

Marcion's Accusers

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1 Contents

<u>1 Contents.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>2 Introduction.....</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>3 Accusations of Tampering with Scripture.....</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>4 Other Ancient Accusations.....</u>	<u>6</u>
<u>5 Anti-Semitism.....</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>6 Persecution.....</u>	<u>9</u>
<u>7 Conclusions.....</u>	<u>10</u>

2 Introduction

In the fourth century the Catholic church gained political power, and over the following centuries they used it to persecute and destroy all rival faith groups, including the Marcionites¹. Because of this, the writings of the ancient Marcionites have not survived; we have no account of their history that comes directly from them. Rather, all primary sources for historical information about the Marcionites were written by their bitter enemies, the Catholics.

As I discussed in *The Origin of the Marcionites*, the writings of the early Catholics are extremely biased; their account of history contains numerous distortions, contradictions and inconsistencies. In that article I dealt with the claims the early Catholics made about the historical origins of the Marcionite movement; however, this is not the only topic on which distorted and misleading information has done injustice to the memory of Marcion and the Marcionites. The early Catholics are not the only people who have propagated inaccurate information about the Marcionites over the centuries. Misunderstandings and confusion has also arisen in for recent times.

In this article I will attempt to counter the many false accusations and misunderstandings that beset knowledge of the Marcionites, and so give the ancient Marcionites a voice to counter the statements posthumously levelled against them; hence the title of this article, *Marcion's Accusers*.

This article is structured into the following sections:

- The gravest, and most frequently repeated accusation against Marcion is perhaps the accusation that he corrupted the scriptures; I will explain why so many scholars failed to question this view.
- I will briefly mention a couple of other accusations made against Marcion by his ancient opponents.
- I will deal with the common modern accusation that Marcion's teachings were anti-Semitic.
- The final section deals with the misconception found among some modern Christians relating to the persecution that Catholics and other Christians suffered in ancient times.

¹ This period of history is discussed in detail in my article *The History of the Christian Bible*.

3 Accusations of Tampering with Scripture

For if the Gospel, said to be Luke's which is current amongst us (we shall see whether it be also current with Marcion), is the very one which, **as Marcion argues in his Antitheses, was interpolated by the defenders of Judaism**, for the purpose of such a conglomeration with it of the law and the prophets as should enable them out of it to fashion their Christ, surely he could not have so argued about it, unless he had found it (in such a form).

Tertullian, in *Adversus Marcionem*, Book 4, Chapter 4, verse 4

Some scholars have interpreted these statements by Tertullian (and similar statements by others) as implying that the Marcionites acknowledged and accepted that Marcion had created their gospel from *Luke*; and I have no doubt that this is precisely that impression that Tertullian wanted to give (remember that his primary target audience was Catholics who might otherwise investigate Marcionite ideas).

Presumably Tertullian's work would not have been very effective if he had made statements which the Marcionites could easily expose as lies². Let us assume therefore that Marcion's work *Antithesis* did indeed argue that *Luke* had been interpolated by the defenders of Judaism. This does not imply that Marcion started with *Luke* and modified it to create his own gospel; the conclusion which Tertullian so skilfully leads us to assume. Consider instead the following scenario:

That Marcion stated with the version of the gospel what was generally accepted in Sinope. As he travelled and his teaching spread he soon encountered other versions of the gospel significantly different to his own (*Luke*, or something that vaguely resembled it). Upon comparing *Luke* with his own gospel he concluded that it has been interpolated by people who wished to harmonise it with *Matthew*, and defend the validity of the Torah. This is a logical conclusion; if the two versions of the gospel are carefully and logically compared it is hard to see what other conclusion can be drawn³.

By the time Marcion arrived in Rome (assuming for the sake of argument that he did travel to Rome⁴) I suspect that even there *Luke* and the long version of the epistles of

2 I could simply accuse Tertullian of lying outright here, but somehow that would be too easy. For the record: I regard compulsive lying (even when the lie can easily be exposed) as a hallmark of true religiosity. For example, think about the absurdities spouted regularly by creationists; see the creationist claims index at talkorigins.org: <http://www.talkorigins.org/indexcc/list.html>

3 As we have seen (and will see again shortly) many of the differences between the two versions of the texts arise because of misunderstandings of the text and innocent scribal errors; the most significant differences, however (from a doctrinal perspective), show signs of being deliberate alterations intended to make the gospel more compatible with the Jewish Christian teaching expressed in *Matthew*.

