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Epiphanius's Condemnation of the Nazarenes: When Orthodox Christian Theology is Threatened by Jewish Practice

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ABSTRACT

In 377 AD, Epiphanius of Salamis wrote the Panarion. In the Panarion he labeled 80 religious sects as heretics. Among those groups was a Jewish-Christian sect called the Nazarenes. The Nazarenes believed that there is one God, that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and that both the Old and New Testaments were to be used as Scripture. For Epiphanius, the only fault of this sect was in their continued observance of the Law of Moses. It is important to explain why Epiphanius concluded that they were heretics. I argue that Epiphanius thought that the Torah observance of the Nazarenes undermined his replacement theology. To Epiphanius, the Church replaced the Jews as God's chosen people and that the Mosaic covenant was discontinued. Any group that claimed to believe in Jesus but continued to follow the Law of Moses blurred the line between the Jewish nation and the Church. This resulted in Epiphanius condemning them as heretics to show that their lifestyle was not acceptable and to protect his theological position.

Keywords: Epiphanius, Epiphanius of Salamis, the Nazarenes, Nazarenes, Replacement Theology, Supersessionism, the Panarion, Ancient Christianity, Ancient Judaism, Jewish-Christianity, Jewish-Christian

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox saint, Epiphanius of Salamis, was born around 315 CE in Eleutheropolis, Judea, where he spent 50 years of his life.¹ He was raised in a Catholic family and went on to do his monastic training in Egypt. While there, Epiphanius honed his skills in the Hebrew and Coptic languages to go along with his knowledge of Latin and Greek.² He came back home around 335 CE and founded a monastery near his hometown,³ and in 367 CE, Epiphanius became bishop of Salamis, Cyprus.⁴ He is notable for his opposition to Origen,⁵ and

¹ Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament Period Until Its Disappearance in the Fourth Century* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), 29.

² Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 29.

³ Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 29.

⁴ Oskar Skarsaune, "Evidence for Jewish Believers in Greek and Latin Patristic Literature," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 528-529.

⁵ Andrew S. Jacobs, "Matters (Un)-Becoming: Conversions in Epiphanius of Salamis," *Church History* 81, no. 1 (March, 2012): 38-39.

for his view on the proper use of images in the churches.⁶ Epiphanius is best known for writing the *Panarion*, a work that combated the doctrines and practices of various groups he considered heretical.⁷

In the *Panarion*, he condemned eighty groups, one of which was called the Nazarenes.⁸ In Book 29 of the *Panarion*, Epiphanius accuses the Nazarenes of being different from both Christians and Jews. He wrote,

They are different from Jews, and different from Christians, only in the following ways. They disagree with Jews because of their belief in Christ, but they are not in accord with Christians because they are still fettered by the Law - circumcision, the Sabbath, and the rest.⁹

In this passage, Epiphanius expresses his view that belief in Jesus as the Messiah is incompatible with Torah-observance. Furthermore, the Nazarenes' Torah-oriented lifestyle is the only reason Epiphanius gives for their condemnation.

Scholars commonly note this observation, but few have explored the other reasons as to why Epiphanius condemns the Nazarenes.¹⁰ Daniel Boyarin argues that Epiphanius was attempting to conduct, "the discursive project of imperial Christian self-definition."¹¹ This Christian self-definition was accomplished by condemning ambiguous Jewish-Christian, groups who Boyarin calls "hybrids."¹² According to Boyarin, identifying hybrids "assumes the existence of nonhybrid, 'pure' religions."¹³ In other words, Epiphanius was attempting to define orthodox Christianity. Though Boyarin's argument is convincing, it does not provide any textual evidence for why Epiphanius condemned the Nazarenes specifically. Nor does he attempt to discover if there was an aspect of orthodox Christianity that Epiphanius thought was being threatened by this group.

⁶ Jacobs, "Matters (Un)-Becoming," 32.

