

Essenes

ESSENES, a monastic order among the Jews prior to Christianity. Their first appearance in history is in the time of Jonathan the Maccabee (161-144 B.C.). How much older they may have been we have no means of determining, but our authorities agree in assigning to them a dateless antiquity. The name occurs in Greek, in the two forms. One form is used by Josephus fourteen times, but the latter is the only form used by Philo. Essenes is also used by Synesius and Hippolytus, and its Latin equivalent by Pliny and Solinus; while the alternative Greek word is employed by Hegesippus and Porphyry. In Epiphanius we find additional variations of the word. There is a place named Essa mentioned by Josephus, from which the name may have been formed, just as the Christians were originally called Nazoreans from Nazara. This etymology, however, is not much in favor now. Lightfoot explains the name as meaning “the silent ones,” others as meaning “physicians.” Perhaps there is most authority in favor of deriving it from the Syriac word, which in the emphatic state becomes another word, so that we have a Semitic correspondence to both their Greek forms. This etymology makes the word for Essene signify “pious.” It has also been urged in excuse for Philo’s absurd etymological derivation.

The original accounts we have of them are confined to three authors—Philo, Pliny the Elder, and Josephus. Philo describes

them in his treatise known as *Quod omnis probus liber* and also in his “Apology for the Jews,” a fragment of which has been preserved by Eusebius. Pliny has a short but striking sketch of them, derived in all probability from Alexander Polyhistor, who is mentioned among the authorities for the fifth book of his *Natural History*. This historian, of whom Eusebius had a very high opinion, lived in the time of Sulla. Josephus treats of them at length in his *Jewish War* (Book 2, line 8), and more briefly in two passages of his *Antiquities*. He has also interesting accounts of the prophetic powers possessed by three individual members of the sect—Judas, Menahem, and Simon. Besides this he mentions an Essene Gate in Jerusalem and a person called John the Essene, one of the bravest and most capable leaders in the war against the Romans. Josephus himself made trial of the sect of Essenes in his youth; but from his own statement it appears that he must have been a very short time with them, and therefore could not have been initiated into the inner mysteries of the society (*De vita sua*, 2). After this the notices that we have of the Essenes from antiquity are mere reproductions, except in the case of Epiphanius (died A.D.402), who, however, is so confused a writer as to be of little value. Solinus, who was known as “Pliny’s Ape,” echoed the words of his master about a century after that writer’s death, which took place in A.D. 79. Similarly Hippolytus, who lived in the reign of Commodus (A.D. 180-192), reproduced the account of Josephus, adding a few touches of his own. Porphyry (A.D. 233-306) afterwards did the same, but had the grace to mention Josephus in the context. Eusebius quoted the account as from Porphyry, though he must

have known that he had derived it from Josephus. But Porphyry's name would impress pagan readers. There is also a mention of the Essenes by Hegesippus and by Synesius in his life of Dio Chrysostom. It has been conjectured that the Clementine literature emanated from Essenes who had turned Christian. (See Ebionites.) There are significantly many religious texts and teachings including gospel records attributed to the Essenes; however, their authenticity remains historiographically unproven, thereby subject to individual interpretation and / or belief on whichever basis.

The Essenes were an exclusive society, distinguished from the rest of the Jewish nation in Palestine by an organization peculiar to themselves, and by a theory of life in which a severe asceticism and a rare benevolence to one another and to mankind in general were the most striking characteristics. They had fixed rules for initiation, a succession of strictly separate grades within the limits of the society, and regulations for the conduct of their daily life even in its minutest details. Their membership could be recruited only from the outside world, as marriage and all intercourse with women were absolutely renounced. They were the first society in the world to condemn slavery both in theory and practice; they enforced and practised the most complete community of goods. They chose their own priests and public office-bearers, and even their own judges. Though their prevailing tendency was practical, and the tenets of the society were kept a profound secret, it is perfectly clear from the concurrent testimony of Philo and Josephus that they

cultivated a kind of speculation, which not only accounts for their spiritual asceticism, but indicates a great deviation from the normal development of Judaism, and a profound sympathy with Greek philosophy, and probably also with Oriental ideas. At the same time we do our Jewish authorities no injustice in imputing to them the patriotic tendency to idealize the society, and thus offer to their readers something in Jewish life that would bear comparison at least with similar manifestations of Gentile life.

