

Early Church Fathers: Marcion and the Two Gods

This is the sixth in a continuing Ekklesia Then & Now series on the influential writers of the pre-Nicene period of the church (before 325 A.D.). Previous installments were an Introduction (ET&N 30), Clement of Rome (70), Justin Martyr (73), Ignatius (80), and Polycarp (88). The purpose of the series is to examine the writings of these individuals to better understand the context of the early church and determine what lessons they hold for today's Christian. Additional installments of this series will include Irenæus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origin, Cyprian, Novatian, and others.

Then

[Note: this slightly fictionalized account of Marcion is based on the ancient testimonies of Justin¹, Hermas², Irenæus³, Hippolytus⁴, Tertullian⁵ and Epiphanius⁶; as well as secondary and tertiary interpretations by John Knox⁷, Adolf Van Harnack⁸, W.C. van Manen⁹, G.R.S. Mead¹⁰, Michael Conley¹¹, Glenn Davis¹², Bart Ehrman¹³, Einar Thomassen¹⁴, J.P. Arendzen¹⁵, and Herbert Christian Merillat¹⁶. See references at end of the "Then" section. I have taken liberties by adopting some theories over others, including some of my own.

Marcion in Sinope

Some time about one hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, a young man from the once-prosperous Black Sea port of Sinope encountered Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia and was captivated by the apostle's gospel of grace. He had been raised as a Christian, his father a leader of the local church. It was part of his required reading, along with the Gospels and the Jewish Scriptures that foretold the coming of the Messiah. For all his life, he had been told that Jesus was that Messiah, but as he reflected on what Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians, he became increasingly troubled. Paul had warned adamantly against those who preached the Law because they sought to rob Christians of their freedom and bring them back into bondage (2:4). He called their message a different gospel and cursed them. These preachers of the Law came from Judea, where Jesus lived and preached, yet they had clearly misunderstood His message. Barnabas, Paul's companion on his first trip into Galatia, and even Peter, who have actually been with the Lord, submitted to the Judaizers out of fear.

It became increasingly clear to Marcion that only Paul understood the gospel, having received it as a direct revelation from the risen Jesus (1:12). Only Paul could be trusted; the other apostles were tainted by their Jewish heritage. Then Marcion remembered something that puzzled him in Luke's gospel, an enigmatic saying of Jesus: "*No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed*" (5:36-38). Suddenly,

Marcion understood: the new wine was the gospel; the old wineskins, the religion of the Jews. Christianity was not a continuation of the story begun with Abraham; it was an entirely new story. By relying on Jewish Scripture, as much of the church did (including his own father), Christians were contaminating the gospel, making it a "different gospel." To be truly free, the church had to sever any connection with Judaism.



Location of Sinope in Pontus on the Black Sea.

He tried to explain this to his father and others, but met only rejection. "The prophets foresaw the coming of Jesus," his father countered, patiently at first. "Their prophecies prove the reliability of the gospel." He sent his son back to reread the Law and the Prophets, but that only confused him. The Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures bore little resemblance to Christ Jesus. For that matter, to Marcion, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures seemed something quite different than the loving God who offered free grace through Jesus. But the more Marcion questioned and challenged, the more impatient his father became.

Finally, as others began to learn of Marcion's ideas and accept them, Marcion's father ordered him to be silent. "You are creating divisions with your silly speculations. I am an overseer of this church, and I cannot have my own son teaching such nonsense. Either cease and repent or leave Sinope." So, driven by his deep convictions and a passion for God and His Son, Marcion reluctantly packed his belongings and assembled a small entourage for a journey. He regretted leaving his home and the thriving shipping business that had earned him a small fortune by age forty, but these worldly concerns were of little consequence to him when the future of God's church was a stake.

