

Ascetic Christianity—Marcion

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1. Notes to add
 - a. Marcion a diaspora Jew who leaves Judaism for Christianity. Alienated by waves of violent millennialism in which Judaism sees trapped in. Comes to see Judaism while monotheistic as ultimately yet entangled within logic of cosmotheism's ethnic particularism and mimetic desire and violence, ie a religion of power and violence. Yahweh the creator of this cosmos and God of the Jews vs others.
 - b. Jesus universalism abrogates particularism and its violence. Not a political messianism but a spiritual messianism of liberation from this world altogether. World will end not in a violent overthrow of imperial cosmotheism but by species not continuing to reproduce, fade away. Pacifist spiritual messianism.
2. Welcome to this second lecture on the reception of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Last time we saw how Paul called for both a conversion away from the mimetic gods of desire and violence and a conversion towards an interior intimacy with the divine spirit within. Paul's first great advocate and disciple, Marcion of Sinope would radicalize Paul's language of conversion to outright dissociation from the world and its imperial gods of mimetic power, desire, violence and scapegoating. For Marcion, the God preached by Jesus was not the creator of *this* world at all. Jesus preached a God unknown not only to the Hellenistic Greeks, but even to the Jews. His Father was not a jealous and violent God of power and might like Yahweh in the "Old" Testament but rather a god of love and mercy, indeed a humble God of *non*-violence. The Father sent his son into this world not to avenge injustice, but to be scapegoated and killed. He sacrificed himself to set us free from all the gods of this world, including the god of the Jews.
3. Thus rather than a logic of recognition and conversion, for Marcion salvation lay in separating oneself from this world and its gods altogether. He effectively preached a gospel of dissociation from the created world, including from one's own body and its natural desires.
4. A recent early church historian, Marcus Vinzent has argued that despite his rejection of the Jewish God and the Jewish Scriptures, Marcion may well have been raised a Jew. To

Vincent, the cynical demonization of Jewish religion sounds like the cry of a disillusioned, once true believer.

5. But how had Yahweh betrayed his chosen people? By inspiring his prophets to preach a military Messiah returning to exact mimetic vengeance on his chosen people's oppressors. But such a call to fight fire with fire had only lead to repeated catastrophe. Over the century prior to Marcion, over a dozen messianic pretenders had stirred up rebellions against Rome only to end up crucified, together with the hundreds of supporters they had rallied to the cause. The revolt in Jerusalem in 70 had even resulted in the destruction of the temple itself. Marcion was himself an adult during the largest Messianic revolt in the early 130's. On the occasion of the Bar Kochba rebellion, Rome decided upon a final solution to their "Jewish problem," executing around 100,000 "rebels," enslaving even more and banishing all remaining Jews from Jerusalem and its vicinity. The city itself was razed and rebuilt as a Roman city under a new name, Aelia Capitolina, named after the emperor Hadrian's own clan. He furnished it with a new temple now dedicated to Jupiter and housing as well a statue of Hadrian, divinized. Marcion became convinced of the demonic futility of fighting the Roman Empire on its own terms.
6. Born and raised in Sinope on the Black Sea at the turn of the first century, Marcion would have gotten wind of a new non-violent, pacifist form of Jewish Messianism from local diaspora Jews converted by Paul a generation earlier. A disillusioned, cynical Jew, turned restless religious seeker, Marcion decided to dedicate his life to the "gospel" of Paul. In fact he would interpret Paul's critique of mimetic desire and violence even more radically than Paul himself. In part this may have been due to Marcion's feeling of betrayal. But it may also have been because Marcion had so much more to lose from these messianic rebellions. For Marcion was a wealthy shipping magnate, who transported grain from the north shores of the Black Sea, in present day Ukraine, to Rome. His business depended upon peace and security in the Eastern Mediterranean. Messianic revolts were not only bad for Jews they were also bad for business.
7. Upon his conversion to Christ, Marcion appears to have turned away from his prior lifestyle of wealth and power altogether, for a simpler, more austere, ascetical way of life. In effect Marcion would turn against mimetic desire as thoroughly as mimetic violence.

He freely gave away a sizable fortune to the poor Christian communities in Rome when he moved there to set up his own Christian house church and school. Unlike Paul, Marcion was not conflicted between mimetic desires of the flesh and spiritual inspiration. He was all in.

