

# HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN.

## Lecture 5 – Editing & Interpreting God!

### Introduction

The Christian faith is simple, but not simplistic. It is plain but not always understandable. “It does have mysteries, complexities, and apparent paradoxes or antinomies, which no amount of theological inquiry or philosophical speculation seems to be able to resolve fully”<sup>1</sup> These apparent contradictions are difficult to embrace even though they are plainly stated in holy Scripture. I have often noted that when men try to make sense of these things, error creeps in. One cannot fully grasp the apparent paradoxes of the inspired Scriptures (Did man write; or God write? Yes!); the sovereignty of God and the moral necessity of man; the union of God and man in Christ, and so on. A number of erroneous views of Christian theology occur because someone tried to harmonize what cannot be comprehended by the human mind.

Since the early days of Christianity, people had difficulty harmonizing polar opposites like the wrath of God versus the mercy of God; like the origin of evil and a good-God creator; like the relationship of Law and Gospel (e.g. the Judaizers, Roman Catholic Church, etc.). We are told that early Christians had no difficulty seeing the Divine in Jesus; but struggled with seeing the humanity in Jesus. That was the problem that Gnosticism sought to resolve.

### Marcion of Sinope – The First Great Heretic

Enter Marcion the son of a bishop who was highly influenced by a Gnostic teacher named Cerdo.<sup>2</sup> Cerdo believed that “the God of the Old Testament was different from the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ . . . the former was sheer justice; whereas the God of the New Testament is loving and gracious”<sup>3</sup>

Although we have seen that the Judaizers and the Gnostics comprised much of the heresy of the early Church, they were seen as false ideologies infecting the Church. No one stood out as a leader to whom the Church labeled as a Heretic. But in comes Marcion in A.D. 140 and “his garbled Christian views were firmly repudiated by the church in Rome and Marcion was excommunicated in A.D. 144”<sup>4</sup>. He is called

### The First Great Heretic.

Another difference about Marcion compared to earlier heresies is that the former heterodoxies never really formed into separate organizations and churches. “Marcion possessed something that none of the

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Harold O.J., Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 62

<sup>2</sup> Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity, Ed. Dr. Tim Dowley, Lion Publishing, Herts, England, 1977, Page 102

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Page 102

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Page 102

gnostic teachers seems to have shared: a high level of organizational ability.”<sup>5</sup> “The Marcionites set up their own churches, modeled on orthodox congregations. They had their own orders of clergy and rituals.”<sup>6</sup>

What did Marcion and his followers believe? Like the Gnostics, the Marcionites replaced the historical event of the fall of man with a notion of an alien god. This god, the god of the Old Testament, makes mistakes, and repents, knows nothing of grace, but only strict justice. The god is responsible for the misery of man; and he gave us the Old Testament with all its features . . .”<sup>7</sup> “The Old Testament god was basically vengeful and the author of evil. God [He] was solely concerned for the Jewish people, for whom he was prepared to destroy all others.”<sup>8</sup> “According to Marcion, the God of the Old Testament . . . wanted to keep humankind subject to himself, while Christ was sent by the real supreme God to reintroduce the old religion of love and peace.”<sup>9</sup>

When it came to harmonizing the apparent conflict between the Law and the Gospel, Marcion “concluded that the Torah had been totally superseded by the Gospel. It seems to me that the conclusion was that the Old Testament was for the Jews and about the Jews therefore it has no relevance. Therefore he discounted the Old Testament. This required him to also disown any New Testament writings that seemed to favor Jewish readers.”<sup>10</sup>

Now Marcion believed that Jesus was the revelation of the “nice” God, the true God. “Marcion denied that Christ ever was truly incarnate.”<sup>11</sup> He did not believe in the virgin birth of Christ but that Jesus “suddenly appeared in the synagogue in Capernaum in A.D. 29 as a grown man . . . He also believed that Christ’s human experiences and sufferings were merely apparent, not real.”<sup>12</sup> Because Marcion didn’t believe in the real incarnation “there was no logical place in his system for a real Second Coming.”<sup>13</sup> “Christ’s humanity was denied, so therefore salvation was only for the soul.”<sup>14</sup>

Some good came out of this Marcion heresy. The struggle provided an opportunity for the church to clarify several major doctrines. For one thing, Marcion and his “New Testament” — the first to be compiled — forced the church to recognize a core canon of New Testament Scripture books: the four gospels and the letters of Paul. The Old Testament was also reaffirmed as Christian Scripture; Tertullian

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 61

<sup>6</sup> Eerdman’s *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Ed. Dr. Tim Dowley, Lion Publishing, Herts, England, 1977, Page 103

<sup>7</sup> Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 61

<sup>8</sup> Eerdman’s *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Ed. Dr. Tim Dowley, Lion Publishing, Herts, England, 1977, Page 102

<sup>9</sup> Holcomb, Justin S.. *Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2)* (p. 45). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Eerdman’s *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Ed. Dr. Tim Dowley, Lion Publishing, Herts, England, 1977, Page 102

<sup>11</sup> Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 64

<sup>12</sup> Eerdman’s *Handbook to the History of Christianity*, Ed. Dr. Tim Dowley, Lion Publishing, Herts, England, 1977, Page 102-103

<sup>13</sup> Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 65

<sup>14</sup> Holcomb, Justin S.. *Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2)* (p. 49). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

declared the Hebrew Bible is indeed the Word of God, arguing in “Against Marcion” that the two Testaments of the Bible are not contrary. At the same time, the church affirmed that the New Testament books are to be considered as fully authoritative as God’s revelation in the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>15</sup>

### Modern Marcionism

This idea that the god of the Old Testament is a different god than the one of the New Testament emerges in several ways. People find it difficult to accept a god that executes his followers if they pick up sticks on the Sabbath, or wipe out generations of people in a seemingly genocide so his followers can have their land. This severity of God is hard to reconcile with love and mercy. The god is partial to one nation at the expense of others. He appears to be unfair and a racist.

