



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Marcion

Citation for published version:

Foster, P 2010, 'Marcion: His life, works, beliefs, and impact', *Expository Times*, vol. 121, no. 6, pp. 269-280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524609357509>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/0014524609357509](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524609357509)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Expository Times

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Foster, P. (2010). Marcion: His life, works, beliefs, and impact. The Expository Times, 121(6), 269-280. [10.1177/0014524609357509](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524609357509)

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



MARCION: HIS LIFE, WORKS, BELIEFS, AND IMPACT

By PAUL FOSTER

School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh

Marcion is perhaps one of the most important figures who shaped the beliefs, structures and collection of scriptural writings of the church in the second century and beyond. Yet the details of his life remain shadowy. No manuscripts of his own works remain, and he was subjected to thoroughgoing attempt to write him out of the history of the Church. The impact he had on church beliefs and structures was dramatic. Inadvertently, he helped crystallize many embryonic developments as those opposed to his ideas reacted against him. However, in the modern period his importance has been recognised, although often misrepresented, as he is characterized both as a champion of plurality and as a reformer seeking a more universal and purer type of faith.

KEYWORDS

Marcion, Apostolikon, Marcion's Gospel, *Antitheses*, Two Gods, Tertullian, Rome

I. Marcion's Life

When compared with the actual sources available, many previous reconstructions of the details of Marcion's life appear remarkably optimistic. Circumstances surrounding his birth and death are unknown, his age when he arrived in Rome is speculative, and even the length of the period of his teaching in the imperial capital is open to debate. Moreover, even when statements about his life are made in the sources, at times these are tendentious – seeking to defame Marcion rather than providing reliable information. Given this lack of evidence and the tendency of the sources to indulge in 'character assassination', caution must be exhibited and there must be an acceptance of the fact that the evidence is limited and the details sketchy.

However, it is virtually certain that Marcion was not a native Roman. Tertullian states that Marcion was 'that shipmaster of Pontus' (*Adv. Marc.* 1.1.4), and in a work attributed to Tertullian but now regarded as pseudonymous the author explicitly states that Marcion was born in Pontus (Ps.-Tertullian, *Adv. Haer.* 1.30.1). Geographically, Pontus formed the south-east part of the coastline of the Black Sea and is the area occupied by the north-east of modern Turkey. Politically this area formed an independent Persian kingdom in the fourth century B.C., but by Marcion's time Pontus had for nearly two centuries been a Roman province having been subjugated by Pompey in 64 B.C. First the area of Pontus was annexed into the joint province of Bithynia and Pontus, but later became the separate province of Pontus in A.D. 62.¹ Pontus is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Acts 2.9, 18.2; 1 Pet 1.1). The first reference points to a Jewish community resident in the province. The second mentions Aquila in the following manner: arriving in Corinth Paul 'found a Jew, Aquila by name, of Pontus in origin, who had recently come from Italy, with Priscilla his wife, because Claudius had issued an edict that all Jews should leave Rome' (Acts 18.2). Although described as being a Jew, the narrative also portrays Aquila as a believer in Jesus. The text also depicts a fairly easy mobility around the Empire with the movement between Pontus, Italy and Corinth being mentioned in

¹ As Wiedemann notes, 'The annexation of Pontus in A.D. 64 may also have been connected with Nero's eastern plans.' T.E.J. Wiedemann, 'Tiberias to Nero', in A.K. Bowman, E. Chaplain & A. Lintott (eds), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. X The Augustan Empire 43 B.C. – A.D. 69 (2nd ed.; Cambridge: CUP, 1996) 254.

mundane terms. The final reference occurs in the opening verse of First Peter. The addressees are described as 'chosen ones, who reside as aliens of the diaspora of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.' Thus, at the time of writing, the epistle already attests the presence of various communities of believers in five different regions which are part of modern Turkey.² Moreover, while the epistle makes it clear that the addressees have faith in Jesus, the reference to the diaspora suggests that their presence in these regions was conceived in Jewish terms being the result of the scattered communities of Jewish peoples.³ Therefore, prior to Marcion's own time even in the somewhat geographically remote region of Pontus there appears to have existed a complex relationship between the fledgling community of believers and the longer term Jewish community, which viewed itself as a displaced or alien people.⁴

The specific association of Marcion with Sinope occurs only in traditions later than Tertullian. Consequently, this may raise questions about the accuracy of this geographical detail. Epiphanius comments in a passage replete with detail, but designed to discredit Marcion that,

He was a native of Pontus – I mean of Helenopontus and the city of Sinope, as is commonly said of him. In his early life he supposedly practiced celibacy, for he was a hermit and the son of a bishop of our holy catholic church. But in time he unfortunately became acquainted with a virgin, cheated the virgin of her hope and degraded both her and himself, and for seducing her was excommunicated by his own father. (Epiphanius, *Pan.* Book 1, 42.1.3)⁵

Here the hermeneutics of suspicion must play a part at a number of points. The type of accusation levelled against Marcion, that of a sexual misdemeanour in relation to a virgin, is the stock-in-trade polemic thrown around to discredit opponents. The late appearance of this accusation in the sources makes its historical reliability questionable. One way to handle this charge is to read it as a metaphor for despoiling the spotless virginal bride of Christ – the church.⁶ In this way it would be no more than a metaphorical way of reiterating the description of Marcion as a false teacher of the church. However, given the stereotypical nature of such accusations, it may be the case that such slander was intended to discredit Marcion by stigmatizing him with the material, rather than the metaphorical charge of being sexually licentious.

