

Marcion and the Violence in Hebrew Scriptures

Topic: How prominent was the issue of divinely perpetrated or sanctioned violence in Marcion's rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures? How is this reflected in the writings of the early heresiologists (e.g. Tertullian, Irenaeus and Hippolytus), and how do you judge their testimony?

Context

During the 2nd century CE, prior to the establishment of a single orthodox view on many issues, the early Christian church held within its embrace a variety of differing views and practices. One of the first to be excluded from that embrace was Marcion, accounted a heretic for his rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) and for his proposal that the Creator of this world was not the same as the God and Father of Jesus.

In a recent book, Derek Flood claims that the issue of divine violence – violence either perpetrated or commanded by God – was at the core of Marcion's agenda and formed the basis of his rejection of the OT. He further claims that other church leaders shared Marcion's concern but resolved it by interpreting the imputation of violence to God allegorically (Flood 2014, 75–81). Motivated by Flood's comments, this essay seeks to clarify the role played by OT attribution of violence to God in the conflict between Marcion and his detractors.

The difficulty of this task lies in two factors. First, none of Marcion's writings are extant and so we depend on his critics' polemic to reconstruct both what views Marcion promoted and what reasoning lay behind those views. Second, what can be read today from those who did have direct access to Marcionite material covers a broad range of issues but only rarely directly addresses the problem of divine violence.

Marcion (d. c. 160 CE¹)

Marcion was born in Sinope, in Pontus, the son of a bishop. He is said to have left Pontus in disgrace and moved to Rome, from where his influence spread (Cross and Livingstone 2009a). A substantial network of Marcionite churches existed during the second and third

¹ All biographical dates taken from *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Cross and Livingstone 2009b).

centuries² (Cross and Livingstone 2009a) and Adamantius, writing in the late third or fourth century, accepts that some called Marcion “bishop” (quoted in Harnack 1990, 28; Lieu 2015, 119). The seriousness of Marcion’s threat is shown by the volume of writings against him, from several decades after his death (e.g. Justin Martyr) to well into the 5th century (e.g. Eznik’s *Refutation of the Sects*).

Marcion’s detractors universally treat him as a trouble maker, a stance that obscures our ability to understand what influenced and motivated Marcion. He was most likely familiar with Gnostic ideas and was frequently grouped with Gnostics such as Valentinus and Basilides by heresiologists. He is often described as a follower of Cerdo, whose sect he joined because – according to Epiphanius – no-one in the church of Rome would accept him (Epiphanius 2009, sec. 42. 1:7-8). Another influence may have been Plato (proposed by Clement of Alexandria as described in May 1987, 141), or the pre-Socratic philosophy of Empedocles (Hippolytus 1986, chap. VII.XVII-XVIII). Based on that type of assumption, Marcion’s approach to Scriptures would be biased by ideas imported from non-Christian sources and his rejection of the OT would not be surprising.

An alternative view, however, is that Marcion was steeped in Christian theology and practice since birth, saw significant intellectual problems with the way the early church was handling the Hebrew Scriptures, and earnestly sought an explanation that reflected his faith in Jesus. Something like this view is asserted by Adolf von Harnack, who wrote “The point of departure for Marcion’s criticism of the tradition cannot be mistaken. It was provided in the Pauline contrast of law and gospel, on the one side malicious, petty, and cruel punitive correctness, and on the other side merciful love” (Harnack 1990, 21).

Apart from compiling a set of Christian Scriptures, containing ten of Paul’s letters and a revised version of Luke’s Gospel, Marcion’s primary written work was the *Antitheses*. According to Tertullian, the work was “entitled *Antitheses* because of its juxtaposition of opposites, a work strained into making such a division between the Law and the Gospel as thereby to make two separate gods” (Tertullian 1972, chap. IV.1).

² Even as late as Epiphanius’ *Panarion*, composed around 374 CE, we read that the Marcionite heresy was still widespread (Epiphanius 2009, sec. 42. 1:1).

One can imagine then³, a Marcion inspired by Paul's distinction between Law and Gospel, grappling with OT texts that attribute violent behaviours and motivations to God: such as God commanding Abraham to kill his own son (Genesis 22:2), and God commanding the genocide of Canaanites⁴ (Joshua 10:40) and Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:1-3). When compared to the instructions of Jesus to love our enemies, and Jesus' demonstration of God's willingness to forgive, this imagined Marcion draws from Cerdo and other sources a resolution that excises the violent God from the gospel.

But is that imagined Marcion reconstructible from the available sources?

Irenaeus (c. 130-202 CE)

In the five-volume work *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus notes that Marcion did not invent his theology independently but by building on the ideas of Cerdo. It was Cerdo who had suggested that the God of the OT was not the father of Jesus Christ. Marcion "advanced the most daring blasphemy against Him who is proclaimed as God by the law and the prophets, declaring Him to be the author of evils, to take delight in war, to be infirm of purpose, and even to be contrary to Himself" (Irenaeus 1986 I. XXVII).

