

## The Ebionites: Eccentric or Essential Early Christians?

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### ABSTRACT

Interest in the world of ancient Christianity has been increasing over the past twenty years as news reports and books about the Gnostic Gospels have caused many to wonder whether their knowledge and assumptions about early Christianity might be either seriously limited or even erroneous. An intriguing example of one form of “early Christianity” which challenges one’s expectations is a group known as the Ebionites, Jewish Christians who did not accept the divinity of Christ, believed that Jesus actually increased an emphasis on the “law” and saw Paul of Tarsus as an enemy. Ebionites were vegetarians and claimed that all of their views were approved by both James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem, as well as Peter. This paper explores what is known about the beliefs, practices, and history of this remarkable group of antiquated believers and examines their place in relation to both the Orthodox Jewish and the “Proto-Orthodox” Christian communities of that era.

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### Introduction

What is a Christian? Today, the answer to that question is relatively straightforward. But, as one peers back into the mists of history, the answer becomes much more difficult to determine. In reality, it appears that there was actually a variety of “Christianities” in the first centuries of the Common Era.

This paper will focus on the ancient Christian group known as the “Ebionites” who were an early group of Jewish followers of Jesus whose beliefs differed substantially from the Pauline tradition. It will examine what is known about the origins, doctrines, and practices of this early group of believers. The question to be addressed in the paper will be whether the beliefs of the Ebionites should be viewed as simply eccentric, and hence, ignorable, or as possibly significantly indicative of the actual beliefs of many of the first Jewish Christians.

### Overview of What is Known about the Ebionites

The memory of the Ebionites remains alive only through descriptions of them in the works of others, actually those who were their opponents. According to Luomanen, “the Ebionites and the Nazarenes are known only from the writings of the Church Fathers who present short summaries of their teachings and quotations from their writing, usually in order to confute what they consider to be heresy.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, whatever is now known about the Ebionites necessarily must be considered to have been filtered through a negative lens. Epiphanius, one of the early Church Fathers who wrote about the Ebionites, believed that heretical views such as they held “represented poisonous doctrines that threatened Christians of his day...”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, their story is fascinating and compelling.

The Ebionites might first be described as “Jewish Christians.” Oskar Skarsaune has observed that the term, Jewish Christian, is increasingly used by scholars today “as a designation of ethnic Jews who, as believers in Jesus, *still practiced a Jewish way of life*....This term can be used as an overarching term to comprise two categories called the Ebionites and the Nazoreans by the Patristic writers;”<sup>4</sup> these Patristic writers included Origen, Hippolytus, Iranaeus, Epiphanius, and Tertullian. The first known use of the name Ebionite was in

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<sup>2</sup>Petri Luomanen, Ebionites and Nazarenes. In *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered*, Ed. Matt Jackson-McCabe (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 2007), 81.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 81.

<sup>4</sup> Oskar Skarsaune, Jewish Believers in Antiquity – Problems of Definition, Method and Sources. In *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, Eds. Oskar Skarsaune and ReidarHvalvik (Peabody: Hendickson Publ., 2007), 9.

Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* which dated around 180 C.E.<sup>5</sup> The contemporary Theologian, Jean Danielou, has argued that the "Jewish Christian period extends from the beginnings of Christianity to approximately the middle of the second century."<sup>6</sup> However, it is from "sources dating from the second to the fourth centuries (that) we know of Christians called Ebionites."<sup>7</sup>

There are several distinct sources of information about the Ebionites. Skarsaune describes these sources as:

- (1) There are short notices about the Ebionites of a heresiological nature in early Fathers like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen and..... in later Fathers (such as) Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Jerome. Among these, Origen and Eusebius stand out as apparently having more first hand information than the others
- (2) If Epiphanius is right that the Pseudo-Clementines contain Ebionite material, then these should be reckoned our main sources for Ebionite theology and history....There is no reason, however, to accept this view. Alfred Schmidkte has convincingly shown that Epiphanius' identification of the group expressing themselves in the Pseudo-Clementines with the Ebionites was entirely without foundation and should be discarded.
- (3) Epiphanius had access to a Gospel he claimed was used by Ebionites, and he quotes fragments of it....It is very uncertain, however, if the author, or group behind this Gospel had anything to do with the group called Ebionites by Irenaeus.
- (4) Jerome claims the Bible translator (i.e., he Translated it into Greek), Symmachus, was an Ebionite, and some other Fathers speak of a sect of Jewish believers called the Symmachians.<sup>8</sup>

