

## Marcion of Sinope

By Victor Garcia

Marcion was a renowned second century heretic whose heresies were so treacherous and well crafted that the early fathers of the church, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Epiphanius and Tertullian found necessary to refute his doctrine<sup>1</sup>—Tertullian alone wrote five books against him. Though Marcion is known for the compilation of the first well defined canon of the New Testament this was not his only accomplishment; he was also a resourceful theologian, an able founder of a structured fellowship of churches and a writer— even though his work *The Antithesis* did not outlive and has come to us through his opponents. Marcion's place in early Christian history is indisputable; his influence through the ages has been such that E. C. Blackman says in the foreword of his work, *Marcion and His Influence*: “Marcion was a many-sided heretic, and the study of him is rewarding because it introduces so many aspects of Christian theology<sup>2</sup>.” And Adolf von Harnack asserts:

Through Marcion I was introduced to textual criticism of the New Testament, to the historical interpretation of Baur's school, and to the problems of systematic theology; there could be no better introduction! He is therefore my first love in church history, and this inclination and veneration have not been weakened in the half-century that I have lived through with him, not even by Augustine...one can dismiss every individual Gnostic without loss, but we cannot omit Marcion if we wish to understand the dynamic development, indeed the metamorphosis, that occurs in the time of that transition—not only because Catholicism is constructed as a defense against Marcion, but in a still higher degree, because it appropriated from this heretic something fundamental<sup>3</sup>.”

Indeed, given the effect of his bold heresies, Marcion was a formidable antagonist of orthodoxy, a man who with his endeavors disturbed and divided the early church; yet, God used his heresies to compel the church to assess and define the Holy Scriptures and to think their theology more systematically. As a result, the orthodox Canon of the New Testament was more definitely assembled and the Apostle's Creed began to take form.

Marcion was born about AD 85 in the city of Sinope, the most important seaport in Pontus on the south side of the Black Sea where his father was a bishop. Before leaving Sinope, his father excommunicated him from the church. Some say, with not much evidence that he was excommunicated for having seduced a virgin, but most probable it was due to his heretical views<sup>4</sup>. From Sinope he went to Rome—in his own ship because he was a wealthy shipmaster—where he became an influential member of the Christian community. In 144, a few years after his arrival to Rome, around 138 or 139, the church there also rejected him for his unorthodox doctrines<sup>5</sup>. He was, however, unmoved by this decision because his theological infatuation was irremediable; thus, he set himself to propagate his doctrine at a large scale and autonomously. And according to the testimony of his contemporaries he succeeded. Tertullian said, “Marcion's heretical teaching has filled the whole world;” Justin wrote in his *Apology* that his propaganda “had spread to the whole human race<sup>6</sup>.”

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<sup>1</sup> Knox, John, p.1

<sup>2</sup> Blackman, E. C., p.vii.

<sup>3</sup> Harnack, Adolf von, p.ix

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.17

<sup>5</sup> Latourette, Kenneth, p.125

<sup>6</sup> Harnack, Adolf, p.19

Marcion's doctrine has been characterized as Gnosticism, and indeed it reflects some Gnostic ideas; however, he was an unusual specimen and his views proceeded from different presuppositions. He was informed, not by the dualistic and eclectic views of contemporary philosophy, but by the Old Testament and the apostolic writings— though the latter had not been canonized yet. As for his disconnection from the philosophers' assumptions Philip Schaff says "He rejected the heathen mythology of the other Gnostics, and adhered to Christianity as the only true religion...His system was more critical and rationalistic than mystic and philosophical<sup>7</sup>." In regard to his estimation of the Old Testament, Harnack asserts, "It is highly remarkable that Marcion acknowledged the Old Testament as a self-contained whole, assumed that it had no adulterations, interpolations, or such, and did not even regard the book as false; instead he believed it to be trustworthy throughout<sup>8</sup>." Here we can say that, unlike the Gnostics, Marcion was a Biblicist, his theology was biblical. Ironically, having a high view of the reliability and divine inspiration of the Old Testament, Marcion contended in good conscience that both its divine author and the book itself must be rejected. This was the result of his utterly literalistic approach to the Jewish Scriptures—an unusual approach in an era when allegorical interpretation was the prevailing method. Guided by his literalistic reading Marcion saw in the Old Testament a despicable God unrelated to the God of the Christians and set himself to criticize Him. Harnack explains that his criticism was aimed to

bring to light the unmerciful 'righteousness', harassing strictness and cruelties, passions, zeal, and wrath of the creator of the world; further, his evil partialities, pettiness, and limitations; and finally his weakness and self-contradictions, his unprincipled whims, and his precepts and commandments which were so often ethically doubtful. This criticism reached its climax in the proof that he was even the "conditor malovulun," the author of evil, the one who incites wars, is deceitful in his promises, and is wicked in his deeds<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, "for him the God of the Jews, together with all his book, the Old Testament, had to become the actual enemy<sup>10</sup>."

