenaeus of Lyon is a convivial author as well who writes at the end of the second century. Irenaeus holds a unique place among the Christian apologists as being the first to endorse the four-fold gospel, and his work *Against Heresies* polemically confronts many of the aberrant Christian groups that had sprung up by the time of its writing. In this way, Irenaeus himself was not simply a supporter of the truth but also a foremost Christian apologist, defending the faith against upstart sects that threatened the purity of *The Way*. He says in his preface to Books one and two in *Against Heresies*,

Some persons reject the truth and introduce false statements...They combine plausibility with fraud and lead the mind of the inexperienced astray and force them into captivity. They falsify the words of the Lord and make themselves bad interpreters of what was well said...Therefore...I consider it necessary to show you, beloved, their...unreason and blasphemy against God.<sup>2</sup>

Irenaeus portrays the Christian church rather differently than Ehrman. Irenaeus sees aberrant sects of Christianity not as adding positively to the diversity of the Faith, but as those who 'reject the truth and introduce false

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<sup>1</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> R. M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 57–8.

statements'. For Irenaeus, the whole concept of 'christianities' would certainly have been objectionable.

The question is: who can we trust more—Ehrman or Irenaeus? Whose perspective is more honest and objective? Do we indeed see a diversity of genuinely Christian movements in the second century or are these sectarian groups that existed outside of a 'mainstream'? Ehrman has the unique advantage of seeing the second century from a broadly historical perspective, whereas Irenaeus is privileged to have a first hand account of the subjects he writes about. In this paper, we will examine each author's treatment of one faction called the Ebionities. Drawing upon the above two works (*Against Heresies* and *Lost Christianities*), the following paper will analyze Irenaeus' and Ehrman's views of the Ebionites, combined with their rhetorical style, as a case study in an attempt to reveal how reliable each author is when writing about Christianity in the second century.

#### BACKGROUND ON THE EBIONITES

The Ebionities are second century believers that have been called 'Jewish Christians' because they maintained that Christians must retain/adopt Jewish distinctives (i.e. circumcision) in order to be truly Christian. While Irenaeus represents the first 'undisputed' use of the term *Ebionites*, it does have an earlier history, 'having evolved into a sectarian name from the generic biblical Hebrew word...meaning "the poor"'.<sup>3</sup> While much debate has centered on the origin of the name, Qumran manuscript 4QpPs37 attests to the possibility that the term 'Ebionite' may well have been a technical designation prior to its clear use late in the second century.<sup>4</sup> Others wonder if Paul's reference to 'the poor' in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26; Gal. 2:10) may not be a reference to the sect as well.<sup>5</sup>

The Ebionites are attested to in other works of the fathers, such as Tertullian, Origen, Epiphanius, Eusebius, and Jerome. Epiphanius, for one, assigns sections of the pseudo-Clementine literature to the Ebionites. A man named Symmachus, a Bible translator, is also known by the church fathers as having been a member of the Ebionities. However, because this group disappears after Jerome's account of them and we have no extant primary sources, very little is ultimately known. With the above in mind,

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<sup>3</sup> D. N. Freedman, G. A. Herion, et al. eds, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (London: Doubleday, 1992), p. 261.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

we now will begin our discussion on specifically how Ehrman and Irenaeus talk about the Ebionites and the second century church.

#### BART EHRMAN AND THE EBIONITIES

Ehrman spends the first couple of paragraphs of his treatment of the Ebionites discussing where the name came from. Citing Tertullian's and Origen's ideas about the provenance of the group, Ehrman wonders about how the Ebionites were first called such. Interestingly enough, when discussing how difficult it is to determine the origin of the name, Ehrman does not make any mention of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

He goes on to note correctly the fact that there are no extant writings of the Ebionites, a fact that forces the modern historian to develop opinions of the group from the writings of the group's enemies. Ehrman observes that the accounts of these opponents are inconsistent in their description of the Ebionites. However, Ehrman does not follow by providing more detail to substantiate the claim. Rather, he simply concludes that there may have been several different groups of Ebionites that these authors were interacting with. While this conclusion certainly supports the thesis of his book (i.e. because there were multiple sects of Christianity, one cannot speak of 'Christianity' but should instead refer to 'christianities'), I am not persuaded that it is the first conclusion one should make from the given data. Inconsistency among authors more readily points to the following possibilities: (1) that one or more of these authors may be incorrect in their recounting of the facts or (2) that the informants of these authors were not adequately representing the given religious community (that is, that the informant(s) themselves differed on points of doctrine with the group, and yet represented themselves as being characteristic of the whole). (3) Related to point (2), as with any large group, smaller sects<sup>6</sup> existed that represented an aberration of the mainstream view of the parent group. Neither of the above possibilities allows us to conclude that there existed many equally-influential expressions of Ebionism or Christianity in the second and third centuries. Furthermore, one can only assume that—from the relative paucity of writing of or about the Ebionities and the scant secondary quotations of the group in the writings of opponents—the group was moderate-to-small in size relative to the proto-orthodox Christian movement. As a mere product of their size, smaller communities would naturally be more unified in doctrine and teaching. In this case, Ehrman uses the given evidence to draw highly-speculative conclusions about the diversity of Ebionite groups.

