

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Minimised Heretic

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Marcion and the making of a heretic. God and Scripture in the second century.
By Judith M. Lieu. Pp. xvi + 502. Cambridge–New York: Cambridge
University Press, 2015. £70. 978 1 107 02904 0

In the last five years, more monographs about Marcion have been published than during the hundred years before. What is it about this man that make scholars worldwide feel the need to interact with him so intensively? And why now, of all times?

One of the reasons for this sudden ‘Marcion-Renaissance’ is precisely that long-term absence of relevant scholarship. For almost a century, scholars had little else to refer to but the classic work by Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), although not without constantly reminding their readers how outdated this monograph actually is. Therefore, it was only a matter of time until the need for a new outlook on the life and thought of Marcion would spark some academic activity. The other reason for Marcion’s popularity among scholars is the fact that he operates at the cross-roads of New Testament studies and patristics, thus attracting the attention of academics from both groups.

With the enormous amount of scholarship being published recently, authors are all the more required to justify their own endeavour by offering something special to their audience. Thus, when reviewing yet another book about Marcion, such as Judith Lieu’s *Marcion and the making of a heretic*, the first question the present reviewer asks himself is: ‘What does it have to offer that might still surprise us?’

An ancient Rorschach test

That Lieu's book is strikingly distinctive can already be seen from its first, and largest, part 'The Polemical Making of Marcion the Heretic' (pp. 15–180), in which the author presents not one, but several 'Marcions': Justin's Marcion, Irenaeus' Marcion, Tertullian's Marcion etc. We encounter the main character of the monograph through the eyes and the imagination of his opponents. Given the fact that none of Marcion's own writings survived, a survey of his adversaries and their assertions is part of any conventional Marcionite study. Lieu, however, does not merely paraphrase the anti-heretical reports, a process she labels as 'wildly misleading' (p. 8). She uses Marcion as a kind of ancient Rorschach test, assuming that the statements by his opponents reveal as much if not more about themselves than about their actual target. Considering Tertullian for example, Marcion's most ardent adversary, Lieu points out that the two men in fact share many characteristics: 'an ascetic rigorism, a pessimism about the human condition, and a negative evaluation of how far a true understanding of God was evinced by, or possible to, those before Christ, as a well as a love of antithesis and of apparent contradiction' (p. 51). Therefore, according to Lieu, Tertullian's immense preoccupation with Marcion is caused by a complex of 'antithesis and attraction' (p. 84).

The problem with such an approach is that the reader may start to wonder whether this 'Marcion' was actually a historical figure or rather some sort of chimera, made up by hostile theologians. One might easily feel reminded of the quest for the historical Jesus, in which some scholars even brought forward the claim that Jesus of Nazareth never existed, but was merely a projection of later generations. Obviously, Lieu does not deny the historicity of Marcion at any point in her book, but she does have a tendency to minimise his distinctive contribution.

By Scripture alone

In the second part of her book ('Marcion through his Scriptures', pp. 183–289), Lieu deals with Marcion 'as editor and interpreter' of his 'Gospel' and his 'Apostolikon'. Without a doubt, this is the part to which many scholars will turn immediately, trying to find out where Lieu stands in the controversial debate about Marcion's role in the formation of the New Testament canon. However, such scholars might be slightly disappointed to find Lieu's results to be rather anti-climactic:

Thus, both at the macro- and at the micro-level any solution to the origins of Marcion's 'Gospel' – or indeed of all Gospel relationships – that presupposes

relatively fixed and stable written texts, edited through a careful process of comparison, excision, or addition, and reorganisation, seems doomed to become mired in a tangle of lines of direct or indirect dependency, which are increasingly difficult to envisage in practice. Marcion's 'Gospel' is to be located in the midst of these multiple trends (pp. 208–9).

In other words: the question of which came first or who changed whom does not apply in this case.