Now, as striking as Marcion's reading of the Old Testament and as his bizarre as his conclusions were, it was even most perplexing that his conclusions were linked to an unanticipated source: the Pauline Epistles. Latourette says, "In Paul he saw the sharp disjunction between law and grace, the grace which is the unmerited favor of God, which Marcion was passionately convinced was of the essence of the Gospel<sup>11</sup>." Of all of Paul's Epistles, Galatians was for Marcion the most useful in his understanding of gospel. Harnack says,

But in Paul himself, particularly in his epistle to the Galatians, so it seemed to Marcion, there were two guiding stars which one needed only to follow in order to find the sure way out of the labyrinth of the poor traditions: (1) Paul explains that there is only *one* gospel and that he represents it *alone, as he had also received it in particular*; and (2) he further says that all the others are proclaiming a *Judaistic* gospel and that therefore he simply must oppose them all as those who are held captive by the false belief that the Father of Jesus Christ is identical with the creator of the world and the God of the Old Testament<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Schaff, Philip, pp.483 and 485

<sup>8</sup> Harnack, Adolf, p.58

<sup>9</sup> Harnack, Adolf, p.58

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.23

<sup>11</sup> Latourette, Kenneth S., p.127

<sup>12</sup> Harnack, Adolf, p.26

Thus, in Marcion's mind, the Pauline antithesis between the law and the gospel led inescapably to the antithesis between the God of justice and the God of love, a truth that the apostles covered up leading the church astray and causing the prevailing doctrinal corruption. It was for this reason, Marcion said, that Paul opposed the original apostles, rebuked Peter, fought the false apostles, and wrote against them in passages like 2 Cor. 2:17: "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit," and 2 Cor. 4:3-4: "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Marcion was a Paulist, and as such he was certain that Paul was the sole true preserver of the gospel of grace. Blackman, asserting Marcion's Paulism says,

There is much in Marcion's teaching as a whole that Paul would have approved...the legalism of Christianity in the second century would have forced Paul to admit that his own struggle against the Jewish Christians had been largely in vain, and that the work he had done needed to be done once more; moreover, he must have recognized in Marcion a disciple who was addressing himself to that task"<sup>13</sup>

In his zeal for his version of Paul's truth, Marcion not only was convinced that his contemporaries were misguided, but that the writings of the apostles were untrustworthy and worse, that the Pauline letters had been forged; thus he felt constrained to purify and assemble the apostolic writings to ascertain and establish the truth of his gospel upon an authoritative canon. Obviously, his canon was arranged according to his views. F. F. Bruce, in *The Canon of Scripture* informs us that the Holy Scriptures that Marcion set "inevitably included no part of the Old Testament." Bruce also explains that the collection was divided in two parts called *Gospel* and *Apostle*. "Marcion's *Gospel*," Bruce says, "was an edition of the Gospel of Luke...Marcion's *Apostle* was an edition of ten letters of Paul. The three Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) are not included..."<sup>14</sup> Marcion's admiration for Paul's teaching was remarkable but his interpretation was askew. Blackman says that his docetism, his dualism and his twisted understanding of the Old Testament "would have filled the Apostle with horror"<sup>15</sup>. His docetism came out in his belief that Christ did not have a material body and was not born of a woman; his dualism led him to the appalling doctrine of the two opposing Gods of Old and the New Testament; and his twisted understanding of the Old Testament made him reject the book completely. These deviations in turn, distorted his understanding of Paul's doctrine and made of him one of the most notorious heretics of church's history. Bruce points up,

Marcion dealt with the text of Paul's letters in the same way as with the text of Luke's gospel: anything which appeared inconsistent with what he believed to be authentic Pauline teaching was regarded as a corruption proceeding from an alien hand and was removed<sup>16</sup>.

Once done with his compilation, Marcion impudently confronted the church in Rome and demanded its leaders to take a stand regarding his works and his teaching; the church complied, but rejected them as "the worst kind of heresy"<sup>17</sup>. However, the formidable test posed by Marcion and the commotion created by this controversy awakened the Church and made it aware of the danger of having such an able heretic with an authoritative written source to back his theology and draw further ideas to build it

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<sup>13</sup> Blackman, E. C., p.106

<sup>14</sup> Bruce, F. F., pp.137-138

<sup>15</sup> Blackman, E. C., p.107

<sup>16</sup> Bruce, F. F. *The Canon of Scripture*, p.139

<sup>17</sup> Harnack, Adolf, p.18

up and extend it. Indeed, Marcion's achievement had no precedent; he was the first to collect, on a theological basis, a New Testament and put it, not alongside the Old Testament but in its place. In *The Spreading Flame*, F. F. Bruce says about the church's reaction to Marcion's canon,