4 It is perhaps a little naive of me to assume that Irenaeus, Clement and Tertullian were telling the truth when they claimed that Marcion travelled to Rome; even this aspect of the traditional account of history is questionable as it is closely linked to the Catholic agenda of portraying Marcion as diverging from orthodoxy. Rome was regarded as the centre of the Catholic establishment, and so Marcion travelling to Rome to be excommunicated there just when Polycarp also happened to be visiting smacks of rhetoric and symbolism. Ultimately however, it makes no difference to me whether Marcion visited Rome or not. On this occasion I will simply assume for the same of

Paul had not had time to fully displace the short version of the texts⁵; as I argued in *The Origins of the Marcionites* the long version of the text may not yet have been accepted in Catholic circles at all.

As history unfolded the short version of the texts came to be associated with the Marcionites, whilst the long text (which contains many useful verses that contradict Marcionite and Gnostic “heresy”) came to be associated with Catholicism. A more detail examination of how the corruption is likely to have been incorporated into *Luke* and the epistles of Paul can be found in another of my essays, entitled *The Root of the Corruption*.

Tertullian and Epiphanius frequently accuse Marcion of deleting material on the basis of whether or not it suited his beliefs. Yet when we examine the differences between the two versions gospel (I am working primarily from the gospel here, because my reconstruction of the Marcionite epistles is far from complete) we see that many of the differences do not fit in with this alleged agenda. Marcion believed that Jesus was a spirit, who had no physical body, and instead only appeared to have a body. Why then did he not erase the following verses from his gospel?

They that **held** him mocked him, **smiting** and **striking** him and saying Prophecy, who is it that smote thee?

*The Marcionite Gospel*⁶, compare with *Luke 22:63-64*

Why are ye troubled? Behold my hands and my feet, for **a spirit hath not bones, as you see I have.**

The Marcionite Gospel, compare with *Luke 24:38-39*

Are we supposed to believe that Marcion examined *Luke 22:63-64*, deleted six Greek words (nearly a third!), yet failed to remove the three words that actually contradicted his beliefs? The only difference between the two versions of the passage is that in the traditional version Jesus is blindfolded, whilst in the Marcionite text the blindfold is not mentioned, and he is presumably being struck from behind. Whoever it was that created this difference, they were not motivated by dogma. Rather the differences are caused by the innocent (in this case) accumulation of words, as a scribes attempted to simplify and clarify the passage. The Marcionite version of the gospel is written in a highly elliptical style, which is likely to confuse a novice of Greek (which was more probable in the Latin speaking west portion of the empire, than in the Greek speaking east).

The passage about the women who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears is another good example of passage in which the two versions are substantially different, but in a way

argument that he did travel to that city.

5 Otherwise how could he had established a large and vibrant church in even that city?

6 All quotations from the Marcionite gospel are from my own reconstruction and translation. This has not yet been completed or published.

that cannot be explained by dogmatically motivated alterations. Since I have discussed that passage in a [previous article](#) I will not describe it again here.

Many of the extra passages in the traditional version of the scriptures do indeed contradict Marcion's beliefs, but if Marcion had been willing to erase them for that, we would have erased everything that contradicted him. It was obvious even to Tertullian that the differences between the texts did not fit in with the supposed agenda of Marcion:

It is certain, also, that with this view **he has erased everything that was contrary to his own opinion** and made for the Creator, as if it had been interpolated by His advocates, whilst **everything which agreed with his own opinion he has retained**. The latter statements we shall strictly examine; and if they shall turn out rather for our side, and shatter the assumption of Marcion, we shall embrace them. **It will then become evident, that in retaining them he has shown no less of the defect of blindness**, which characterizes heresy, than he displayed when he erased all the former class of subjects.

Tertullian, in *Adversus Marcionem*, book 4, chapter 6, verse 2

Tertullian's only response to this is to invoke a supernatural explanation; supposedly Marcion is "blind", because he is "a heretic". So often invoking a supernatural explanation like this is the last recourse of people whose beliefs are in conflict with the evidence. But the allegation that Marcion deleted material on the bases of dogma is shattered by the simple fact that in spite of ample opportunity, he chose not to do so on numerous occasions.