Either way, the fabricated or metaphorical charge appears to be a later invention. This in turn makes one question the value of the other 'new' information in this description. The detail that Marcion was the son of a bishop who later excommunicated him appears to be motivated by a desire to blacken Marcion further, by leaving him no excuse for his deviance from 'orthodox' faith. Furthermore, the specificity in naming his city of origin as Sinope is also open to challenge. It would

² Raymond Brown succinctly summarises the dating issue. 'If written by Peter, 60-63; more likely 70-90.' R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 706. However, regardless of either dating the basic point is that there were in the first century already communities of believers in Jesus and communities of Jews. This is useful contextual information for understanding Marcion's knowledge of both belief systems.

³ Achtemeier notes that 'The term diaspora/ ("diaspora") is like e)klekto/ j (elect), drawn from Jewish tradition. Because of that fact some commentators have concluded that the letter was addressed to Jewish Christians.' P.J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996) 82.

⁴ See further, K.H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 65-66.

⁵ Translation from F. Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book 1 (Sects 1-46)*, NHMS 63 (2nd ed., rev. and expanded; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 294.

⁶ This view is supported by Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Battles for Scriptures and Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: OUP, 2003) 104.

appear that this is the type of additional detail which may have been supplied to convince an author's audience that they could rely on the account being given since the writer was aware of specific details in his subject's life. As Moll has observed, 'it is also possible that Epiphanius felt the need for a precise hometown in order to make his story look more real, and chose Sinope exactly because of Marcion's well-known profession.'⁷

Therefore, very little is known of Marcion's early life. He appears to have come from Pontus, and the description of him as a shipmaster is both resilient and plausible given that the area stretched along the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea, and the inland mountainous terrain was not amenable to agriculture. The link with Sinope is late, and may be no more than an educated guess linking Marcion with the largest city in the province. The details of his father being a bishop and his seduction of a virgin, have the hallmarks of typical slanderous fabrications. Notwithstanding these limitations, association with Pontus would account for knowledge of both Judaism and the early Christian church.

There are two further elements in Marcion's biography which may potentially belong to the pre-Roman phase of his life. However, on closer examination it is impossible to place either of these elements with certainty. There are accounts of an association with Cerdo, who is described as a native of Syria in certain sources.⁸ However, opposing a meeting prior to Marcion's visit to Rome, Epiphanius explicitly states that 'after a short time in Rome he [Cerdo] imparted his venom to Marcion, and Marcion thus became his successor' (Epiphanius, *Pan.* Book 1, 41.1.9). This then is perhaps the most likely meeting place, although earlier sources fail to name Rome or any other location. However, both early and late sources are consistent in reporting such a link between the two figures. According to Tertullian's embittered perspective, Marcion had 'in one Cerdo an abettor of this blasphemy, – a circumstance which made them the more readily think that they saw most clearly their two gods' (*Adv. Marc.* 1.2.2). Moreover, at least in some sense Tertullian appears to characterise Marcion as some kind of disciple of Cerdo: 'Marcion brought nothing good out of Cerdon's evil treasure' (*Adv. Marc.* 4.17.5). Such traditions are made even more explicit in Pseudo-Tertullian:

After him emerged a disciple of his, one Marcion by name, a native of Pontus, son of a bishop, excommunicated because of a rape committed on a certain virgin. He, starting from the fact that it is said, 'Every good tree bears good fruit, but an evil evil,' attempted to approve the heresy of Cerdo; so that his assertions are identical with those of the former heretic before him. (Ps.-Tertullian, *Adv. Haer.* 1.6.2).

This, however, looks typical of later heresiological works, which attempt to establish a genetic link between successive generations of false-teachers. Moreover as the wider context outlines, ultimately all deviance is traced back to Simon Magus, and following on from Marcion, a certain Lucan continues to propagate the same beliefs. Despite this constructed genealogy of heresy, there is a resilient and early strand of tradition that connects Marcion with Cerdo, and has both sharing a conception of 'two gods'.

The second possible link with pre-Roman ministry in Asia Minor is to be found in an incident recounted by Irenaeus involving Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. 'Polycarp himself replied to Marcion, who met him on one occasion, and said, "Do you know me?" "I do know you, the first-born of Satan."' (Irenaeus, *Ad. Haer.* 3.3.4).

⁷ S. Moll, 'Three Against Tertullian: The Second Tradition about Marcion's Life', *JTS* 59 (2008) 178.

⁸ Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.11.1.

Polycarp's long life and lengthy period in episcopal office makes it difficult to date this event with precision. Noting the problems in dating the year of Polycarp's death, Parvis opts for a likely date of 156 C.E.⁹ Given that Polycarp is already in office at the time of Ignatius' own martyrdom, the meeting between Polycarp and Marcion, if historical, could have taken place at any time between the 120s and prior to Polycarp's martyrdom. However, it is also possible to place the confrontation between Marcion and Polycarp in Rome. Eusebius preserves a fragment of a letter attributed to Irenaeus and addressed to Victor of Rome. Discussing the difference between Eastern and Western Christians surrounding the dating of Easter, and advising an attitude of accommodation rather than dispute, Irenaeus reminds Victor that 'when blessed Polycarp paid a visit to Rome in Anicetus' time, though they had minor differences on other matters too, they at once made peace, having no desire to quarrel on this point' (Eusebius, *H.E.* 5.24.16). Anicetus was a leading presbyter in Rome from around the early to mid 150s to the mid 160s. If Polycarp's visit is historically accurate, it must have occurred prior to his return to Smyrna and martyrdom in 156 C.E., but probably after 153 C.E. when Anicetus may have become a leading figure in the Roman church. This would mean the encounter with Marcion took place a decade after the split between Marcion and the Roman church. Alternatively, Marcion could have encountered Polycarp prior to the 140s in Smyrna, or there may be other unevidenced visits either of Marcion to Asia Minor or Polycarp to Rome between 140 and 153 C.E. There is simply no way to pin-down this event, or to verify its historicity.