⁷ Epiphanius compiled the *Panarion* later in his life, between 374 and 377. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 29.

⁸ Epiphanius condemned eighty groups because of the eighty concubines mentioned in Song of Solomon 6:6. He viewed the Church as the one true love of God, just as Solomon was writing to his one true love in this passage. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, xxi.

⁹ *Panarion* 29.7.5.

¹⁰ Petri Luomanen argues that Epiphanius's description and condemnation of the Nazarenes "is pure fiction." He claims Epiphanius imagined the characteristics of this group because he wanted to condemn Jewish-Christianity "in its 'pure form,'" not just the obviously heretical (in Epiphanius's eyes) Ebionites. Though this study treats Epiphanius's description of the Nazarenes as the heresiologists genuine impression of the group, Luomanen's thesis concerning Epiphanius's motivation is compatible with what this study offers. This study inquires beyond what Luomanen offers in the same way as with Boyarin's, as will be mentioned. Petri Luomanen, "Nazarenes," in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics"*, ed. Antti Marjanen (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 307-309.

¹¹ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, Pa: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 207-214.

¹² Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 214.

¹³ Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 208.

This study attempts to further the discussion by answering the question: does Epiphanius mention what specific aspect of his vision of Orthodox Christianity the Nazarenes seemingly challenged? Moreover, what doctrine was Epiphanius attempting to define as orthodox Christian? I argue that Epiphanius condemns the Nazarenes for their Torah-observance because Epiphanius perceived their Jewish practices as a threat to his belief in supersessionism.

Supersessionism is the doctrine that the Church replaced the nation of Israel as God's chosen people¹⁴ and that the New Covenant brought by Christ replaced the Mosaic Covenant.¹⁵ So, from Epiphanius's point of view, any Jewish group that claimed to believe in Christ but continued to keep Jewish customs found in the Torah, appeared as a threat to that theological formulation. Supersessionism simultaneously gave divine status to the Church while it stripped divine status from the nation of Israel. The fact that the Nazarenes had representative qualities of both groups, which blurred the distinction between the new Israel (i.e., the Church) and physical Israel, supports the idea that Epiphanius condemns them as a result of their Jewish practices. Furthermore, as Boyarin mentioned, this hybrid group was used by Epiphanius as a foil to promote orthodoxy.

It is necessary to survey what else Epiphanius knew about this group to help illuminate this thesis. Epiphanius likely did not have any first-hand experience with the Nazarenes¹⁶ and was relying mostly on the *Commentary on Isaiah* (as quoted by Jerome)¹⁷ which was used by the Nazarenes.¹⁸ Although, Epiphanius admitted that he did not have complete knowledge of this group. He wrote, "As to Christ, I cannot say whether they too are misled by the wickedness of Cerinthus and Merinthus, and regard him as a mere man - or whether, as the truth is, they affirm that he was born of Mary by the Holy Spirit."¹⁹ Other than this, Epiphanius spoke with great confidence about what he believed were the attributes, beliefs, and practices of the Nazarenes.

According to Epiphanius, the Nazarenes were residing in Beroea, Syria²⁰ (modern-day Aleppo²¹); they were Jewish people²² who were perfectly versed in Hebrew²³ and in possession of an Aramaic version of the Gospel of Matthew.²⁴ As for their beliefs, Epiphanius attributed to them

¹⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, "Christians & Jews: Starting Over: Why the real dialogue has just begun," *Commonweal*, no. 2 (2003): 15.

¹⁵ Hal Smith, "The Orthodox Church and 'Supersessionism,'" *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 19, no. 56 (Spring 2015): 41.

¹⁶ Smith, "The Orthodox Church and 'Supersessionism,'" 35.

¹⁷ Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 57.

¹⁸ Oskar Skarsaune, "Fragments of Jewish Christian Literature Quoted in Some Greek and Latin Fathers," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 373.

¹⁹ Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 29.7.6.

