

Marcion: Portrait of a Heretic

There is little doubt that the teachings of Marcion and his followers represented a greater threat to Orthodox Christianity than any other heresy in the second century.(1) Although none of his own writings are extant(2) it is possible to piece together a picture of the man and his message from the writings of his opponents,(3) especially from Tertullian (c.160 - c.225 AD), though this must be done carefully, realising that they were far from unbiased.

Marcion was born in c.85(4) at Sinope (modern Sinop on the Black Sea) in Pontus(5) the son of a bishop(6) and became a prosperous ship owner and merchant.(7) Epiphanius (c.315-403) alleges that his father expelled him from his home church for seducing a consecrated virgin,(8) but this generally held to be a libel among modern scholars.(9) He travelled to Rome in 135- 140 and presented the church there with a gift of 200 000 sesterces.(10) It was here, while a member of the church, that he developed his theology, possibly incorporating the ideas of the Gnostic teacher Cerdo with whom he became acquainted.(11) On being rejected by the eldership of the church and having his money returned to him, he set about organising his followers into a separate community(12) before finally being excommunicated in 144.(13) From Rome he began to spread his message far and wide.(14) Justin Martyr (c.100-165) wrote in the 150's that he was "teaching men to deny that God is the maker of all things in heaven and earth and that the Christ predicted by the prophets is His Son".(15) Marcion died c.160, but the movement to which he gave his name continued into the third century.(16) By the fourth century most of the Marcionite churches had been absorbed into Manicheism, another pseudo-Gnostic movement influenced by the writings of Paul the Apostle.(17) Ephraem Syrus (c.306-373) "emphasised always the kinship between Marcionites and Manicheans in his day."(18)

Ancient writers such as Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130 - c.200).(19) Tertullian and Hippolytus (c.170 - c.236)(20) did not hesitate in classifying Marcion as a Gnostic. Many scholars, however, are not convinced that his teaching was truly 'Gnostic'.(21) Paul Johnson provides a helpful summary of the difficulties involved in this issue:

No one has yet succeeded in defining 'gnosticism' adequately, or indeed in demonstrating whether this movement preceded Christianity or grew from it. Certainly Gnostic sects were spreading at the same time as Christian ones; both were part of the general religious osmosis. Gnostics had two central presuppositions: belief in the existence of a secret code of truth, transmitted by word of mouth or by arcane writings. Gnosticism is a 'knowledge religion' - that is what the word means - which claims to have an inner explanation of life. Thus it was, and indeed is, a spiritual parasite which used other religions as a 'carrier'. Christianity fitted into this role very well. It has a mysterious founder, Jesus, who had conveniently disappeared, leaving behind a collection of sayings and followers to transmit them; and of course in addition to the public sayings there were 'secret' ones, handed on from generation to generation by members of the sect. Thus Gnostic groups seized on bits of Christianity, but tended to cut it off from its historical origins. They were Hellenizing it [making it acceptable to the Greeks (from 'hellenas'=Greek)]... Their ethic varied to taste: sometimes they were ultra-puritan, sometimes orgiastic. Thus some groups seized Paul's denunciation of the law to preach complete licence.(22)

Kenneth Scott Latourette argues that Marcion's teachings were in starker contrast to Gnosticism than they were with Judaism.(23) Although Marcion was a dualist (the second

characteristic of Gnosticism), his dualism took a different form to the other Gnostics(24) and in contrast to them did not claim to possess a secret body of knowledge.(25) For classic Gnostic teachers such as Valentinus (2nd century) and Basilides (who taught in Alexandria in the 2nd quarter of the 2nd century)(26) salvation was the release of the divine 'spark' or pneuma from the 'prison' of the fleshly body, "for the pneuma is not at home in the world of light and spirit".(27) After death the pneuma (spirit) has to pass through a number of spheres, each ruled by a demonic 'archon'. The number of spheres varied with each Gnostic system. Basilides had 365 of them!(28) Possession of Gnosis allowed the spirit to pass through the spheres and be reunited with the 'Supreme God'.(29)