The date of Marcion's arrival in Rome is neither unproblematic, nor uncontested. Traditionally, a date sometime in the late 130s or early 140s has been favoured. Harnack suggested that Marcion was active within the Roman Christian community for 'five years between 139 and 144', prior to his split with the group.¹⁰ The date of the split is based upon a detail given in Tertullian that 'from Tiberius to Antoninus Pius, there are about 115 years and 6½ months. Just such an interval do they place between Christ and Marcion' (*Adv. Marc.* 1.19.1). Obviously there is a certain degree of imprecision in Tertullian's chronology as to whether the dating commences with Christ's death or the beginning of his ministry and also identifying which specific event is denoted by the end point.¹¹ Nonetheless, Harnack confidently stated that the split 'occurred in July in the year 144.'¹²

The other assumption in Harnack's reconstruction is the belief that Tertullian's chronological note unambiguously refers to the date of Marcion's split from the Roman church. More recently, however, Moll has read this as referring to the time when Marcion first appeared in Rome.¹³ He may be correct in this assertion, although the alternative preferred by Harnack is not impossible. The greater difficulty arises from the imprecision in the whole note. Tiberius' period in office spanned the years

⁹ S. Parvis, 'The Martyrdom of Polycarp', in P. Foster (ed.), *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers* (London: T&T Clary – A Continuum imprint, 2007) 131.

¹⁰ Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* (trans. J.E. Steely and L.D. Bierma; Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1990 [German orig. 1924]) 17-18.

¹¹ The value of this chronological measure has been called into question by Hoffmann who sees it as a device to depict Marcion's teachings as a late development. Thus he states, 'Tertullian's calculation is not offered, therefore, in the interest of supplying biographical information, but rather in order to prove that Marcion's teaching did not arise before the middle decade of the second century.' J. Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity: An Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinist Theology in the Second Century* (Chico: Scholars Press) 1984, 70.

¹² Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, 19.

¹³ See S. Moll, *At the Left Hand of Christ* Edinburgh PhD thesis 2009; to be published as *The Arch-Heretic Marcion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

14-37, while the period of Antoninus Pius was 138-161. The problem is that no combination or subtraction of these dates produces a result within even ten years of the supposed '115 years and 6½ months'. The most one can assert is that Tertullian knows of a Marcionite tradition of '115 years and 6 ½ months' between Christ and Marcion, but there is no additional information by which to identify the events that mark the respective end-points of this calculation. However, Tertullian reports that Marcion, following the note in Luke's Gospel, took the fifteenth year of Tiberius (Lk 3.1) to signify the year of Christ's appearing (*Adv. Marc.* 5.7.1). This corresponds to 29 C.E. While an exact date in 29 C.E cannot be determined, adding the 115 years and 6½ to both the start and end of the year results in either Marcion's arrival in Rome or split with the churches in the city taking place between the beginning of July 144 C.E. and the end of June 145 C.E.

While the exact dates remain unknown, there are some details concerning Marcion's activities in Rome that appear reasonably certain. Perhaps one of the most striking events occurred soon after his arrival in Rome. Marcion made a large financial donation to the church, which was subsequently returned when he and his teachings were rejected. Tertullian reports that, 'in the first warmth of faith he contributed money to the Catholic church, which along with himself was afterwards rejected, when he fell away from our truth into his own heresy.' (*Adv. Marc.* 4.4.5). Elsewhere the sum donated is specified as being 200,000 sesterces (Tertullian, *De praescr.* 30).¹⁴ Later sources also relate a discussion in a meeting between Marcion and the presbyters of the Roman church in which the former presented his ideas to the church elders. Harnack describes this as 'a formal hearing', but such a description may imply too great a judicial tenor in the meeting. Rather, according to Epiphanius, Marcion emphasized the disjunction between Judaism and Christianity citing the Lukan passages about new wine in old skins (Lk 5.36). When the elders of the Roman congregations refused to accept the implications Marcion drew from this passage, the following reaction is attributed to him:

Becoming jealous then and roused to great anger and arrogance Marcion made the split, founding his own sect and saying, 'I am going to tear your church, and make a split in it for ever.' He did indeed make a split of no small proportions, not by splitting the church but by splitting himself and his converts. (Epiphanius, *Pan.* Book 1, 42.2.8).

It is at this point detailed knowledge of Marcion's life ceases.