²⁰ *Panarion* 29.7.7.

²¹ Joan E. Taylor, "The Phenomenon of Early Jewish-Christianity: Reality or Scholarly Invention?," *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, no. 4 (December, 1990): 326.

²² *Panarion* 29.5.4; 7.1; 9.1; 9.3.

²³ *Panarion* 29.7.4.

²⁴ *Panarion* 29.9.4.

many of his orthodox Christian doctrines. The Nazarenes believed that there is only one God,²⁵ that Jesus was the Son of God²⁶ and that he is the Messiah.²⁷ They read from both the Old Testament and the New Testament²⁸ and they believed in the resurrection of the dead.²⁹ Additionally, Epiphanius knew this group was cursed by the nearby Jewish community three times a day because of these beliefs. He wrote,

Not only do Jewish people bear hatred against them; they even stand up at dawn, at midday, and toward evening, three times a day when they recite their prayers in the synagogues, and curse and anathematize them—saying three times a day, ‘God curse the Nazarenes.’ For they harbor a further grudge against them, if you please, because despite their Jewish origin, they preach that Jesus is Christ—something that is the opposite of those who are still Jews and have not accepted Jesus.³⁰

So, not only was Epiphanius condemning the Nazarenes as heretical to the Christian faith but he also recognized that the Jewish community was condemning the Nazarenes as well, for what he would consider orthodox Christian beliefs. However, it is crucial to note that not once in the *Panarion* does Epiphanius describe what would be a heretical theological belief on the Nazarenes’ part. Additionally, when taking other sources written about the Nazarenes into account, even modern scholars have been unable to find a potentially heretical belief displayed by this group. Joan Taylor has noted that, “Theologically, there is nothing that would have distinguished them as being anything but broadly orthodox.”³¹ For Epiphanius, the fault of the Nazarenes was not their internal, theological beliefs but their external Jewish practices.³²

For Epiphanius, in Book 29, belief in Jesus and observation of the Torah were mutually exclusive. He pointed to Galatians 3:10, 22, the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:20), and Galatians 5:2-4 as his prooftexts for why observation of the Torah and circumcision are grounds for condemnation,

But they too are wrong to boast of circumcision, and persons like themselves are still ‘under a curse,’ since they cannot fulfill the Law. “For after Moses had given every commandment he came to the end of the book and ‘included the whole in a curse’ by saying, ‘Cursed is he that continueth not in all the words that are written in this book to do them.’”³³

But how can people like these be defensible since they have not obeyed the Holy Spirit who said through the apostles to gentile converts, ‘Assume no burden save the necessary

²⁵ *Panarion* 29.7.3.

²⁶ *Panarion* 29.7.3.

²⁷ *Panarion* 29.7.2; 7.5; 9.3.

²⁸ *Panarion* 29.7.2.

²⁹ *Panarion* 29.7.3.

³⁰ *Panarion* 29.9.2.

³¹ Taylor, “Phenomenon,” 326.

³² Taylor, “Phenomenon,” 327.

³³ *Panarion* 29.8.1. cf. Galatians 3:10, 22

things, that ye abstain from blood, and from things strangled, and fornication, and from meats offered to idols?’³⁴

And how can they fail to lose the grace of God, when the holy apostle Paul says, ‘If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing . . . whosoever of you do glory in the Law are fallen from grace?’³⁵

However, it is important to note that Epiphanius did not accuse the Nazarenes of other common heresies associated with Jewish groups, such as, requiring gentiles to observe Jewish customs, believing one must observe the Torah for salvific purposes, or of viewing gentile Christians as inferior.³⁶ He attributed many Christian doctrines to this group and even admitted that other Jewish groups condemned them for being, in their eyes, Christians. Being able to elucidate that the only fault Epiphanius could find with the Nazarenes was their Torah-observance clarifies precisely which aspect of his theology was threatened.