“Richard Dawkins, in his New York Times bestseller *The God Delusion*, writes, “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.”<sup>16</sup>

What ends up happening, is that we find people “rejecting the Old Testament. Rejecting anything that sounds too Jewish from the New Testament. Completely divorcing the Old Testament from the New Testament.”<sup>17</sup>

The problems that Marcion tried to resolve in his heretical system of belief are not uncommon today. We could reframe them this way in the forms of questions:

1. How can a God of wrath and justice also be a God of grace and mercy?
2. Where does sin come from if God is holy and perfect and He is the creator of all things?
  - a. Or ... How can a holy and loving God permit evil?
3. What is the relationship between the Old and the New Testament? Or is there any?
4. How do Christians blend obedience to the Law, good works and free grace and mercy through faith alone?
5. How can an infinite, eternal God take on human flesh and be both at the same time?
6. How can a universal, holy God be pro-Israel at the expense of other ethnicities?

Marcion was trying to resolve a lot of problems and his solution amounted to a notion of several gods and a complete divorce of the Old and New Testaments. You can see that to wrestle with all these topics would each take a lecture series. What we don’t want to repeat is to fall into a simplistic solution by trying to harmonize apparent contradictions and difficulties through human reasoning. Here is an abbreviated approach to Marcion’s problems but perhaps it will help in our thinking process.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, Pages 51-52

<sup>16</sup> Holcomb, Justin S.. *Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2)* (p. 52). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Rose Publishing. *Creeks and Heresies* . Rose Publishing. Kindle Edition.

1. By affirming the trustworthiness and reliable of Scripture (meaning all 66 inspired books) both the nature and the character of God are clearly defined rendering Him righteous in all His works. (Psalm 145:17). The Scriptures adequately explain the use of the Old Testament; it's relation to the New. The Scriptures adequately explain the relationship of obedience to free grace.
2. Many of Marcion's issues with the severity of God and love, mercy and kindness find their solution in the person of Jesus Christ, the Cross of Christ and in the New Covenant. Marcion's problem with Israel, its role and eschatology find its solution in the New Covenant.
3. There still remain some mysteries, like the union of humanity and deity in the Person of Christ. There will always be some of this nature. This is where one must bow before an infinitely wise and holy God and trust in His character when we fail to understand his ways.
4. Marcion's problem with evil was addressed well by Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. As Greg Koukl writes, "Augustine's approach was not just brilliant; it was practical. His insight is intellectually credible *and* emotionally satisfying in that it gives hope and offers meaning to the Christian trying to make sense out of life in a fallen world."<sup>18</sup> I encourage you to read Augustine's City of God if this is an area you want help in.

Polycarp, according to Irenaeus in his work, *Adversus Haereses*, had an encounter with Marcion: "And Polycarp himself replied to Marcion, who met him on one occasion, and said, 'Dost thou know me?' 'I do know thee, the first-born of Satan.'"<sup>19</sup> The denial of the unity of the Godhead, attributing evil to God and acting as an editor to what God did and said is heretical and demonic.

### Application

Rather than fall into heretical beliefs, is there a process whereby a sincere believer seeks to come to a place of peacefulness regarding hard-to-understand matters in Christianity? Here are some things to consider:

- A. Faith in who God is release's the conflict in what God does. Faith remembers who we are and who God is. "*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.*" (Psalm 131:1, ESV)
- B. Because of your knowledge of God you can affirm that a logical, answer exists, whether you will understand it or not. Isaiah recording the words of God wrote, "*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*" (Isaiah 55:9, ESV). Therefore we don't define love, justice, mercy, etc. by our own definitions.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.str.org/articles/augustine-on-evil#.XZ4SqEZKi00>

<sup>19</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcionism>

- C. All God intended us to know, we can know. Moses instructs us, *“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”* (Deuteronomy 29:29, ESV) (cf: Romans 11:33)
- D. The resolution of so-called “problem texts” in the Bible can only be adequately resolved by the Bible. The Reformation principle was this: *sola Scriptura*. If Scripture is the final authority and adjudicator on matters of life and doctrine, then Scripture will interpret Scripture. This not only includes contextual examination along with historical and grammatical appreciation; it includes applying Biblical theology to the text: i.e, the New Testament explains the Old; and the clear clarify the unclear. Again, we recall the words of Augustine: *“The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed, the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed.”*

The very practical lesson for us today is to learn the lesson that we cannot resolve Biblical difficulties human reasoning. We are warned therefore not to try to reconcile and rationalize what God says is true even though we don't understand it. Scripture is the editor and interpreter of God. We are not. Elizabeth Elliott is quoted as saying:

“God is God. If He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in His will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to.”