The biggest problem he faced was where to go. He wanted to meet with church leaders who would be open enough to listen to him and to appreciate the validity of his beliefs. He considered Antioch, the great missionary church that had first sponsored Paul's missions to the Gentile world. He thought about Ephesus, where Paul had spent his longest uninterrupted period of teaching. Corinth, the church about which Paul seemed the most passionate, was another possibility. He thought about the reputation Athens still had of a place where all ideas were heard and considered. But ultimately, the decision was obvious. Rome was the capital of the empire; it was Paul's final resting place; it was the recipient of Paul's most elaborate explication of grace. Besides, to gain broad acceptance, all ideas had to eventually be adopted in Rome. Why not start there? Surely in Rome, where Jewish thought was barely tolerated and education was valued, he would gain an audience. From Rome, the center of the world, the renewed truth he discovered would radiate throughout the church.

Marcion in Rome

He arrived in Rome in the third year of Emperor Antoninus (140) to discover that the primary leader of the Roman church, Hyginus, had only recently died, creating a leadership vacuum. Marcion saw a Divine hand in this, thinking that he might ascend to the Roman episcopate, from which he could engineer the eradication of Jewish influence on Christianity. To demonstrate his commitment to the Roman church, he

donated a sizeable portion of his fortune - two hundred thousand sesterces, an amount equal to the daily wage of fifty thousand unskilled laborers. Optimistic and confident, he nevertheless knew there would be opposition from the Jewish element in the church, but he boasted to at least one Roman that he would "divide your Church and cause within her division, which will last forever."

During his four years in Rome, Marcion became increasingly frustrated by the lack of a stable ecclesiastical structure. It was impossible to identify a citywide leader of the church. Unlike Sinope, where the entire church (admittedly, a relatively small church) assembled as one, there were dozens of Christian groups meeting in homes and apartments across the huge city. He met several times with Pius, an overseer of the largest congregation, but the man rejected him as cavalierly as his father had. For a time, he befriended a man named Hermas, who shared his concern over the lack of a coherent church structure but disagreed as to the cause. Hermas viewed moral corruption as the primary threat to the church and called for penance.

"The church must be like a white tower composed of stones of such purity that the tower itself becomes as a single stone," Hermas told Marcion one day. "But regardless of the stones," Marcion countered. "The tower will fall if the foundation is faulty." "The foundation of the church is *Christos* Himself," Hermas said. "How can there be any fault in Him?" "It is not *Christos* - the Jewish Messiah - who is the foundation, but *Chrestos*, the Holy One of God. That is precisely the problem, Hermas. The church is infected with the disease of the Hebrew Scriptures. The religion of *Chrestos* is new wine, and it can't be held in the old wineskin." Hermas frowned at him. "I don't know what you're talking about, Marcion. I think perhaps you are a broken stone lying on the ground." He rose and walked away, shaking his head and mumbling.

He heard of a woman named Grapte, who had the responsibility to teach the widows and orphans across all congregations in Rome. The fact that the Roman church had given a woman such a role impressed Marcion, who believed that there should be equality of the sexes in the true church and that male dominance was yet another vestige of Judaism. Despite his inquiries, however, he was never able to get together with her.

Perhaps his most significant association in Rome was with Cerdon, a teacher from Syria who had, like Marcion, traveled to Rome. Viewed as a curiosity by most Roman Christians, Cerdon taught of two gods - one good, one bad. The bad one, the demiurge, was self-evident to anyone who took the time to look around at the world he had created. In Cerdon's elaborate accompanying cosmology, which Marcion found pointless, the demiurge was an emanation of the perfect Good God, but like the product of a sloppy copyist, beset with flaws. He also rejected Cerdon's claim that salvation came through knowledge that freed the soul from the demiurge's control - knowledge that Jesus had secretly conveyed to His disciples. Marcion had no use for any knowledge coming from Jesus' hopelessly confused Jewish followers - secret or otherwise. He understood that salvation came, as Paul - the only true apostle - taught, from grace alone.

