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# Early Christianity: One Extreme Meets the Other

*By Jim Myers*

One of the great unknowns to most Christians is the diversity of beliefs of their spiritual ancestors. I always believed that Jesus established a new religion and it became my Baptist church. My mental picture was that there had been just one form of early Christianity that 99.9% of the Christians were members. I knew that there were heretics, but I assumed that they were few -- *kind of like an annoying mosquito*.

The fact of the matter is that there was no dominant form of the Jesus Movement that evolved, with a single set of core beliefs in tact, to ultimately become the Constantinian form of Roman Christianity. The Jesus Movement was exclusively a Jewish sect during the life of Jesus. Within a decade or two after his crucifixion by the Romans, the original movement split into multiple new sects – each with a variety of new beliefs and doctrines. Many allowed Gentiles to be admitted as full members.

By 150 CE two forms existed that represented the extreme poles of Christianity, between which most of the other forms could be placed. On one extreme were the Ebionites, a sect that probably came into existence around the time of destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. At the other extreme were the Marcionites who had only been around for about a decade. I am going to create a hypothetical conversation between two fictional characters – **Ebi the Ebionite** and **Marci the Marcionite** – to illustrate their beliefs.

### Ebi & Marci Discuss Their Beliefs

**Ebi:** I am a follower of Jesus.

**Marci:** I am a follower of Jesus too.

**Ebi:** I am a follower of the true God through Jesus.

**Marci:** I am a follower of the true God through Jesus too.

**Ebi:** Our views came from Jesus.

**Marci:** That's great, ours did too.

**Ebi:** Jesus's death is the way of salvation.

**Marci:** I completely agree.

**Ebi:** Our members are only Jews.

**Marci:** We have Jews and Gentiles as members.

**Ebi:** You can't allow Gentiles to become members because being Jewish is fundamental to a right standing before God.

**Marci:** No, you are wrong about that because Jewish practice is fundamentally detrimental for a right standing before God.

**Ebi:** We believe that there is only one God.

**Marci:** Well you are in error once more because everyone knows that there are two Gods – the Good God of New Testament & Evil Inferior God of Old Testament.

**Marci:** Surely you believe that Jesus is completely divine and not human?

**Ebi:** No he wasn't; he was completely human and not divine. There is only one God, not two or three!

**Ebi:** All you have to do is read our Scriptures (Old Testament), the true revelation of the one God, to know that Jesus couldn't have been divine!

**Marci:** What are you talking about? The Old Testament is a book inspired by the inferior God of the Jews. The New Testament is superior to the Bible of the Jews. It contains the teachings of Paul, the one and only true apostle of Jesus.

**Ebi:** Are you kidding? Paul is the arch heretic of the church and his teachings are false!

**Marci:** You can't be a follower of Jesus if you reject the foundational doctrine of his inspired apostle -- justification comes by faith in Christ apart from the works of the law.

**Ebi:** The laws of the Old Testament are to be followed now just as much as they were before he was born. They are the divine words of God.

**Marci:** We reject the laws of the Old Testament because they are the products of the inferior God, the God of the Jews.

**Ebi:** We agree that there are new Scriptures that must be added to the Old Testament -- a version of Matthew (without the first two chapters, which say that Jesus was born of a virgin), and possibly a few other books, including our own Gospel of the Ebionites. But our New Scriptures agree that we are still under the laws of the Old Testament.

**Marci:** Our New Scriptures begin with the Gospel of Luke (again, possibly without its first two chapters, which say that Jesus was born). They also include the ten letters of Paul, but you will not find the Bible of the Jews in our Scriptures.

**Ebi:** Paul was a heretic! Why would you want anything written by him in your Bible? He never met Jesus before the crucifixion. He was never called as an apostle. Jesus taught the twelve

apostles that he personally called. Shouldn't you include their writings in your Bible?

**Marci:** The Creator attempted and succeeded in deceiving the apostles that Jesus called about the true message. He mixed it with various Jewish elements and connected it to his Old Testament Scriptures. Your apostles were deceived, just read Paul's writing and you will find out how wrong they are!

**Ebi:** Let's get something straight right here and now. The Ebionites are not just Christians, we the true Christians!

**Marci:** You are wrong again Ebion -- the only true Christians are the Marcionites. We have the true message of Christ. If you want to be saved you better listen to our teachings.

Just two centuries later both would share a common fate, they would be condemned as heretical by the powerful Roman Christian sect that was endorsed by Emperor Constantine. Christianity would look very different if either the Ebionites or the Marcionites had won.

If the Ebionites had won we would have a different New Testament. Since they were opponents of the Apostle Paul and thought he was a heretic, a lot of our New Testament would have been excluded. They would have kept a modified version of what is now our Gospel of Matthew, but maybe not any of the other Gospels. Christians would have to be Jewish, which means uncircumcised men would have to get circumcised "to be saved." Christians would be keeping kosher food laws, keeping the Sabbath, worshiping on Saturday and keeping all of the Jewish festivals. *Christianity would be just another sect of Judaism.*

If Marcion had won the Christian Bible would only include a modified version of Luke and ten of Paul's letters. There would be no link to Judaism; no Old Testament. Peter would be a famous heretic instead of the first Pope. A question that has always intrigued me is -- *What would have happened to Judaism if their Bible had not been included in the Christian Scriptures and linked to Christianity forever?* **BHR**

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This spiritual journey begins with one book for many of us – our Bible. It has a history too. Who wrote its words? Who decided what our “word of God” would be? In what language was it written? How can we most accurately understand its words and messages? How accurate are our English translations? Is there a way that I can learn to work with the original languages -- without going back to college -- so I will be able to check the work of the translators?

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