However, his impact and ongoing teaching activity is recorded as early as Justin Martyr. In his *First Apology* he states;

And there is someone called Marcion from Pontus, who even now is still teaching those he can persuade to consider some other, greater than the creator God. And with the help of the demons, he has persuaded many from every race of humanity to utter blasphemies, and he has made them deny God the maker of this universe and confess some other who is greater, beyond him. (Justin, *First Apology* 26.5).¹⁵

Such sentiments are repeated in a second passage from the same work (Justin, *First Apology* 58.1-2). This leads to the supposition that for at least a decade after his split from the presbyters of the Roman congregations Marcion was still active in his teaching. The time of Marcion's death remains as uncertain as that of his birth. Harnack noted that 'no source reports that he was still living in the time of Marcus

¹⁴ Lampe notes the buying power of 200,000 sesterces in Marcion's day. See P. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (London: T&T Clark – A Continuum imprint, 2003) 245.

¹⁵ This translation is taken from D. Minns & P. Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (OECT; Oxford: OUP, 2009) 149-150.

Aurelius.’¹⁶ Thus, while acknowledging that the place and time of Marcion’s death are unknown, nevertheless Harnack infers that he was dead by 161 C.E. By contrast, Moll, arguing that Marcion was born later than Harnack’s proposal of 85 C.E., wishes to stretch this boundary further. He asserts ‘it would be a good guess to say Marcion dies about 165.’¹⁷ The truth is the sources about Marcion’s life die out before their subject, and there is no indication about the circumstances of his death.

II. Marcion’s Writings and Re-writings

It is perhaps the case that Marcion is best known for texts he re-wrote, rather than for his own original theological compositions. However, even within his re-writing of texts that later became part of a collection now known as the New Testament the very process of omitted certain texts, selecting others and reframing the contents within those texts, much of his theological agenda becomes apparent. Marcion selected a group of texts which he saw as exemplifying his own belief in the disjunction between the evil creator God of the Jewish scriptures, and the previously unknown God revealed through Jesus Christ. For Marcion, Luke’s Gospel and ten of Paul’s epistles – or at least expurgated forms of these writings – contained the revelatory knowledge of Christianity as he understood it. The entire corpus of Jewish scriptures were rejected, as were the other writings that later formed the New Testament. Just a few decades after this radical revision Irenaeus described Marcion’s editorial work in the following manner. ‘Marcion and his followers have betaken themselves to mutilating the Scriptures, not acknowledging some books at all; and, curtailing the Gospel according to Luke and the Epistles of Paul, they assert that these are alone authentic, which they have themselves thus shortened.’ (*Adv. Haer.* 3.12.12).¹⁸

a. Marcion and the Pauline Corpus

Unfortunately, no manuscripts of Marcion’s works survive. Instead scholars depend on three sources to reconstruct Marcion’s Gospel and his *Apostolikon* (the collection of ten Pauline epistles). These sources are Tertullian’s *Adversus Marcionem*, the *Dialogue of Adamantius* preserved under the name of Origin (but now that attribution is recognized as spurious), and Epiphanius’ *Panarion* 42. Epiphanius actually attributes eleven epistles to Marcion (*Panarion* 42.11.10). This is because he identifies separately Laodiceans and Ephesians, instead of recognising that the former name was the title Marcion gave to the epistle known in the New Testament under the latter name. Epiphanius also provides an order for Marcion’s *Apostolikon* which differs from that of Tertullian not just in the insertion of Laodiceans into the list, but also by inverting the order of Philemon and Philemon.

| Order | Tertullian <i>Adv. Marc.</i> 5 | Epiphanius, <i>Pan.</i> 42.11.7-8 |
|-------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. | Galatians | Galatians |
| 2. | 1 Corinthian | 1 Corinthian |
| 3. | 2 Corinthians | 2 Corinthians |
| 4. | Romans | Romans |
| 5. | 1 Thessalonians | 1 Thessalonians |
| 6. | 2 Thessalonians | 2 Thessalonians |
| 7. | Laodiceans = Ephesians | Ephesians |

¹⁶ Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, 19.

¹⁷ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, forthcoming.

¹⁸ See A.F. Gregory, *The Reception of Luke and Acts in the Period before Irenaeus* (WUNT 2.169; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 173-210.

| | | |
|----------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 8. | Colossians | Colossians |
| 9. | Philippians | Philemon |
| 10. | Philemon | Philippians |
| 11. | | Laodiceans |
| Rejected | 1&2 Timothy, & Titus | 1&2 Timothy, Titus & Hebrews |

Turning first to Marcion's collection of the letters of Paul, Tertullian provides the earliest and most important evidence for reconstructing Marcion's text. However, Clambeaux's comments must be given due weight. 'Tertullian's objective was to destroy Marcionite arguments. Due attention must be paid to his polemical motivations. Many of the citations from Pauline letters show signs of tampering on Tertullian's part, designed to make the citations more artfully fit his arguments.'¹⁹ Likewise, Epiphanius' list of passage which he states as deviating from the received form, are also presented for polemical purposes. Epiphanius stated that Marcion's compilation of Pauline epistles had 'been tampered with throughout, and had supplemental material added in certain passages' (*Panarion* 42.11.12). Lastly, the *Dialogue of Adamantius* in its first two books provides a stylized debate between a certain Adamantius and two contemporary Marcionite opponents – Marcus and Megethius (all three characters appear to be literary creations). There are severe problems with using the *Dialogue* as a source for reconstructing Marcionite readings. These include the damaged state of the text, the division of text-types between the Latin manuscripts that appear to witness a different Greek archetype used by Rufinus, compared to the archetype behind the surviving Greek manuscripts – none of which is earlier than the twelfth century, also there is a tendency in the *Dialogue* to present very loose citations, and finally there is debate concerning which books of the *Dialogue* actually preserve readings from Marcion's Pauline corpus.²⁰