Marcion remembered nothing further from Cerdon's lessons because a candle had flared in his head. Two gods explained everything that he bothered him from the first time he encountered Paul's letter to the Galatians and subsequently, as he puzzled over the inconsistent nature of Jehovah/Yahweh, the God described in the Hebrew

Scriptures. Jehovah had to ask Adam where he was (Genesis 3:9), whereas Jesus could perceive even the thoughts (Luke 5:22). Jehovah mandated "an eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:24), but Jesus called his followers to "turn the other cheek" (Luke 6:29). Jehovah demanded isolation from menstruating women (Leviticus 15:19,25), while Jesus healed just such a woman (Luke 8:43-44). Jehovah countenanced divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1), but Jesus condemned it (Matthew 19:8). Jehovah created both good and evil (Isaiah 45:7), but the God of Jesus has "no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Jehovah was jealous (Exodus 20:5), but the Good God, representing love, "knows no jealousy" (1 Corinthians 13:4). Jehovah is unforgiving (Exodus 20:5), but Jesus calls others to forgive "seventy times seven" times (Matthew 18:22-23).



Marcion (left), with John, to whom he "brought Scriptures from the Pontic brethren." 10th century miniature from the archives of the Cathedral St. Bravo, Ghent.

There had to be two gods, Marcion concluded. He accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as literal truth, so he didn't view Jehovah/Yahweh as "evil" because he saw instances of lovingkindness. What he saw in Jehovah/Yahweh was righteousness - a severe, often harsh and inconsistent justice that was contradictory to Jesus' teachings. He spent the next few weeks pouring over his personal copies of Christian writings and borrowed copies of the Hebrew Scriptures. His Pontic companions worried that he was deathly ill, since he barely slept or ate, but he emerged with a completed book he called *Antithesis* (contradictions) in which he painstakingly catalogued the contrasts between Jehovah/Yahweh, who he concluded was nothing more than the Jew's tribal god, while the "Stranger God," who was previously unknown to mankind and essentially unknowable, was the ultimate God.

Jehovah/Yahweh was a slave-master, enacting picayune laws, then punishing any Jew who failed to comply. As compensation, perhaps, he kept promising a Messiah who would lead the Jews to world domination. He got the Jews out of Egypt, but they were still in bondage to him. The Stranger God, on the other hand, was all love, and when He noticed what Jehovah/Yahweh was up to (something like a neighbor seeing a child torturing a defenseless kitten), He took pre-emptive action, sending *Chrestos* as a ransom to free Jehovah/Yahweh's slaves. Jesus died on the cross not to save people from sin, which was, after all, Jehovah/Yahweh's fault, but from Jehovan bondage. Marcion's new bitheism fit perfectly into his rejection of Hebrew Scripture - they were about Jehovah/Yahweh's interactions with the Jews and had nothing whatsoever to do with the Stranger God and his intervention.

In the summer of 144, Marcion addressed a group of Roman elders and teachers he had invited to his comfortable rented home under the guise of a discussion of Luke 5:36-38 (the wineskins passage). It didn't take the others long to recognize that their host had no interest in dialogue, and when he introduced the idea of two gods, they responded in a variety of ways - almost all negative.

"Nothing new. That's what Cerdon teaches," one said with a feigned yawn.

"Blasphemy!" another shouted. "The apostles clearly teach that Jesus is the son of the Creator,"

"Small wonder your father ex-communicated you," yet another observed.

"What you preach is dangerous," a practical one observed. "The Romans begrudgingly respect the Jews because of the antiquity of their religion, and we enjoy a modicum of protection by claiming descent from them. If you remove the association, we'll become something Romans abhor - *novel*. It'll be open season on the church. Nero's persecutions will look like a child's game by comparison."

Marcion admitted to himself that the last one had a point, but he didn't care. Truth was truth, regardless of the consequences. He was bitterly disappointed that the Roman church failed to fulfill his expectation of a friendly reception. He had hoped to gain the Roman episcopate and send missionaries across the Mediterranean world to spread the true gospel, but he now realized he would have to do it himself. He went to Pius, who was the closest thing he could find to a leader of the church, and announced his intentions to leave.

"That may be for the best," Pius said with a shrug. "Under the circumstances, I think I should return your donation to the church. If you'll send your representative tomorrow, I will have it ready for you." Marcion almost objected because it made his donation appear to be a rejected bribe, but he realized the funds would be needed for his ambitious evangelistic plans. He left Rome two days later, boarding one of his own ships in the port of Ostia.

