

Passage on early Christian sects

Author: Isaac Newton

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— with God & at length was made flesh.

The Christians of the uncircumcision during the three first centuries & part of the fourth generally held that Christ was in the beginning before all things & that God created all things by him & said unto him Let us make man & that he had dominion over all things & appeared to Adam in paradise & to [Cain & Noah &] the Patriarchs & Moses & Ioshuah & at length came down from heaven, was incarnate & born of the Virgin Mary without the help of a man & became a true man & suffered & rose again from the dead & reascended into heaven where he was before. And the Christians of the circumcision were also of the very same opinion excepting some disputes about the incarnation. For Epiphanius^[1] reciting the several opinions of the Ebionites tells us that some of them said that Christ was Adam, even that Adam who was first formed by God & animated by the divine breath, & that others of them said that Christ was from above & that he was a spirit which was created before all things & was above the Angels & had dominion over all things & was called Christ, & that his habitation or residence was there perpetually; but as often as he pleased, he descended to these lower regions, as when he came in Adam & appeared to the patriarchs cloathed with a body, coming to Abraham & to Isaac & to Jacob; that this same Christ came in these last times & cloathed himself with the body of Adam [that is with flesh & bones of the race of Adam] & appeared a man & was crucified & rose again & ascended. But these Ebionites again when they please say it was not thus, but that a spirit who is the Christ came into Iesus & cloathed himself with him who is called Iesus. Thus far Epiphanius. And a little after describing more at large the third opinion of these Ebionites he represents that they said that ^[2]Iesus was born of the seed of man [viz^t of Ioseph & Mary] & was chosen, & by election was called the son of God from the Christ who came upon him from above in the form of a dove & that they said not that this Christ was generated of God the father [viz^t in the naturall sense of the word that is by emission of his fathers substance as a man is generated or as the heathens suppose their gods to be generated but that he was created as one of the Archangels [viz^t in respect of his spiritual body] & was greater then they & reigns over both the Angels & all things which were made by the omnipotent & came & taught what was in their Gospel, that is, in the Gospel according to Matthew. What the Ebionites meant by the first of these three opinions I do not well understand, unless perhaps they meant that Christ was the Adam Cadmon or first Man of the Cabbalists, that is, their first Sephiroth or Æon called by them Kether, the Crown or supreme Sephiroth & by the Gnosticks Ἀρχή the Beginning. But whatever they meant, it is manifest that the Ebionites according to all the three opinions here ascribed to them taught that Christ was as old as the creation of the world, & according to the second & third opinion (& perhaps also the first) that he was above the Angels & Archangels & reigned over them & over all <2r> things else from the beginning & came down from heaven & was either incarnate of the Virgin or descended upon Iesus. // And if the Ebionites made Christ as old as the creation & took him to be the supreme being next under the father & Lord of the Vniverse, much more did the Nazarenes. For the Nazarenes generally called Christ the son of God, which those Ebionites who said that Iesus was the son of Ioseph, did not. Those Ebionites said only that Iesus was the son of God by election & by the descent of Christ upon him, but they allowed not a generation of Christ as the Nazarenes did, nor did they say that Christ was born of a Virgin suffered on the cross & rose again from the dead. These things they attributed only to Iesus the son of Ioseph & Mary, & therefore the Nazarenes who said ^[3]that Christ **{illeg}** was the son of God & born of a Virgin & suffered & rose again & ascended, were of the opinion that Christ came down from heaven & took flesh of the Virgin by the power of God & was born of her & suffered & rose again &

ascended where he was before, & by reason of his supernatural incarnation was called the son of God. And whereas those Ebionites who were of this opinion said that he was ‡ < insertion from f 1v > ‡ created before all things, they meant not that he was produced out of nothing (for that was a later sense of the word:) but that he was formed with a spiritual body without the emission of his fathers substance. For God the father has not a bodily substance to emit, & therefore in the literal sense of the word, generates nothing with a body. Had they been asked whether Christ was the beginning of the creation of God & the first begotten of every creature, that is, the first begotten of every thing produced without the emission of the fathers substance, I question not but that they would have granted it: [& therefore in calling him a creature intended not to deny him to be the [son of God in the sense of the Apostle] but neither they nor the Nazarenes had been taught to call him the son of God by a generation in a literal sense before the world began.