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<sup>6</sup> What Ehrman calls 'christianities'.

Unfortunately, tentative conclusions and value-laden language riddle Ehrman's treatment of the Ebionites. Immediately in the opening paragraph of his section on this sect, Ehrman conjectures, offering little justification for his ideas. Selected phrases from the following quotation demonstrate how speculative Ehrman's writing on this point truly is: 'This seems like...probably based on...Possibly...It may...Maybe these people... Surely some of these people...It may be that there were...' This leaves the reader wondering how much of this treatment is simply guesswork to begin with.<sup>7</sup>

Ehrman goes on to discuss two of the Ebionites' doctrinal distinctives: he notes that the group neither held to Jesus' preexistence nor his virgin birth. Ehrman also observes that New Testament books assert *either* the virgin birth *or* the preexistence of Christ. He aims to give the reader an idea about how groups like this may have emerged in the second century—their doctrine often depended on the books they had. The application of this principle, however, cannot be maintained with the Ebionites because the Gospel of Matthew (which espouses the virgin birth) was revered by the Matthean community and yet this belief was not adopted by the Ebionites. Regrettably, Ehrman does not recognize this fact objectively, nearly resorting to 'straw man' argumentation when he says, 'Ebionite Christians, however, did not have our New Testament and understood Jesus differently'. The point he makes is neither fair nor helpful. Of course, *no* Christians in the second century had 'our New Testament', yet Ehrman here implies that *because of this* they held different beliefs—a principle already shown above to be untrue of Ebionities. On the contrary, a vast majority of Christians throughout the history of the Christian church did not have 'our New Testament' and yet still held many of the same tenets (i.e. the virgin birth and the preexistence of Christ) that later Christians came to believe as well. Beyond this, Matthew was the most read gospel of early Christianity. The Ebionities refusal to accept the majority view on the virgin birth is a major dissention by the group, not simply a matter of being literarily unprivileged.

A more objective treatment of the Ebionites by Ehrman seems to fall in line with what we know historically about the group. 'The Ebionite Christians...believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah sent from the

<sup>7</sup> *Lost Christianities* (New York: Oxford, 2005), pp. 99–100. The paragraph above centres on the unknown origin of the group's name, one wonders why Ehrman uses his opening two paragraphs to handle this insignificant and dubious point (i.e. that we do not know where the name comes from or what it means). Might he be acting rhetorically, centering discussion at times on issues that are, by nature, conjectural simply to raise doubt in the reader's mind about how much one *can* know about these groups in this time period?

Jewish God to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures.<sup>8</sup> He mentions Irenaeus as a reliable early source that corroborates his data, to whom we now turn to analyze his second century perspective on the Ebionites.

### IRENAEUS AND THE EBIONITES

Like Ehrman, Irenaeus is far from a dispassionate purveyor of the facts. He strongly holds his views and intends to persuade his readers to do the same. It does seem, however, that Irenaeus is much less skillful at hiding his biases than Ehrman. To put it another way, Irenaeus' writing more obviously reveals the distinction between his own views and the history he recounts. Time and again, Irenaeus' rhetorical style rather easily allows the reader to separate his own views from the history to which he makes reference.

For example, in 1.26.2 Irenaeus writes, 'Those who are called Ebionites would agree that the world was made by the real God but as to the Lord they profess the same opinions as Cerinthus and Carpocrates [i.e. denying the virgin birth].'<sup>9</sup> The above statement portrays two principles of Ebionite theology: belief in a supreme creator-god and denial of the supernatural conception of Jesus. He goes on to write in the same passage:

[The Ebionities] use the Gospel according to Matthew only and reject the Apostle Paul, whom they call an apostate from the law. They strive with excessive pedantry to expound the prophecies. They practice circumcision and persevere in legal customs and the Jewish way of life, so that they pray toward Jerusalem as if it were the house of God.<sup>10</sup>

In the above quote, Irenaeus recounts the doctrine of the Ebionites, yet uses occasional value-laden terms to cast Ebionite doctrine in a negative light. His description of this group using 'excessive pedantry' in expounding prophecies or praying toward Jerusalem 'as if it were the house of God' are adequate examples of this. Nevertheless, in the above one is easily able to separate Irenaeus' own opinion with the what he believed the Ebionites actually held as doctrine.