In terms of the language of these three sources, it must be remembered that when using Tertullian his text is written in Latin so one must retrovert into Greek in order to try and recover the form of Marcion's text. By contrast, Epiphanius' *Panarion* is written in Greek, but he is not as interested in specific textual differences as with discussing the alternative theological interpretations which Marcion derives from his Pauline text.²¹

Notwithstanding these obvious difficulties, in a number of cases it becomes exceedingly clear to detect why Marcion adapted his text in the manner he did, in order to support his own theological agenda. A particular striking example is Marcion's deletion of Gal 4.24-26, a passage which speaks of the two covenants (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 5.4.3). Marcion replaces the term 'covenant' with 'exhibition', to protect against the notion that in the two sons of Abraham one can recognise both Judaism and Christianity.²² Such a link to Abraham and the God he worshipped was inconceivable for Marcion's conception of the deity worshipped by Christians. On a smaller scale, Marcion replaced the expression 'the last Adam' (1 Cor 15.45) which describes Jesus, and instead uses the phrase 'the last man' in order to sever possible links with Jewish history.

¹⁹ J.J. Clambeaux, *A Lost Edition of the Letters of Paul: A Reassessment of the Text of the Pauline Corpus Attested by Marcion* (CBQMS 21; Washington: CBA, 1989) 12.

²⁰ Clambeaux, *A Lost Edition of the Letters of Paul*, 57-59.

²¹ The most recent full-scale attempt to reconstruct Marcion's Apostolikon is Ulrich Schmid, *Marcion und Sein Apostolos: Rekonstruktion und Historische Einordnung der Marcionitischen Paulusbriefausgabe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995).

²² See Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, 32.

b. Marcion and the Gospel of Luke

Many striking features relating to Marcion's use of Luke may be observed. First, he is the earliest author known to have used a form of a text close to that of canonical Luke. However, the nature of the relationship between Marcion's text and the third gospel and the exact form of Luke used by Marcion have become topics of intense scholarly debate.

It remains the case that the majority position held in contemporary scholarship is the one originally advocated by the earliest critics of Marcion – namely that he was a mutilator and corruptor of Luke's Gospel. With florid rhetoric Tertullian asks, 'What Pontic mouse ever had such gnawing powers as he who has gnawed the Gospels to pieces?' (*Adv. Marc.* 1.1.4). More precisely in Book 4 Tertullian states 'Marcion seems to have singled out Luke for his mutilating process' (*Adv. Marc.* 4.2.2). Even earlier, Irenaeus describes Marcion's use of Luke in much the same manner.

[Marcion] mutilates the Gospel which is according to Luke, removing all that is written respecting the generation of the Lord, and setting aside a great deal of the teaching of the Lord, in which the Lord is recorded as most dearly confessing that the Maker of this universe is His Father. He likewise persuaded his disciples that he himself was more worthy of credit than are those apostles who have handed down the Gospel to us, furnishing them not with the Gospel, but merely a fragment of it. (Irenaeus, *Ad. Haer.* 1.27.2)

This description of Marcion's handling of the text of Luke remains a constant element in descriptions of his reworking of this text throughout the early Church. Modern descriptions are not quite so vitriolic, but they retain the same perspective on Marcion's modification of a base text close to the third gospel. Thus Marcion is seen as an abbreviator, a re-writer, or an editor of a text that would have been remarkably close to 'canonical' Luke.²³ However, another strand of scholarship has questioned this straightforward reading of the testimony of the church fathers. Given the lack of incontrovertible evidence for the existence of Luke prior to Tatian's *Diatesseron* or Irenaeus' statements about the fourfold gospel canon where Luke is explicitly named,²⁴ some have resisted the supposition that Marcion was a mutilator of canonical Luke. Against the weight of patristic testimony it is disputed whether canonical Luke was used by Marcion, and whether Luke's gospel was based on Marcion's text rather than *vice versa*.²⁵

These counter-arguments were powerfully presented by Knox. Citing the final sentence of his conclusion to give an orientation to his overall argument, Knox stated that '[t]here is no decisive ground for denying the source of Marcion's Gospel was a document considerably more primitive than the third canonical gospel – a "proto-Luke" upon which both Marcion and Luke relied.'²⁶ This also effected Knox's date for the composition of Acts as well as that of canonical Luke. He argued there is 'no adequate evidence for the existence of Acts before the middle of the second century; there is also no evidence for the existence of Luke in its present form until that

²³ Thus a centrist work such as F.L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone (eds.) *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd rev. ed; Oxford: OUP, 2005) states that Marcion produced 'an edited recension of the Gospel of St. Luke.' 1040.

²⁴ Irenaeus, *Ad. Haer.* 3.1.1; 3.11.8.

²⁵ See R.S. Wilson, *Marcion: A Study of a Second Century Heretic* (London: James Clark, 1932) 136.

²⁶ J. Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1942) 167.

time.²⁷ In this sense, canonical Luke, Acts and the Pastoral Epistles were all seen as being written in response to the threat Marcion posed. Such theories have recently been re-articulated, but without positing such a late date for Luke-Acts. Joseph Tyson has argued that Acts and canonical Luke were indeed responses to the Marcionite challenge, but he re-dates Marcion on an earlier period. Placing Marcion's encounters with Polycarp not in Rome but in Asia Minor prior to his visit to the imperial capital, leads him to advocate the following radical re-dating.

