

The Christian Canon for Tertullian : The Position and Criterion of the Bible in his polemic against Marcion¹⁾

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1. Introduction

One authentic scriptural Canon must exist — in the moment when Marcion was convinced of this, a certain difficult attempt approached him concerning the literary gospel which he possessed. That is, the attempt to bring such gospel into existence for himself.²⁾

When Marcion of Sinope (A.D.85-165)³⁾ made his decision to attempt to define an authentic canon, as Adolf von Harnack presumed, and when he actually compiled his Canon which consisted of Luke and ten Pauline Epistles,⁴⁾ it was clear that a

1) This short essay was originally presented at the inaugural conference of the Western Pacific Rim Patristics Society (WPRPS). The conference was held at the University of the Sacred Heart Tokyo in 2004. I would like to thank Professor Karen J. Schaffner for kindly proofreading it.

2) Harnack, Adolf von, Marcion : Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott, Leipzig 1924, 2te Auflage, 1996, p.39.

3) Moll raises an objection to this chronological period of Marcion's life. Marcion arrived at Rome in 144, and a short time later he established his own church. If he was born in A.D. 85, he started a revolutionary movement at over sixty years old, and that is highly unlikely. Moll, Sebastian, The Arch-Heretic Marcion, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 250, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2010, p.26.

great threat for the church was generated. In fact, several church fathers, such as Justin Martyr (A.D.c.100-c.165) and Theophilus of Antioch (later A.D. 2C.),⁵⁾ made attempts to refute Marcion and his Canon. From this fact one can ascertain that this was a situation not to be disregarded.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the positioning of the Canon of Marcion for Tertullian (A.D.c.160-c.225) who tried to refute Marcion with his Canon in hand,⁶⁾ and the meaning of the Scriptures and its exegesis for the church and heresies. As we know, the Canon of Marcion excluded the Old Testament from the Scriptures, so it will be very significant for the study of the church's stance to the Old Testament in the second century to clarify how Tertullian tried to attest the importance of the Old Testament. Furthermore, since the heretic church, which was based on the teachings of the those like the Gnostic writers or Marcion, also made use of the Scriptures and interpreted them, it was paramount for Tertullian to explain why the exegesis of the orthodox church was duly authorized and why that of the heretic church was filled with numerous errors.

Based on this I want to try to clarify three points in this text. The first is how Tertullian understood the Canon of Marcion, that is, how he evaluated the Canon compiled by, in his opinion, a heretic. Secondly, I want to examine Tertullian's attitude toward and opinion about the separation of the Old Testament and the New Testament and his assessment of the importance of their continuity. The last point

4) Marcion called these epistles Apostlikon. Its contents and order are following : Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Laodiceans (Ephesians), Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon.

5) Although their works don't exist any more, a lot of scholars pointed out that Tertullian referred to these works when he wrote the refutation against Marcion. Cf. Quispel, Gilles, De Bronnen van Tertullianus' Adversus Marcionem, Leiden 1943, pp.12-13. ; Meijering, E. P., Tertullian Contra Marcion : Gotteslehre in der Polemik, Adversus Marcionem 1-2, Philosophia Patrum Volume III, Leiden 1977, p.1 ; Barnes, T. D., Tertullian : A historical and literary Study, Oxford 1985, 2ed., p.327.

6) According to Barnes, it was after the 4 volume of "*Adversus Marcionem*" that Tertullian had the text of the Marcion's Canon in hand. Barnes [1985], p.327.

concerns the relation of the heresies to the Scriptures, in other words, the positioning of the Scriptures between the Orthodox Church and the heretic church.

2. The Canon of Marcion

There is little doubt that the Canon of Marcion was a serious threat to Tertullian. One can deduce this because he zealously tried to refute his Canon in volumes 4 and 5 of “Adversus Marcionem” which included a large proportion of Tertullian’s literary works. In “de Praescriptione Haereticorum,”⁷⁾ however, which presumably was written before “Adversus Marcionem,”⁸⁾ Tertullian denied the Canon of Marcion very simply but with clarity.