There is some difficulty in determining how far the Essenes separated themselves locally from their fellow-countrymen. Josephus informs us that they had no single city of their own, but that many of them dwelt in every city. While in his treatise *Quod omnis, etcetera*, Philo speaks of their avoiding towns and preferring to live in villages, in his "Apology for the Jews" we find them living in many cities, villages, and in great and prosperous towns. In Pliny they are a perennial colony settled on the western shore of the Dead Sea. On the whole, as Philo and Josephus agree in estimating their number at 4000; we are justified in suspecting some exaggeration as to the many cities, towns and villages where they were said to be found. As agriculture was their favorite occupation, and as their tendency was to withdraw from the haunts and ordinary interests of mankind, we may assume that with the growing confusion and corruption of Jewish society they felt themselves attracted from the mass of the population to the sparsely peopled districts, till they found a congenial settlement and free scope for their

peculiar view of life by the shore of the Dead Sea. While their principles were consistent with the neighbourhood of men, they were better adapted to a state of seclusion.

The Essenes did not renounce marriage because they denied the validity of the institution or the necessity of it as providing for the continuance of the human race, but because they had a low opinion of the character of women. They adopted children when very young, and brought them up on their own principles.

Pleasure generally they rejected as evil. They despised riches not less than pleasure; neither poverty nor wealth was observable among them; at initiation every one gave his property into the common stock; every member in receipt of wages handed them over to the funds of the society. In matters of dress the asceticism of the society was very pronounced. They regarded oil as a defilement, even washing it off if anointed with it against their will. They did not change their clothes or their shoes till they were torn in pieces or worn completely away. The color of their garments was always white. Their daily routine was prescribed for them in the strictest manner. Before the rising of the sun they were to speak of nothing profane, but offered to it certain traditional forms of prayer as if beseeching it to rise. Thereafter they went about their daily tasks, working continuously at whatever trade they knew till the fifth hour, when they assembled, and, girding on a garment of linen, bathed in cold water. They next seated themselves quietly in the dining hall, where the baker set bread in order, and the cook brought each a single dish of one kind of food. Before meat and after it

grace was said by a priest. After dinner they resumed work till sunset. In the evening they had supper, at which guests of the order joined them, if there happened to be any such present. Withal there was no noise or confusion to mar the tranquility of their intercourse; no one usurped more than his share of the conversation; the stillness of the place oppressed a stranger with a feeling of mysterious awe. This composure of spirit was owing to their perfect temperance in eating and drinking. Not only in the daily routine of the society, but generally, the activity of the members was controlled by their presidents. In only two things could they take the initiative, helpfulness and mercy; the deserving poor and the destitute were to receive instant relief; but no member could give anything to his relatives without consulting the heads of the society. Their office-bearers were elected. They had also their special courts of justice, which were composed of not less than a hundred members, and their decisions, which were arrived at with extreme care, were irreversible. Oaths were strictly forbidden; their word was stronger than an oath. They were just and temperate in anger, the guardians of good faith, and the ministers of peace, obedient to their elders and to the majority. But the moral characteristics which they most earnestly cultivated and enjoined will best appear in their rules of initiation. There was a novitiate of three years, during which the intending member was tested as to his fitness for entering the society. If the result was satisfactory, he was admitted, but before partaking of the common meal he was required to swear awful oaths, that he would reverence the deity, do justice to men, hurt no man voluntarily or at the command of

another, hate the unjust and assist the just, and that he would render fidelity to all men, but especially to the rulers, seeing that no one rules but of God. He also vowed, if he should bear rule himself, to make no violent use of his power, nor outshine those set under him by superior display, to make it his aim to cherish the truth and unmask liars, to be pure from theft and unjust gain, to conceal nothing from his fellow-members, nor to divulge any of their affairs to other men, even at the risk of death, to transmit their doctrines unchanged, and to keep secret the books of the society and the names of the angels.

Within the limits of the society there were four grades so distinct that if any one touched a member of an inferior grade he required to cleanse himself by bathing in water; members who had been found guilty of serious crimes were expelled from the society, and could not be received again till reduced to the very last extremity of want or sickness. As the result of the ascetic training of the Essenes, and of their temperate diet, it is said that they lived to a great age, and were superior to pain and fear.

During the Roman war they cheerfully underwent the most grievous tortures rather than break any of the principles of their faith. In fact, they had in many respects reached the very highest moral elevation attained by the ancient world; they were just, humane, benevolent, and spiritually-minded; the sick and aged were the objects of a special affectionate regard; and they condemned slavery, not only as an injustice, but as an impious violation of the natural brotherhood of men (Philo Book 2, line 457). There were some of the Essenes who permitted marriage,

but strictly with a view to the preservation of the race; in other respects they agreed with the main body of the society.