Marcion embarks on restoration mission

With time to reflect during the voyage, Marcion recognized there was one thing he envied about the Jewish church's use of the Hebrew Scriptures. At least they had an established written record to refer to, and while they were wrong in claiming the messianic prophesies referred to Jesus, they provided documentation. It would benefit his new church to have its own body of writings - ones that would be authoritative in determining beliefs and practices. As his ship sailed south along the Italian peninsula, he returned to his collection of Christian documents. He rejected the gospels of both Matthew and John immediately. Matthew's account was clearly filled with the Jewish infection, and both were penned by Jewish disciples who misunderstood Jesus. For what he would call the *Evangelicon*, he chose Luke's account, primarily because Luke was both a Gentile and an associate of Marcion's hero, Paul.

As he reviewed Luke's Gospel again, he recognized that Jewish-Christian copyists must have inserted judeocentric material, so he simply removed it. The birth story at the beginning obviously had to go, since Jesus, as the Son of the Stranger God, could not have a corporeal body that was the product of Jehovah/Yahweh's material creation. The initial reference to the Jewish John the Baptist was expunged, as was the genealogy of Jesus and His temptation by the Devil. Hence, the *Evangelicon* began with "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Jesus descended into Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching on the Sabbath days; And they were astonished at his doctrine" (compare to Luke 3:1-4:32).

Finally, he added a stirring introduction: "Oh wonder over wonder, at once rapture, potency and astonishment, good news that leaves one speechless, not rightly able to fully comprehend, nor capable of drawing comparisons with anything know."

Next, he formulated the *Apostolikon*, ten Pauline letters (all except 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) to which he applied similar editorial surgery. Galatians, in Marcion's view, was the most important book of the *Apostolikon* since it contained both an unequivocal pro-faith/grace, anti-law statement (2:16) and a thorough

excoriation of the role of Jewish practices (circumcision, feasts, etc.). Even in *Galatians*, however, he had to make a few corrections. 1:4-5 went because they indicated Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins rather than rescue from Jehovah/Yahweh. Paul's testimony of his own Jewish roots (1:13-14) was an obvious Jewish addition, as was the comparability of Peter's mission to the Jews and Paul's to the Gentiles in 2:8.

Throughout the voyage, Marcion practiced his editorial skills, eliminating the judeocentric additions and occasionally restoring words that had obviously been left out. He added very brief introductions to each book¹⁷, and by the time his ship docked at Seleucia, he had his documentation - Scripture that would be familiar to Christians (as long as they didn't pay close attention to the details) and that would thoroughly validate his teachings. He had decided to begin his missionary activities in Antioch because he was not really attempting to establish a new church, but only to restore what Paul had originally accomplished before it was contaminated by Judaizers. As he entered the city, he was filled with confidence, anticipation and evangelical fervor. With the truth, validated by Paul's original words, he had no doubts.

From the beginning, he determined that the churches he restored would not suffer from the kind of moral laxity Hermas saw in the Roman church. Strict discipline was expected of his church members. Because procreation served the purposes of Jehovah/Yahweh, all sexual relations, including marriage were forbidden. Only the sexually pure (virgins) could be baptized, and married members renounced their vows and lived separately. Regimented fasting practices were also established. On the other hand, unlike the Judeocentric churches, women served in positions of relative authority in an ecclesiastical structure that mirrored the "orthodox" church (bishop-presbyters-deacons). Significantly, Marcionites were every bit as committed as their orthodox brethren. In his *Church History*, Eusebius Pamphilius, reports numerous Marcionites who suffered martyrdom.