From these sources, it is also known that the Ebionites used a version of the Gospel of Matthew and also what appears to be a harmony of the Gospels of Mark, Luke and Matthew known as the "Gospels of the Ebionites."<sup>9</sup> The Gospel of Matthew used by the Ebionites appears to have been altered in two significant ways: first, the genealogy of Jesus was different so as to reflect their views; secondly, the food of John the Baptist was changed from "locusts and wild honey" to "cakes and wild honey" (by altering the spelling of the Greek word for locust) in order to be consistent with a vegetarian lifestyle.

Thus, conclusions that might be drawn about the Ebionites are often tentative as there is disagreement among scholars about the validity, accuracy, and reliability of the sources of information which must be used to study them. For example, it is not clear that each of the writers (i.e., the Church Fathers) is referring to the same group of believers; it may be that there were multiple groups of Ebionites, perhaps, each with a slightly different practices or beliefs. Luomanen notes that "we may have to reckon with the possibility that, from early on, there may have been at least two types of Ebionites: (1) Hebrew/Aramiac speaking Ebionites who shared James the Just's positive attitude toward the temple, used only Matthew's Gospel and accepted all the prophets; and (2) Hellenistic-Samaritan Ebionites who totally rejected worship in the temple, used only the Pentateuch, and ...perceived Paul as their great opponent."<sup>10</sup> There may also be the variations in the beliefs and practices of Ebionites that resulted from idiosyncratic changes induced by transmission from generation to generation, or one place to another.

There are two possible etymologies for the term, Ebionite; in actuality, no one is sure why this name was used. Epiphanius, following the ancient practice of deriving names for different schools or groups among philosophers, assumed that the name must have been ascribed to followers of an individual or teacher

<sup>5</sup>Luomanen, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (Chicago: The Henry Regnery Co., 1964), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99.

<sup>8</sup>Skarsaune, 423.

<sup>9</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 12-14.

<sup>10</sup>Luomanen, 101.

called, "Ebion," in much the same way that one could refer to a follower of Aristotle as an "Aristotlean."<sup>11</sup> Epiphanius seems not to be alone in his use of this derivation. Skarsaune notes that "(a)ccording to Tertullian, the Ebionites are called so because they adhere to the teaching of Ebion. When *ebonim* was transformed into a sect name (in Greek), *Ebiounaioi*, it demanded according to standard pattern for these names, a sect-founder."<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus called a group of Jewish believers who claimed that Joseph was the biological father of Jesus the "followers of Ebion." But, Skarsaune observes that "(i)n so doing, he may have misunderstood and misapplied a common Jewish-Christian self-designation, "the poor ones," using it only for a particular group among them. Reports on "Ebionites" in later heresiologists may refer to the same group....But, later use of the term, Ebionites" may also sometimes refer to Jewish believers in a more general sense."<sup>13</sup>

Thus, a more likely explanation for the source of the name was that it was derived from the biblical Hebrew term, *ebionim*. Skarsaune believes that this was neither a sect-name, nor was it used in a derogatory way about the group. He notes that in "the Hebrew Bible, *ebion* and *ebionim* are very frequently occurring terms and they generally refer to those in Israel who are looked down upon by the rich and powerful and who expect to be delivered by the God of Israel in the present time or the *eschaton*."<sup>14</sup> Crossan, when describing the same biblical term, *ebion*, notes that there were two words used to describe the "needy": the first, *ani*, could be distinguished from the second, *ebion*, by the urgency of the need it described. He states that "(w)hereas the *ani* was pressed by debts and dependent upon the good grace of an employer or creditor, the *ebyon* (or *ebion*) needed to be helped at once if he were to survive."<sup>15</sup> Yet, according to Skarsaune, "Origen knew this meaning the term, but gave it a surely secondary pejorative meaning: those among the Jews who have believed in Jesus are called "the poor" 'because of their hanging on to the poverty of the law. The Ebionites are poor of understanding'."<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, this term, "ebionite," was once a title of honor according to Schoeps. He states that "*ebonim* or 'Ebionites' is a re-hebraized ancient title of honor which the remnant of the primitive church adopted, probably after their flight from Jerusalem, on the basis of Jesus' beatitudes concerning the 'poor'."<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is likely that those who might have selected and borne this name practiced a radical dependency on God which they considered a most positive lifestyle or way of being in the world.