The compilation of this canon was a challenge and incentive to the Church of Rome and the other churches which held the same doctrine. If these churches denied that Marcion's canon was the true one, then let them show what the true one really was. In consequence, it is from the time of the anti-Marcionite reaction that we find the earliest explicit statements from the side of the Church Catholic defining the Christian canon<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, Marcion did not bestow any authority to the books he included in his canon; they were already recognized as authoritative, only that they had not been formally compiled. Marcion's canon, however, compelled the church to act in this direction. Says Knox,

the high regard which had previously been bestowed upon the Gospels and upon other early Christian writings and the use of them in services of worship prepared the way for the New Testament, but do not account for its sudden emergence as precisely the thing it was. Some occasion is obviously to be found. That occasion was Marcion's canonization of "gospel and Apostle"<sup>19</sup>.

Thus, though Marcion's tainted canon was not the ultimate reason for the arrangement of the true Canon, it was a significant factor. F. F. Bruce, in *The Formation of the Canon*, clarifies, "the widespread view that Marcion provided the church with its precedent for establishing a canon of the New Testament...is probably wrong"<sup>20</sup>. And J. N. D. Kelly contends,

The significance of Marcion's action should not be misunderstood. He has sometime been acclaimed (e.g. by the great German scholar Harnack) as the originator of the Catholic canon, but this is an extravagant point of view. The church already had its roughly defined collection, or (to be more precise) collections of Christian books which it was beginning to treat as Scripture<sup>21</sup>

Hence, Marcion was not the definite factor, but a crucial one. Putting his role in perspective, Bruce, citing Theodor Van Zahn, asserts, "Marcion formed his Bible in declared opposition to the Holy Scriptures of the church from which he had separated; it was in opposition to his criticism that the church in its turn first became rightly conscious of its heritage of apostolic writings"<sup>22</sup>.

As we have noted previously, Marcion's canon was not created in a theological vacuum; it was the outcome of a system which the church realized was not inconsequential but extremely harmful. This was being marked by the great number of people who embraced it, not only for its allure and coherence but also for its purported faithfulness to the Pauline theology and its exaltation of Christ's grace. Furthermore, Marcion, astutely, reinforced his canon with an attached commentary where he explained his theological principles. This commentary was called *The Antithesis*, a book that did not last, but we know through the writings of Marcion's contenders. Harnack affirms that "a reconstruction of *The*

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<sup>18</sup> Bruce, F. F., p. 229

<sup>19</sup> Knox, John, 32-33

<sup>20</sup> Bruce, F. F., p. 144

<sup>21</sup> Kelly, J. N. D., p.58

<sup>22</sup> Bruce, F. F., *The Canon of Scripture*, p.144

*Antitheses* is impossible<sup>23</sup>”; however, enough is known to have a fairly clear idea of its content and design. We know for example that in it Marcion expressed profusely his admiration for the grace of the gospel; F. F. Bruce says in this regard: “*The Antithesis* opened up with a lyrical celebration of divine grace, which should arouse a sympathetic echo to every evangelical heart: “O wealth of riches! Ecstasy, power and astonishment! Nothing can be said about the gospel, nor yet imagined about it; neither can it be compared to anything<sup>24</sup>” Harnack informs us that the essential content of the book was “the contrasting of the words and deeds of the creator of the world and of the good God (or of his Christ), and hence also the contrasting of the law (of the Old Testament) and the gospel<sup>25</sup>.” As for the purpose of the book we know that Marcion designed it as a polemical-apologetical work, but further, he intended to make it “an authoritative work for the community [of his followers] and thus its credal book<sup>26</sup>.”

It is noteworthy that Marcion, with all his unorthodox ideas, always appealed to doctrinal principles in conceptual form, which he not only taught orally, but published it. Also, he never appealed to “the Spirit” or to a special revelation, and as a matter of principle, he discarded the allegorical and typological explanations of the inspired texts. Moreover, he rejected the apocryphal books and based his arguments only in the gospels, the apostolic writings and the Old Testament. Furthermore, he abstained from using philosophical or mystery-wisdom tenets<sup>27</sup>. These facts point out to Marcion’s keen mind and his ability to scrutinize abstract ideas. However, his public success at a popular level, which made him a founder of churches, came from his ability to communicate his abstract ideas in simple and practical ways. In fact, as Blackman says, “Marcion was the founder not of a school, but of a church<sup>28</sup>,” in other words, his interest was not purely theological but pastoral; he did not ambition to be a great thinker, but a reformer and for that reason he challenged the established church of his days and when rejected, he did not surrender but went on preaching his ideas. Harnack goes as far as asking, “Who does not think here of Luther?<sup>29</sup>”

