

# STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

---

---

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers in Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

## Anti-Judaism in Marcion and His Opponents

Joseph B. Tyson

Southern Methodist University

Volume 1 (2005-2006): pp. 196-208

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol1/iss1/art21>

Editor's Note: This article includes material adapted from the author's recently published book, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2006), and is used with permission. It also depends on additional material in the same book that provides a detailed argument that the Acts of the Apostles was written in the first quarter of the second century as a reaction against Marcion. This material is too extensive to be included here, but interested readers are invited to assess that argument by consulting the book.

In his recent study of early Christian theological diversity, Bart D. Ehrman entertains the possibility that things might have turned out differently and Marcionite Christianity might have prevailed over all other movements of the second century. He regards its victory as plausible, because "it took what most people in the empire found most attractive about Christianity—love, mercy, grace, wonder, opposition to this harsh, material world and salvation from it—and pushed it to an extreme, while taking Christianity's less attractive sides—law, guilt, judgment, eternal punishment, and, above all, association and close ties with Jews and Judaism—and getting rid of them."<sup>1</sup> Then he projects two possible results:

This may have opened the doors to heightened hostilities, since Marcion seems to have hated Jews and everything Jewish; or possibly even more likely, it may have led simply to benign neglect as Jews and their religion would have been considered to be of no relevance and certainly no competition for Christians. The entire history of anti-Semitism might have been avoided, ironically, by an anti-Jewish religion.<sup>2</sup>

Ehrman finally, however, abandons the scenario of a Marcionite victory, on the grounds that Romans would not have embraced a religion that stressed its own novelty.

<sup>1</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 111.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Ehrman adopts the usual characterization that Marcion "hated Jews and everything Jewish" and that his form of Christianity was "anti-Jewish." In my judgment, these characterizations need to be nuanced much more carefully and assessed in the light of views expressed by those who did in fact win the day, Marcion's opponents. My interest is in raising the question of anti-Judaism both in Marcion and in his opponents.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Marcion

Marcion was the best known leader of a non-orthodox Christian movement in the early church. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other defenders of the proto-orthodox tradition devoted significant attention to the challenges he presented. The precise dates of his birth and death are unknown, but he was probably born in the latter half of the first century C.E. in Sinope, on the Black Sea. It was rumored that his father was a bishop of the church there. Marcion had a successful ministry in Asia Minor, probably beginning early in the second century, and, about the middle of the century, he came to Rome, where he was initially accepted but finally condemned for views that Rome deemed heretical. The probable time of his death was a few years after 150 C.E.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For other recent assessments of Marcion and the Jews, see David P. Efroymson, "The Patristic Connection," in Alan Davies, ed., *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 98-117; Stephen G. Wilson, "Marcion and the Jews," in Stephen G. Wilson, ed., *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 2; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1986), 2:45-58; and his *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70-170 CE* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Marcion is usually thought of as active in the middle of the second century. This dating is based on comments by Marcion's opponents, but close study of the sources shows that Marcion's teachings were known in the East during the first quarter of the second century. The argument is complex, but by way of summary, we should note that from Justin we learn that Marcion had had an extensive ministry in the East prior to 150 C.E. and that from Polycarp we can conclude that his

Marcion took his inspiration from the letters of Paul, most notably Galatians. He was deeply impressed with Paul's contrast of law and grace and concluded that these must be the domains of two Gods. One God is revealed in the Hebrew Bible as the creator, law-giver, and judge of humankind. This God, thus, is identified with the created order, Torah, and the Jews, his chosen people. Marcion did not question the inspiration or authority of the Hebrew Bible; he interpreted it literally as the word of the Creator-God but not as prophetic of Jesus. The second God is the Father of Jesus Christ, completely unknown in this world before the appearance of Jesus in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar (29 C.E.). This is the God of grace, love, and mercy. The work of Jesus was to release people from the Creator-God and deliver them to the domain of the God of grace.

As is well known, Marcion and his followers developed the first Christian canon, without the Hebrew Bible but with ten letters of Paul and one gospel, which resembled the Gospel of Luke in today's NT.<sup>5</sup> Although Marcion's foes claimed that he "mutilated" the Gospel of Luke, some modern scholars question this assertion and maintain that Marcion's Luke preceded the canonical text we now know.<sup>6</sup>

---

teachings were known by 130 C.E (see Justin, *First Apology*, 26; see also *1 Apol.* 58. See Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 7:1). Indications from the Pastorals (e.g. 1 Tim 6:20) suggest even earlier dates. We probably will not be far off if we conclude that Marcion's views were known, at least in part and in some locations, as early as 115-120 C.E. For further details, see R. Joseph Hoffman, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity: An Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinist Theology in the Second Century* [AAR Academy Series 46; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984].

<sup>5</sup> The ten letters in Marcion's *Apostolikon* were Galatians, 1, 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1, 2 Thessalonians, Laodiceans (probably our Ephesians), Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon.