Opponents' Response

Within a few short years, the population of Marcionites nearly equaled that of other Christians. Marcion succeeded in establishing his restored Pauline churches in virtually every city, and unlike later Gnostic sects, they did not meet with the apostate Judaizers. Marcionism marked the first real denominationalism in Christianity, and the two groups refused fellowship with one another. Marcion's startlingly rapid success is attested to by a comment by Justin Martyr in about 150 (just six years after Marcion left Rome):

"(T)here is Marcion, a man of Pontus, who is even at this day alive, and teaching his disciples to believe in some other god greater than the Creator. And he, by the aid of the devils, has caused **many of every nation** to speak blasphemies..." (Apology 26, Roberts-Donaldson translation at earlychristianwritings.com, *emphasis added*)

Justin didn't consider Marcionites to be genuine Christians, but the responses became increasingly vitriolic as Marcionism continued to thrive well into the fourth century. In about 176 (probably after Marcion's death), Irenaeus mentioned Marcion repeatedly in his voluminous *Against Heresies* and reported that Polycarp (in a confrontation in about 155) called Marcion "the first-born of Satan." Tertullian wrote a five-volume tome *Against Marcion* in 207. Marcion also gets a prominent mention in Hippolytus' *Refutation of All Heresies* in about 220., and Epiphanius' *Panarion* (fourth century) includes an extensive treatment of Marcion and his Bible.

It is a testament to the appeal of Marcion's message that his sect persisted to as late as the sixth century in isolated areas without the opportunity to grow through procreation.

¹ *Apology*

² *Shepherd of Hermas*

³ *Against Heresies (multiple references)*

⁴ *Refutation of all Heresies VII.17-26*

⁵ *Against Marcion*

⁶ *Panarion*

⁷ *Marcion and the New Testament*

⁸ *History of Dogma I*, p. 266-281

⁹ Reconstructed text of Marcionite *Galatians* at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/3827/Galatians.html>

¹⁰ *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* p. 241-249

¹¹ *Marcion's Place in Early Christianity: A Political Power Play* at

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/3827/powerpla.htm>

¹² *Marcion and Marcionites* at <http://www.ntcanon.org/Marcion.shtml>

¹³ *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Oxford University Press, 2003

¹⁴ *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Second-Century Rome*, Harvard Theological Review 97:3 (2004), p. 241-256

¹⁵ *Marcionites* entry in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09645c.htm>

¹⁶ "Marcion and the Stranger God" (chapter 9) in *The Gnostic Apostle Thomas* at

<http://www.gnosis.org/thomasbook/ch9.html>

¹⁷ For example, Marcion's introduction to *Romans*: "The Romans are in the regions of Italy. They had been reached by false apostles and under the name of our Lord Jesus Christ they were led away into the law and the prophets. The apostle calls them back to the true evangelical faith, writing to them from Corinth." It is ironic that Marcion's little introductions found their way into Orthodox Bibles and persisted for centuries.



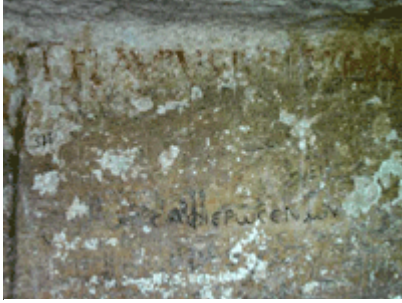
Today, Marcion is mostly unknown, and his writings exist only in the refutations from the patristic leaders of the orthodox church. Those who claim his work disappeared because of some organized pogrom to excise his name from church history ignore the facts that:

1. Marcion's work can be reconstructed from the writings of the very church leaders skeptics accuse. If the church was determined to erase his memory, why aren't its own documents edited?
2. Almost no ancient documents exist. Paper is by its nature a highly perishable commodity, so unless someone is interested in laboriously copying a text, it won't survive. The lack of Marcionite documents is evidence of disinterest (nobody cared enough to copy them) rather than censorship.
3. Marcionism persisted until at least the fifth or sixth century. If orthodox leaders mounted a campaign to stamp out Marcion's legacy, they were extraordinarily ineffective.