From Justin we learn that Marcion had had an extensive ministry in the East prior to 150 C.E., and from Polycarp we can conclude that his teachings were known in the East by 130 C.E. Indications from Ignatius and the Pastorals suggest even earlier dates. We probably will not be far off if we conclude that Marcion's views were known, at least in some parts and in some locations, as early as 115-120 C.E.²⁸

In turn this leads to seeing the context that called Acts into existence as being a response to Marcion, with that work being 'written about 120-125 C.E., just when Marcion was beginning to attract adherents.'²⁹ In effect, Tyson recognized that dating Luke-Acts as late as the mid second century was unconvincing. However, in order to maintain the primitivity of Marcion's gospel and the theory that Luke-Acts constituted a reaction to that earlier text he is forced to make two moves. First, he pushes the date of Marcion's activities implausibly early, while secondly pushing the date of Luke-Acts as late as suggested by the most extreme voices in contemporary scholarship. In effect his theory rests on two highly speculative dating decisions.³⁰

Therefore, it appears best to be guided by the unified testimony of early Christian writers on the subject. This would mean that Luke's gospel was already in existence at the time when Marcion produced his own gospel-text. Marcion's text was, therefore, an abridgment of the form of the third gospel known to him.³¹ One of the key motivations in re-working the text was to remove passages that reflected links between Jesus and Judaism. However, this was not the only type of alteration. Marcion also preserved a different version of the Lord's Prayer. His text opened with the line 'Father, let your Holy Spirit come upon us and cleanse us' (*Adv. Marc.* 4.26.3-4). This may reflect his positive understanding of soteriology as purification.

c. The *Antitheses*

Tertullian not only names a work entitled the *Antitheses*, he also states the purpose of the work. He declares this to be Marcion's 'special and principal work' and continues by observing, 'Marcion's *Antitheses*, or contradictory propositions, aim at committing the gospel to a variance with the law, in order that from the diversity of the two documents which contain them, they may contend for a diversity of gods also.' (*Adv. Marc.* 1.19.2). In this opening description, Tertullian identifies what is without doubt the very heart of Marcion's religious system. Unlike cosmological systems in some

²⁷ Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament*, 122.

²⁸ J.B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2006) 31.

²⁹ Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts*, 78.

³⁰ See R.I. Pervo, *Acts* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) for a recent late dating of Acts. Pervo dates Acts to around 115, which still does not make it quite late enough to support the type of argument Tyson is advocating (5-7).

³¹ Luke's gospel is known to have circulated in two major textual forms. It may be the case that the so-called Western text represented the form known to Marcion, but certainty is impossible due to many citations of Marcion's text being provided in Latin – which may have been secondarily influenced by Western influences in the Old Latin versions of the gospel, or may reflect the form of the text known to Tertullian.

forms of 'gnosticism' that viewed the God of the Jewish scriptures as a lower deity responsible for the creation of the material world, which consequently distanced the supreme God from the taint of the material realm, Marcion set up a more exclusive opposition between these two deities.

Commenting on the form of the *Antitheses*, Harnack contended that this work was far more than a set of pithy sentences or maxims that mapped out Marcionite theology in opposition to proto-orthodox statements of faith. He suggested that

the *Antitheses* were by no means only a great bundle of brief theses and counter-theses, but the work only received its name from these; they were themselves embedded in a work in which the gospel and the apostle, whether continuously or – as is more probable – in numerous individual passages were commented on in an apologetic-polemical fashion, i.e. also *antithetically*.³²

Notwithstanding this statement, elsewhere Harnack expressed greater caution with regard to being able to reconstruct the form of the *Antitheses*.³³ While the exact form of the work may resist reconstruction, some of its contents were genuinely antithetical propositions. Thus Tertullian reports Marcion writing, 'It says in the law, "eye for eye and tooth for tooth", but the Lord says in his gospel, "if someone strikes you on one check, turn to him the other also."' (*Adv. Marc.* 4.1.1). Therefore the *Antitheses* supply a closely linked framework and hermeneutical system by which Marcion's scriptural collection of a single gospel and ten Pauline epistles may be read in relation to his over-arching theological system.

III. Marcion's Theology

Much of Marcion's belief system can already be detected in part through the underlying motivations in the way in which he handled texts that formed the scriptures of his community. It may be suggested that even to describe this belief system as 'theology' is to imply a level of cognitive organisation that was lacking from these beliefs. However, since the core of Marcion's system of thought was an alternative understanding of God, there is probably no better term than 'theology' to describe his ideas. Moreover, the attempt to establish a coherent system articulated both through 'scriptures' and the *Antitheses* does show some degree of systematization at an early stage in Marcionite thought, originating with the movement's founder.

i. Marcion's Gods

As his opponents recognize, Marcion's separation of the deity of the Jewish scriptures from the deity that he understood Jesus to proclaim is the fundamental belief in his system. From this everything else follows as a corollary. Marcion's dualistic cosmology maintained exclusive division between the good God of his own belief system who had been revealed through Jesus, and the evil God depicted in Jewish scriptures. Irenaeus, one of the earliest writers to engage in refuting Marcion, set out Marcionite teaching on the natures of the two deities in the following manner.