For since Marcion separated the New Testament from the Old, he is (necessarily) subsequent to that which he separated, inasmuch as it was only in his power to separate what was (previously) united.⁹⁾ (De Praescriptione Haereticorum, xxx.9-10)

The point that Tertullian made an issue of was that of an additional act, that is Marcion’s separation of the Holy Scriptures. Before he detached the Old Testament

7) I used the Latin text from the edition of Refoulé and Schleyer in this paper. Tertullien, Traité de la prescription contre les hérétiques, R. F. Refoulé (ed.), Sources Chrétiennes, 46, Paris 1957 ; Tertullian, De Praescriptione Haereticorum vom Prinzipiellen Einspruch gegen die Häretiker, Dietrich Schleyer (hg.), Fontes Christiani, Band 42, Turnhout 2002. To translate this text into English, I extracted the text from the English translation of “the Ante-Nicene Fathers.” Tertullian, The prescription against heretics, the Ante-Nicene Fathers, American reprinted Ver., 1997, pp.243-270.

8) Refer to the following works about the dating of the Tertullian’s work. Tertullian, Adversus Marcionem 1-5, E. Evans (ed.), Oxford 1972, p. xviii ; Tertullien, Contre Marcion 1, R. Braun (ed.), Sources Chrétiennes, Paris 1990, pp.17-19 ; Barnes [1985], pp.326-327.

9) *Si enim Marcion nouum testamentum a uetere separauit, posterior est eo quod separauit quia separare non posset nisi quod unitum fuit.*

from the Scriptures, they had remained in good order, that of being a unit. But Tertullian saw the act of separating them as having been done on Marcion's own authority, not on the authority of the apostles or the Lord, thereby a demonic act characteristic of heresy.

Let me return, however, from this digression to discuss the priority of truth, and the comparative lateness of falsehood, deriving support for my argument even from that parable which puts in the first place the sowing by the Lord of the good seed of wheat, but introduces at a later stage the adulteration of the crop by his enemy the devil with the useless weed of wild oats.¹⁰⁾ (De Praescriptione Haereticorum, xxxi.1)

According to this argument of Tertullian, the Canon of Marcion was nothing more than an inferior product which had once been a unified Old Testament and New Testament. But afterwards it was bastardized by the devil, so it could not be of any benefit for faith in God. This argument of Tertullian seems to be apparently explicit, but in reality he didn't delve further into the content of the Old Testament and the New Testament. His refutation against Marcion was terminated at this point in the text. However, one has the opportunity to examine how Tertullian viewed and evaluated these two testaments. Before entering this question, we should make clear how Marcion assessed the Scripture and why he threw out one, and adopted the other as the Canon.

10) *Sed ab excessu reuertar ad principalitatem ueritatis et posteritatem mendacitatis disputandam, ex illius quoque parabolae patrocinio quae bonum semen frumenti a Domino seminatam in primore constituit, auenarum autem sterilis faeni adulterium ab inimico diabolo postea superducit.*

3. Separation of the Old Testament and the New Testament

According to Tertullian, Marcion was bothered about the Word of the Lord in Luke which says a good tree produces no bad fruits and a bad tree produces no good fruits. Because he, like other heretics, struggled with the problem of evil (*mali quaestionem, id est unde malum*).¹¹⁾ If this Word of the Lord was right, the source of evil in this world must have been God himself, the Father of all creatures. But it was not acceptable for him to consider God, about whom the apostle Paul preached, as the origin of evil. But at that time, Marcion found a solution to this problem by differentiating the Word of the Creator, from that of the Lord.

So when he found the Creator declaring, "It is I who create evil things," in that he had... already assumed him to be the author of evil, he interpreted with reference to the Creator the evil tree that creates evil fruit — namely, evil things in general — and assumed that there had to be another god to correspond with the good tree which brings forth good fruits.¹²⁾ (Adversus Marcionem.I.2.2)¹³⁾

For Marcion it was the separation of the Creator and the Father of Christ that resolved the problem of the origin of evil. That is, if one attributed all the evil things in the world and acts of human beings to the Creator, the Author of them, one could retain good faith in the God of whom Christ preached, because this faith

11) Cf. Harnack [1924], pp.97-101 ; Rottenwöhner, Gerhard, Unde Malum?: Herkunft und Gestalt des Bösen nach heterodoxer Lehre von Markion bis zu den Katharen, Karlsruhe 1986, pp.23-28.