The accusation that the OT God takes delight in war is not taken up in any detail by Irenaeus. He does, however, discuss the more general principle that a good God must also act as a judge against those who oppose his benevolence, a principle that Marcion denies (Irenaeus 1986 III. XXV 2-4). Irenaeus sees no contradiction in a depiction of God as both good and angry, though that seems to be a key obstacle for Marcion.

Tertullian (c. 160-225 CE)

Tertullian wrote multiple critiques of Marcion, the lengthiest – the five books of *Against Marcion* – at least 40 years after his death (Tertullian 1986, chap. I.I and footnote on p. 271). A core strand in that work is to show that Marcion's supposed antitheses between Law and Gospel do not constitute real contradictions. To establish that, Tertullian argues that even a

³ This is my own imagining, though more or less consistent with the models proposed by Harnack (Harnack 1990), May (May 1987) and Hoffman (Hoffmann 1987).

⁴ Harnack suggests that Marcion's *Antitheses* included "Joshua conquered the land with violence and cruelty, but Christ forbade all violence and preached mercy and peace" (Harnack 1990, 60). I have not been able to track down which anti-Marcion writer implies that inclusion.

good God must be a judge, he re-interprets some OT texts to make them more reasonable, and highlights parts of the New Testament (especially within the corpus accepted by Marcion) that demonstrate continuity with the OT. All three approaches touch on the issue of divine violence but never directly engage with examples of extreme violence such as commands to filicide or genocide.

With regard to God being a judge, Tertullian gives a more extensive argument than Irenaeus. Whereas Marcion's two gods are unequal: "one judicial, harsh, mighty in war; the other mild, placid, and simply good and excellent" (Tertullian 1986, chap. I.VI), Tertullian claims that a "good" God must also be just. Goodness and justice cannot be separated, and if Marcion accepts that injustice is evil then he must also admit that justice is good (Tertullian 1986, chap. I.XXVII and II.XII). Furthermore, the circumstances of the Fall necessitated that a just God should become a judge (Tertullian 1986, chap. II.XI). God judges evil by not willing it and by prohibiting it. God cannot prevaricate between not willing and not punishing: if God did not punish something, that would deny that God did not will it (Tertullian 1986, chap. I.XXVII). Justice becomes active through condemning, through chastening, and through ruthlessly pursuing goodness. Consequently we should both love and fear God (Tertullian 1986, chap. II.XIII).

A modern commentary on this argument might question whether his psychological assumptions are valid. When Tertullian questions why the Marcionites do not "boil over into every kind of lust" (Tertullian 1986, chap. I.XXVII) he assumes that only the fear of punishment will motivate moral behaviour. Indeed he explicitly claims that good is "not strong enough to recommend itself by itself alone" (Tertullian 1986, chap. II.XIII). Marcion, along with Ghandi, Paul (e.g. Romans 12:21) and John (e.g. 1 John 4:18) may well argue the contrary, that love, goodness, grace and mercy are far more powerful motivators than judgement, punishment and fear.

Some OT stories and principles are justified by Tertullian in the light of God being both good and just. I will consider two examples briefly and then one in more detail. All three show Tertullian's ability to deny Marcion's claims about the Creator's moral failures without needing to deny OT claims about the Creator.

First is the claim, apparently by Marcion, that Isaiah 45:7 proves that the God of the OT created evil. To this, Tertullian replies that Marcion conflates two types of evil: sins and

punishments. Isaiah only implies that God created the second of those, a claim supported by the use of “calamity”, “disaster” and “woe” rather than “evil” in many translations of the verse. From this, Tertullian deduces that despite the apparent severity of God’s actions in the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and the Egyptian plagues, these were all acts of justice (Tertullian 1986, chap. II.XIV).

Second, Marcion claims that Moses is morally superior to the Creator, for when God wants to destroy the Israelites, Moses intercedes to calm God down (Exodus 32). But, says Tertullian, it was God’s intent to allow Moses to stand up for the people in order to demonstrate how much is permitted to one who has faith (Tertullian 1986, chap. II.XXVI).

In the context of vengeance, mercy, severity and gentleness all co-existing in the Creator, Tertullian writes an extensive justification of the *lex talionis*, claiming that permitting retaliation is a way to reduce violence. By allowing the right to retribution, an “eye for an eye” etc (Exodus 21:23-24) dissuades people from committing the original injury: “the permission of this retribution was to be the prohibition of provocation” (Tertullian 1986, chap. II.XVIII).