Many features of the practices and beliefs of the Ebionites recall those of an earlier Jewish group, the Essenes. The Essenes were an heterodox Jewish group who first known to have existed about two hundred years prior to the Christian era, but who later also appear to have been contemporaneous with the Ebionites during the first century of the Common Era. The Essenes were characterized by their rejection of the official priesthood and their living together in communities. Danielou quotes Epiphanius, writing in his *Panarion* (XXX,16), who mentioned that the Ebionites had a ritual bath and had believed that God created two beings, Christ and the Devil, and that Christ came to the world to destroy sacrifices. According to Danielou: "Many features in this passage recall Essenism. It was known that the ritual bath was an essential Essene rite....the second part of the passage (which describes their beliefs) exhibits pure Essene doctrine. God has established from the beginning a good and evil principle....The last point mentioned in Epiphanius...speaks of a condemnation of sacrifices. This might seem strange coming from a Jew, but it will be remembered that one of the features of Essenism...was in fact their condemnation of bloody sacrifices in the temple."<sup>18</sup> The Essenes also did not accept all of the Pentateuch of Moses.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, it seems probable that the Essenes were, at least in some respects, the spiritual ancestors of the Ebionites. It may be that the Essenes "seeped into" into the Ebionites after disappearing around 70 C.E.<sup>20</sup> Danielou asserts that "The Ebionite doctrine is thus a fusion of the apocalyptic and Essene traditions. It

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<sup>11</sup>Luomanen, 85.

<sup>12</sup>Skarsaune, 425.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 424.

<sup>14</sup>Skarsaune, 421.

<sup>15</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 320.

<sup>16</sup>Skarsaune, 424.

<sup>17</sup> Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Jewish Christianity: Factional Disputes in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 10.

<sup>18</sup> Danielou, 56-57.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 58-58.

<sup>20</sup>Carsten Peter Thiede, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jewish Origins of Christianity* (New York: Palgrave Publ., 2000), 227. (Thiede 2000)

regards Christ as the “first of the archangels, that is to say, he is identified with Michael....Ebionism uses the same conceptual system as orthodox Jewish Christianity , but its theology is different. Its doctrine remains purely and simply Jewish with a simple Christian coloring; it is in no way Trinitarian , and in it, Christ is not God.”<sup>21</sup>

What then were the characteristic beliefs of the Ebionites? Ehrman states that “Ebionites were and understood themselves to be Jewish followers of Jesus.” Further, they believed “that Jesus was the Jewish messiah sent from the Jewish God to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures. They also believed that to belong to the people of God, one needed to be Jewish...observing the Sabbath, keeping kosher, and circumcising all males.”<sup>22</sup> It was reported by Irenaeus that Ebionites faced toward Jerusalem as an act of reverence during their prayers and worship each day.<sup>23</sup> They did not accept the virgin birth, or the idea that Jesus might have pre-existed. They did acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, but not for because of his having a Divine nature or because of the virgin birth, but because of his having been “adopted by God” to be his son. Ebionites were said to have “maintained that their views were authorized by the original disciples, especially Peter and Jesus’ own brother, James, head of the Jerusalem church after the Resurrection.”<sup>24</sup>

Akers mentions three essential characteristics of the Ebionites, as well as other Jewish Christian groups such as the Elchasites, the Nazoraeans and the Ossaens : that is that “they adhered to Jewish law, they were vegetarian, and they rejected animal sacrifice.”<sup>25</sup> He then lists the following as additional key beliefs that the Ebionites held:

- There is only one God.
- Jesus is the true prophet.
- A simple lifestyle is desired by God.
- Jesus condemned animal sacrifice and teaches vegetarianism.
- Alcohol should be avoided.
- God has one law for everyone.
- The law has been distorted by false texts.
- Warfare is condemned.
- Christ has already appeared many times.
- Baptism was important for salvation.
- Paul was an apostate from the law.<sup>26</sup>

Most of these essential beliefs will now be discussed in light of what is known about the Ebionites; some of the categories will be combined as they are inter-related.