One might ask if the prooftexts quoted above provide enough explanation for Epiphanius condemning the Nazarenes for their Torah-observance. This might be the case if it were not for Epiphanius failing to condemn Torah-observant followers of Jesus elsewhere in the *Panarion*. Notice in Book 30 of the *Panarion*, “Against the Ebionites,” Epiphanius goes into a long aside concerning a Jewish convert to Christianity, Joseph of Tiberias. In this section, Epiphanius made note of Jewish believers in Jesus who remained in the Jewish communities and observed Torah because their faith in Jesus was a secret. And yet, he did not heap condemnation on their heads. Epiphanius recounts,

He fell ill a second time in turn, and was given up in the same way. When he was assumed to be dying by his Jewish kin he heard the words from them that they always repeat in secrecy among themselves. (3) An elder, *a scholar of the law*, came and whispered to him, “Believe in Jesus, crucified under Pontius Pilate the governor, Son of God first yet later born of Mary; the Christ of God and risen from the dead. And believe that he will come to judge and quick and the dead.” That same Josephus told me this plainly during his story, as I can truthfully say.³⁷

And,

Besides, I have heard this sort of thing from someone else. *He was still a Jew* from fear of the Jews, but he often spent time in Christian company, and he honored Christians and loved them. He traveled with me in the wilderness of Bethel and Ephraim, when I was going up to the mountains from Jericho and saying something to him about the advent of Christ, and he did not dispute it. (5) I was amazed—*he was learned in the Law* as well and able to argue—and I asked the reason why he did not dispute, but agreed with me, about Jesus Christ our Lord. I had got no further than this when he too revealed to me that when

³⁴ *Panarion* 29.8.6. cf. Acts 15:20

³⁵ *Panarion* 29.8.7. cf. Galatians 5:2-4

³⁶ Wolfram Kinzing, “‘Non-Separation’: Closeness and Co-operation between Jews and Christians in the Fourth Century,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 45, no. 1 (March, 1991): 33.

³⁷ *Panarion* 30.9.2. (emphasis added)

he himself had been near death they had told him secretly, in a whisper, ‘Jesus Christ, the crucified Son of God, will judge you.’ (6) But let this be recorded here, from a genuine report about these persons and about this formula.³⁸

The significance of these passages cannot be overstated. Epiphanius condemned the Nazarenes as heretics because of their Torah-observance, but here he is recounting stories that involved “a scholar of the law” and one who “was still a Jew . . . learned in the Law,” confessing belief in Jesus Christ. This passage is significant because Epiphanius was making note of these cases as a point of pride for the Christian faith and clearly not as an accusation of heresy.

The difference between the Nazarenes and these secret Jewish believers in Jesus was that the Nazarenes were an autonomous, public community professing belief in Jesus as the Messiah while the secret Jewish believers in Jesus did not have these qualities. The Nazarenes were living a contentious lifestyle right in between a Jewish community and a Christian one.³⁹ They were followers of Jesus, contrary to the nearby Jewish community and continued observe Torah, contrary to nearby Christian community. This combination of belief and behavior challenged the Jewish community’s idea of the Messiah and the Christian community’s idea of supersessionism. The secret Jewish believers in Jesus did not create that problem because they remained hidden in the ranks of rabbinic Judaism. Rather than being conceived as a threat to supersessionism, these covert Jesus followers represented a point of victory for the Church. The optics of each group was entirely different. Moreover, this double standard demonstrated by Epiphanius reveals that something besides, or in addition to, mere Torah-observance in apparent contradiction to Galatians and Acts was not what ultimately bothered Epiphanius.

As mentioned above, this study argues that Epiphanius was motivated to condemn the Nazarenes because the hybridity of this group threatened his attempt to define orthodox Christianity, particularly the doctrine of supersessionism. Epiphanius opened Book 29 with an argument against the way the Nazarenes identified themselves. Within this argument, he stated, “But with the transfer of the royal throne the rank of king passed, in Christ, from the physical house of Israel to the church.”⁴⁰ This statement shows that Epiphanius adhered to supersessionism, a theology that stated that the Church became the spiritual Israel and that physical Israel is no longer God’s chosen people.