W.H.C. Frend considers that though the Gnostic Cerdo(30) may have provided Marcion with ideas he "may well have come to similar conclusions by another route, namely, by attentive study of the Scriptures and in particular the key work for Christians, Isaiah 39-66. There he found in 45:7 the claim made by Yahweh, 'I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord, who do all these things,' and this was fundamental to his interpretation of Christianity.(31) How, Marcion reasoned, could an evil tree bring forth good fruit? So he concluded that there must be two Gods: the Creator God of the OT, who was characteristically a God of Law, who involved himself in contradictory courses of action, who was fickle, ignorant, despotic and cruel.(32) The Supreme God, Marcion held, was wholly a God of Love who had remained completely hidden until he was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. "Out of pure mercy... he undertook to rescue... beings for whom he had no responsibility, since they were the creatures of that other God, the Demiurge."(33)

Marcion's Christ was docetic(34) (he only appeared to be a man, because Marcion considered matter to be evil - the creation of the Demiurge), it is also difficult to see a distinction between his representation of the Father and the Son, leading to the conclusion that he was also a modalist.(35)

Latourette continues:

Christ, so Marcion contended, came down from heaven and began teaching, proclaiming a new kingdom and deliverance from the rule of the malevolent Demiurge. However, those who were loyal to the Demiurge crucified Christ, thus unwittingly contributing to the defeat of the former, since the death of Christ was the price by which the God of Love purchased men from the latter's kingdom into his own. Christ also rescued from the underworld those who had died and who in their life-time had not been obedient to the Demiurge and thus from the standpoint of his Law were wicked. All that the Good God asks of men if they are to escape from the rule of the Demiurge is faith in response to his love. Men have been emancipated from the legalistic requirements of the Demiurge and of his creature Judaism.(36)

Marcion refused point-blank to allegorise the OT text(37) instead he rejected it completely. For him it was the true account of the history of the Jews, but spoke of the Demiurge.(38) Paul, Marcion claimed, was the only true apostle and gathered together ten of his epistles, excluding 1 & 2 Timothy & Titus, from which he carefully removed any 'Jewish corruptions'.(39)

All of the other apostles, he maintained, had corrupted their Master's teaching by an admixture of legalism.(40) Marcion selected Luke as the only reliable Gospel, editing out all OT references, the accounts of the birth of Jesus and John the Baptist (because they contain OT prophecies and links to historical events), His genealogy, records of historical local rulers

of the time (Luke 3:1) and began at Luke 4:31 "...Jesus came down to Capernaum..." By this his readers were to suppose that He simply appeared from heaven, fully grown.(41) Finally Marcion added his own book, the 'Antitheses' or 'Contradictions', in which he expounded his theology.(42)

Marcion's ethics err on the side of asceticism. Tertullian claims that he forbade marriage because procreation was the invention of the Demiurge.(43) Despite this his teachings proved extremely popular and their spread, phenomenal. Justin declared that they had become diffused through every race of men(44) and Tertullian compared the Marcionites - who had churches, bishops and martyrs of their own - to "swarms of wasps building combs in imitation of the bees".(45) No other heretic of the second century called forth such a widespread response from the Orthodox church; writers who agreed on little else were united against him.(46) Tertullian wrote no less than five books against him.(47)

Commenting on Marcion's role in Church history F.F. Bruce points out that:

...the chief importance of Marcion in the second century lies in the reaction which he provoked among the leaders of the Apostolic Churches. Just as Marcion's canon stimulated the more precise defining of the NT canon by the Catholic Church, not to supersede but to supplement the canon of the OT, so, more generally, Marcion's teaching led the Catholic Church to define its faith more carefully, in terms calculated to exclude a Marcionite interpretation.(48)

Latourette concurs that Marcion appears to have been the first to gather some of the Christian writings into a well-defined collection and so speeded the formation of an authoritative Orthodox canon.(49) In addition he points out that although the so-called 'Apostle's Creed' as we know it dates from the 6th century, it derives from an earlier, briefer form known as the Roman Symbol, thought to originate in the late 2nd century. This credal statement seems to have been formulated to counter Marcionite and other similar heretical teachings. It makes clear that the Father, not the Demiurge, created the universe; that there is only One God; that Jesus had a normal human birth (through a miraculous conception); that Jesus was a human being, and that he will return to be Judge of the living and the dead (the All-Loving God of Marcion was not the Judge - a role that he assigned to the Demiurge).(50)

E.H. Broadbent in *The Pilgrim Church* concludes: "Any error may be founded on parts of Scripture; the truth alone is based on the whole. Marcion's errors were the inevitable result of his accepting only what pleased him and rejecting the rest".(51)

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References

(1) G.R.Evans, A.E. McGrath, & A.D. Galloway, *The Science of Theology*. (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1986) 43. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*. (London: Penguin, 1967), 39.