<sup>6</sup> This represents my own position, which is worked out in detail in my *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2006). My study is based on that of John Knox,

Marcionite Christianity was so vigorous in the late second century that the number of adherents probably approximated or even outnumbered the proto-orthodox in some places. There is evidence of its survival as late as the eighth century C.E.

It is unarguable that Marcion's canon did not include any of the Hebrew Scriptures and that his theology completely separated the God of Jesus from the God of Israel. But we will understand him better if we begin where he began. The great Berlin scholar, Adolf von Harnack, who deeply admired Marcion, asserted that the gospel of Christ constituted the origin and the totality of Marcion's religious life. In Harnack's words, Marcion "felt in the gospel the whole force and power of the 'Numinous,' to use [Rudolf] Otto's expression."<sup>7</sup> Harnack noted the force expressed in what appears to be the opening of Marcion's *Antitheses*: "O wonder beyond wonders, rapture, power, and amazement is it, that one can say nothing at all about the gospel, nor even conceive of it, nor compare it with anything."<sup>8</sup> Harnack stressed Marcion's

---

*Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1942), but the contention that the Marcionite text of Luke was earlier than the canonical text goes back to Albrecht Ritschl and Ferdinand Christian Baur. See Ritschl, *Das Evangelium Marcions und das kanonische Evangelium des Lukas* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1846); Baur, *Kritische Untersuchungen über die kanonischen Evangelien, Ihr Behältnisz zu einander, ihren Charakter und Ursprung* (Tübingen: L. F. Fues, 1847), 391-531.

<sup>7</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* (trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma; Durham, N.C.: The Labyrinth Press, 1990), 66. This is a translation of a major part of Harnack's *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom Fremden Gott: Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der Katholischen Kirche* (TU 45; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche, 1921).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel*, 59. The quotation comes originally from the fourth-century Syrian writer, Ephrem, *An Exposition of the Gospel*, 1. Ephrem locates the sentence at the beginning of what he calls, Marcion's "Proevangelium," apparently the same as the

reading of the Pauline epistles as his “point of departure.” “The point of departure for Marcion’s criticism of the tradition cannot be mistaken. It was provided *in the Pauline contrast of law and gospel, on the one side malicious, petty, and cruel punitive correctness, and on the other side merciful love.*”<sup>9</sup> This observation is confirmed by Marcion’s collection of the Pauline letters, headed by Galatians. Irenaeus and Tertullian both note this. The latter writes, “The separation of Law and Gospel is the primary and principal exploit [*opus*] of Marcion. His disciples cannot deny this, which stands at the head of their document, that document by which they are inducted into and confirmed in this heresy.”<sup>10</sup>

Paul’s writings about the justification of sinners through Jesus Christ must indeed have had a powerful effect on Marcion’s religious life. He concluded that the characteristics attributed to the divine in the Hebrew Scriptures were at fundamental odds with those associated with the divine in the letters of Paul. For him there was an irresolvable contrast between a God who enacted laws and judged humans in accordance with their obedience or disobedience of them and a God who justified sinners. Marcion was also struck with the contrast between the teachings of Jesus and those of the Hebrew Scriptures, and he could not become convinced that Jesus and Paul meant to signify the same deity who was known through the Hebrew Scriptures. These convictions evidently formed the center of Marcion’s faith and led him to challenge much that was taken for granted by

---

*Antitheses.* If authentic, this would constitute the longest surviving sentence composed by Marcion.

<sup>9</sup> Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel*, 21; emphasis in original.

<sup>10</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 1, 19:4. (Ernest Evans, *Tertullian, Adversus Marcionem* [2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972]). Apparently Tertullian refers here to Marcion’s *Antitheses*. Cf. Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 2, 2:5; 2, 11:1; 3, 2, 12:1; 2, 17:1.

other Christians. Marcion’s core convictions, which are clearly rooted in the Pauline epistles, led him to the further conviction that the God who was revealed by Jesus was totally unknown before the time at which Jesus appeared. What Jesus revealed and Paul taught was fundamentally new, unexpected, and unanticipated. At one point, Marcion went before the leaders of the church at Rome to ask for their understanding of two passages in a text that must have been generally known:<sup>11</sup>

He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed” (Luke 5:36-37).

No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit (Luke 6:43).<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> The episode is reported in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42, 2 (Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* [NHS 35; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987]). If this incident is historical, it is impossible to know what text Marcion would actually have used. Apparently the verses were included in Marcion’s Gospel, and they are in canonical Luke. But it does not seem likely that the Roman leaders would have acknowledged Marcion’s Gospel in a debate that involved his orthodoxy, and, in my judgment, canonical Luke is post-Marcionite. The only conclusion seems to be that the text in question here must have come from a gospel known both to Marcion and the Roman leaders. Such a text could have served as a source both for Marcion’s Gospel and canonical Luke. On this point, see my *Marcion and Luke-Acts*, chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> Harnack, speaking for Marcion, wrote: “When he [Jesus] spoke of the two trees, the corrupt and the good, which are able to produce only such fruits as are given by their very nature, he can mean thereby only the two great divine authors, the Old Testament God, who creates nothing but bad and worthless things, and the Father of Jesus Christ, who produces exclusively what is good” (Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel*, 22).

