

How to Become a Heretic

An Introduction to Marcion Studies

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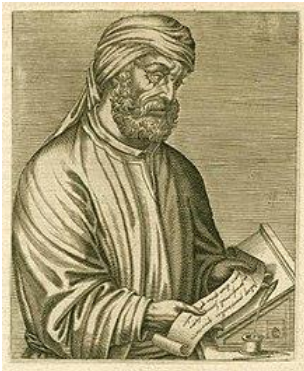
In the *Philosophus Grade* of the S.R.I.C.F. the Celebrant congratulates the candidate with these words:

The study of the Divinity above us should be your future aim, the subject of your aspirations. Life is all too short for success; purity of life is essential, the cultivation of your higher self will lead you to sublime conceptions yet unknown to you. Be steadfast and true to your obligations. Be never less ready to learn than your Fratres are to teach, and may you attain your spiritual desires.

These are noble words for members of our society, and indeed, for anyone who would study religion or philosophy. Unfortunately history is strewn with other consequences of those who pry too much into the secrets of God and religion, consequences imposed by those whose views of this activity are less than charitable, and who are more interested in suppressing views other than their

own than they are in exploring the possible validity of the ideas of others. In religion those who do not adhere to the views of those in power are more often than not labeled “heretics,” and the fate for some of these “heretics” is more than just disapproval. Such was the fate of Thomas Cranmer, pictured above in the panel to the right, who was burned at the stake in Oxford, England on Saturday, March 21, 1556 (Old Style). The man on the left, pictured above, did not suffer this extreme penalty, but he was labeled by the Church as a *heretic* and the Church thereafter knows him as *Marcion the Heretic*. Whether he deserved this appellation or not is the subject of this study – a study of the teachings of Marcion, the son of a Christian bishop, and a philosopher of religion in the early days of the Christian Church. This is his story.

Marcion was born in A.D. 85 in Sinope, a city on the southern shore of the Black Sea in the Roman Province of Pontus. As noted above, his father was the bishop of the city, and if so, it is likely that Marcion learned to read the extant texts of early Christianity at home from his father. These texts would undoubtedly have included the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament which was essentially the “Bible” of the early church – before the creation of the canon of the New Testament, although the canon was in the process of creation during Marcion’s lifetime, and indeed, Marcion is credited with having created the first list of New Testament books that should be considered as “Scripture” by the Church.¹



Quintus Septimius
Florens Tertulianus

Because Marcion was declared a *heretic* by the Church, his writings only survive in the works of his enemies. But as he had a lot of enemies, we have a rather complete compendium of his thought. The most extensive of these polemical attacks on Marcion is to be found in the five volume Against Marcion, written by Tertullian of Carthage (A.D. 155 – A.D. 120), but there are other authors whose writings are also the source of our knowledge of Marcion’s beliefs. Tertullian was particularly the opponent of Gnosticism, but while Marcion was not a Gnostic, he nevertheless earned the approbrium of Tertullian – five volumes worth!

Before proceeding further it is necessary to explain how theological ideas in early Christianity evolved and how “truth” emerged from that process. The explanation must start with the words attributed to Jesus himself as recorded in the 14th chapter of the Gospel According to John:

¹ Wescott, Brooke Foss, A General Survey of the Canon of the New Testament, Third Edition, London: Macmillan and Co., 1870, p. 282.

16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,^{to} to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will beⁱⁿ in^{you} you. *John 14:16-17, NRSVUE*

The operational principle here is that Jesus will send “another Advocate” (meaning the Holy Spirit) who, as the “Spirit of truth,” abides with the Apostles and therefore their message will always be the “truth.” While this works for the Apostles, there arises the question as to whether this “Spirit of truth” will be located somewhere else after the death of the last of the Apostles. Of course the matter was of little concern in the earliest days of the Church because there was the expectation that Jesus would return and restore the Kingdom of God before there was any need to explore the question of what would happen after the last of the Apostles was gone.