There is only One God. The Ebionites, as Jews, were monotheists. Therefore, they rejected any assertions that Jesus or the Holy Spirit could be divine as that would verge into polytheism. Instead, they believed that Jesus was an ordinary man who was born “of the seed of a man, Joseph.”<sup>27</sup> Skarsaune, when discussing Irenaeus’ description of the Ebionites, states that “They favored reading (the Greek word) *neanis*, (as) “young woman” in Isaiah 7:14 and said explicitly that Joseph was Jesus’ father. This made them emphasize all the more the significance of Jesus’ baptism...”<sup>28</sup> It was then, during the baptism, that Jesus was adopted as the “Son of God” when the “spirit” descended upon him. Ehrman notes that Ebionites believed that “(w)hat set Jesus apart from all other people was that he kept God’s law perfectly and so was the most righteous man on earth.”<sup>29</sup> The Ebionites did not use the title, Christ” for Jesus, nor did they accept that Jesus was sinless as “their gospel allowed Jesus to admit unwitting sins or sins of ignorance.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, in considering the Ebionites’ assertion Jesus was not God, Ehrman suggests that “one might suspect that their

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<sup>21</sup>Danielou, 114.

<sup>22</sup>Ehrman, 100.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 100.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 100.

<sup>25</sup> Keith Akers, *The Lost Religion of Jesus* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000), 29.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 26-28.

<sup>27</sup> Luomanen, 86.

<sup>28</sup>Skarsaune, 429.

<sup>29</sup>Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 101.

<sup>30</sup>Schoeps, 62.

resilient Jewishness forced them to affirm monotheism to such an extent that they could not conceive of Jesus also as God.”<sup>31</sup>

Jesus is the True Prophet. To the Ebionites, Jesus did not come to abolish the law; rather, he came to teach his followers how to obey the law more faithfully. In their view, as mentioned previously, he kept the law perfectly and was the only person to ever have done so. Thus, he was to “adopted” as God’s son at his Baptism. It is also important to recognize that the Ebionites would have thought that Jesus’ teaching role in relation to the law was especially important as they contended that the writings of the Pentateuch had been corrupted and did not represent the true law of God; he would restore the forgotten laws received on Mount Sinai for God’s people. Akers explains that the Ebionites “based their belief in Jesus on Deuteronomy 18:15-18, when Moses predicts a future prophet due to the peoples’ reluctance to hear the voice of God. For the Ebionites, Jesus is this prophet, the prophet of truth.”<sup>32</sup>

A Simple Lifestyle is Desired by God. As discussed previously, the very name “Ebionite,” with its root meaning being a kind of dire poverty, suggests a lifestyle defined by a radical dependency on God. When speaking about the lifestyle of the Ebionites, Akers asserts that “the Ebionites traced their ‘poverty’ back to the time when the followers of Jesus held all of their possessions in common (Acts 4: 32-35).”<sup>33</sup> This Ebionite “poverty” did not necessarily mean that an individual would actually be destitute. Thus, Akers notes that “(i)n the *Recognitions* Peter is depicted as living an extraordinary simple lifestyle living on a strict vegetarian diet and wearing simple clothes (*Recognitions* 7.6).”<sup>34</sup> Another aspect of this simple lifestyle besides vegetarianism was the avoidance of alcohol; when celebrating their “mysteries” or Eucharist, the Ebionites used water rather than wine.