Epiphanius likely based his above statement off of one of the originators of supersessionism, Justin Martyr (c. 160),⁴¹ who wrote in *Dialogue with Trypho*, “For the true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham . . . are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ, as shall be demonstrated while we proceed.”⁴² In the eyes of the supersessionists of these early centuries, the Church replaced the Jewish people as the new

³⁸ *Panarion* 30.9.4. (emphasis added)

³⁹ Kinzing, “Non-Separation,” 32.

⁴⁰ *Panarion* 29.3.7.

⁴¹ Johnson, “Christians & Jews: Starting Over,” 16.

⁴² Justin Martyr, trans. by Marcus Dods and George Reith. *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter 11. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/01282.htm>.

Israel. Also, circumcision and Torah observance were ineffectual identity markers for whether someone is part of God's chosen people. According to this theology, anyone who believes in Christ is part of the new, spiritual Israel, and physical Israel no longer has any spiritual significance.

Supersessionism implied that Torah-keeping should no longer play a role in the life of a believer in Christ. Again, Justin Martyr provided a clear statement concerning this,

But we do not trust through Moses or through the law; for then we would do the same as yourselves . . . For the law promulgated on Horeb is now old, and belongs to yourselves alone; but *this* is for all universally. Now, law placed against law has abrogated that which is before it, and a covenant which comes after in like manner has put an end to the previous one; and an eternal and final law—namely, Christ—has been given to us, and the covenant is trustworthy, after which there shall be no law, no commandment, no ordinance.⁴³

Adhering to supersessionism naturally leads to a dismissive attitude of the Torah and to the observance of its laws. According to Epiphanius, having orthodox Christian beliefs were not enough if one continued to practice a covenant that had supposedly been dismissed.

Epiphanius never accused the Nazarenes of claiming that Gentiles needed to observe the Torah, or that one required to observe the Torah to attain salvation, as he did with the Ebionites.⁴⁴ What Epiphanius took issue with was the appearance of the Nazarenes. Todd S. Berzon says, “heresies challenged the pastoral expertise of the heresiologists and compelled explanations and refutations of their appearance, diversity, and proliferation.”⁴⁵ Epiphanius could not condemn the Nazarenes based on their internally held beliefs but was compelled to account for their threatening Torah-observance. The primary orthodox Christian doctrine Epiphanius held that could be challenged by this behavior was his supersessionism.

One might point to Epiphanius' association of the Nazarenes with a false prophet to show an alternative explanation. In Book 19, Epiphanius wrote against the Ossaeans, which were a group with Jewish beliefs that did not practice Jewish law.⁴⁶ According to Epiphanius, this group was started by a man named Elxai. He wrote a book containing false prophecies⁴⁷ and taught that idol worship was not a sin.⁴⁸ In Book 19, Epiphanius made the following comment,

And I shall pass this sect by as well. For again, Elxai is associated with the Ebionites after Christ, as well as with the Nazarenes, who came later. (5) And four sects have made use of him because they were bewitched by his imposture: Of those that came after him, the Ebionites and Nazarenes; of those before his time and during it the Ossaeans, and the Nasaraeans whom I mentioned earlier.⁴⁹

⁴³ *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter 11.

⁴⁴ Kinzing, “Non-Separation,” 41.

⁴⁵ Todd S. Berzon, “Known Knowns and Known Unknowns: Epiphanius of Salamis and the Limits of Heresiology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 1, no. 75 (January 2016): 91.

⁴⁶ *Panarion* 19.1.5.

⁴⁷ *Panarion* 19.1.4.

⁴⁸ *Panarion* 19.1.8.

⁴⁹ *Panarion* 19.5.4.