Not all the individual Christian communities – the churches – resolved this in the same way. In some of them “inspired” members conveyed messages to their congregations that purported to be this continuing function of the Holy Spirit. But in others another paradigm was growing popular – the idea that of a “disciple of a disciple” – a disciple of one of the Apostles would be identified as the continuing source of “truth” because he had studied under that Apostle. By extension this principle then extended to the next generation of disciples, and so forth. And who were these successors? Irenaeus of Lyon maintained in his work, Against Heresies, written, it is believed between A.D. 174 and A.D. 189, that these “successors” to the Apostles were in fact the bishops of the church. By this time the pattern of a “supervisor” (a bishop) and a committee of “elders” (presbyters) had become the dominant governing structure of the Church. Each local congregation had its own bishop and its committee of presbyters, and Irenaeus believes that those bishops who had studied under one of the Apostles, or who had studied under a student of one of the Apostles, had the “truth” which Jesus had guaranteed to the Apostles through the action of the Holy Spirit. This principle is the idea of the “Apostolic Succession,” a principle still active in some branches of Christianity to this day – including, of course the Roman Catholic Church which eventually came to the conclusion that one bishop, out of all the others – the

Bishop of Rome – was the single repository of the “Apostolic Succession” when it came to defining “truth” amongst competing theologies. It took a long time for this principle to prevail, and its chief competitor was the idea that the inspired books of the Bible were an equal, or even a more valid, expression of the idea of the transmission of authority to declare the “truth.”

The biggest problem with all this, and the one which is the background for the story of Marcion, is that at the beginning there were not only competing varieties of Christianity, but competing ideas as to the nature of Christianity among those who were generally recognized as the bishops of the major Christian centers in the Roman Empire. Later historians of the Church attempted to create lineages of bishops, but any close study of this history quickly shows how difficult this really is.

It was stated earlier that Marcion was the son of the Bishop of Sinope, but the church at Sinope did not have a clear line of succession back to any of the Apostles. So even if his father had been in the “orthodox” (meaning “right belief”) tradition, there is no guarantee that the teachings that he held were authentic. Of course we do not know what those beliefs were, and as he and his son quarreled, it is impossible to say that his father was “orthodox,” while Marcion was a *heretic*. We only know from Tertullian that he quarreled with his father, and that a story arose that his father excommunicated him not because of his beliefs, but because he was charged with having raped a Virgin of the church at Sinope.

An explanation here is in order. The early churches had a practice of setting apart some single women who were not married, and who presumably had not had sexual relations with a man, as Virgins. They devoted themselves to prayer and good works on behalf of the community, and were highly respected for their virtue and devotion to Christ. Some scholars are of the opinion that there was no actual “rape” of a Virgin involved, but that this story arose at a later time as calumny against Marcion whose beliefs had “violated” the “virginity” of the pure Christian faith. We will, of course, never know the real story because everything we know about Marcion was that which was written by his enemies.

In the second part of this paper we will examine the teachings of Marcion, and the “Marcionites” who followed him. We know that he was not only a popular preacher but that his followers founded rival churches in many of the communities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. But before undertaking an analysis of his theology it is important to know more about his attempt to take over the church in the most important city in the empire – the City of Rome. This story is based on a 1982 doctoral dissertation written by R. Joseph Hoffmann for a D.Phil at Oxford University. The dissertation was published in 1984 as Marcion: On the

Restitution of Christianity.² It is also based on a subsequent paper by Dr. Hoffmann, A New Preface to Marcion Studies.³

This is an excerpt from A New Preface:

My study of Marcion thus began in an ordinary enough way: as a study of Tertullian's idea of history. But in reading more of Tertullian—a dogged apologist for his new faith, and a tireless opponent of superstition, philosophy, and heresy—I was drawn to his invective against Marcion. What was an “arch-heretic” (*haresiarchés*) I wondered? Was one as influential as an archbishop, or more poignant in his argumentation than the garden-variety heretics Tertullian compares to “weeds” and “fevers”? Soon Tertullian became the background for a much more extensive investigation into the impressive list of church fathers who had worried about the success of Marcion and his followers—a success that was a matter of record by the time of Justin Martyr, writing around 145 CE, when Marcion's reputation was already secure:

The demons put forward Marcion of Pontus, who is still, even in our time, teaching men to deny that God is the maker of all things in heaven and on earth, and that the Christ predicted by the prophets is his son, and preaches another god besides the Creator of all, and likewise another son. This man many have believed, as if he alone knew the truth, and laugh at us, though they have no proof of what they say, but are carried away irrationally as lambs by a wolf, and become the prey of atheistic doctrines, and of demons.