While it is certainly wise to point out the intrinsic uncertainties surrounding this problem, Lieu's thesis is continuous with her aim of minimising Marcion's theological contribution, assuming that his editorial work was virtually zero. Instead, he is being presented as a mere interpreter of the texts, both for the Gospel and for Paul. Lieu concludes that 'Marcion's Paul was evidently not so much a mutilated Paul as an interpreted one' (p. 269). However, at the same time she asserts that 'Clearly for Marcion Paul's teaching established the incommensurability between the Creator and the Christ, revealer of another God' (p. 261). It is at this point that the reviewer cannot help but wonder: is it really possible to portray the Apostle Paul as teaching an antagonism between the Creator and the Christ without mutilating his message? Is such a view really within the realm of interpretation?

Ironically, in this particular point Lieu is in line with the aforementioned Adolf von Harnack: 'Marcion's attitude towards the Law does not differ from that of Paul significantly, if the supposition of two different gods is neglected.'¹ While arguing from two completely different angles and with two completely different agendas, both Lieu and Harnack fail to understand the radical dualism which is at the heart of Marcion's teaching and which cannot be attributed to the Apostle without hugely distorting his texts, no matter how creative an exegete one may be. It is exactly for this reason that one of the first reviewers of Harnack's monograph, Walter Bauer (1877–1960), questioned the dependence of Marcion on Paul as a whole:

I do not believe that Marcion found his good god in the letters of Paul and read himself into his opposition against the OT and its god from there. His thoughts have to be imposed on the apostle of the heathen too forcibly to be actually derived from him.²

¹ 'Marcions Stellung zum Gesetz unterscheidet sich also nicht stark von der des Paulus, wenn man die letzte Voraussetzung der beiden Götter wegläßt': Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (1921), 3rd edn, Darmstadt 1996, 108.

² 'Ich glaube nicht, daß Marcion seinen guten Gott in den Paulusbriefen gefunden und daß er sich an ihnen in seinen Widerspruch gegen das AT und seinen Gott hineingelesen hat. Seine Gedanken müssen dem Heidenapostel zu gewaltsam aufgezwungen werden, als daß sie von diesem stamen könnten': Walter Bauer, review, 'Harnack.

It is mainly due to Ulrich Schmid's excellent study that we have a reliable reconstruction of Marcion's *Apostolikon* available, including a conclusive methodology according to which Marcion performed his changes to the text. In a way, Schmid is also a minimalist, but only in the sense that he does not consider every variant in the Marcionite text to be necessarily of Marcionite origin. Only in those cases in which any other possibility for the existence of the variant (copyist's mistake etc.) can be excluded is he willing to see Marcion's own hand.³ Based on this principle, Schmid was able to show that Marcion did not perform changes or additions to the text, but merely deleted longer coherent passages, including one or more of these topics: (1) Abraham as the Father of all believers; (2) Israel as point of reference for the Church; (3) judgement according to the Law; (4) Christ as the one in whom all things were created.⁴ In his own monograph on Marcion, the present author provided a similar set of rules according to which Marcion deleted passages from the Gospel.⁵

Obviously, any theory about the methodology of Marcion must remain speculative. Maybe Lieu has chosen the better part by conceding that the evidence is too sparse for such theories. Still, the condemnation of Marcion by his contemporaries and later generations calls for an explanation. Heated debate over the meaning of Scripture was, as Lieu points out correctly, most common among Christian theologians of the second century and beyond. However, difference of opinion does not automatically result in anathema. When considering the exegesis of Irenaeus, for instance, we find that he not only differs from Marcion, but also with Marcion's contemporary Justin and many more. Why did the bishop of Lyon accuse Marcion, and him alone, of mutilating the Scriptures and not others with whom he disagreed? Because he could tell the difference between disagreeing about the exact meaning of a certain parable and disagreeing about whether the Father of Jesus Christ is also the Creator of the world. Second-century Rome may well be the great laboratory of Christian theology, but in every laboratory, ancient or modern, certain ground rules apply.

Action and counter-action

Time and again, Marcion has served as the pivotal point for explaining a variety of ecclesial developments within the Early Church. In his monumental work *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (1968), Hans Freiherr von

Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott', *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* clxxxv (1923), 7.