Marcion understood these sayings as declarations by Jesus that what he revealed was new and, hence, incompatible with what had gone before. The good he equated with the new; the bad with the old. It was apparently these contentions that led the Christian leaders in Rome to break off relations with Marcion and his followers.

Our ancient sources agree that Marcion made a total separation between the religion that Jesus and Paul espoused and that of the Hebrew Scriptures. The God of Jesus was totally unknown before Jesus appeared.<sup>13</sup> The God who ruled prior to 29 C.E. knew nothing of Jesus or of the second God.<sup>14</sup> The revelation of the God of Jesus occurred when Jesus first appeared, and Marcion was willing to date it with precision—in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, emperor of Rome. This is the first verse of Marcion's gospel, a verse that also appears in Luke 3:1. If Marcion had known the verse in the Lucan form, he would have been impressed with the evangelist's own precision at this point—"In the fifteenth year of the rule of Tiberius Caesar, while Pontius Pilate was ruler of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, Philip, his brother, tetrarch of the country of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the time of the high priests Annas and Caiaphas, God's word came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the desert" (Luke 3:1-2). Marcion might well have observed that Luke found it extremely important to call attention to this very date. But Marcion would not have been able to use the Lucan phraseology in this form, since it refers to the appearance of John the Baptist rather than Jesus. The Marcionite form combined Luke 3:1a with 4:31 and evidently ran: "In the fifteenth year of the rule of Tiberius Caesar in the times of Pilate, Jesus Christ went down to

<sup>13</sup> See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 1, 9:2.

<sup>14</sup> See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3, 1:2; 3, 5:1.

Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and he was teaching them in the synagogue."<sup>15</sup>

Consonant with his conviction that the God of Jesus had been totally unknown before the fifteenth year of Tiberius, Marcion concluded that there could be no connection between Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures. Irenaeus scorned Marcion for excluding the Hebrew patriarchs—Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham—from salvation.<sup>16</sup> But it was the separation of the prophets from Jesus that seemed most unsettling for Marcion's opponents.<sup>17</sup> As Harnack, in expressing Marcion's views, put it, "Christ is all in all and hence also the founder and the perfecter of faith. Before him were only false prophets, and after him there is no need of any further revelation but only of a restorative reformation."<sup>18</sup> Evidently, Marcion stressed a non-allegorical, non-figurative interpretation of the prophets and, indeed, of all the Hebrew Scriptures. Tertullian condemned him for this because it meant that he was in agreement with Jews, who likewise denied that the prophets predicted the coming of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> Marcion's insistence on literal interpretation is especially stressed in a reference by Tertullian to Isa 7:14; 8:4:

Appeal next, as your custom is, to this description of Christ which Isaiah makes, and assert your claim that it in no point agrees. In the first place, you allege, Isaiah's Christ will have to be named Emmanuel, and afterwards

<sup>15</sup> See Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium*, 165\*-166\*. I refer here to the German edition, which contains Harnack's reconstruction of the Gospel of Marcion. This section was unaccountably omitted from the English translation.

<sup>16</sup> See Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1, 27:3; 4, 8:1.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Heresies* 4, 34:1.

<sup>18</sup> Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 2, 21:2; 3, 5:4; 3, 12:1.

to take up the strength of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria against the king of the Assyrians: and yet he who has come was neither known by any name of that kind, nor has ever performed any warlike act.<sup>20</sup>

But Marcion evidently believed in the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures and accepted Isaiah and the other prophets as trustworthy predictors of the future. It follows that the future one predicted by these prophets was not Jesus and that such a one had not yet come. That coming is still to be anticipated as a future event, as Jews believe.<sup>21</sup> If Tertullian is right, the distinction between the two Christs was, in part, relative to the extent of their functions: "Neither for that matter can you establish that suggestion of yours, with a view to distinguishing between two Christs, as that the Judaic Christ was intended by the Creator for the regathering out of dispersion of the people [of Israel] and no others, whereas your Christ has been advanced by the supremely good god for the deliverance of the whole human race; ..."<sup>22</sup>