I say that my Gospel is the true one; Marcion, that his is. I affirm that Marcion's Gospel is adulterated; Marcion, that mine is.

Tertullian, in *Adversus Marcionem*, Book 4, Chapter 4, verse 1

4 Other Ancient Accusations

Marcion, indeed, [went] with the two hundred sesterces which which he had brought into the church, and, when banished at last to a permanent excommunication, they scattered abroad the poisons of their doctrines. Afterwards, it is true, Marcion professed repentance, and agreed to the conditions granted to him-that he should receive reconciliation if he restored to the church all the others whom he had been training for perdition: he was prevented, however, by death.

Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics (De Praescriptione Haereticorum)*, chapter 30, verses 2-3

There is nothing that re-assures the devout religious mind quite like the belief that the founder of the opposing faith repented, and simply didn't have time to tell their followers the truth. When such a rumour circulates it is perhaps accepted a little too readily, and without critical thought; consider for instance the popular rumour in creationist circles that Darwin recanted evolution on his death bed. Some how the idea that Marcion repented, but conveniently died before he had time to tell his followers is just a little hard for me to take seriously.

Tertullian wrote in the early third century, and it is extremely unlikely that he ever met Marcion. Since he is not a first hand witness to the event he describes, and it is not mentioned by any of the earlier writers, I dismiss this as a rumour.

Another ancient piece of slander than is hard to take seriously is Epiphanius' claim that Marcion was disgraced and ostracised from his home church for seducing a consecrated virgin (see *Panarion* 42:1:4). Epiphanius was even further removed from the time of Marcion than Tertullian, and his is the only ancient writer to make this claim. The story is similar to a story told by Tertullian in *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* chapter 30; however, in Tertullian's version of the story it is not Marcion that is disgraced but his student Apelles. I don't know of a single historian who takes this story seriously.

5 Anti-Semitism

This section deals not with the accusations made by Marcion's ancient Catholic opponents, but rather a new one; in modern times Marcion is often accused of being anti-Semitic.

Marcion was certainly very critical of the Jewish bible and did not consider it scripture; but, if this is an act of anti-Semitism then by extension of the same reasoning we must conclude that modern Christians are Islam-o-phobic for rejecting the Qur'an, Budd-o-phobic for rejecting the Buddhist sutras and Daoism-o-phobic for rejecting the writings of Lao Tsi.

Ancient Marcionite theology is sometimes misunderstood oversimplified. Marcion believed in the existence of two Gods; the father of Jesus was one (the supreme God) and the creator described in the Hebrew scriptures was the other (the God of the world - to use the terminology of *2 Corinthians* 4:4). Some people assume from this that the Marcionite perception of the Jewish God was analogous to the Christian perception of the devil; but that is incorrect. The ancient Marcionites did not conceive of the creator of the world as evil, but rather as a being of justice and retribution. They believed that the Jewish God was in a sense the creator of evil, but the Jewish bible itself states this quite clearly (*Isaiah* 45:7). Reading and believing a statement in the Jewish bible is hardly anti-Semitic; it doesn't mean that they considered the Jewish God to be intrinsically evil nor does it mean that they hated the Jews.

The ancient Marcionites certainly sought to distance themselves from some aspects of Judaism. In Judaism the Sabbath is a sacred day of rest; the ancient Marcionites fasted on this day⁷, an act of rejection of the physical world and it's creator. This was part of their dualistic thinking; they believed that salvation was an escape from the physical world, and so fasting (a denial of their dependency on physical food) was a way of shunning the world that they wished to escape from. I am not aware of any evidence that this rejection of the Jewish God and the Jewish bible manifested as a hatred of the Jews.

The misconception that Marcionism is anti-Semitic goes back to the Second World War. The Nazi's produced a re-written version of the bible, removing many references to Judaism (as Marcion is also commonly accused of doing). Many people have mistakenly drawn parallels between the Nazi views about the bible and those of the ancient Marcionites.

Marcion and his followers saw Christianity and Judaism as separate religions whilst the Nazi's (like mainstream Catholic / Protestant / Orthodox Christians) saw Christianity as a continuation of Judaism. Historically this belief that Christianity is a continuation Jewish religious traditions has lead to a great deal of problems between Christians and Jews. The Jews reject the Christian interpretation of their scriptures, and believe that

⁷ The ancient Marcionite practice of fasting on the Sabbath is mentioned in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42:3:3-4.

the fundamental teachings of Christianity are in conflict with the Torah; meanwhile Christians have frequently claimed that the Jews as a culture are guilty, for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah.