Irenaeus gets more aggressive with Ebionite doctrine in book three of *Against Heresies* as he calls for the repentance of the Ebionites trying to dissuade them from their current beliefs,

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Grant, *Irenaeus*, p. 95.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

But again, we allege the same against those who do not recognize Paul as an apostle: that they should either reject the other words of the Gospel [Luke/Acts] and not make sure of them; or else, if they do receive all these [i.e. the testimony of Acts] they must necessarily admit also that testimony concerning Paul, when he [Luke] tells us that the Lord spoke at first to him from heaven(3.15.1).<sup>11</sup>

Here Irenaeus accuses the Ebionites of inconsistency in doctrine as it relates to their accepted Scriptures. He charges them to either abandon Luke/Acts (which attests to the apostleship of Paul) or accept Paul as an apostle. Irenaeus thus maintains that the Ebionites cannot accept Luke/Acts and still reject the apostleship of Paul.

The above may denote an inconsistency in Irenaeus' report about the group. Chapter 3.11.7 can be added to the quotation from 1.26.2 as clearly affirming the Ebionites' Matthew-only stance, 'The authority of the gospels is so great that the heretics themselves bear witness to them and each of them tries to confirm his own teaching out of them. Thus the Ebionites who use only the Gospel according to Matthew are proved by it not to think correctly about the Lord [i.e. by denying the virgin birth].'<sup>12</sup> However, 3.15.1 seems to indicate that they also held Luke/Acts as holy, which is the basis of Irenaeus' accusation of inconsistency. The one difficulty with the above apparent inconsistency is that Irenaeus does not explain what he means by 'and not make use of them [Luke/Acts]; or else, if they do receive all these'. That is, do *making use* and *receiving* both refer to the ascription of biblical authority? Could the Ebionites have 'received' Luke/Acts as a resource but not as a sacred text? It seems unlikely because Irenaeus mentions the authority of Luke/Acts side-by-side with the authority they *should* ascribe to Paul. Nevertheless, some of these questions remain unanswered.

Later in 3.21.1, Irenaeus takes on the Ebionites' rejection of the virgin birth. In this section, Irenaeus quotes Isaiah 7:14 in the following, 'Some allege, among those now presuming to expound the Scripture, [thus:] "Behold, a young woman shall conceive, and bring forth a son."<sup>13</sup> Notice that he quotes the passage as an *exposition* of the text, rather than the text itself. The Masoretic Text contains exactly what Irenaeus has written above. It is more likely that he would have used the Septuagint to read the Old Testament, which records the following at Isaiah 7:14, 'Behold, a

<sup>11</sup> See also Philip Schaff, *Against Heresies*, in Church Story Collection (Garland: Galaxie Software, electronic resource).

<sup>12</sup> Grant, *Irenaeus*, pp. 130–131.

<sup>13</sup> Schaff, electronic resource.

virgin shall conceive in the womb and shall bring forth a son.' Later in the paragraph, he recognizes this:

But [the Old Testament] was interpreted into Greek by the Jews themselves, much before the period of our Lord's advent, that there might remain no suspicion that perchance the Jews...did put this interpretation upon these words... had they been cognizant of our future existence, and that we should use these proofs from the Scriptures, would themselves never have hesitated to burn their own Scriptures.

Irenaeus, then, admitting that the translation of the Septuagint was in itself an interpretation of Scriptures, describes the Ebionite preference of 'young woman' (from the Masoretic Text) as a *re*interpretation of the text. That is, what Irenaeus describes as reinterpretation is actually just the maintenance of the text in the original Hebrew and the rejection the decision of the translators of the Septuagint. Irenaeus sees this action by the Ebionites as a 'setting aside' of the testimony of the prophets as they argue that Jesus was begotten naturally by Joseph (3.21.1). Irenaeus' words above also show how given he can be to overstatement as he asserts that the Jews would have burned their own Scriptures had they ever thought it could be used by the Christians to validate their belief in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. This example further illustrates for the reader that it can be relatively easy to distinguish fact from rhetoric in Irenaeus' writing. There is little doubt what of the above is a criticism from Irenaeus himself and what is the data on which this criticism is based.

Irenaeus briefly mentions the Ebionites again in 4.33.4, calling into question their belief that Jesus is not fully God. He writes, 'He will judge also the Ebionites; [for] how can they be saved unless it was God who wrought out their salvation upon the earth? Or how shall man pass into God, unless God has [first] passed into man?'<sup>14</sup> Here he makes the point that Jesus would have been unable to save humanity had he not been himself God. Or, with hymnic parallelism, he states that mankind cannot become like God unless God first had entered the world to become like a man. Irenaeus affirms that the Ebionites did not believe Jesus was divine, but they still believe that he came to save.