If Christ is all in all, and if Jesus revealed a hitherto unknown God, it follows that the God of Israel is not to be the object of Christian worship. The qualities of this God are at odds with those of the father of Jesus Christ. But Marcion nevertheless accepted the Hebrew Bible as the book to be identified with this God, in a sense, the book that revealed this God. In this sense it is trustworthy Scripture, accurately describing the Creator-God, giving a truthful account of history, and containing yet to be fulfilled prophecies. Harnack calls attention to the fact that "Marcion remained

true to the Jewish-Christian tradition in identifying the creator of the world and the God of the Jews ..."<sup>23</sup> But Marcion was sharp in his criticism of this God. A Creator-God was no more acceptable to Marcion than to the Gnostics, although he was not interested in describing creative activity in their terms. For him, neither the creation stories of Genesis nor the Torah as a whole was to be challenged on the grounds of its accuracy but rather in terms of the God portrayed in them. Despite his animus against him, Tertullian is probably correct in claiming that Marcion had deep suspicions about the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. This God enacted the *lex talionis*, which allowed for physical retaliation that for Marcion was deeply objectionable.<sup>24</sup> This God was not consistent: "he forbids labour on sabbath days, and yet at the storming of the city of Jericho he commands the ark to be carried round during eight days which include the sabbath."<sup>25</sup> This God was inconsistent on the matter of sacrifices.<sup>26</sup> This God was either capricious or lacking in foresight, initially approving and later disapproving certain persons;<sup>27</sup> or God repents a previous action, as in the case of Saul (1 Sam 15:11) or Jonah (Jonah 3:10; 4:2).<sup>28</sup> This God seems not to be omniscient, unaware of the whereabouts of Adam in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:9, 11) or of Cain's murder of Abel (Gen 4:9-10).<sup>29</sup>

These considerations strongly suggest that it is simplistic to judge Marcion as anti-Jewish on the grounds of his

<sup>20</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3, 12:1.

<sup>21</sup> See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3, 6:3; 3, 7:1-8; 3, 8:1-2; 3, 21:1.

<sup>22</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3, 21:1.

<sup>23</sup> Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 2, 18:1.

<sup>25</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 2, 21:1.

<sup>26</sup> See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 2, 22:1-4.

<sup>27</sup> See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 2, 23:1.

<sup>28</sup> See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 2, 24:1-2.

<sup>29</sup> See Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 2, 25:1, 3.

attitude toward the Hebrew Bible. Apparently he agreed both with Jews and proto-orthodox Christians that the books in this collection were divinely inspired. Nor did Marcion question the historical accuracy of these writings or their prophetic power. On these points, Marcion's interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures would be consonant with Jewish interpretations. He would agree that the Hebrew prophets predicted the coming of the Messiah and that this figure was not Jesus. Key to Marcion's interpretation is his insistence on the literal meaning: Isaiah (especially in Isa 7:14; 8:14) was addressing the people of his own time about the threats from foreign kingdoms; he was not speaking of the coming of Jesus. Nevertheless, Isaiah and all the prophets are trustworthy and authoritative.

Marcion's critique of the Hebrew Bible, thus, was not directed to its authority but to its morality. He saw in these writings, especially in Torah, something that fell beneath the teachings of Jesus and Paul, and the contrasts were so extreme that, although he accepted the divine origin of the Hebrew Bible, he concluded that the God who inspired these Scriptures was not the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

These observations suggest that we should more carefully describe Marcion's attitude toward Jews and Judaism. It is not sufficient simply to say that he was anti-Jewish, although he was certain that the morality he saw in the Hebrew Bible was deficient. Inevitably he would judge the religion that was based on these writings as inferior to his own. But apparently he would not question its legitimacy or its right to continue after the appearance of Jesus. He would pity Jews as being kept under the control of the God of creation, but he would regard their expectation of a Messiah as fully conforming to the writings of the Hebrew prophets. Further, his insistence on literal interpretation would, as Tertullian himself observed, create a significant

compatibility with Jews. Marcion's decision to exclude the Hebrew Bible from the Christian canon creates a clear demarcation between Christianity and Judaism, and in this sense he would encourage his followers to regard the survival of Judaism after the time of Jesus as legitimate but theologically irrelevant. Whether this would have led to a diminished degree of anti-Judaism on the part of his followers is, of course, impossible to say, but Ehrman is probably correct to observe that "benign neglect" is at least consistent with Marcionite principles.

## 2. Marcion's Opponents

It is customary to observe that the defeat of Marcionite Christianity underscored the intimate relationship between the church and Judaism. It meant that Christians would continue to hear readings from the OT and thus be led to understand the story of ancient Israel as part of their own history. It meant that they would be able to see Jesus as part of an ongoing history and as a participant in an ancient and vibrant Jewish culture. This judgment is certainly correct, but the proto-orthodox victory also had the potential to bring Jews and Christians into conflict over the interpretation of these texts. If Christians believe that the same God who sent Jesus Christ also sent Moses, they must develop some ways to address the apparent differences between their teachings. The Gospel of Matthew contributed to a resolution of this problem by having Jesus use six antitheses: "You have heard ...but I say to you" (see Matt 5: 21-48). However one interprets the contents of these antitheses, the form suggests that the words of Jesus are to be substituted for those of Moses. It is also essential that the OT prophets bear witness to Jesus. In contrast to Marcion's Gospel, the canonical version of Luke has the resurrected Jesus explain to two of his disciples how the Scriptures, including Moses and all the prophets, spoke of a suffering Messiah and thus

predicted the coming of Jesus (Luke 24:26-27). In Acts 3:18, Peter makes essentially the same observation.<sup>30</sup>

In what follows I will make use of two second-century texts which, on the one side, oppose Marcion and, on the other, express forms of anti-Judaism.