(2) Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (London: Penguin, 1988), 47: "Preservation of an ancient writing required positive effort over a long period. Early Christian documents were produced in very small quantities on highly perishable papyrus. Unless they were constantly retranscribed they did not survive at all. There was no need of a censor, unless a heresiarch had followers over successive generations to keep his work alive."

(3) F.L. Cross, & Livingstone, eds. "Marcion," *The Oxford Dictionary Of The Christian Church* (Oxford: OUP,

- 1990) 870. Christie-Murray, David. *A History of Heresy*. (Oxford: OUP, 1990), 27.
- (4) W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 213.
- (5) Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.1.4: "The most barbarous and melancholy thing about Pontus [dismal as the region is of itself] is that Marcion was born there."
- (6) Cross & Livingstone, 870.
- (7) Hendrik F. Stander, "Marcion," Everett Ferguson, ed. *Encyclopedia Of Early Christianity*. (New York: Garland, 1990), 568. Christie-Murray, 26 notes that he may even have been a bishop himself.
- (8) Epiphanius, *Against Heresies* 43.1. Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*. (London: Banner of Truth, 1978), 52.
- (9) J.F. Bethune-Baker, *An Introduction To The Early History Of Christian Doctrine*. (London: Methuen & Co., 1903), 81. Stander, 568. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, 1910 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 484: "...this does not agree with his asceticism, and Irenaeus and Tertullian bring no charge of youthful incontinence against him."
- (10) 50 000 silver denarii. W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church*. (London: SCM, 1991), 55.
- (11) Stander, 568.
- (12) Stander, 568: "Marcion's church was organised in a similar way to the Roman church, so much so that Cyril of Jerusalem found it necessary to warn believers lest they enter a Marcionite church by mistake (*Catechetical Lectures* 4:4)." Christie-Murray, 27: "They have been called the first dissenters."
- (13) Cross & Livingstone, 870.
- (14) Frend, *Rise*, 215.
- (15) Justin Martyr, *I Apology* 58.
- (16) Cross & Livingstone, 870. Bethune-Baker, 84, claims that there were Marcionite churches still in the 7th century. *Encyclopedia Britannica Micropedia*, "Marcion," Vol. VI. (London: William Banton, 1974), 605, finds evidence of them, especially in Syrian culture, in the late 10th century. Benjamin Walker, *Gnosticism: Its History And Influence*. (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1983), 146: argues that the absorption into Manicheism occurred after the 8th century.
- (17) Cross & Livingstone, 864.
- (18) Frend, *Rise*, 228. "Marcion divided the sheep of Christ, and Mani despoiled the despoiler. One madman bit another." Ephraem Syros, *Hymn Against Heresies*, 22.3, E. Beck, CSCO, Script, Syri. 76-77 (Louvain, 1957), 58.
- (19) Stander, 568.
- (20) Cross & Livingstone, 573.
- (21) Stander, 568; Berkhof, 52. Christie-Murray, 27: "He does not seem to have been an orthodox gnostic." Chadwick, 38: "Marcion... stands quite apart from the mainstream of Gnosticism." Philip J. Lee, *Against The Protestant Gnostics*. (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 16: "Many Christian gnostics made some attempt to avoid an overt dualism, realising that a complete disconnection between God and world could not be accepted by the Church. Their task, therefore, became that of making an indirect connection which would nevertheless exonerate the good God of all guilt in regard to this world. Often the connection was made through a series of archons (semidivine rulers) who ruled over the lower spheres in the absence of God." Walker, 144: "Marcion made faith and not gnosis the vehicle of redemption. Salvation, he said, was available to all men, and did not involve secrets, secret revelations or knowledge of magical rituals. The saved are 'believers' and not 'knowers' or

'doers'. Love and mercy spring spontaneously from the heart of those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Because of this, scholars such as Harnack do not regard Marcion as a true Gnostic, and point to the basically Christian characters of many of his beliefs."

(22) Johnson, 45.

(23) K.S. Latourette, *A History Of Christianity*. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode Ltd., 1955), 125.

(24) Latourette, 126. Daniélou, Jean *Gospel Message And Hellenistic Culture*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 396: "...the actual dualist systems current were of three different kinds: the Pauline dualism of Sarx-Pnuema; the Platonist dualism of the sensible and intelligible orders of reality; and the Gnostic dualism of the Pleroma, the transcendent world of the Supreme God, and the Kenoma, the material universe made by the Demiurge and dominated by the evil powers."