The passage haunted me for no particular reason, except that to read Tertullian, and even Irenaeus, who made Marcion “successor” to an irrelevant and otherwise unmentioned and workless heretic called Cerdo in the episcopate of Hyginus (138- 142) would lead one to think that Marcion became troublesome only when he began to teach at Rome “under Anicetus,” (157-168?). This made surprising (and nearly inexplicable) Justin's complaint that as late as his day, Marcion was still teaching men to deny God the Creator.

And there is Marcion, a man of Pontus, who even at this day is 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, and to deny that God is the maker of this universe, and to assert that some other being, greater than he, has done greater works.

The *First Apology* was written not earlier than 138 in the reign of Antoninus Pius. Justin himself died in 165, roughly three years before the death of the Roman

² Hoffmann, R. Joseph, Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity: An Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinist Theology in the Second Century, American Academy of Religion, 1984.

³ Hoffmann, R. Joseph: A New Preface to Marcion Studies, downloaded on May 22, 2023, https://www.academia.edu/29038347/A_New_Preface_to_Marcion_Studies .

presbyter, Anicetus--said in one place (Irenaeus) to have been head of the church in Rome during Marcion's time, and a generation before the Roman bishop, Eleuthereus (d. 189), alleged by Tertullian to have repudiated and excommunicated Marcion in Rome. Marcion thus "came" to Rome, for reasons fleshed out incoherently by later writers like Epiphanius and the Pseudo-Tertullian, around the time of Hyginus, or during the time of Anicetus, or (again?) in the days of Eleuthereus—that is, between 136 and 189, a span of half a century.

This excerpt from Hoffmann's Essay places the journey of Marcion to Rome in context. While the Church was still organizationally in formation, and while it is an anachronism to state that the Bishop of Rome ruled the Church at this time, it is evident that Rome itself as the capital of the Roman Empire was an extremely important place for anyone with ambitions of importance to in some way to be associated with the Roman community of Christians. From later sources the following accusations were made against Marcion:

- He came to Rome to bribe the church there to make him Bishop of Rome – by donating a significant sum of money to the church.
- His ambitions were thwarted when Eleuthereus, the then Bishop of Rome, found him out and excommunicated him. His "bribe" was returned to him and he was sent packing.

Hoffman further states:

The "apostolic" case against Marcion will have been more believable in the credulous period prior to the existence of the *ecclesia magna*, when the twin threats of persecution and heresy shaped and sharpened not merely Christian defenses but early doctrine. But, as Harnack rightly perceived, following the era of historical-critical study of the gospels and the canon, it is clear that Marcion's influence must be assessed afresh, in the light of what we now know about individual texts, their composition, selection, and the theological tendencies of the collectors—both "orthodox" and other. To a large extent, as a recent Christian-apologist-critic of the present study suggested, the question of Marcion's dates is of final importance in determining whether he was a lender or a borrower, a precipitator or a respondent.

We are often told that it is the "winners" who write the history. In this case it appears to be true. Had Marcion succeeded in his ambition to head up the Church of Rome his teachings might have become mainstream instead of the "heresy" that his works were later labeled. It will be important in the next part of this paper to explore what Marcion taught, and why his theology was a problem for the proto-orthodox movement within the Church. A reading of Hoffman's 1984 book, and the subsequent essay on the same subject will fill in the details. Both the book and the essay have copious footnotes and references to sources for those who are so

inclined. In any event, Marcion lost his attempt to become “Pope” and “Marcionite” became the name of a major heresy in the Church down to the present day. Whether this is a just label will have to await the second part of this paper – an examination of what Marcion was teaching, and its implications for Christianity.

¹ Irenaeus. *Adversus Haereses*. III, 4, 3 f. In *Irenaeus: Heresies*, IV.6, Irenaeus alludes to a complete work against Marcion by Justin.