

MARCION: A WITNESS TO HOW EARLY CHRISTIANITY WAS MYTH-BASED NOT HISTORY-BASED

There was a "heretic" active in the Second Century at Rome who said that the followers of Jesus were apostate and following an incompetent God who is really just an angel with high ideas about himself. His name was Marcion. He held that only Paul among the apostles had preserved the true message of Jesus which was that the entire Old Testament was nonsense and knew the real God not the angel the Jews mistook for a God. Marcion taught that only the writings of Paul and the gospel, similar to Luke but with much omitted was the word of God. He produced the first list of sacred books for what he believed to be the true religion of Jesus. For him, Jesus was an apparition that came down from Heaven to reveal the true God. Marcion was stigmatised an excommunicated heretic in 144 AD by the Church in Rome.

The things that Marcion did but did not need to do tell us more than anything else ever could.

Marcion gave strong indications that no Christian books were taken seriously by anybody in his day and were not considered to be worth taking seriously. It could be that the gospels and Acts were still top secret.

THE GOSPEL OF THE LORD

It is believed that Marcion knew the Gospels. He was out to devise a canon of scripture. Instead of contemplating a study of all the gospels about, Marcion refused to consider any book that accepted the revelation of God to the Jews or that had any Jewish teaching in it. He believed that only one gospel could be considered to be true. This gospel was an edited version of Luke or something like it. It is not certain that it really was Luke's and Marcion never said it was Luke's (page 137, The Canon of Scripture). I believe that it was not Luke's Gospel for Mark would have been a better choice for a person who wants to deny that Jesus was a Jew and believed in the Old Testament as fully the word of God and came straight out of Heaven fully grown and who never had anything to do with John the Baptist. There is not much mutilating to do and it can be avoided by reinterpreting and saying that the parts of the Old Testament it uses as prophecies were from the real God and stolen by the daft God who wrote the Old Testament. But with our Luke, Marcion would have had to start at Luke 3:1 and then go on to Luke 4:31. This means rejecting too much. If Marcion used Luke then it must have been already missing a lot of the stuff that he would not accept.

Marcion called his Gospel, the Gospel, and perhaps implicitly denied or simply didn't affirm it was Luke's work in doing so. Some authorities hold that he thought Paul wrote the gospel in its original state. Marcion was convinced that the Gospel he had was not written by Luke or anybody other than Paul himself (page 40, The Early Church). The four Gospels did not exist in those days.

It is unsurprising that we cannot be sure the gospel book was Luke's for we have to depend on data from over fifty years later from mad Tertullian who feverishly hated Marcionism (same page) that it was indeed Luke's. He was accused of editing and dropping portions out of the gospel of Luke. This gospel may not have been Luke but the forerunner of Luke and it could be Marcion was right that the gospel was tampered with and needed amending. Marcion accepted the crucifixion and the resurrection but as an illusion for Jesus was an apparition. He certainly had no need to deny most of what was in the Lucan infancy narratives. The Church says he had for he regarded Jesus as an apparition and not a real man. But Marcion knew that when Jesus seemed to die on the cross he could seem to have been born. It would have made Marcion's gospel more acceptable had he kept the stuff about Mary and Jesus' birth and so easier for his Church. So he must have been very sure that these things never happened or were late inventions before he could omit them. We know he studied his case thoroughly and was very cautious (page 104, The Call to Heresy). We must remember that being closer to the time of Jesus and living before the Church had the chance to wipe out too many documents it did not like, that Marcion knew things we never will for he had access to many lost documents. The claim that nobody knew of the God of Jesus until Jesus appeared is very strange and can only be explained as if Marcion learned this from some source he trusted. He could have had Jesus appearing occasionally before which would look better and stop people from scoffing at his theology on the basis that Jesus took a long time before he came to teach the world and reveal the true God of love. But he was sure he couldn't and he was sure he could shut them up.

Marcion's Gospel probably had a prayer for the Holy Spirit to descend and make us clean in the Lord's Prayer instead of thy kingdom come. It was not an alteration by him for lots of approved authorities used the same reading (page 138, The Canon of Scripture). For example, Gregory of Nyssa. Marcion considered himself to be an editor and not a ghost-writer. There are some anomalies about his gospel text that cannot be explained except as statements and omissions in the text that he used (page 138, The Canon of Scripture) meaning that he did not have Luke's gospel. Marcion knew that cutting out lumps of text was one thing but alteration was a different thing and could and would get him discredited altogether. Marcion's followers altered his Gospel and his writings to the degree that we cannot know if he did the altering or not so it seems probable that they did the altering. It is easier to do all this interfering when a sect has been started than when it is

trying to get off the ground. Things need to be stable in the early years. The sect would have been well established by the time Luke came out and its Gospel could have been used to write Luke. It could have been that when the sect was tampering with its gospel book that it amalgamated elements from Luke with it.