#### A. The Acts of the Apostles (c. 120 C.E.)

In my judgment, it was the author of Acts, writing about 120 C. E., who first perceived the threat of Marcionite Christianity. My reasoning behind this judgment is laid out in a recent book, and space does not allow a discussion of the argument here.<sup>31</sup> Here I want to call attention to some of the major implications of regarding Acts as a response to the Marcionite challenge. Acts answers Marcionite contentions point by point. Marcion stressed the distance between Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures, but the author of Acts repeatedly showed that Paul and the other Christian leaders maintained that Jesus fulfilled the predictions of the Hebrew prophets. Marcion claimed that Paul was the only apostle, but Acts portrays him as at one with Peter and the others, even subservient to them on some occasions, and it defines

apostleship in a way that strictly excludes Paul.<sup>32</sup> Marcion called Peter and the others “false apostles,” in contrast to Paul, but Acts not only characterizes them as in total agreement with Paul but even goes so far as to attribute to Peter the first conversion of a Gentile (Acts 10:1-11:18). Marcion maintained that Paul proclaimed a God of grace, who released humankind from the domination of the God of Torah, but the author of Acts characterized Paul as a Torah-observant Jew and a devout Pharisee. Marcion taught that Jesus brought Torah to an end, but Acts showed that the apostles and Paul agreed that some things from Torah were still to be required even of Gentile believers (see Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25).

Conceiving of Acts as an anti-Marcionite text enables us to appreciate the contribution of its author. This author is not simply telling the story of the rise of Christianity; he is defining the Christian movement in direct opposition to that of the Marcionites. His narrative totally revises the Marcionite portrayal of the earliest Christians. For the author of Acts, belief in Jesus is in full conformity with the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures; Torah is not totally dispensed with; Jewish traditions are not absolutely jettisoned.

Yet another major contribution should be considered. Marcion’s canon was the first to be devised by a Christian and, as a consequence of his theology, it contained no books from the Hebrew Bible. The Acts of the Apostles, by insisting on the role of Jesus and the apostles in fulfilling prophetic promises, must have paved the way for the Hebrew Scriptures to become part of the Christian Bible, as

<sup>30</sup> Commenting on Acts 3:18, F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, eds., (*The Beginnings of Christianity: Part 1. The Acts of the Apostles* [5 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1920-33; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979] 4:37), write, “None of the prophets, rather than all of them, made this prophecy, if we confine ourselves to (a) Messianic prophecies, (b) the original meaning of these prophecies, or (c) Jewish interpretation of these prophecies. But Christian interpretation applied to Jesus all passages in the Psalms and Isaiah which refer to suffering.”

<sup>31</sup> See my *Marcion and Luke-Acts*, where I maintain, following John Knox, that Acts was written in the second century as an anti-Marcionite text. See also Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2006). Pervo mounts a compelling argument for dating the composition of Acts in about 115-25.

<sup>32</sup> Only in Acts 14:4, 14 does the author use the term “apostle” for Paul (and Barnabas). These references constitute exceptions to the rule laid down in Acts 1:21-22.



the Old Testament.<sup>33</sup> This is not an issue that the author of Acts faced directly, but it is plausible to suggest that without the contribution of this author, the canonical status of the OT would have been far more questionable than it in fact was.

An underlying theme of Acts is that of promise and fulfillment, a theme that plays a role in Christian hermeneutics for centuries. Contrary to the Marcionite claims, the author of Acts makes it clear that the Hebrew prophets were not only proclaiming truth but that what they proclaimed pertained to Jesus. The forceful and engaging narrative of Acts and its use in anti-Marcionite controversies late in the second century assured that for proto-orthodox Christians the Hebrew prophets would forever be bound up tightly with Christian proclamation.

But the connection between Moses, the prophets, and Jesus that the author of Acts insisted on did not assure a positive relation between Christians and Jews. On the contrary, this author walks a line that is intended to distinguish his own community from both Marcionite Christians and contemporary Jews. While he elevates Moses and the prophets to a high status for Christians, he simultaneously denigrates contemporary Jews. For the most part, the Jewish people in Acts are cast in the role of opponents of Jesus and his followers. The apostle Peter repeatedly accuses them of putting Jesus to death. Not only do Jews reject the message that ostensibly was meant for them, but they frequently oppose the preachers in violent ways. They engage in plots; they incite riots; they bring accusations in Roman courts and call for executions. The Paul of Acts affirms that Jews hear the Scriptures read to

<sup>33</sup> The emphasis on Luke-Acts is not intended to minimize the significance of other early Christian literature. Writing from within a different context, the author of the Gospel of Matthew, for example, surely played a role here as well.

them every Sabbath, but they do not understand them (Acts 13:27). Although the early chapters of Acts show that Jews responded heartily and in large numbers to the Christian preachers, much more negative images increase as the narrative progresses. At the end of the book, Paul quotes from Isaiah to condemn Roman Jews, and by implication all Jews, for their imperceptiveness and disobedience (Acts 28:25-28).