(25) Daniélou, 396.

(26) Cross & Livingstone, 141.

(27) John Drane, "Gnosticism In The New Testament," *TSF Bulletin* 68 (Leicester, UCCF, Spring 1974): 7.

(28) Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 1.24.3: "...more and more principalities and angels are formed, and three hundred and sixty-five heavens wherefore the year contains the same number of days in conformity with the number of heavens." Lee, 16.

(29) Drane, 7.

(30) Walker, 143: "Cerdo (d. 143), a Syrian gnostic, had started his career as a Simonian (follower of Simon Magus) and then branched out on his own. He taught that God the Father was merciful and good. He was the Supreme Being, but unknown, until first made known to man by Jesus. The god proclaimed in the law and the prophets of the Old Testament was the creator of the world, and inferior to the supreme being. He was a god of justice who demanded obedience. Cerdo believed that only the soul and not he the body shared in the resurrection."

(31) Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.2; Frend, *Rise*, 213.

(32) Cross & Livingstone, 870. Lee, 17: "Although the Marcionites did not view Israel's God as the Prince of Darkness, as did some of the more radical gnostic systems, they did regard him as 'just' as opposed to the good God who is 'love'."

(33) Latourette, 127.

(34) Cross & Livingstone, 870. That is "He denied the reality of Christ's body and his physical resurrection." Christie-Murray, 27.

(35) Bethune-Baker, 82. Walker, 61: "Marcion speaks in brutal terms of the ignominy of man created in loathsome matter, conceived in the filth of sexuality, born among the unclean, excruciating and grotesque convulsions of labour, into a body that is a 'sack of excrement', until death turns it into carrion, a nameless corpse, a worm-filled cadaver."

(36) Latourette, 127. Chadwick, 40, comments that "In Marcion's evaluation of the Old Testament there lurks a constant overtone of anti-semitism."

(37) Latourette, 126.

(38) Frend, *Rise*, 214.

(39) F.F. Bruce, *The Canon Of Scripture*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 138-139. "Christ's earliest apostles proved failures, but he raised up Paul after them." Edwin C. Blackman, *Marcion and his Influence*. (London: SPCK, 1948), 48. "Marcion claimed that only Paul understood the true nature of Christ's mission." Blackman,

96. "In over-straining the difference between Paul and the other apostles, he was the forerunner of the Tubingen school of critics." Schaff, 486.

(40) Bruce, *Canon*, 135.

(41) Bruce, *Canon*, 138.

(42) Cross & Livingstone, 870. Christie-Murray, 27: "He refused to allow marriage after baptism, dividing his disciples into an elite of baptised or 'perfect', who led lives of extreme asceticism and unbaptised, living ordinary lives. The latter supported the Perfect and were baptised at the end of their lives."

(43) Johnson, 47. Walker, 126: "Marcion... deemed marriage 'a filthiness and an obscenity.' It was a diabolical institution that had upon it the seal of Antichrist and the mark of Satan. It did nothing more than sanction sexual indulgence..."

(44) Tertullian, *Apology* 1.26.

(45) Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.5.

(46) Cross & Livingstone, 870.

(47) Frend, *Rise*, 215. Cross, 870: Among his other opponents were Dionysius of Corinth (c.170); Theophilus of Antioch (late 2nd century); Philip of Gortyna; Rhodo of Rome (2nd century); and Bardesanes at Edessa.

(48) F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1964), 252.

(49) Latourette, 134. Walker, 145: "It was to him [Marcion] that we owe the terms Old Testament and New Testament... His suggested emendation of the New Testament constituted the earliest textual criticism of the Bible." Brackets mine. "According to Von Harnack, Marcion was the real creator of the Catholic Church; "by his organisational and theological ideas and by his activity Marcion gave the decisive impetus to the creation of the early Catholic church and provided it with a model, what is more, he deserves the credit for the first grasping and carrying out a canonical collection of Christian writings, the New Testament." Von Harnack A. *Marcion, das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, 2nd edn. (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1924), 114-115 cited in Rumscheidt, Martin (Ed.), 'Adolf Von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its height,' John de Gruchy, gen. ed., *The Making of Modern Theology* (London: Collins, 1989), 28:

(50) Latourette, 135-136.

(51) E.H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, 2nd edn. (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1935), 15.