Marcion's Gospel had several places where it was a shortened version of what was in Luke. The trouble is that most of these changes make no sense for the phrases omitted did Marcion's system of belief no harm. For example, the reference to power going out of Jesus and healing was dropped from Luke 6:19. Luke 7:36 saying Jesus went into a Pharisees' house was left out. The story of the woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears and anointing them was unnecessarily just cut down to essentials. Luke 8:23-24 and 8:43-45 were summarised. The word eternal before life was left out of Luke 10:25 though Marcion believed in eternal life. Even more telling is that Marcion in his edition of the Gospel had it that Jesus said he would be put to death but dropped the reference to the Jews having done it in Luke 9:22 and also in Luke 24:7 though he was a notorious anti-Semite. These things prove that Marcion did not alter Luke's gospel but edited a gospel that was like Luke's but was not Luke's. He may have had the forerunner of Luke's gospel. The early Church was then freely making changes to the gospels. Marcion was honest for he retained bits where Jesus referred to himself as Son of Man though Marcion believed that Jesus was not a real man but a vision. He left the bits where Jesus said he would suffer and die unchanged. Please research this further in *The Gospel of Marcion and the Gospel of Luke Compared*. This webpage says that since Marcion's version is the simplest it preceded Luke. Christians object that this is wrong for a book might just be shortened but there is other evidence that Marcion may not have been shortening but just editing an existing gospel. There is no reason to hold that he hacked lumps off St Luke's gospel.

When Marcion was able to admit that Jesus was Son of Man and died on the cross despite being a vision he could have left the infancy narratives in Luke but he dropped them so whatever he had it was not Luke. He dropped the baptism by John and everything even though there was no reason to believe that the baptism as Luke tells it was Jewish or favoured Judaism. Also if Marcion had had Luke all he had to do was leave out anything that indicated approval for the Jewish God allowing suffering or commanding punishment which were the two things Marcion did not like about him. Marcion did approve of this God a lot and believed that he was a fair God but he believed there was a higher God and unlike the Jewish God this God had no interest in punishing people and was pure love and detested suffering. This other God of sweetness and light was the one Marcion said Christians should serve. Whatever gospel Marcion had denied most of what the present gospels say about Jesus. If he had had Luke he would have left it untouched as much as possible to enhance his own credibility. But he was sincere and it was the producers of Luke who were the fakes.

In our New Testament, we have the gospel of Luke and then there is another book claiming to be a sequel by the same author as Luke. Marcion never mentioned the Acts of the Apostles and his followers rejected it when it became available. Had Marcion possessed the Gospel of Luke he would have had its sequel too. Marcion would have refuted the Lucan authorship of Acts had he known of it for it was the major threat to his doctrinal system if his gospel was Luke's. It accepted the twelve apostles that Marcion wrote off as apostates and portrayed his hero, Paul, whose gospel he claimed to restore as accepting them. A man who went to the trouble of writing a book to show how the Old Testament contradicted Paul and Jesus would not have omitted to devote more strength to handle a bigger threat. He would not have shot himself in the foot by using Luke's Gospel when the Acts were so unpalatable to him unless the Acts of the Apostles was still unknown.

The idea that the Gospel was a mutilation of Luke's was rejected by critics in the 1800's (according to the same dictionary and page). Marcion stressed salvation by faith like Paul did and Jesus saved us chiefly by his teaching and was hostile to Judaism. John's gospel with its Jesus who seems barely human and who teaches a lot would have been a better choice for him than Luke's gospel or anything similar. There would be less changing to do. It did not exist when he did not go after it. Marcion needed a gospel like John's that was mystical and emphasised mystical experiences to append credibility to his version of Christianity.