The author of Acts offered the proto-orthodox Christians a formidable weapon in the controversy with Marcionite Christians, but he did little to diminish negative attitudes toward Jews. In fact, he probably promoted them. In addition, his insistence on the theme of promise and fulfillment posed a significant problem for later Christians, namely how to interpret the OT. Our second text illustrates this problem.

#### B. Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 160 CE)

Writing several decades after the author of Acts, Justin illustrates a characteristic way to address the hermeneutical problem. Justin knew about Marcion but did not give him the same attention that Luke, Irenaeus, and Tertullian did.<sup>34</sup> He nevertheless struggled with problems presented by the Hebrew Scriptures, which seemed to speak in promising terms about Israel, despite the fact that it was Gentiles who were receiving the fulfillment of the promises. Justin's problem is that of comprehending both past and present under the care of the same God, whose past actions are recorded in the OT and whose present word is given through Jesus the Christ and in his church. A major part of the problem is how to understand the requirements of Torah.

<sup>34</sup> Justin wrote a book attacking Marcion, but it has not survived.

In Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* we have what purports to be a debate between a Christian and a Jew. Justin argues with one Trypho, who is portrayed as a learned Jewish leader. The debate is very civilized, similar to a philosophical discussion. It is generally admitted, however, that this is not a record of an actual debate and that Trypho is probably a fictional character. The *Dialogue*, nevertheless, reveals a great deal about Justin's interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

In *Dialogue* 8, Trypho portrays Christianity as turning away from God. He calls upon Justin to embrace Judaism, and he lists the requirements: circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, feasts, new moons; indeed, obedience to the whole Torah. Trypho understands that the food laws and the observance of Passover are obligations of Judaism, and that the temple sacrifices were once required. Surprisingly, Justin is willing to accept these as divine demands, but insists that they are intended only for Jews, not for Christians. In *Dialogue* 11, he says that Christians trust the same God as the Jews but they obey a higher law, which was given later, as predicted in Isa 51:4-5. He admits that circumcision is a practice that is deeply rooted in the Scriptures, but he insists that God intended it for Jews alone, in order to mark them off for punishment. He later makes specific mention of the Roman prohibition which followed upon the second Jewish rebellion against Rome (132-135 C.E.) and says that circumcision provides a means of identification, so that Jews can be barred from entering the city of Jerusalem.<sup>35</sup> These requirements—circumcision, Sabbath, festivals—were imposed upon Jews because of their hardness of heart.<sup>36</sup>

Other Jewish practices have resulted from their misunderstanding of Scripture. Justin claims that this is the

<sup>35</sup> See Justin, *Dialogue* 9, 16, 92.

<sup>36</sup> See Justin, *Dialogue* 18, 27, 46.

case with the practice of using unleavened bread at Passover. Although Jews understand this commandment in a literal, material fashion, it really refers, says Justin, to a command to repent, "to practice other deeds, not to repeat your old ones."<sup>37</sup> Many prescriptions in the OT have a typological purpose and so were not understood by Jews. The Passover lamb, for example, is a type of the crucified Christ.<sup>38</sup> The flour offering for a cleansed leper is a type of the Eucharistic bread.<sup>39</sup> Circumcision on the eighth day is a type of the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week (which is both first day and eighth day).<sup>40</sup> The twelve bells on the high priest's robe are types of the twelve apostles.<sup>41</sup>

In general, Justin categorizes the commandments in Torah in three groups. First, there are those ethical commands which are universal. He says, "God shows every race of man that which is always and in all places just, and every type of man knows that adultery, fornication, murder, and so on are evil. Though they all commit such acts, they cannot escape the knowledge that they sin whenever they do so."<sup>42</sup> Second, there are the prophetic passages, i.e., those that typologically refer to Jesus the Christ. Third, are the historical, i.e., those that are intended only for Jews.

The second group, the one Justin labels as prophetic, is the most interesting for our purposes, and the commandments in this group are treated extensively in the

<sup>37</sup> Justin, *Dialogue* 14 (Stephen B. Falls, *Saint Justin Martyr* [FC; New York: Christian Heritage, 1949]).

<sup>38</sup> See Justin, *Dialogue* 40.

<sup>39</sup> See Justin, *Dialogue* 41.

<sup>40</sup> See Justin, *Dialogue* 41.

<sup>41</sup> See Justin, *Dialogue* 42.

<sup>42</sup> Justin, *Dialogue* 93.