³ Cf. Ulrich Schmid, *Marcion und sein Apostolos*, Berlin 1995, 31. ⁴ *Ibid.* 254–5.

⁵ Cf. Sebastian Moll, *The arch-heretic Marcion*, Tübingen 2010, 92–8.

Campanhausen established the theory that the formation of the New Testament canon was above all an anti-Marcionite reaction: ‘With Marcion’s bible, the question of a new canon, i.e. the question of the “real” testimonies for the original gospel as the principle for all later tradition and as the rule for the ecclesial annunciation was put once and for all.’⁶ Far more recently, it was Markus Vinzent who claimed that Marcion lies not only behind the formation of the New Testament canon, but behind the writing of the canonical Gospels as such, particularly by establishing an increasing interest in the resurrection of Christ in the middle of the second century.⁷ Also, Marcion has been considered a decisive factor in the formalisation of anti-Jewish argument in the second and third centuries. It was David Efroymson who first called attention to the fact that in the case of Tertullian, for instance, the largest block of anti-Jewish material is not to be found in his *Adversus Judaeos*, but in his *Adversus Marcionem*:

The question was not the earlier question ‘Does the law bind’, nor the further question ‘Why not?’ These were the questions of the original debate with Judaism. Here the question came from Marcion, and was about God: ‘If, as “everyone” agrees, the law is to be abandoned – especially since it is so clearly “inferior” to what Christians do – how can one take seriously the God who enacted this inferior law in the first place?’

Tertullian’s answer (and the answer of Justin and Irenaeus) was as follows: the (admitted) ‘inferiority’ of God’s ‘old’ law and/or cult cannot be due to any inferiority on God’s part, but must be accounted for by the ‘inferiority’ of the people with whom God was working at that time.⁸

In accordance with her agenda of minimising Marcion’s impact on the history of the Church, Lieu rejects such models of action and counteraction and prefers a ‘richly contextual one’ (p. 295). Unlike in the case of Marcion’s Scriptures, where one might feel a certain appreciation for Lieu’s refusal to commit herself to a definitive position regarding Marcion’s place within the trends of the second century, in the case of Christian-Jewish relations, the shift between the time before and after Marcion is so striking that it cannot be ignored. As Efroymson correctly pointed out, the original debate between ‘Christians’ and ‘Jews’ was

⁶ ‘Durch Markions Bibel war die Frage eines neuen Kanons, d.h. die Frage nach den “echten” Zeugnissen für das ursprüngliche Evangelium als Maßstab aller späteren Überlieferung und als Norm für die kirchliche Verkündigung, ein für alle Mal gestellt. Die Kirche konnte in ihrer damaligen Lage, wenn sie sich behaupten wollte, diese Frage nicht überhören’: Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel*, Tübingen 1968, 193.

⁷ Markus Vinzent, *Christ’s Resurrection in early Christianity and the making of the New Testament*, London 2011. See also his *Marcion and the dating of the Synoptic Gospels*, Leuven 2014.

⁸ David P. Efroymson, ‘The patristic connection’, in Alan Davies (ed.), *Antisemitism and the foundations of Christianity*, New York 1979, 101.

about the observance of the law, a debate which dominates the first century and becomes tangible in many of the New Testament texts. With this question ‘settled’, Christians begin to wonder why God gave such a law in the first place. Until the time of Marcion, there is no clear distinction between the ‘Old Testament’ and the ‘New’. It is taken for granted that the Old Testament is a Christian book, either unreflectively as in Ignatius, or in deliberate dissociation from Jewish traditions as in the Letter of Barnabas. One generation later, Justin puts the following lines in his *Dialogue with Trypho*:

But blame it on your own wickedness that God can be calumniated by foolish people who claim that He did not always teach everyone the same justice. For to many people these instructions seemed absurd and unworthy of God, since they had not received the grace to understand that He called your people, who did evil und suffered from illness of the soul, to conversion of the spirit.⁹

Among the ‘foolish people’ we can certainly identify Marcion, but also the Gnostic Ptolemy, who, in his letter to Flora, is himself already reacting to Marcion’s theology.¹⁰ Justin can no longer ignore the discrepancies between the ‘Old Testament’ and the ‘New’. Marcion ultimately destroyed that possibility by publishing his *Antitheses*. However, Justin also refuses to accept Marcion’s solution of two different gods. In other words, he has to explain why one and the same god, who is almighty and omniscient, gives different laws to different people at different times. His own solution may be more ‘orthodox’, but with far more tragic consequences: Justin blames the Jews and thus establishes the basis for centuries of anti-Jewish polemics within the Church.