But, it was precisely this blend of theological and pastoral passion that led the Orthodox Church to counteract his doctrine as much as his canon. It is here, some propose, when an archetype of Apostles’ began to emerge. To be sure, the Creed’s version that we know did not exist before the sixth century; thus, obviously what the church knew in the second century resembling the Apostles’ Creed was not known as such. Latourette, speaking of the process of the formation of the Creed since its origin in the second century, says, “[the Creed’s] essential core has a much earlier origin. It seems to be an elaboration of a primitive baptismal formula...<sup>30</sup>” Knox, in *Marcion and the New Testament* cites an study on the origin and purpose of The Apostles’ Creed conducted by A. C. McGiffert in which he “established the very great probability that the Apostles’ Creed was based on a somewhat shorter creed known as the Old Roman Symbol, which was composed in Rome between A.D. 150 and 175, and that it was designed particularly to refute the errors of Marcionism<sup>31</sup>.” Affirming McGiffert’s declaration Knox says, “...not many students of early Christian history would take issue with him<sup>32</sup>.” Blackman also says,

It has been suggested that the Old Roman Symbol was formulated against Marcion. In itself this is not improbable, especially when it is remembered that the Marcionity heresy

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<sup>23</sup> Harnack, Adolf, p.57

<sup>24</sup> Bruce, F. F., *The Canon of Scripture*, p.134

<sup>25</sup> Harnack, Adolf, p.53

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.53

<sup>27</sup> Harnack, Adolf, p.65

<sup>28</sup> Blackman, E. C., p.1

<sup>29</sup> Harnack, Adolf, p.18

<sup>30</sup> Latourette, Kenneth. p.135

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.34

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 34

originated in Roma and grew into a “counter- Church, the only counter-Church, no inferior in compactness and catholicity to the Great Church itself<sup>33</sup>”

Latourette asserts, “the Roman Symbol may well have been an elaboration of an earlier form which went back to the primitive baptismal formula, modified in such fashion as to make it clear that the candidate for baptism did not adhere to the beliefs in which Marcion, who had a strong following in Rome, differed from the Catholic Church<sup>34</sup>” *The book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) also regards the Apostle’s Creed as an offshoot of the Roman Symbol, which was used in an adapted form against the marcionite’s doctrines: “Around A.D. 180, Roman Christians developed an early form of the Apostles’ Creed to refute Marcion<sup>35</sup>.”

This Roman Symbol had significant similarities with the later Apostle’s Creed. It began with a declaration about God and Christ: “I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ his Son,” an allusion that dismissed the Marcionites’ idea of the creator and the Father as two different Gods. Then included a section confessing Christ’s humanity, his work and his second coming as judge: “...who was born of Mary the Virgin, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, on the third day rose from the dead, ascended into Heaven, sitteth on the right hand of the Father, from which he cometh to judge the living and the dead<sup>36</sup>.” This section asserted definitely that Jesus was the Son of the Almighty—the creator—and that he was perfectly human and had a physical body, which Marcion denied. The last part: “[I believe] in the Holy Spirit and the resurrection of the flesh” stressed the goodness of the physical and material creation, an idea abhorrent both to Marcion and to the Gnostics.

In any case, whether the precursor of the Apostles’ Creed—the second century Roman Symbol—was arranged in direct opposition to Marcion or not, it is true that he motivated an action in this direction. *The New Dictionary of Theology* does not assume a direct connection between Marcion and the Creed, but acknowledges a link: “The Apostle’s Creed indirectly refuted various heresies (e.g. Ebionites, Marcion, Gnostics, docetists)<sup>37</sup>,” also it deems Marcion as a factor in the doctrinal definition of the early church: “Marcion’s challenge...sharpened its [church] emphasis on certain doctrines in the rule of faith (see Creeds)<sup>38</sup>.” F.F. Bruce agrees with this assessment: “The chief importance of Marcion in the second century lies in the reaction which he provoked among the leaders of the Apostolic Churches. Just as Marcion's canon stimulated the more precise defining of the NT canon by the Catholic Church, not to supersede but to supplement the canon of the OT, so, more generally, Marcion's teaching led the Catholic Church to define its faith more carefully, in terms calculated to exclude a Marcionite interpretation<sup>39</sup>.” Thus, we see that a chaotic and repulsive theological conception was used by God to enrich the church’s doctrinal understanding and set permanently the parameters of its divine inspired writings.

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<sup>33</sup> Blackman, E. C., p.87

<sup>34</sup> Latourette, Kenneth, 135.

<sup>35</sup> *The book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, p.6

<sup>36</sup> Latourette, Kenneth, p.135

<sup>37</sup> Ferguson, Sinclair, p.179

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.412

<sup>39</sup> Bruce, F. F., *The Spreading Flame*, p. 252

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