Some random comments and rebuttals

Marcion was not a Gnostic, as some neo-Gnostics claim. While he held to some similar beliefs (multiple gods, docetism), there were also marked differences:

- Marcion did not ascribe to the kind of dualism (spirit/flesh, heaven/hell, good/evil, light/darkness) most Gnostics did. His creator god was not evil, just not very loving.
- Marcion did not develop the kind of elaborate cosmology (multiple heavens, celestial beings, etc.) Gnostics did.
- Most importantly, Marcion was a firm believer that salvation came only through the grace of God, while Gnostics taught that (self-) knowledge (gnosis) was the path to salvation.



The Marcionite inscription

Denominationalism is claimed by some to be the curse of modern Christianity, but Marcionism proves that denominationalism existed from the very early years of the church. Marcionism is, in a sense, Protestantism in all its denominational glory. Any zealot or charlatan with a fruitcake idea about God and Jesus (Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and Charles Taze Russell come to mind) can start a new one. Negative attitudes toward denominations generally center on the mistaken notion that such churches are somehow worshipping their founders

rather than THE founder, but in one of the great ironies of Christian archaeology, the earliest known church building inscription comes from a Marcionite church in Syria: "The Lord and Saviour Jesus, the Good - Chrestos." Then, as now, most Christians worshipping under denominational banners know precisely to whom the glory belongs (see ET&N 44, *What's in a Name?*).

In the same vein, Marcion can be viewed as a precursor of Martin Luther. Both boldly challenged the status quo because of deeply-held convictions. Both initially sought to reform the church, not start a new one. Both earned vehement responses from the ruling elite. Both fell short of getting it right (in my opinion). Most importantly, both championed the fundamental biblical truth of salvation through unmerited grace.



Martin Luther defends his position to Catholic leaders at the Diet of Worms, 1521

The primary flaw in Marcion's underdeveloped theology is the laughable incompetence and/or despicable indifferent of Marcion's "Good God." Marcion belittled Jehovah/Yahweh for his treatment of humanity, but somehow gave his Good God a pass on divine ignorance. His scheme presupposes an all-powerful, supposedly all-knowing God who twiddled his divine thumbs for centuries, apparently ignorant of Jehovah/Yahweh's unconscionable behavior toward his defenseless created mortals. What kind of god is that?

Marcion forced the orthodox church to formulate and close its canon. This contention is mostly nonsense. Response to Marcion may have hastened the establishment of four gospels, as stated by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*. But if the assertion were true, the church certainly took its sweet time when you would assume there would be a sense of urgency. Marcion's Bible probably first appeared some time around 145. Nearly four decades *earlier*, Polycarp quoted or referred to eighteen of the twenty-seven (67%) canonical New Testament books in his letter to the church in Philippi. The vast majority of the authoritative Christian writings were already recognized years before Marcion. At the other chronological extreme lies the fact that some of the remaining books (2 Peter, Jude, Hebrews, James, and Revelation, in particular) remained disputed for another two hundred years!

Writing early in the fourth century, Eusebius reports precisely this fact: "Of the disputed books, which are nevertheless familiar to the majority, there are extant the Epistle of James, as it is called; and that of Jude; and the second Epistle of Peter;

and those that are called the Second and Third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another of the same name" (III.25,3). It is not until 367, more than two hundred years after Marcion compiled his Bible that Athanasius of Alexandria cites a complete list of canonical books (39th Festal Letter). Even decades later, works like the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Apocalypse of Peter* found their way into "official" orthodox Bibles, and the formal adoption of the canon by the Catholic church did not occur until the second council of Carthage in 419.

Paul was accepted into Christian canon because of Marcion. A subset of the previous, this one is even sillier. Virtually every extant early Christian document quotes from the Pauline corpus and treats him with the deepest respect. Even within the canon, Peter refers to Paul as his "beloved brother" and his letters as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16), but the skeptics often challenge the authenticity of 2 Peter.

Clement, writing to the Corinthian church on behalf of the Roman church (1 Clement) late in the first century quoted from Titus, 1 Corinthians, Hebrews (consistently attributed to Paul by ancient sources), and Philippians. In his seven authentic letters written about 107, Ignatius of Antioch quoted from Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians. Polycarp (ca. 108) quoted from every Pauline letter except Colossians, Titus, and Philemon. Paul's letters were widely distributed and quoted long before Marcion.

