

HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn considers Tertullian and Marcion

NO. 4 - TERTULLIAN VS MARCION

Marcion



The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. (Dawkins, *The God Delusion*)¹

One of the surprising things about heresies is that they are never new, only recycled. The quote above could easily have been penned by one of the earliest of all heretics, Marcion (85-160 AD). Unlike famous

atheist author Dawkins, he was well placed *inside* the church, where he could cause the greatest harm. He was a consecrated bishop from Asia Minor (modern Turkey), who intensely disliked anything Jewish within the Christian faith. Especially the fighting and smiting, or even the creating and walking around in gardens. He suggested that someone must have tampered with the original version of the Bible, and he set out to rectify it.

For Marcion, the God of the New Testament was far nicer than the lower deity of the old. Not only did he seem less angry, he just seemed more dignified, and remained at a respectful distance to creation. Likewise, his son Jesus only *appeared* to share human flesh. So he never actually died on a cross or needed a bodily resurrection. In fact, Jesus was so other-worldly, he wasn't born in the usual messy fashion, but 'came down to Capernaum'² fully

formed, by some kind of celestial teleportation.

Whereas some heretics distort scripture, Marcion savaged it with a pair of scissors. Out went the entire Hebrew Bible. Out went all three of the gospels written by Jews. In what was the first recorded list of books of the Bible, he kept only a corrupted gospel of gentile Luke and ten letters of Paul. A radically anti-semitic and very 'new' testament.

Unfortunately Marcion was wealthy from his family's ship building trade and was able to make a huge donation to the church in Rome, which won him a great deal of influence. Eventually the church woke up to the danger of his pick and mix approach to Scripture, and expelled him in 144 with a full refund. But he had won many followers, and founded a rival church. 'Marcionites build churches like wasps build nests'³ complained one concerned onlooker.

Tertullian



The onlooker was Tertullian, 160-222 AD, a North African Berber and giant of the early church. He was scandalised by Marcion's approach to the Bible documents that had been carefully handed down from those entrusted with them, just one generation before.⁴ Comparing them with the precious cargo on one of Marcion's ships, he asked Marcion if he had ever tampered with the documents; a sacrilegious crime just as tampering with cargo would be. He ridiculed Marcion's 'discovery' of a hitherto unknown version of the gospels, which he recognised as a flagrant fiction: 'O Christ, most patient Lord, who suffered this interference with your revelation for so many years, until Marcion came to your rescue!' ⁵

Tertullian recognised Marcion's motives for inventing a

designer god, who would be less demanding of us: 'A better God has been found! He never takes offence, never gets angry, never punishes ... He forbids all crime, but only with words'. You can almost hear Marcion dreaming up a god made in his own image, with the words 'I like to think of god as ...'

Many recent authors have followed in Marcion's footsteps, discarding the most historically reliable texts for more palatable works of fiction. Dan Brown most recently suggested that the New Testament was corrupted, perhaps at the time of Constantine when the church and Roman Empire became inseparable. But thankfully, the work of safeguarding the 'good deposit'⁶ entrusted to the first Christians had been achieved two centuries before Constantine, within one generation of Jesus. Thanks to men such as Tertullian.

Tertullian was one of the first theologians to describe in detail how the old related to the new, without 'cutting God in two' as Marcion did. The God of the Hebrew Bible was just as much a God of grace as revealed by Jesus. Jesus spoke more on sin and judgment than anyone else in scripture,⁷ and showed

himself to be at one with the creator, as shown by many of his miracles. He also referred to the Hebrew Bible (the only one he ever read) as the highest authority in all matters. Indeed, he came to fulfil the Old Testament law and prophetic expectation,⁸ not to abolish it, as Marcion wanted.

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There is an irony here, though. In one sense we should be grateful for these early disputes. Dissenters like Marcion have been catalysts for mainstream Christians to clarify ideas central to the faith. Ironically then, orthodoxy has been the legacy of heretics. For instance, faithful Christians were so shocked by Marcion's butchery of the Bible, that they formalised the collection of books known today as the Bible, in what is referred to as the *canon*, named after a measuring stick. Only those books that measured up to the 'rule of faith', in terms of historical reliability, would be accepted as authoritative.

Tertullian was so immersed and captivated by the seamless story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, he went on to write prolifically on many topics, and shape a Christian worldview. For instance, he was the first to coin the word 'trinity' to describe the God of the Bible in three persons, in both Old and New Testaments. This was controversial to the Jews and is still a great mystery. But he was keen to submit to how God had revealed *himself*, rather than dream up a 'designer god' out of wish fulfilment. He was therefore rather sceptical about secular philosophy, famously asking 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Or the Academy with the Church?' This may sound a little anti-intellectual, but it was a Greek philosopher (often quoted by Dawkins) who most eloquently warned of the danger of creating gods in our own image. Xenophanes noted that different races drew gods to look precisely like them, and predicted that if animals could paint, lions would create lion gods, and horses horse gods, in their own likeness!⁹

conclusion

It's easy to side with Tertullian with hindsight. No orthodox church today teaches contempt

for the Old Testament or the God of the Jews, although anti-semitism has been all too common amongst many Christians until surprisingly recently. But more subtly, do we love the only Bible Jesus read, as much as he did?

Have you ever performed the smudge test? Take your Bible and look along the edge of the pages: which pages are worn and smudged from repeated reading? Just the New Testament and Psalms? Do we treat the Bible like a pick and mix selection, to be plundered for its sweet selection of comforting promises? Or are we willing to submit to the whole

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counsel of God,¹⁰ perhaps especially the parts we find difficult? These might be the parts we most need to hear, that prevent us from dreaming up a god made in our own image, but with no basis in reality. Will we follow Tertullian's brave example?

SUMMARY

Marcion's recycled heresies:

recognise these?

- The Old Testament has been rendered obsolete
- Jesus is too nice to be angry about sin
- Jesus didn't really have a body, die on a cross, or rise from the dead
- The New Testament has been corrupted, and needs revision

Tertullian's legacy

- Scripture is the way God has chosen to reveal himself
- The Bible is a seamless whole and should be revered in its entirety
- The concept of trinity explains how God can be simultaneously ruler, God incarnate and indwelling spirit

REFERENCES

1. Dawkins R. *The God Delusion*. London: Black Swan, 2007:51
2. A deliberate distortion of Luke 4:31
3. Tomkins S. *A Short History of Christianity*. Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2005:29
4. Luke 1:1-3
5. Cited by Tomkins S. *Loc cit.*
6. 2 Timothy 1:11-14
7. For instance see Matthew 25, Mark 13, Luke 10:8-14
8. Matthew 5:17-20
9. *Clement, Miscellanies V.110 and VII.22. Isn't it wonderful that it was a Christian church father who has preserved this philosopher's warning for Dawkins to quote at Christians?*
10. Acts 20:27