If it is true that Epiphanius was under the impression that the Nazarenes were a group led, or influenced by, the false prophet Elxai, then it would be an alternative, motivating factor behind the condemnation of the Nazarenes other than a threatened theological presupposition.

If Epiphanius genuinely thought that the Nazarenes had an association with the false prophet, then it is reasonable to expect Epiphanius to connect the two parties in Book 29. He could have done this either by mentioning the false prophet's name or any shared practices and beliefs. It would also be the expectation that there would be no significant contradictions in practices and beliefs between the two parties. Ultimately, Epiphanius failed to meet either of these expectations. In Book 29, Epiphanius failed to make a connection between Elxai and the Nazarenes and even provided significant contrary information: Elxai did not live his life in accordance with the Torah, which is the only reason Epiphanius gave for condemning the Nazarenes.⁵⁰

Epiphanius' failure to connect Elxai and the Nazarenes is surprising considering he connected Elxai with the Ebionites in Book 30. In "Against the Ebionites," where he stated,

But I have already indicated, even before this, that Ebion did not know of these things. After a time his followers became associated with Elxai, and they have the circumcision, the Sabbath and the customs of Ebion, but Elxai's delusion. (6) Thus they believe that Christ is a manlike figure invisible to human eyes, ninety-six miles—or twenty-four schoena, if you please!—tall; six schoena, or twenty-four miles wide; and some other measurement through. Opposite him the Holy Spirit stands invisibly as well, in the form of a female, with the same dimensions. (7) 'And how did I find the dimensions?' he says. 'I saw from the mountains that the heads were level with them, and from observing the height of the mountain, I learned the dimensions of Christ and the Holy Spirit.' (8) I have already spoken of this in the Sect, 'Against Ossaeans.' I have put it down here though, in passing, lest it be thought that I fail from forgetfulness to mention characteristics of any nation and sect which are also found in others.⁵¹

Epiphanius desired to make sure his reader knew that he did not forget about his earlier comment about the influence Elxai had on the Ebionites. So why did Epiphanius not do the same in Book 29 if there was indeed a connection between Elxai and the Nazarenes?

A possible reason for why Epiphanius mentioned the Nazarenes in Book 19, "Against the Ossaeans," is because Epiphanius "tends to join his heresies together or at least to ascribe to them a kind of line of succession."⁵² He was pairing these groups together to establish credibility through heredity. If he could establish a common thread between groups, then the reasons for condemnation all add up, and the reader could become even more convinced of his case. Pritz says, "he frequently makes generalizations concerning succession or interrelation of heresies that may not have been justified from his sources. This seems to be the case with his statement that the Nazarenes adopted the Book of Elxai."⁵³ Considering these factors and alternative explanations, it

⁵⁰ *Panarion* 19.1.5.

⁵¹ *Panarion* 30.17.5.

⁵² Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 37.

⁵³ Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 37.

is unlikely Epiphanius genuinely found a connection between the Nazarenes and the false prophet Elxai.⁵⁴ The best explanation for Epiphanius' condemnation of the Nazarenes is that he was ultimately motivated to condemn them in defense of his supersessionism, not merely on the basis of their Torah observance.

In summary, while scholarship has done a serviceable job of noticing that Epiphanius did not have any theological grounds for condemning the Nazarenes, there has not been adequate time or energy spent examining what else might have triggered this response in Epiphanius. Boyarin provides a general motivation for Epiphanius' project of identifying heresies but creates new questions to answer. Epiphanius claims the Nazarenes' Torah-observance disqualified them from Christianity based on Galatians and Acts. However, taking his inconsistent judgements on Torah-observant Jewish believers in Jesus and his adherence to supersessionism into account, it is most reasonable to conclude that ultimately, it was the threatening optics a publicly Torah-observing, Jesus-believing Jewish group had on supersessionism that compelled Epiphanius to condemn the Nazarenes.

⁵⁴ Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 36.

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