Condemnation of Sacrifice: The Ebionite doctrines show some influences of the earlier Essenes who rejected the priesthood and, according to the ancient author, Philo, also rejected animal sacrifices. Akers observes that, in the Ebionite Gospel, Jesus says, “I came to abolish sacrifices ...and unless you cease sacrificing, my anger will not cease from you” (*Panaraion* 30.16.5).”<sup>35</sup> Schoeps explains that the Ebionite view was that “animal sacrifice, it was claimed, was permitted on a temporary basis by Moses and only because of peoples’ hardness of heart; Jesus abolished it and replaced the bold of animals with the water of Baptism.”<sup>36</sup> Schoeps notes the following about the Ebionites: “In their view, Christianity had been freed from the Jewish sacrificial worship not through the universally efficacious sacrifice of the Son of God, as the church which followed Paul believed, but rather, through the water of Baptism whereby Jesus had extinguished the fire of the Sacrificial cult.”<sup>37</sup>

Akers develops this Ebionite concept of Jesus’ rejection of sacrifice as the true underlying cause of his death at the hands of the Romans because this created a threat to the public order. Akers argues that the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple has been misunderstood by having the emphasis placed on the money-changers; he contends that, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus emptied “the Temple of animals that were to be sacrificed, or (the synoptic) to drive out those who were taking them to be killed or were selling them to be killed.”<sup>38</sup> He concludes then that “(e)veryone –both the Jesus movement and the priests - acts as if Jesus did something that struck at the core of Temple practice. The priests want Jesus killed, and even after he is dead, they want to destroy his followers.”<sup>39</sup>

God has one law for everyone and The law has been distorted by false texts: According to Akers, the Ebionites believed, in a fashion similar to Paul (Galatians 3:28), that “the distinction between Jew and gentile is abolished for the Jewish Christians but with a different result altogether – everyone should follow the universal and eternal law (*Homilies* 8.10) revealed to Moses (*Recognitions* 1:35).”<sup>40</sup> The Ebionites’ view appears to have been that Jesus “was a *prophet* who sought to restore the original law... (and) when

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<sup>31</sup>Ehrman, 152.

<sup>32</sup>Akers, 26.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 26.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 26-27.

<sup>36</sup>Schoeps, 82.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, 83.

<sup>38</sup>Akers, 117.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid, 119.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 27.

Jesus disagrees with the religious authorities in *moral* matters, it was because they *did not go far enough* in their allegiance to the law.<sup>41</sup> Akers notes that "Jesus did not bring something new, he brought something old to those to whom he preached."<sup>42</sup> Thus, Danielou observes: "Finally, the Ebionites are faithful observers of the law. They observe circumcision and the Sabbath....they see Jesus as a reformer of the law who brings it back to the true ideas of Moses."<sup>43</sup> Though there might have been agreement between the Ebionites and the orthodox Christians about Jesus' approach to the law, there was a sharp contrast between their views of the reliability of the Jewish scriptures. The orthodox Jewish and the "proto-orthodox" Christians accepted the Jewish scriptures as written; the Ebionites did not.

Akers states that "the Ebionites condemned many of the texts in the Jewish scriptures as false texts: they believed they were not inspired by God, but were false and shouldn't be part of scripture at all."<sup>44</sup> They accepted the law as being given to Moses, but "denied that the written books of Moses (Pentateuch) were the same as the law. The written tradition (the Jewish scriptures) had been corrupted by false texts."<sup>45</sup> Schoeps explains that the Ebionites believed that these errors or falsifications would be removed by the True Prophet, Jesus. What were the primary falsifications? Schoeps argues that they are, "(a)s we have seen, *Homilies* 3.52 programmatically names 'the sacrifices, the monarchy, and the female prophecy and other such things' as ordinances that do not come from God."<sup>46</sup> The Ebionites also rejected the anthropomorphic descriptions of God, "especially all statements concerning God's attributes, actions, and active as well as passive emotions."<sup>47</sup> The Ebionites also denied "the full revelatory character" of the books of the prophets; the reason for this, according to Schoeps is "probably to be sought in the disillusionment resulting from the non-fulfillment of the ancient predictions of the prophets about a political messiah."<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, Schoeps suggests that the Ebionite belief that falsifications existed in scripture, though it was a view that was rejected by Orthodox Jews and Christians, may not have been as eccentric as it first appears. He suggests that "...we may regard it as certain that the Ebionite theory of false pericopes did not come out of the blue, but derived from ancient recollections that the extant version of the Torah was not identical with the Sinai version but had been distorted by additions and alterations."<sup>49</sup>