< text from f 2r resumes >

Vpon the commencing of the Iewish war, the Christian Iews or Nazarenes fled from Ierusalem into other countries & chiefly into Peræa on the eastern side of Iordan , & there they began first to be called Ebionites. They were called Nazarenes before by their enemies the unbeleiving Iews, & in Peræa they were first called Ebionites by their friends & themselves: for they gloried in the name of Ebionites & said that they knew of no such man as Ebion, but from the days of the Apostles had distributed their goods to the poor & by that means being generally impoverished were called Ebionites from the word Ebion which in their language signifies a poor man. This is the account which they gave of themselves. ¶ < insertion from f 1v > ¶ And according to this account the Ebionites were the Nazarenes of Peræa & these Nazarenes were of several opinions. Some said that Christ was Adam, but in what sense I do not find. Some that he was a spirit created before all things & had dominion over all things & dwelt in heaven & descended whenever he pleased & conversed with the Patriarchs & in the last days came down & was incarnate & appeared as a man & was crucified & rose again & ascended. And this I take to be the original & most general opinion of the Nazarenes. And some said that this Christ who was before the creation & had dominion over all things only descended upon Iesus in the form of a dove & dwelt in him & did the supernatural works but was not really incarnate nor born nor died, but when Iesus was led to Pilate departed from him. And many of these Nazarenes being so zealous of the law as not only to observe it themselves but also to impose it upon the converted Gentiles as requisite to salvation they were at length distinguished from the rest of the Nazarenes by the name of Ebionites. This sect was therefore as old as the first Council of Ierusalem, tho the name was of a later date. And from all this . . . < text from f 2r resumes > But many among them being so zealous of the law as not only to observe it themselves but also to impose it on the converted Gentiles as requisite to salvation, these were censured for it & at length the name of Ebionites appropriated to them to distinguish them from the rest of the Nazarenes. This sect was therefore as old as the first Council of Ierusalem tho the name was of a later date [& the Nazarenes were the first Christians.]. And from all this it is manifest that the Christians of the Church of Ierusalem beleived from the beginning that Christ was before the creation & had dominion over the Angels & Archangels & all things, & at length came down from heaven & either was incarnate or descended upon Iesus. And this faith spread from Ierusalem into all the earth, & continued to be the faith of all the Churches till the days of Hegesippus Irenæus & Pope Eleutherus, the Christians generally beleiving that Christ was incarnate of the Virgin & became man, & some few that Christ descended upon Iesus, or in our language, that the divine nature descended upon the humane, or God the Word upon the man Christ Iesus.

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And this state of the primitive Church explains to us the true meaning of the beginning of the gospel of Iohn. In the beginning was the Word & the word was with God. All things were made by him & without him was nothing made that was made. By these words Iohn confirms the opinion of the Nazarenes & those Ebionites who said that Christ was in the beginning of the creation of the world, & was then with God the father & that God created all things by him. And the Word was God, not a mere power or vertue of the father emitted without a proper life will & understanding & actuated by the fathers will as was the opinion of some who said that Christ descended upon Iesus, but a person with a proper life understanding & will, & not any person but a divine person, a person with dominion, a person who had dominion over the Archangels & Angels & all things created. For this is the signification of Θεὸς. Οὗ Θεὸς is an individual & signifies the supreme God when limited to no other sense: Θεὸς is a species (as Origen & Epiphanius tell us) & may signify any divine Being with dominion. For Elohim, Θεὸς, Deus, God are words of dominion & have the same signification with the word Lord but in a higher degree. And the word was made flesh. This is said in opposition to those

who taught that Christ descended upon Iesus in the form of a Dove & dwelt in him & did the works & for confirming the opinion of those who said that he overshadowed the virgin & was incarnate in the proper sense of the word & became a true passible man. And for establishing the same opinion Iohn saith in his first Epistle, Who is a lyar but he that denyeth that Iesus is the Christ?

[1] Hæres. 30. sect. 3

[2] ib. sect. 14 & 16

[3] Hieron. supra