*Dialogue*. Justin's strategy here is to show how Jews misunderstood these commandments by interpreting them literally. In some cases Jewish error results from the hidden nature of the truth, which is part of God's design. In most cases, however, it is the fault of the Jews. It results from a positive effort on their part to distort the Scriptures, for which they are culpable. Justin lays the blame chiefly at the feet of the teachers. He claims that Trypho, and by implication Jews in general, have been "instructed by teachers who are ignorant of the meaning of the Scriptures."<sup>43</sup> Justin maintains, as does the *Epistle of Barnabas*, that the Scriptures belong to Christians, not Jews, because only Christians understand them.<sup>44</sup> Jewish teachers, he claims, are "incapable of understanding the truths spoken by God."<sup>45</sup>

The charge of misunderstanding of Scripture becomes crucial in the interpretation of such passages as Isa 7:14. Trypho claims that Justin has mistranslated this verse: "The quotation is not 'Behold a virgin (*parthenos*) shall conceive and bear a son,' but 'Behold a young woman (*neanis*) shall conceive and bear a son.'<sup>46</sup> Trypho further maintains that the verse is a reference to the birth of Hezekiah and that the prophecy was fulfilled in the birth and life of this king of Judea. He charges that the Christian belief in the virgin birth is very close to Greek mythology, and he compares it to the birth of Perseus to the virgin Danae, when "Zeus descended upon her in the form of a golden shower."<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Justin, *Dialogue* 9.

<sup>44</sup> See Justin, *Dialogue* 29.

<sup>45</sup> Justin, *Dialogue* 38.

<sup>46</sup> Justin, *Dialogue* 67.

<sup>47</sup> Justin, *Dialogue* 67.

In response Justin says that the charge of inaccurate translation is a device which the Jewish teachers use to discredit Christian faith and to advance their own claims. "For whenever there arises in the Scriptures an evident contradiction of their silly and conceited doctrine, your teachers boldly affirm that it was not so written in the original text."<sup>48</sup> Justin claims to prove that the Septuagint (LXX) translation is accurate, but his method for doing so does not include a comparison with a Hebrew text, a method espoused neither by Trypho nor Justin.<sup>49</sup> Justin's initial proof is to insist on the conformity of the LXX with Christian faith. The sum of his argument is that Isa 7:14 reads *parthenos* instead of *neanis*, because Jesus was born of a virgin and this birth was anticipated by the prophet Isaiah. Later, he adds another proof. He observes that Isaiah says that the birth of the son is to be a sign, but there is nothing extraordinary about a young woman conceiving after sexual intercourse. The integrity of the verse itself, he claims, depends on reading *parthenos* instead of *neanis*, for otherwise the sign loses its significance.<sup>50</sup>

Justin is an early representative of an emerging Christian tradition of denigrating literal interpretations of OT texts. He identifies such interpretation as Jewish, and his method of interpretation is an implicit admission that, for many texts, literal interpretation does not produce an understanding of the underlying unity of OT and NT. He and other opponents of Marcion were thus compelled to find different ways to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures. At the beginning of the third century Tertullian is explicit in attacking Marcionite and

---

<sup>48</sup> Justin, *Dialogue* 68.

<sup>49</sup> That neither disputant refers to the Hebrew text probably indicates that Justin did not know Hebrew.

<sup>50</sup> See Justin, *Dialogue* 84.

Jewish literalism.<sup>51</sup> He makes a special effort to describe a non-literal method of interpretation: "So from now on I demand that our opponents acknowledge two special cases of prophetic diction. The first is that by which things future are sometimes set down as if they had already taken place."<sup>52</sup> "Another form of speech will be that by which not a few things are set forth figuratively by means of enigmas and allegories and parables, and are to be understood otherwise than as they are written."<sup>53</sup> And Tertullian cites the example of Paul, who

[I]nterprets as concerning not oxen but ourselves that law which grants an unmuzzled mouth to the oxen that tread out the corn [cf. 1 Cor 9:9], and affirms that the rock that followed them to provide drink was Christ [cf. 1 Cor 10:4], in the same way as he instructs the Galatians that the two narratives of the sons of Abraham took their course as an allegory [cf. Gal 4:22ff.], and advises the Ephesians that that which was foretold in the beginning, that a man would leave his father and mother, and that he and his wife would become one flesh, is seen by him to refer to Christ and the Church [cf. Eph 5:31ff.].<sup>54</sup>

For Tertullian, a literal interpretation of the Scriptures is to be regarded as Jewish and hence deficient.

<sup>51</sup> Apparently most early Christian writers thought that Jewish interpretation was exclusively literal. However, Jewish writings of the proto-rabbinical period were quite varied, and many make abundant use of non-literal methods of interpretation. Nevertheless, the writings of Tertullian and others led Christians to avoid literal interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures since it would support Jewish and Marcionite beliefs.

<sup>52</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3, 5:2.

<sup>53</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3, 5:3.