8. Marcion also took it upon himself to not only edit the Gospel according to Mark preached by Paul, but he amplified it with sayings of Jesus circulating among the Christian churches in Asia Minor (identified by nineteenth century exegetes as “Q” for Quelle, “source” in German.. He also set about gathering letters written by Paul to the network of churches he had founded.
9. When Marcion moved to Rome at around 135 CE, he brought with him his collection of writings, divided into three parts: the first part, entitled the *Antitheses* highlighted the novelty of Jesus life and teachings by juxtaposing quotes from the Law and the Prophets with some teaching or action of Jesus that directly contradicted them. The second part was his Pauline redaction of the Gospel according to Mark, referring to it simply as “*the Gospel*” or *Evangelion*, The third part was an anthology of the letters of Paul he had collected, which he dubbed the *Apostolikos*, that is, the “Writings of the Apostle.” He referred to all three as “the *New Testament*”, to set it off over against the “*Old Testament*” of the Jewish Law and Prophets, now rendered obsolete.
10. Now Marcion did not claim that the writings of the “Old” Testament were false. Yahweh was the creator, but the creator of this world riven by mimetic desire and violence. However, Yahweh was not the God proclaimed and personified in Jesus. Rather Yahweh acted just like all the other gods of imperial cosmotheism. He was a jealous god, tolerating no other gods before him. He was a partial god, who favored his chosen people over all others. And he was a god to be approached in fear and trembling, like a slave before an imperious master, rather than like a son towards his loving Father.
11. Yahweh could even turn against his own people when they disobeyed him. He was an intimidating god of justice without mercy, a warrior god who called for genocide against his enemies. In short, Yahweh was the very deification of power and might, the opposite of the God of love and forgiveness preached by Jesus.
12. Yahweh was not even a wise God, but like the other gods of cosmotheism, he was a god who could make mistakes and even be bribed by sacrificial offerings into changing his

mind. Far from being foretold in the law and the prophets, any more than in the poetry of Homer or Hesiod, Jesus announced the inbreaking of a God previously unknown to anyone. In effect, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was a radical rupture from *everyone's* ancestral religion. Jewish Christians could not no more remain Jews than Greek converts could continue to worship Apollo or Isis.

13. Marcion argued that Christianity called for a similarly radical break from creation. Christians would have to sever their ties to this world, not only morally but also socially, psychologically even corporeally. They would have to forswear not only mimetic desire but even natural bodily desires in the pursuit of a radical purity and a spiritual perfection wholly separate from this world and its gods. Sex even within marriage was *porneia*, And eating meat made you complicit in the butchery that produced it.
14. But then, how *was* this demonic world of mimetic power, desire and violence ever going to end, if not through a messianic Armageddon? Marcion's answer was that the world would end when women stopped bearing children. When Christians put a stick in the spoke of the natural world's endlessly whirling wheel of life and death. All would be saved when no more would be born. In the meanwhile, one could live like an angel in this passing world by disentangling oneself from the pull of mimetic desire and bodily passions, dissociating oneself from society, family and even one's own bodily desires to live in an angelic community of like-minded disciplined and determined free spirits.
15. Marcion's dissociation from sex also led to a dissociation from gender altogether in his communities. As critics would complain, Marcionite women also numbered among its prophets and teachers, ritual presiders and community leaders. The Marcionite church never strayed from the idealism of the early Paul that in the Christian assembly there were neither Jews nor Greeks, masters nor slaves, men nor women. In fact given the perils of childbirth (women's life expectancy was substantially lower than men's) and the trauma of abusive husbands (from which wives had no legal recourse), a life dedicated to celibacy could indeed be attractive, even inspiring, to young women. After all its not like they got to choose their husbands. Marriages were arranged by their families. By marrying a good provider, a wife would come to love her husband over time.
16. Virginity could be especially attractive and inspiring for strong willed women prophets , who could adopt the persona of the maiden spiritual warrior like Inanna, Anahita or

Athena, young virgins liberated from the demonic gods of this world, both those of nature and those of empire. For such women the Father's Kingdom of God had indeed already come.

17. In 144 a council of elders of all the Christian communities in Rome convened and invited Marcion to make the case for his ascetic Gospel of spiritual perfectionism. One might take the vast sum of wealth he had already donated to the community to be a gambit to become the new movements' patron. However he failed to convince the council of assembled elders and the two groups severed all ties. Marcion's gospel was not only too hostile to Judaism for Jewish Christians, it was just too idealistic for any ordinary human being who worked for a living and raised a family. In short it called for too radical a break with people's social, cultural, familial and corporeal lives. Ordinary Christians could not be expected to live extraordinary heroic lives of purity and spiritual perfection dissociated from the world around them. Marcion's donation was returned to him and he in turn dissociated himself from the rest of the Christian assemblies in Rome to found his own, ascetic celibate communities. They would still call themselves Christian, but they were "ex-communicated," expelled: from the larger network of other Christian assemblies in Rome.
18. Now you might think that a community of virgins would die out after the first generation, like would happen with the Shakers in nineteenth century America. But you would be wrong. Marcionite Christianity retained a lasting appeal. Its ascetical rejection of corporal and mimetic desire, its dissociation from all violence and its shunning of all social status, inspired generations of converts. It dissipated only when mainstream Christianity itself became the religion of the empire and could enforce its own "ortho-dox" or "right thinking" understanding of the Gospel.
19. But even after being forcibly suppressed, Marcion's idealistic spirituality of purity and perfection would continue, in a more domesticated form within the broader imperial church. For no sooner had the empire become Christian than monks and monasteries would make their appearance, all dedicated to a radical pursuit of spiritual perfection apart from the world and dissociated from their own bodies. Heroic radical Christianity was tolerable, but only in small doses, among a spiritual elite that did not treat its

idealism as the norm for all, or look down upon the broader assembly of ordinary Christians, the universal or “Catholic” Church.