12) *inveniens creatorem pronuntiantem, Ego sum qui condo mala, quanto ipsum praesumpserat mali auctorem et ex aliis argumentis, quae ita persuadent perverso cuique, tanto in creatorem interpretatus malam arborem malos fructus condentem, scilicet mala, alium deum praesumpsit esse debere in partem bonae arboris bonos fructus.*

13) I extracted the Latin text and the English translation from the edition of Earnest Evans. Cf. Evans [1972], pp.6-7.

belonged to a God other than the God who created evil. For this reason it was necessary to separate as well the Old Testament, which came from the Creator, from the New Testament, which was the Word of the Father of Christ. At least, as far as salvation is concerned, Marcion regarded the Old Testament as being of no value. Marcion's thought that only the New Testament was the anchor of his faith can be derived from this point.

Here the question about what Tertullian thought concerning Marcion's devaluation of the Old Testament can be raised. He began with the attempt to separate the problem of evil, which troubled Marcion terribly, from the sphere of the faith, as this problem concerned not Christianity but pagan philosophy,¹⁴⁾ the begetter of heresies :

This (=this world's wisdom) the Lord called "foolishness," and "chose the foolish things of the world" to confound even philosophy itself. For it (philosophy) is that which is the material of the world's wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and dispensation of God. Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy. ---The same subject-matter is discussed over and over again by the heretics and the philosophers ; ---Whence comes evil? Why is it permitted? What is the origin of man? And in what way does he come?¹⁵⁾ (De Praescriptione Haereticorum, vii.1-3,5.)

As Marcion separated the Creator, the origin of the bad fruits, from Christ and the Father who will save us, so Tertullian kept the problem of evil away from the

14) Cf. Sider, Robert D., "Approaches to Tertullian, A study of recent scholarship," in Second Century, vol.2, 1982, pp.247-250.

15) *Hae sunt doctrinae hominum et daemoniorum prurientibus auribus natae de ingenio sapientiae saecularis quam Dominus stultitiam uocans stulta mundi in confusionem etiam philosophiae, ipsius elegit. ---Eadem materia apud haereticos et philosophos uoluntatur---, unde malum et quare? et unde homo et quomodo?*

Christian Faith and connected this problem to philosophy which was the source of heresies. Although Tertullian tried to solve this problem of evil in “Adversus Marcionem,”¹⁶⁾ as evil which God created should have been regarded as the punishment of this just God, he denied in this text any argument of the separation derived from the problem of evil. What then did Tertullian consider about the continuity of the Old Testament and the New Testament?

Refoulé points out that we can certainly confirm that Tertullian himself made a distinction between these two testaments.¹⁷⁾ Tertullian used the term, the New Testament and the older one (*nouum testamentum, uetere*),¹⁸⁾ and he recognized that there were two different ways through which these testaments came to us, that is to say, through the prophets and through the apostles. But, although Tertullian distinguished between them, he didn't separate these two testaments, and considered them as one Scripture. In fact, he placed an emphasis on the unity and the continuity of the New Testament and the Old Testament. This can be seen from following sentence :

*“They have,” says He (=the Lord), “Moses and Elias,” —in other words, the law and the prophets, which preach Christ ;*¹⁹⁾ (*De Praescriptione Haereticorum, viii.6*)

One can recognize his typological interpretation²⁰⁾ about Christ in this text and

16) *Adversus Marcionem II.* 14.2. Cf. Osborn, Eric, Tertullian : First Theologian of the West. Cambridge 1997, p.101.

17) Refoulé [1957], p.15.