<sup>54</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3, 5:4.

### 3. Conclusion

Marcion's predilection for a literal interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures has sometimes been explained by his alleged earlier contact with Jews in Pontus. R. Joseph Hoffmann goes so far as to say that Marcion himself was probably "a convert from the Jewish community in Pontus."<sup>55</sup> Although there is little support for this contention, Hoffmann is quite right to conclude, "There is no compelling evidence to support the judgment that Marcion's theology is anti-Jewish in design, and the familiar view that his 'rejection' of the OT made him the arch-antisemite of the ancient church is uninformed."<sup>56</sup> Marcion evidently was one of the first Christians to see that efforts to ground the new faith in the old faced several problems. He certainly is the first known to us to propose a simple if draconian solution to the problems: to regard the Hebrew Scriptures as valid, accurate, authoritative, and divinely inspired but irrelevant for Christian faith. In a sense, this solution freed Marcion and allowed him to interpret these Scriptures literally. He need acknowledge no obligation to see a pattern of prophecy and fulfillment that would relate Christian faith to the Hebrew Scriptures.

Marcion's opponents, however, were convinced not only that the Hebrew Scriptures were divinely inspired but that there was some kind of underlying unity between them and the story of Jesus and the church. The author of Acts maintained that the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures were fulfilled by Jesus and the early Church. He also made it clear that, for the most part, contemporary Jews, because of their rejection of the gospel, were no longer heirs of the promises. Beyond his use of the promise-fulfillment motif, the author of Acts gave little help to his successors in interpreting the

<sup>55</sup> Hoffmann, *Marcion*, 29.

<sup>56</sup> Hoffmann, *Marcion*, 231.

Hebrew Scriptures. Nonetheless, the belief in a basic link between the Hebrew Scriptures and the early Christians meant that interpreters such as Justin and Tertullian would generally prefer non-literal interpretations. In this way they could maintain the underlying unity of OT and NT.<sup>57</sup>

The Acts of the Apostles posed a problem that later Christians, such as Justin and Tertullian, would try to solve. In doing so, they would exemplify a developing tradition of anti-Judaism that went far beyond Marcion. Their claims may be summarized as: (1) The OT belongs to Christians, not Jews; (2) For many OT texts, literal interpretation, as used by Jews and Marcionites, is inappropriate and misleading; (3) Non-literal interpretation uncovers the true meaning of the OT texts and reveals its underlying unity with the NT.

I do not wish to project what might have been the course of history if Marcion had been victorious over his opponents. I do think, however, that it is a misreading of history to think of him as the arch-antisemite of the early church. On the contrary, Marcion's insistence on the literal interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures potentially created a bond of understanding between him and Jews that his opponents could not have achieved. Nor did they attempt to do so. Although they may have been aware of Jewish interpretations, as Justin exhibits, they were confident that their own non-literal interpretive methods supported Christian faith, as maintained in the Acts of the Apostles. Especially in terms of the claim that the OT belongs to Christians and not to Jews, we see not only the proto-

orthodox rejection of Marcionite theology, but also an illustration of early Christian supersessionism.<sup>58</sup>

In brief, the victory of proto-orthodox Christianity over the Marcionites was a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it secured the retention of the Hebrew Scriptures for Christian study. On the other, it opened the way to an increasingly virulent form of anti-Judaism.

---

<sup>58</sup> See Heikki Räisänen, "Marcion and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism: A Reappraisal," in *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays 1991-2000* (BibInt 59; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 191-205. Räisänen (200) wrote: "Catholic Christianity wrenched the Scripture from the Jews, reinterpreting it to fit its own experience. Covenantal symbols were appropriated by way of spiritualizing interpretation: actual circumcision was replaced with the circumcision of the heart, observance of the law with obedience to moral commands. Precisely because it was asserted that the Old Testament had already spoken of Jesus, the continuing existence of Judaism as a religion with rival claims to Scripture was felt to be a threat; ..." Note also the conclusion reached by Stephen Wilson: "Putting it simply, it is as if the Marcionite said to the Jew: 'Keep your God, your Scriptures, your Messiah, and your law; we consider them to be inferior, superseded in every way by the gospel.' The Catholic said: 'We'll take your God, your Messiah, your Scriptures, and some of your law; as for you, you are disinherited, cast into a limbo, and your survival serves only as a warning of the consequences of obdurate wickedness.' I would not like to be found defending either view of Judaism. ...Judaism is the loser in either case. Whether the Marcionite position, had it prevailed, would have led to the same sad consequences as the view of its opponents is hard to say. But it is worth a moment's reflection." (Wilson, "Marcion and the Jews," 58).

---

<sup>57</sup> It was not inevitable that later Christians would employ non-literal interpretive strategies. The Antiochenes of the third and fourth centuries were known to have emphasized the historical value and literal meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures, and even Origen, best known for his use of allegorical interpretation, did not deny that some biblical passages had literal meanings.