The suggestion that the church adopted Paul's letters into the canon to make it more acceptable to Marcionites defies both history and logic. By the time the canon solidified (367), Marcionism was in decline, particularly in the west. If anything, the misuse of passages from Paul by Marcion (and many Gnostics) would make it less likely his letters would be considered authoritative by Marcion's opponents.

Marcion had access to original copies of Pauline letters. This theory became popular among some scholars beginning around 1900, but there is little or no evidence, and his locale makes it very unlikely. Sinope, lying at the terminus of a great caravan route from Persia and Arabia, was once a major trading port for the Greeks, but when the Romans constructed their extensive system of excellent roads and developed ports in Seleucia (Antioch), Caesarea, and Ephesus, they had much closer options than Sinope. Consequently, the city declined in importance, becoming a relatively distant outpost of the Empire. Why would anyone think someone in Sinope would have more reliable copies of *Romans*, *1-2 Corinthians*, *Ephesians*, *Philippians*, or *1-2 Thessalonians* than residents of those cities in particular? Among the recipients of Pauline letters, only Galatia was relatively close to Pontus. There is no reasonable basis on which to suppose Marcion had original copies of Pauline letters when others did not.

So what is Marcion's lasting contribution to Christianity?

In one online article, the author concludes with "All in all, despite his obvious heresy, Marcion's impact on Church History actually was largely positive" (Chris Price, *Marcion, the Canon, the Law, and the Historical Jesus*, 2002 at christianorigins.com). A suggestion I would vigorously debate. The Catholic Church that evolved in response to Marcion and other so-called heretics became a hierarchical, sacramental, works-based hodge-podge of paganism, Roman institutions and unscriptural traditions, all supported by the claim of "apostolic succession" - a concept I will discuss in more detail in the next installment of the *ET&N* Early Fathers series (Irenaeus, scheduled for April 17). Human error has led to a church that is, by and large, only a vague semblance of the organic faith Christ initiated, but God's will can be discerned by those willing to lay aside the past and return to God's word.

It would be inappropriate to blame Marcion for the errors of others. Ultimately, too much of the story of the church from the second century on is one of the all-too-familiar human struggle for power, the antithesis of Christ's teachings. We need to reminded time and again that Jesus' ministry was one primarily to those who had been marginalized by the institutional religion of His time. From the moment of His birth, first announced not to kings, priests, scribes, elders and other religious leaders, but to anonymous shepherds, Christ Jesus represented something qualitatively new (see ET&N 91). Too many who thought themselves key members of God's community forgot that then and still forget it!

Ultimately, Marcion's failure was one of imagination. He could not imagine a God who is simultaneously loving and just. He insisted on a literal reading of the Old Testament and judged God's actions based on his own standards. To his enormous credit, he recognized that the Gospel was something new, so he assumed it must come from a "new" God. That assumption was his fatal flaw, but from what I have learned about the man, I hope God forgave him and will welcome him into the fold at the end of time. Sometimes in judging "heresy" (which literally means simply, *a different opinion*) the church has forgotten that the Gospel is something different, not more of the same old religion.

Marcion's contribution cannot be considered "positive" in light of the response to him, but perhaps he can be viewed as a faithful Berean (Acts 17:10-11), one who searched the Scriptures to see if what others were telling him was true. He reached one important wrong conclusion, but he had the core - individual reconciliation to God only through the free gift of grace - dead right. Finally, if Epiphanius' claim that Marcion was excommunicated by his father, perhaps Marcion's ultimate legacy is one that has plagued so many people - an inability to conceive of a God both loving and righteous because of his own father's shortcomings.



Place your comments or questions on the *ET&N* Blog at blog.peculiarpress.com

Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean yourself. If you still disagree, comment on the *ET&N* blog so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Paul's Co-workers: Titus (Jan 23)

© Richard M. Soule, 2007 Unlimited copy and distribution permission is hereby granted on the condition that this copyright notice is included and no profiteering is involved.

Website: www.peculiarpress.com

View back issues at www.ETandN.com

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.