This radical change in the Christian view of the Old Testament (and its people) happens precisely between 140 and 160 CE, i.e. precisely in the time of Marcion’s emergence.¹¹ While considering this to be a mere coincidence is certainly possible, however, among the scarce pieces of evidence from the second century, one is not likely to find a stronger case for the immediate influence of one theologian’s activity.

Context is everything

It is not until page 295 of her book that Lieu addresses the question of Marcion’s biography. However, even in this third and last part, ‘The Second-Century Shaping of Marcion’ (pp. 293–432), Marcion does not

⁹ Justin, *Dialogue* 30.1 (my translation).

¹⁰ Cf. Moll, *Marcion*, 14–17, 144–7.

¹¹ This statement is based on the consensual dating of the Letter of Barnabas (130s), of Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 160), and of the emergence of Marcion (140s). As for the dating of Ignatius, unanimity has not been reached. However, most scholars do not place him after the time of Marcion.

become tangible as a person: 'It will not be possible to give an incontrovertible account of Marcion's life, not even of his life as a Christian (and as a "heretic"); still less will it be possible to use such a life, including traditions such as his career as a sailor or ship-owner, to explain the development of his teaching and his relationship with the broader Christian traditions' (p. 297). Instead of providing her readers with a precise biography of Marcion, Lieu attempts to establish 'a plausible context' (p. 297) for him, a context which starts with Justin Martyr, who, according to Lieu, led a life 'parallel' to that of Marcion. The following pages (pp. 298–317) contain a thorough analysis of Justin's multi-faceted context, including his social context, his literary context, his philosophical context and his Jewish context. Lieu is well aware of the surprising nature of such a comparison between Justin and Marcion:

A context that brings Marcion not just over against Justin but also alongside him, as the founder of a school, if not the first of such, may seem very different from the conventional, still 'heresiological', view of Marcion as more of an ecclesial figure, being ejected from, or breaking decisively from, 'the Roman church' and forming an independent church with his own structures and hierarchy. (p. 322)

This sentence contains Lieu's agenda in a nutshell. The present reviewer is intrigued, not least because he argues for the 'conventional view of Marcion as an ecclesial figure'. He also, at least in one case, adheres to the 'antagonistic model' (p. 295), according to which the rise of anti-Jewish argument from the middle of the second century onwards can be explained as reaction to Marcion and his theology. This present reviewer's views represent, therefore, in a manner of speaking, the exact antithesis of those of Lieu. As such, it is unlikely that he will be persuaded by the model presented here, however much he may appreciate its learned and comprehensive nature. Lieu provides a truly innovative and stringent interpretation, even though it is an interpretation of Marcion's context rather than of Marcion himself.

Shew our critics a great man, a Luther for example, they begin to what they call 'account' for him; not to worship him, but take the dimensions of him, – and bring him out to be a little kind of man! He was the 'creature of the Time,' they say; the Time called him forth, the Time did everything, he nothing – but what we the little critic could have done too!¹²

Apparently, Judith Lieu is exactly the kind of critic that Thomas Carlyle had in mind when writing these lines. Certainly, there is no need to return to the nineteenth century and its theories of 'great men', much less for

¹² Thomas Carlyle, *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history* (1841), New Haven 2013, S. 29.

Marcion to be portrayed as a man of such superhuman greatness. Still, one question remains: Do we really need to contextualise a man to such a degree that all his individuality, his creativity and, yes, his greatness is destroyed? Maybe Lieu does. After all, she is part of a postmodern context.