It will be apparent that the predominant tendency of the society was practical. Philo tells us expressly that they rejected logic as unnecessary to the acquisition of virtue, and speculation on nature as too lofty for the human intellect. Yet they had views of their own as to God, Providence, the soul, and a future state, which, while they had a practical use, were yet essentially speculative. On the one hand, indeed, they held tenaciously by the traditional Judaism: blasphemy against their lawgiver was punished with death, the sacred books were preserved and read with great reverence, though not without an allegorical interpretation, and the Sabbath was most scrupulously observed. But in many important points their deviation from the strait path of Judaic development was complete. They rejected animal sacrifice as well as marriage; the oil with which priests and kings were anointed they accounted unclean; and the condemnation of oaths and the community of goods were unmistakable innovations for which they found no hint or warrant in the old Hebrew writings. Their most singular feature, perhaps, was their reverence for the sun. In their speculative hints respecting the soul and a future state, we find another important deviation from Judaism, and the explanation of their asceticism. They held that the body is mortal, and its substance transitory; that the soul is immortal, but, coming from the subtlest ether, is lured as by a sorcery of nature into the prison-house of the body. At death it is released from its bonds, as from long slavery, and

joyously soars aloft. To the souls of the good there is reserved a life beyond the ocean, and a country oppressed by neither rain, nor snow, nor heat, but refreshed by a gentle west wind blowing continually from the sea (vide Homer, *Odyssey* Book 4, lines 566-568), but to the wicked a region of wintry darkness and of unceasing torment. Josephus tells us too that the Essenes believed in fate; but in what sense, and what relation it bore to Divine Providence, does not appear.

The above evidence has left students in doubt as to whether Essenism is to be regarded as a pure product of the Jewish mind or as due in part to some foreign influence. On the one hand it might be maintained that the Essenes out-Pharisee'd the Pharisees. They had in common with that sect their veneration for Moses and the Law, their Sabbatarianism, their striving after ceremonial purity, and their tendency towards fatalism. But if the Pharisees abstained from good works on the Sabbath, the Essenes abstained even from natural necessities; if the Pharisees washed, the Essenes bathed before dinner; if the Pharisees ascribed some things to Fate, the Essenes ascribed all (Josephus *Antiquities* Book 13. Chapter 5, section 9). But on the other hand the Essenes avoided marriage, which the Pharisees held in honor; they offered no animal-sacrifices in the Temple; they refrained from the use of oil, which was customary among the Pharisees (Luke 7:46); above all, they offered prayers to the sun, after the manner denounced in Ezekiel (8:16). These and other points of divergences are not explained by Ritschl's interesting theory that

Essenism was an organized attempt to carry out the idea of “a kingdom of priests and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

Granting then that some foreign influence was at work in Essenism, we have four theories offered to us—that this influence was Persian, Buddhist, Pythagorean, or lastly, as maintained by Lipsius, that of the surrounding Syrian heathenism. Each of these views has had able advocates, but it must not be supposed that they are mutually exclusive. If we consider how Philo, while remaining a devout Jew in religion, yet managed to assimilate the whole Stoic philosophy, we can well believe that the Essenes might have been influenced, as Zeller maintained that they were, by Neo-Pythagoreanism. But as Pythagoras himself came from Samos, and his doctrines have a decidedly Oriental tinge, it may very well be that both he and the Essenes drew from a common source; for there is no need to reject, as is so commonly done, the statements of our authorities as to the antiquity of the Essenes. This common source we may believe with Lightfoot to have been the Persian religion, which we know to have profoundly influenced that of Israel, independently of the Essenes.

The fact that the Pharisees and Sadducees so often figure in the pages of the New Testament, while the Essenes are never mentioned, might plausibly be interpreted to show that the New Testament emanated from the side of the Essenes. So far as concerns the Epistle of Saint James this interpretation would probably be correct. That work contains the doctrine common to

the Essenes with Plato, and suggestive of Persian Dualism, that God is the author of good only. There are also certain obvious points of resemblance between the Essenes and the early Christians. Both held property in common; both had scattered communities which received guests one from the other; both avoided a light use of oaths; both taught passive obedience to political authority. The list might be enlarged, but it would not necessarily prove more than that the early Christians shared in the ideas of their age. Christianity was to some extent a popularization of Essenism, but there is little reason for believing that Jesus himself was an Essene. De Quincey's contention that there were no Essenes but the early Christians is now a literary curiosity.

