

Lecture Three

Christians Who Refuse to Be Jews

Scope: This lecture considers the Marcionites, a group of "heretics" that stood diametrically opposed to the Ebionites. Marcion, the second-century philosopher-theologian who started their sect, insisted that true Christianity had nothing to do with Judaism. Pointing out that the apostle Paul clearly differentiated between the "law" of the Old Testament and the "gospel" of Jesus, Marcion went a step further, insisting that the law of the Jews had no relation to Jesus or his God. There were, therefore, two different Gods, the Jewish God who created this world, made Israel his people, and gave them his law, and the God of Jesus who came into the world to deliver people from the vindictive creator and law-giving God of the Jews. Among Marcion's authorities supporting his views was a "canon" of Scripture, which, naturally, included none of the Old Testament but did contain ten of Paul's letters, in addition to a gospel comparable to our Gospel of Luke.

Outline

- I. In the last lecture, we discussed the Ebionites, a group of Jewish Christians who came to be proclaimed as heretics in part because they tied themselves too closely to the Jewish tradition from which Christianity emerged.
 - A. The wide diversity of early Christianity can be seen by considering a group that stood at the opposite end of the theological spectrum from the Ebionites, who were, in fact, proclaimed heretics because they went too far the other way.
 1. Rather than refusing to acknowledge Jesus' divinity, they emphasized it too much, stressing that Jesus was so much God, he was not really human.
 2. Rather than embracing the Jewish tradition as of ongoing importance, they rejected Judaism altogether.
 3. This group of second- and third-century Christians maintained, in fact, that the God of the Old Testament could not be the God of Jesus, that there were, therefore, two separate and distinct Gods.
 - B. This group, the Marcionites, was named after their founder, a second-century philosopher-theologian, Marcion.
 - C. Once again, none of the writings of this group has survived. We must depend on the writings of the antagonistic church fathers, especially the early third-century Tertullian.

- II. Marcion was evidently raised in a Christian church in Sinope, in northern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).
 - A. His own father was allegedly the bishop of the church, who eventually deemed his son's views too heretical to be tolerated.
 - B. Marcion was independently wealthy and moved to Rome (c. 139 A.D.), where he made a huge donation to the church.
 - C. In Rome, Marcion devoted himself to study and to writing his two significant literary works.
 - D. Then, in 144 A.D., he called a council of the leaders of the church of Rome (the first church council meeting of any kind that we know about), in hopes that they would ratify his views.
 - E. Instead, the Roman church elders found Marcion's views repugnant, excommunicated him from the church, and returned his donation.
 - F. Marcion then went into Asia Minor and established churches of people he had convinced of his views, proving remarkably successful (with Marcionite churches thriving there for centuries).

- III. Marcion's views can be contrasted to those of the Ebionites, who saw Paul as their mortal enemy. Marcion thought that Paul was the one apostle who rightly understood the nature of the Christian message.
 - A. Paul is, in many ways, the most important Christian figure from the first century.
 - 1. Thirteen books of the New Testament are attributed to him.
 - 2. He was, originally, one of the principal persecutors of Christianity.
 - 3. Paul had a visionary experience in which Jesus appeared to him, and he converted to Christianity.
 - 4. Paul developed the idea that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection led to the salvation of the world.
 - B. Paul had differentiated between his gospel message and the Jewish law, maintaining that a person is made right with God by faith in Christ, completely apart from following the requirements of the law.

C. Marcion pressed this differentiation to a logical conclusion.

1. There is a radical disjunction between law and gospel.
2. The God who gave us the gospel cannot, therefore, be the god who gave the law.
3. The law was given to the Jews by the Jewish God. The gospel was given by Jesus—evidently from a different god.
4. The logical conclusion: The God of Jesus was not at all the God of the Jews. The Jewish God created this world, called Israel to be his people, and gave them his law. Because they could not keep the law, they were condemned by the wrathful justice of their God.
5. In contrast, the God of Jesus is a God of mercy and love. Jesus came to save people from the just wrath of the Old Testament God who created this world.
6. Jesus himself could obviously not belong to the creator God or to the material world that he created: Marcion's conclusion was that Jesus was not actually born into this world or part of it. He was not a flesh-and-blood human but a phantasm.
7. Scholars have called this view *docetism*, from the Greek word *dokeo* for "to seem, to appear."
8. The Jewish God required a death penalty for those who sinned; given that Jesus died for others, the Jewish God was compelled to accept his sacrifice for the sake of others (even though it was a deception, because Jesus did not have a real body).

IV. Marcion developed his views in two major literary productions, one of which he wrote and the other he edited.

A. His *Antitheses* (= contradictory statements) contrasted the Old Testament God of wrath with Jesus' God of love and mercy.

1. The Old Testament God, for example, tells the Israelites to murder all their enemies in Jericho, but the God of Jesus tells his followers to love their enemies.
2. The God of the Old Testament allowed the prophet Elisha to call out a bear to attack and kill the children who were taunting him; Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me."
3. The God of the Old Testament said "cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree"; the God of Jesus ordered him, the one who was blessed, to be hanged on a tree.

B. The book Marcion edited was actually the first canon of Scripture known

to be devised by an early Christian.

1. It contained eleven books: ten of Paul's letters (all that are now found in the New Testament, except 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) and a gospel very much like our Luke.
 2. The Old Testament was obviously excluded.
 3. But even the books Marcion included refer to the God of the Old Testament and make positive comments about the creation. Marcion maintained that these books had been corrupted by Judaizers; thus, he removed all comments that seemed to contradict the gospel that he believed he inherited from Paul (including, for example, the first two chapters of Luke, which narrate Jesus' birth in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures).
- V. It is interesting to contrast Marcion and the Ebionites because they stood at such opposite ends of the theological spectrum.
- A. The Ebionites were strict monotheists (there is only one God); Marcion was a strict ditheist (two Gods).
 - B. The Ebionites embraced the Jewish law completely; Marcion completely rejected it.
 - C. The Ebionites insisted that Jesus was man but not God; Marcion claimed he was God but not man.
 - D. The Ebionites rejected Paul as an arch-heretic; Marcion revered Paul as the one Christian who had understood Jesus' gospel.
 - E. The Ebionites accepted a form of the Gospel of Matthew as their Scripture; Marcion accepted a form of the Gospel of Luke.
- VI. One thing Marcion had in common with the Ebionites is that he was opposed by the proto-orthodox Christians, who declared him a heretic.
- VII. For the historian, it is especially important to note the positive effect Marcion had on the development of orthodox Christianity. He led other Christians to stress monotheism and the importance of establishing a canon of Scripture (including the Old Testament).
- VIII. In many ways, Marcion and his teachings live on today among Christians who have never heard his name. Many Christians continue to contrast the Old Testament God of wrath and the New Testament God of mercy; many also think that the law of Moses is for the Jews, not Christians and, thus, relegate the Old Testament to a secondary status.

Essential Reading:

John Clabeaux, "Marcion," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. IV, pp. 514-521.
Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*.

Supplementary Reading:

Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence*.

H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How could such diametrically opposed forms of Christianity as the Ebionites and the Marcionites both claim to represent the original teaching of Jesus and his apostles?
2. Does the Christianity you're familiar with seem more like the Ebionite or the Marcionite version?