And, indeed, the followers of Marcion do directly blaspheme the Creator, alleging him to be the creator of evils, [but] holding a more tolerable theory as to his origin, [and] maintaining that there are two beings, gods by nature, differing from each other, -the one being good, but the other evil. (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.12.12)

³² Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, 54.

³³ Thus Harnack states, 'one cannot yet draw a clear conception of the *form* of the *Antitheses*.' *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, 55.

Moll has argued that a two-stage deformation occurred in representing Marcion's understanding of the evil deity of the Jewish scriptures.³⁴ First he notes that writers such as Clement of Alexandria,³⁵ Tertullian,³⁶ Origen³⁷ and Hippolytus³⁸ report Marcion's system as a belief concerning the good God of his own system and the just God of Judaism. In this first stage of alteration there is often reference to evil matter, alongside the just God. The second stage reflects a development in the thinking of one strand of Marcion's followers who understand there to be three divine figures – the good God, the demiurgical Lawgiver, and the evil God.³⁹ In part the first mutation may be due to two factors – followers of Marcion refining their beliefs under the influence of thinkers such as Valentinus who also was active in Rome roughly around the same time as Marcion, and secondly proto-orthodox writers not fully understanding the subtleties of Marcion's beliefs and hence being influenced by more widespread and better known 'gnostic' ideas.

ii. The Role of Jesus in Marcion's System

The primary function of Jesus in Marcion's system is to be the revealer of the good God. Thus Tertullian reports the central tenet of their christology as being 'but our god, say the Marcionites, although he did not manifest himself from the beginning and by means of the creation, has yet revealed himself in Christ Jesus.' (*Adv. Marc.* 1.19.1). It may also be the case that Marcion allowed for more than one Messianic figure, and thus had a multiplicity of Christs. After describing seven divine figures in Marcion's system, Tertullian reports two messianic figures: 'their Christs--the one which appeared in the time of Tiberius, the other which is promised by the Creator' (*Adv. Marc.* 1.15.3). Here, however, caution must be exhibited, for Tertullian indulges in biting parody through *reductio absurdum*, and it is questionable whether Marcion himself enumerated nine divine beings.

However it is in book three of his *Adversus Marcionem* that Tertullian refutes at length Marcion's understanding of Christ. However, the contents of this book remain of limited value in reconstructing Marcion's christology. This is because it sets out the positive reasons for holding to the belief that Christ was the son of the creator God, and not, as Marcion held, the revealer of the good God. Notwithstanding this, there are some reflections upon Marcion's christology. For Marcion, the coming of Christ was not previously announced in the prophecies of the Jewish scriptures – this is unsurprising given his rejection of those scriptures and his negative portrayal of the God they represent. Tertullian also imputes a docetic christology to Marcion. Again the trouble with Tertullian's description is that his rhetoric appears to outstrip his reason, and because the purpose is to besmirch Marcion one is suspicious that every type of 'heresy' is being loaded onto him. Nonetheless Tertullian states that:

to reject the bodily substance of Christ, since he [Marcion] had introduced his very god to our notice as neither the author nor the restorer of the flesh; and for this very reason, to be sure, as pre-eminently good, and most remote from the deceits and fallacies of the Creator. His Christ, therefore, in order to avoid all such deceits and fallacies, and the imputation, if possible, of belonging to the Creator, was not what he appeared to be, and

³⁴ See Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, forthcoming.

³⁵ *Strom.* 2.39.1.

³⁶ *Adv. Marc.* 1.15.5.

³⁷ *De Princ.* 2.5.

³⁸ *Ref.* 10.19.1.

³⁹ *Adam. Dial.* 1.2.

reigned himself to be what he was not--incarnate without being flesh, human without being man, and likewise a divine Christ without being God! (*Adv. Marc.* 3.8.2).

Therefore, Tertullian's chief concerns in book three are to demonstrate that Jesus is foretold by the prophets – thereby undercutting Marcion's claim that Christ was the revealer of a previously unknown good God, and to respond to the docetic form of christology which he both attributes to Marcion and sees as being a consequence of his belief system.

iii. The Role of the Spirit

Like many of his contemporaries, Marcion does not appear to have developed any substantial pneumatology. Epiphanius records, in relation to Galatians, that Marcion excised the words 'it is written' connected to the text 'we, having the Spirit of faith, also believe and therefore speak.'⁴⁰ It is difficult to perceive whether for Marcion this 'spirit' is an attitude of faith, or an entity in some way linked to his good God. It appears best to conclude that Marcion does not appear to have developed a theology of the Spirit.

IV. Marcion's Impact

Marcion had both an immediate impact, as well as a more lasting effect on early Christianity. Among the diverse thinkers of early Christianity, Marcion was perhaps the most active in setting up an institution that rivalled the emergent orthodox church. He went further than simply propounding an alternative cosmology or articulating a theoretical belief system. He and his followers set up rival meetings, and attempted to challenge the status of other Christian meetings. Thus as Moll notes,

More than any other heretical group of early Christianity, Marcion's movement seems to have resembled the orthodox church as far as liturgy and organization were concerned, and it may be the only heretical group of the time which actually deserves the name of 'church'.⁴¹

Sacramental rites, including baptism in the triune name⁴² and a form of Eucharistic celebration which may have been more elaborate than a mere bread and wine ritual were practised in Marcionite meetings.⁴³

In terms of its lasting impact, the Marcionite movement survived at least until the middle of the fourth century in the West and perhaps for a couple of centuries longer in the East. The firmest evidence of the movement's strength is perhaps to be detected in the repeated and detailed rebuttals issued by early Christian writers. Tertullian's lengthy five-volume work (which was in fact an expanded second edition of a previous work) shows that even as far afield as Carthage there was felt a need to rebuff Marcionite thought six or seven decades after the inception of the movement. Over a century and a half later, Epiphanius writes at far great length against

⁴⁰ See (Epiphanius, *Pan.* Book 1, 42.12, scholia 3 and 27 on Galatians). Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, 355.