Later in 5.1.3, Irenaeus follows with a combined attack on the Ebionites' rejection of the virgin birth and the deity of Christ. He calls the Ebionites 'vain' for not receiving 'by faith into their soul the union of God and man, but who remain in the old leaven of [the natural] birth, and who do not choose to understand that the Holy Ghost came upon Mary.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



Again we see Irenaeus lashing out against certain doctrine upheld by the Ebionites. Yet, as in all other illustrations, we have in stark contrast the doctrines Irenaeus believed the Ebionites upheld and the conclusions Irenaeus himself makes about such beliefs. As with any ancient author, reconstructing the history behind the text is most difficult and is entirely dependent on extant evidence. The above examples, however, adequately show the reader some of the tenets of Ebionite Christianity and the Irenaeian reaction that followed.

## CONCLUSION

Researching prolific authors like these can be a challenging task. Yet both Irenaeus and Ehrman provide many clear examples by which we can judge the character and quality of their work. Ehrman continues to present the public with provocative ideas that test the foundations of Christianity. As we have seen, however, for all his strengths, Ehrman has the dangerous tendency to be a *maximalist* in the way he uses data to support his hypotheses. By this I mean that Ehrman may be guilty of using limited data to sustain highly improbable propositions introduced in his book. First, we looked at how Ehrman begins this section in his book by speculating about the origin of the name 'Ebionites'. I noted how he fails to mention one of the earliest sources on the topic, found in a document at Qumran. Then I discussed an instance in which Ehrman fails to substantiate a claim that early descriptions of the Ebionites were inconsistent, before using this conclusion to bolster his thesis that there may be more than one group which called themselves 'Ebionites'. I then covered Ehrman's discussion of doctrinal distinctives of the Ebionites: a denial of the virgin birth and the preexistence of Christ. His treatment of these issues is commendable, and yet I noted Ehrman's 'straw man' argument, which confuses the issues and further weakens any claim to objectivity he might have.

Still, while Ehrman's delivery of the historical facts surrounding the group seem to line up with what early Christian authors have to say, he nevertheless also takes on a polemical tone that sounded more like the rhetoric of an apologist than a historian. Contrary to what he set out to prove, I am not persuaded that the Ebionites were simply 'lost to posterity, destroyed or forgotten by the proto-orthodox victors in the struggle to decide what Christians would believe and read.'<sup>16</sup> Rather, it seems more historically plausible that this group was marginalized due to their overall

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<sup>16</sup> *Lost Christianities*, p. 103.

obscurity and the lack of their doctrine being adopted by a critical mass in the Christian movement.

The study of Irenaeus was illuminating as well. The apologist does not hesitate to show his true colors in *Against Heresies*. His treatment of the Ebionites is neither dispassionate nor objective. However, our research has shown that, for all of Irenaeus' rhetoric, identifying where he is stating the beliefs of the Ebionites and where he lashes out against them is not difficult. He begins in 1.26.2 by squarely stating their denial of the virgin birth and goes on to detail other views they hold (i.e. accept Matthew only, deny Paul, practice circumcision, etc). He follows this in book three by attempting to argue particulars with them. However, we saw a possible inconsistency in his recounting of the group's belief. Having already stated that the Ebionites held only to Matthew, Irenaeus seems also to imply that they hold Luke/Acts as Scripture. From this point we examined the apologist's handling of Hebrew prophecy, noting another area of bias where he describes the Jewish understanding of Isaiah 7:14 as an *exposition* (i.e. reinterpretation) of what the text was originally meant to communicate. Lastly, we covered Irenaeus' own views of the mutual-dependence of the virgin birth and the deity of Christ, one indication as to why he so vehemently defended both doctrines against assailants.

In summary, the work of both Irenaeus and Ehrman should be taken (in Ehrman's words) with 'a pound of salt'.<sup>17</sup> One may expect as much from Irenaeus, a self-reputed Christian apologist whose sole purpose in writing the above work is to defend the Christian movement from purported heresies that arose in the second century. Such an *apologia* is not expected from Ehrman, whose work is marketed as a historical survey of the Christian movement in the first few centuries. The polemical tone he takes and the way he crafts his argument makes one wonder if *Lost Christianities* is not an apologetic work in itself. Whatever the case, the above example reminds the reader to be wary, regardless of the author's stated intention, of taking any author simply 'at his word', without a critical examination both the claims of and the ideas behind the work.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 100.