The original sources of our knowledge of the Essenes have been mentioned at the beginning of this paper; the best modern discussions of them are to be found in such works as Zeller's *Philosophie der Griechen*, volume 3. The copious bibliography in Conybeare's edition of Philo's *De vita contemplativa* bears upon the Essenes as well as upon the Therapeutes. For a specially Jewish view of the Essenes see Kohler's article in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*. They are there regarded as being "simply the rigorists among the Pharisees." But we are also told that "the Pharisees characterized the Essene as 'a fool who destroyed the world.'"

EBIONITES (signifying in Hebrew "poor humans"), a name given to the ultra-Jewish party in the early Christian church. It is first

met with in Irenaeus, who sheds no light on the origin of the Ebionites, but says that while they admit the world to have been made by the true God (in contrast to the Demiurge of the Gnostics), they held Cerinthian views on the person of Christ, used only the Gospel of Matthew (probably the Gospel according to the Hebrews—so Eusebius), and rejected Paul as an apostate from the Mosaic Law, to the customs and ordinances of which, including circumcision, they steadily adhered. A similar account is given by Hippolytus, who invents a founder named Ebion. Origen divides the Ebionites into two classes according to their acceptance or rejection of the virgin birth of Jesus, but says that all alike reject the Pauline epistles. This is confirmed by Eusebius, who adds that even those who admitted the virgin birth did not accept the pre-existence of Jesus as Logos and Sophia. They kept both the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord's day, and held extreme millenarian ideas in which Jerusalem figured as the center of the coming Messianic kingdom. Epiphanius with his customary confusion makes two separate sects, Ebionites and Nazarenes. Both names, however, refer to the same people (the Jewish Christians of Syria), the latter going back to the designation of apostolic times (Acts 24:5), and the former being the term usually applied to them in the ecclesiastical literature of the second and third centuries.

The origin of the Nazarenes or Ebionites as a distinct sect is very obscure, but may be dated with much likelihood from the edict of Hadrian which in A.D. 135 finally scattered the old church of Jerusalem. While Christians of the type of Aristo of Pella and

Hegesippus, on the snapping of the old ties, were gradually assimilated to the great church outside, the more conservative section became more and more isolated and exclusive. "It may have been then that they called themselves the Poor Men, probably as claiming to be the true representatives of those who had been blessed in the Sermon on the Mount, but possibly adding to the name other associations." Out of touch with the main stream of the church they developed a new kind of pharisaism. Doctrinally they stood not so much for a theology as for a refusal of theology, and, rejecting the practical liberalism of Paul, became the natural heirs of those early Judaizers who had caused the apostle so much annoyance and trouble.

Though there is insufficient justification for dividing the Ebionites into two separate and distinct communities, labelled respectively Ebionites and Nazarenes, we have good evidence, not only that there were grades of Christological thought among them, but that a considerable section, at the end of the second century and the beginning of the third, exchanged their simple Judaistic creed for a strange blend of Essenism and Christianity. These are known as the Helxaites or Elchasaites, for they accepted as a revelation the "book of Elchasai," and one Alcibiades of Apamea undertook a mission to Rome about A.D. 220 to propagate its teaching. It was claimed that Christ, as an angel 96 miles high, accompanied by the Holy Spirit, as a female angel of the same stature, had given the revelation to Elchasai in the third year of Trajan (A.D. 100), but the book was probably quite new in Alcibiades' time. It taught that Christ was an angel

born of human parents, and had appeared both before (namely, in Adam and Moses) and after this birth in Judea. His coming did not annul the Law, for he was merely a prophet and teacher; Paul was wrong and circumcision still necessary. Baptism must be repeated as a means of purification from sin, and proof against disease; the sinner immerses himself “in the name of the mighty and most high God,” invoking the “seven witnesses” (sky, water, the holy spirits, the angels of prayer, oil, salt, and earth), and pledging himself to amendment. Abstinence from flesh was also enjoined, and a good deal of astrological fancy was interwoven with the doctrinal and practical teaching. It is highly probable, too, that from these Essene Ebionites there issued the fantastical and widely read “Clementine” literature (Homilies and Recognitions) of the third century. Ebionite views lingered especially in the country east of the Jordan until they were absorbed by Islam in the seventh century.