

Marcion: Coming to the Father Through the Son

Marcion (ca. 85-160) was an early Christian bishop and likely the first to be excommunicated as a heretic (decreed in 144 AD). He taught that Yahweh, as a jealous and wrathful God was a separate and lower entity than the all-forgiving God of Love of the New Testament. Marcion concluded that many of the teachings of Jesus were incompatible with the actions of the god of the Old Testament, Yahweh. The similarity of this belief to Gnostic Christian theology was used to label Marcion as a Gnostic. Many in Rome claimed his theology to be dualistic like the Gnostics and his peer, Eusebius, went so far as to accuse him of being a Gnostic. [I do not see his theology as dualistic. Marcion believed in a spiritual hierarchy with the Elohim, of which Yahweh is one, as lower than the Father of the Trinity.] Marcion declared that Christianity was new and distinct from Judaism. Marcion did not claim that the Jewish Scriptures were false, just that they were fulfilled and a new age had begun. Since many of the early Christian leaders were Jews, this brought wrath upon him.

Marcion proclaimed that the god of the Old Testament, whom he called, as did Plato, the Demiurge, the creator of the *material* universe. Yahweh was a jealous deity of the Jewish tribe. Mosaic Law is based on reciprocal justice and from a god who punishes mankind for its sins through suffering and death. The Father god proclaimed by Jesus is a universal god of compassion and love who understands humanity and our struggles and offers us mercy. Out of mercy, God intervened in the world to save humanity.

Marcion was the first to propose a New Testament canon based largely on writings of Luke and Paul. He rejected many contemporary books later accepted as Scripture in the western part of the church. The debate that ensued prompted the Roman church to develop a Catholic canon.

Was Marcion a Gnostic? Like the Gnostics, he argued that Christ was essentially a divine spirit who entered a human body, that of Jesus, at the baptism. However, his concept of God cannot be reconciled with Gnostic philosophy which held that every human being is born with a small piece of God's spirit lodged within his/her soul (a 'Divine Spark'). Turning away from the physical world (which Gnostics and Hindus regarded as Maya, that is illusion) and embracing the God-like qualities leads to salvation. In contrast, Marcion, held that the Heavenly Father (the father of Christ) has no part in making the world, but is interested in human endeavors to spiritualize it.

Marcion founded a Christian Church that expanded throughout the known world within his lifetime. In size and adherents, it rivaled the Catholic Church. It survived Catholic condemnation and imperial disapproval for several centuries after the death of Marcion.