If the main form of Christianity in Europe through medieval and modern history had been Marcionite rather than Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, it is hard to imagine this anti-Semitism occurring. The Marcionites did not apply a Christian interpretation to the Hebrew Scriptures, but rather accepted that there were certain incompatibilities between the two. The Marcionites also did not believe that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah; they believed that he was the messiah sent by a separate and unrelated deity. The idea that the Jews are guilty of rejecting their Messiah is thus ridiculous in the context of genuine Marcionite theology.

The Nazi's promoted a particularly anti-Semitic form of theology called replacement theology. According to replacement theology God has rejected the Jews as his special people, and the Christian church is the replacement. Closely linked to this is idea that all of the promises made to the Jewish patriarchs have been transferred to the Christian church. Replacement theology was first devised by the very early Catholics; some of Marcion's most outspoken ancient adversaries were key to it's development. Replacement theology and its development throughout Christian history is discussed in much more detail in my article *The History of the Christian Bible*.

It is true that the Marcionite gospel contradicted Jewish beliefs, and the Marcionites believed that the teaching of the Gospel and the Hebrew Scriptures contradict one another (which is obvious even to most Sunday school children), but it is common for two religions to contradict one another and does not imply that members of the two religions must hate one another.

To summarise: the roots of Nazi anti-Semitism are not in any way related to Marcionite teachings. Referring to the Nazi theology as "Marcionite" demonstrates a gross and laughable failure to understand the perspectives of both the Nazis and the Marcionites. Nazi hatred and anti-Semitism actually stems from replacement theology; a "Christian" theological system that was developed by the very same ancient Catholics who opposed and later exterminated the Marcionites.

6 Persecution

There are some modern Christians who mistakenly think that only the ancient Catholics suffered persecution from the Roman authorities. It is true that some Christian groups (such as the Gnostics) were willing to participate in Pagan ceremonies, as demanded by the Romans; but other groups (including the Marcionites) refused to do this even under threat of death.

The book *The Martyrdom of Pionius and his Companions* records the martyrdom of a Catholic called Pionius, during an episode of persecution in Smyrna on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Polycarp. The account records that even the local Catholic bishop, Euctemon, offered sacrifices to the Roman gods in order to save his life (see chapters 15, 16 and 18). In chapter 21 we read that Pionius was burnt at the stake. It is astonishing that none of his fellow Catholics died with him (though the title implies that they also died afterwards), instead it was a Marcionite named Metrodorus who joined him on the pyre.

The death of Pionius and Metrodorus is also recorded by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Church History* 5:15:46). Elsewhere Eusebius also records the martyrdom of an anonymous Marcionite woman in Caesarea (*Church History* 7:12). In *Martyrs of Palestine* 10:2 he records the death of a Marcionite Bishop named “Asclepius”, who died on the same pyre as a Catholic named “Apselamus”. In *Church History* 5:16 Eusebius records that the Montanists (another sect branded heretical by the Catholics) appealed to the Catholics to be accepted as genuine Christians, on the basis that they had many Martyrs and willingly endured persecution. The response they were given was as follows:

For **some of the heresies have a great many martyrs**; but surely we shall not on that account agree with them or confess that they hold the truth. And **first, indeed, those called Marcionites**, from the heresy of Marcion, say that they have a multitude of martyrs for Christ; yet they do not confess Christ himself in truth.

Eusebius, *Church History*, book 5, chapter 16, verse 21

7 Conclusions

In this essay I have not provided arguments that the scriptures of the Marcionites are legitimate; rather I have provided counterarguments to the misconceptions that may make them seem illegitimate. History did not learn the story of the Marcionites from their own account; it learned it from the writings of their bitterest enemies; this has profoundly distorted the truth on many issues. Even after the ancient Marcionite faith was persecuted out of existence the name “Marcion” continued to be derided and slandered, so great was its infamy in ancient Catholic writings. My objective in this essay has been to provide a voice for a group of people that no longer have a voice of their own, and set the record straight on their behalf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this article. If you have any questions or comments please do not hesitate to contact me:

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