⁴¹ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, forthcoming.

⁴² The attribution of Trinitarian baptism is acknowledged by Augustine, *Bapt.* 3.15.

⁴³ See A. Stewart-Sykes, 'Bread and Fish, Water and Wine. The Marcionite menu and the maintenance of purity', in G. May and K. Greschat (eds.), *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung/ Marcion and His Impact on Church History* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002) 207-220.

Marcionites than against any of the other sects he identifies.⁴⁴ Part of the reason for this extensive interest is to be found in one of his opening comments.

The sect is still to be found even now, in Rome and Italy, Egypt and Palestine, Arabia and Syria, Cyprus and the Thebaid – in Persia too moreover, and in other places. For the evil one in him has leant a great deal of strength to the deceit. (Epiphanius, *Pan.* Book 1, 42.1.1)

Furthermore, the *Dialogue of Adamantius* appear to reflect developments and divergent strands within the movement. This is likely an indication of a flourishing and self-reflective movement with the confidence and numerical strength to engage in internal discussions about the meaning of core teachings.

It is tempting to find Marcionite ideas surfacing down through the centuries and to postulate a direct link. Thus groups such as the Manichaeans are seen as assimilating Marcionite ideas. Given the temporal overlap between Marcionite groups and early Manichaeism this is not impossible. However, posited links with Bulgarian Bogomils of the tenth century or the thirteenth century Cathars in the south of France are highly speculative.⁴⁵ It needs to be recognized that conceptual affinities do not prove genealogical descent.

V. Conclusions

Marcion is perhaps a far more important figure in the landscape of early Christianity than is usually recognized. He not only violently shook the churches in Rome, he actually ruptured the loose organization of house churches, and may indirectly be one of the significant factors leading to the introduction of a presiding bishop in the imperial capital.⁴⁶ Although best known for his 'mutilation' of Luke's gospel and his reworking of a ten letter collection of Paul's letters, Marcion's theological enterprise was far larger and more creative than is usually recognized. He differed from gnostic-types of belief systems not simply by seeing the material realm as evil and distancing the highest deity from the world. Instead he saw that in Jesus a new and good God had been revealed. This God was totally separate from the God of Jewish scriptures who was evil and capricious. In a brilliant and daring master-stroke Marcion jettisoned any connection with the Old Testament. This solved certain problems in relation to the Jewish heritage of Christianity. However, at least from emerging orthodox perspectives, such a move was fundamentally flawed since it denied the antiquity of the Christian heritage, it discarded the prophetic foretelling of the coming of Jesus, and it rendered creation itself as evil.

Notwithstanding the difficulties highlighted by antagonistic interlocutors, the Marcionite movement flourished for at least three centuries after its inception. Some of Marcion's beliefs (especially that of jettisoning the Jewish scripture) continued to appear superficially attractive to certain Christian groups down through the centuries. While he identified a tension in reconciling Christianity to its Jewish heritage, his solution, while attractive at one level, was seen as too radical and as not reflecting the historical realities of the Jewishness of Jesus.

⁴⁴ To try and quantify the difference In Williams' edition the treatment of Marcionites occupies seventy-three pages (294-364). The next most extensive treatment is that of the Valentinians covering forty-four pages (165-208). By contrast most of the other groups are treated in only a few pages each.

⁴⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcion> (accessed 1st November 2009).

⁴⁶ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 399, 408-411.

V. Bibliography

- J.J. Clambeaux, *A Lost Edition of the Letters of Paul: A Reassessment of the Text of the Pauline Corpus Attested by Marcion* (CBQMS 21; Washington: CBA, 1989).
- A.F. Gregory, *The Reception of Luke and Acts in the Period before Irenaeus* (WUNT 2.169; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).
- Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* (trans. J.E. Steely and L.D. Bierma; Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1990 [German orig. 1924]).
- J. Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity: An Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinist Theology in the Second Century* (Chico: Scholars Press) 1984.
- J. Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1942).
- P. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (London: T&T Clark – A Continuum imprint, 2003).
- G. May and K. Greschat (eds.), *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung/ Marcion and His Impact on Church History* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002).
- D. Minns & P. Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (OECT; Oxford: OUP, 2009).
- S. Moll, 'Three Against Tertullian: The Second Tradition about Marcion's Life', *JTS* 59 (2008) 169-180.
- S. Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).
- S. Parvis, 'The Martyrdom of Polycarp', in P. Foster (ed.), *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers* (London: T&T Clark – A Continuum imprint, 2007).
- U. Schmid, *Marcion und Sein Apostolos: Rekonstruktion und Historische Einordnung der Marcionitischen Paulusbriefausgabe* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995).
- J.B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2006).
- F. Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book 1 (Sects 1-46)*, NHMS 63 (2nd ed., rev. and expanded; Leiden: Brill, 2009).
- R.S. Wilson, *Marcion: A Study of a Second Century Heretic* (London: James Clark, 1932).