18) *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, xxx. 9

19) *Habent, inquit, Moysen et Heliam, id est legem et prophetas Christum praedicantes secundum quod et alibi aperte :*

20) cf. Speigl, Jakob, “Tertullian als Exeget”, in : Stimuli : Festschrift für E.Dassmann, Münster 1996, pp.171-173.

ascertain his aim to retain the prophesied Savior, the part of that which came down from the Old Testament, so as not to separate these two testaments. This retention of the Old Testament was emphasized from another aspect as well. That is, by recognizing the prophets and the law, the content of the Old Testament, and the Gospel as the rule of faith (*regula fidei*), Tertullian gave importance to the Old Testament.

The rule of faith, according to Speigl,²¹⁾ can be divided into two spheres. One is the sphere of the content of the faith, and the other is the sphere of the institution, like the church, which establishes the basis for holding the faith. One can see that Tertullian considered the content of the faith as One Lord God, the Creator of the universe, and Christ Jesus (born) of the Virgin Mary, the Son of God the Creator, and the Resurrection of the flesh.²²⁾ And to establish the rule or the principle of this faith, the role of the church must be regarded as important.

*the law and the prophets she (=the church) unites in one volume with the writings of evangelists and apostles, from which she drinks in her faith.*²³⁾ (*De Praescriptione Haereticorum, xxxvi.5*)

The role and the aim of the church were to unite the Old Testament, which was the law and the word of the prophets, and the New Testament, which consisted of the Gospels and the letters of the apostles. This role of the church supported the faith of the Christian.

21) Speigl [1996], p.168.

22) *unus Deus Dominus, Creator uniuersitatis, Christus Iesus ex uirgine Maria, Carnis resurrection (De Praescriptione Haereticorum, xxxvi. 5).*

23) *legem et prophetas cum euangelicis et apostolicis litteris miscet, inde potat fidem ;*

4. The Holy Scripture and the heretic church

In addition, it was the rule of faith that rejected the legitimacy of the heresies to use and interpret the Scriptures. Tertullian described ;

*For wherever it shall be manifest that the true Christian rule and faith shall be, there will likewise be true Scriptures and expositions thereof, and all the Christian traditions.*²⁴⁾ (*De Praescriptione Haereticorum, xix.3*)

The place where the rule of faith existed was the Christian Church and in this place the rule was handed down from the apostles. The ground for the rule of faith was only in the church. There was no rule in heresy because the faith which the apostles received from the Lord took root in the church.

*And original sources of the faith must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the (said) churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God.*²⁵⁾ (*De Praescriptione Haereticorum, xxi.4*)

The reason why heretic churches were regarded as “heretic” was that they inherited the tradition not from the apostles but from pagan philosophy.²⁶⁾ Such churches, as they had no right to approach the Word of God, could not have the opportunity to establish the rule of faith. For this reason, Tertullian believed that heretic churches had no legitimacy to touch the true Scriptures.

24) *Vbi enim apparuerit esse ueritatem disciplinae et fidei christianae, illic erit ueritas scripturarum et expositionum et omnium traditionum christianarum.*

25) *et originalibus fidei conspiret, ueritati deputandam, id sine dubio tenentem, quod ecclesiae ab apostolis, apostoli a Christo, Christus a Deo accepti ;*

5. Conclusion

Tertullian denied the value of the Canon of Marcion on the basis of three points in this text: Marcion arranged the Scriptures on his own authority; he denied the unity of the Old Testament and the New Testament, and lastly Marcion and his church didn't succeed the rule of faith from the apostles and establish it. But in spite of this refutation, the threat of the Canon of Marcion did not seem to disappear from his mind. This threat led him to continue writing a detailed refutation about this heretic Canon in "Adversus Marcionem."

26) It was often pointed out that Tertullian had antagonistic feelings toward philosophy, because he said "credible because inept" (*De Carnis Christi*, 5) or "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" (*De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, vii.9). But recently some scholars argued that Tertullian did not have so much adversarial position against the philosophy of rationalism, but rather he developed a rational argument based on faith. Dunn, Geoffrey D., *Tertullian, The Early Church Fathers*, New York, 2004, p.32; Wilhite, David E., *Tertullian the African: An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian's Context and Identities*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2007, pp.22-23.