THE FIRST CANON

Marcion was the first Christian to set forth a canon of scripture. Marcion "became the first person to draw up an exclusive canonical list of Biblical books, which excluded all the Old Testament and large parts of the New, grounded on the basic assumption that the twelve apostles had not possessed the insight to comprehend the true meaning of Jesus" (page 40, *The Early Church*). The epistles of Paul were part of his canon although Marcion emended them feeling that they had been altered by false followers of Jesus. However, whatever book he used the Pastoral Epistles and Hebrews were absent from it indicating that they were known forgeries in Paul's name (*The Canon of Scripture*, page 131). I would add that it could mean that they were forged later or hidden at that time. Marcion's flesh-hating brand of Christianity flourished and is certainly to be taken as evidence that the New Testament had been hidden and interfered with. So the entire Old Testament was dropped and one edited gospel was used along with most of Paul's letters.

The fact that the Church had no canon and that Marcion beat it to one shows that the Church was not interested in sacred writings except the Old Testament and regarded gospels and such just as interesting but not significant. The Church,

according to some, could still have had a secret canon of books. I reject this. A Church cannot have a secret canon. Even if it did it kept it quiet because the books were not completed yet.

The early Church was in such turmoil that it would have been a miracle if it had no canon so that the Church could be revived and invigorated in better circumstances. There were no scriptures it could turn to and that were not laughed at and thought to be too silly to bother refuting. It was in a helpless situation as far as scriptures were concerned.

MARCION STATED THAT THE EVIDENCE WAS FLIMSY

Marcion was excommunicated by Rome in 144 AD for heresy. He denied that Jesus existed before he appeared straight out of Heaven in the synagogue of Capernaum which is the event that occurs in Luke 4:31. This means that Marcion denied the existence of Jesus' mother Mary, the existence of St Joseph the massacre of the innocents and the birth in the manger, the baptism by John the Baptist – in short everything before Jesus began his ministry. He asserted that the twelve apostles failed to understand the gospel and polluted it which was why Paul was chosen to save and preserve the good news. He did this when he could have said the apostles just kept the secret tradition of the true gospel and preached another theology to the public. When the apostles could be so wrong why could they not be wrong about Jesus' existence?

Marcion came very close to saying that there was no historical Jesus. It is obvious that if Jesus really did descend as a divine super-powered apparition from Heaven as Marcion's theology stated that Jesus had to be a myth. Marcion as good as said that the evidence for Jesus was flimsy and that until later in the gospel story it was non-existent for he appeared out of nowhere. In its reply to him, the Church just used gospel materials and was unable to provide objective evidence for the events surrounding Jesus that Marcion denied. For example, they did not provide evidence for the link Jesus had with the Baptist nor did they provide evidence that the massacre of the innocents over Jesus really took place. Thanks to Marcion the gap in Christianity's evidences was shown up. If everybody believed then that Jesus existed it would make no difference to the case against Jesus simply because they could not have believed for the right reasons. The argument that Jesus must have existed for nobody denied his existence simply has no hope of being right.

THE MARCIONITES

Marcion founded a very successful and very early Church that was able to get all its members to be celibate and many were martyred. They committed a huge sacrifice to deny that the human Jesus of the gospels existed for they even denied that he was a Jew by religion and excised all references to his Jewish faith from their scriptures. Their Jesus was an opponent of the Old Testament. Marcion was not unjustly biased towards heresy for he had nothing to gain but scorn and also he could not get much power when he forbade his followers to have sex and therefore babies. Marcion was a damn sight lot more credible than the gossellers who wrote anonymously meaning we can't eliminate unjust bias, who made a hero of a heretic Jesus and then lied that he was not a heretic and whose works were hidden from critics who wouldn't have been that interested in them had they come out. Marcion had the kind-heartedness to reject the brutality of the Old Testament so he was a better man with his faults than any gosseller ever was.

Marcionism called Jesus not Christus which means Messiah but Chrestus which means The Good. Marcion denied that Jesus was the Christ or Messiah because he rejected anything Jewish and the Messiah was the Jewish title for the king of the world that God would send but he rejected their God and so he rejected this title. When Marcion was able to create a successful Church that denied that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah it shows that the evidence for something that was as important as the resurrection could be denied convincingly in those days. It shows that many held that the Jesus story was riddled with legend.

The Church says that the apostles died for the message of the gospels so the gospels are true. What about the followers of Marcion who came along not too long after Paul died saying that Paul taught nothing of what the Church leadership was saying he taught? They refused to marry for the sake of the gospel, living martyrdom, and were often bloodily martyred and they were more numerous than the apostles and yet we are told their martyrdom does not bid us take their message seriously! Why were the thousands of people who knew Paul and heard him preach not able to refute them but instead converting to them?

We conclude that Marcion and his success shows that there was a strong sense in the early Church that talk of a Jesus who was more than legendary was questionable.