Warfare is condemned. Akers notes that, though Epiphanius does not describe the Ebionites as pacifists, one can see that there are "several passages in the *Recognitions*, undoubtedly of Jewish Christian origin, (which) espouse pacifist principles."<sup>50</sup> For example, he mentions that in the recounting of the story of Paul's attempt to kill James (prior to Paul's conversion experience) in *Recognitions* 1, the early Christian community did not resist the violence against them because of their "pacifist principles." Additionally, Akers notes that, in a later section of *Recognitions* (3:32), there is an account of a time when Peter "announces opposition to war."<sup>51</sup> The pacifistic beliefs of the Ebionites were consistent with the views of others in the early Christian community.

Baptism Important for Salvation: for the Ebionites, it appears that Baptism was considered a substitute for animal sacrifices; this is addressed in the *Recognitions*. There is one aspect of the Ebionites' baptismal practice that is not clear: it is not known whether this a "one time" event, or a daily form of ablution similar to those practiced by the Essenes.<sup>52</sup>

Opposition to Paul: The Ebionites considered Paul to be an apostate.<sup>53</sup> Schoeps has observed that "(t)he real basis for the opposition to Paul...was undoubtedly the fact that, since Christianity seemed to them to be essentially the Mosaic law restored through Jesus the Prophet, they abhorred Paul as an enemy of the law."<sup>54</sup> Skarsaune, while recognizing that the Ebionites "repudiated Paul because they disagreed with him

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid. 63, 69.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 77.

<sup>43</sup>Danielou, 63.

<sup>44</sup>Akers, 77.

<sup>45</sup> 78

<sup>46</sup>Schoeps, 81.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, 92.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid, 91.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, 84.

<sup>50</sup>Akers, 27.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 27-28.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 28.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid, 28.

<sup>54</sup>Schoeps, 134.

concerning the law”, suggests that “(t)he exact nature of this disagreement, however, is not easy to pinpoint.”<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusions

In the early days of Christianity, the Ebionites appear to have been the largest grouping within what has more recently been referred to as “Jewish Christianity.” Schoeps argues that the Ebionites were “the physical descendants of the first disciples –including Jesus’ own relatives – (and) were the bearers of a legitimate tradition.”<sup>56</sup> But, as Ehrman observes, “Ebionite Christianity was at a serious disadvantage when it came to appealing to the masses....the idea of large scale conversions to a religion that required kosher food laws and circumcision seems a bit “far fetched.” He continues, noting that, even if the Ebionites had become a dominant force in the early Christian community, then “Christianity itself would likely have ended up a footnote in the history of religion books used in university courses in the west.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, given the difficult lifestyle they had chosen and that there was opposition to the Ebionites from the orthodox Jewish community (i.e., they were “cursed” by them), as well as from the “proto-orthodox” early Christian community, it is not surprising that the Ebionites disappeared by the fourth century.

What is the significance of the Ebionites for the study of the early Christian Church? As Harvey Cox states in his book, *The Future of Faith*, “(t)he following are now evident. First, there never was a single “early Christianity;” there were many and the idea of heresy was unknown.”<sup>58</sup> Recognizing that there was such variety in the early church, and that a strong initial tradition such as that of the Ebionites has been largely lost in the “sands of time,” then knowledge about them and their differing view of the message of Jesus should encourage modern Christians to understand that we do not need to be so protective of our “creedal” faith. Rather, we should be flexible and willing to consider that there may be some nearly forgotten, but possibly vital earlier traditions within Christianity that might be instructive and useful for both modern understanding and practice of faith.

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<sup>55</sup>Skarsaune, 437.

<sup>56</sup>Schoeps, 134.

<sup>57</sup>Ehrman, 110.

<sup>58</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 58.

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