Tertullian concedes to Marcion that Jesus taught something different than the *lex talionis*: “Admittedly Christ teaches a new degree of forbearance, when he puts restraint on that retaliation for injury which the Creator permitted by demanding an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: for he on the contrary orders us rather to offer the other cheek, and in addition to the coat to let go of the cloak also” (Tertullian 1972, chap. IV.16). But he claims that this supplements rather than contradicts the *lex talionis*, and he remains confident that vengeance will be taken by God.

For Tertullian, the patience commanded by Jesus only makes sense in the knowledge that God will take revenge, otherwise our patience would be in vain⁵. While it is impossible to reconstruct what Marcion originally claimed, or to predict how he would have responded to Tertullian’s criticism, I can’t help thinking that Tertullian has misunderstood the core point of Jesus’ words and example. Might not Marcion have argued that Jesus, speaking on behalf of God, directs his followers to leave vengeance to the Lord, and then, *acting as God*, demonstrates that God’s response to human evil is the self-sacrifice of the Cross? That is,

⁵ (See also Epiphanius 2009, sec. 42. 6:6-7)

rather than asking us to act as moral agents in one way (with forgiveness) even though God will act morally in the opposite way (with revenge), doesn't Jesus call us by his word and example to demonstrate grace in exactly the same way that God does?

In other sections of *Against Marcion*, Tertullian justifies the violence of God. He believes that God was just to send bears against children to avenge their insults to Elisha (Tertullian 1986, chap. IV.XXIII). He accepts that bloody sacrifices, burnt offerings, retaliation, and dietary laws are foolish and weak, but notes that the foolish and weak are exactly what Paul's God chooses (1 Corinthians 1:27) (Tertullian 1986, chap. V.V). Paul also writes that it is a righteous thing for God to bring trouble and punishment to those who trouble God's followers and do not obey the gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:6-8) (Tertullian 1986, chap. V.XVI). Jesus – the very one Marcion claims to be purely good and who disbelieves in hell – comes to bring fire to the earth (Luke 12:49) and a sword (Matthew 10:34). Jesus acts as a judge who promises rewards and punishments just as the OT Creator did (Tertullian 1986, chap. IV.XXIX). Even Marcion's hero Paul accepts the rightness of the wrath of God (e.g. Romans 1:18) (Tertullian 1986, chap. V.XVI).

On the other hand, Tertullian employs this principle of Scriptural interpretation: "very many events are figuratively predicted by means of enigmas and allegories and parables, and that they must be understood in a sense different from the literal description" (Tertullian 1986, chap. III.V). Consequently, there are some violent representations of God that he does not feel compelled to accept. He cites as an example the use of "sword" in Psalm 45, Revelation 1:16 and Ephesians 6:17 (Tertullian 1986, chap. III.XIV).

Tertullian emphasises the option of an allegorical interpretation presumably because Marcion does not, a point subsequently magnified by Origen.

Origen (c. 185-254 CE)

Origen seems more understanding of the problem Marcion is trying to resolve than Tertullian. In *De Principiis*, Origen notes that some heretics – he may well have Marcion in mind – see evil attributed to God in the OT and deduce that this cannot be the God affirmed by Jesus. On the other extreme, he also acknowledges that some "within the faith of the church" use those same OT texts to falsely impute attributes to God that go beyond what

one would accuse even the “most unjust and cruel of men” (Origen 1986 IV. 8). Origen’s path through the horns of that dilemma is to assert that much of Scripture needs to be interpreted allegorically: that the Scriptures are a kind of veil or covering that we need to peel back in order to see “the meaning of the Spirit of God, which is perhaps lying profoundly buried” (Origen 1986 IV. 14).

In his *Homilies on Joshua*, Origen expands on this idea that God’s violence should not be interpreted literally. “Unless those physical wars bore the figure of spiritual wars, I do not think the books of Jewish history would ever have been handed down by the apostles to the disciples of Christ, who came to teach peace” (Origen 2002, 138). Again, he writes about the genocide of the Amalekites and other Israeli military violence, saying “You should understand the wars of the just by the method I set forth above [i.e. spiritually rather than literally], that these wars are waged by them against sin [i.e. rather than against a physical enemy]” (Origen 2002, 94).

Although these quotes are not directed at Marcion⁶, Origen clearly appreciates the same problem as Marcion: that the violence attributed to God in the OT needs some explanation other than a literal reading. Origen’s explanation is to retain the texts but interpret them allegorically. Marcion on the other hand reads the text literally and hence rejects their application to the God of Jesus Christ.

In his commentary on Romans, Origen describes Marcion as “a man who takes no pleasure at all in allegorical interpretation” (Origen 2001, chap. 2.13.27). If Marcion only allowed a literal reading of the OT we can understand why he considered the only option to be a complete rejection of it. As Judith Lieu suggests, however, the various opponents who accuse Marcion of eschewing allegory may be overstating his position for polemic reasons (Lieu 2015, 365).

Other early critics of Marcion

“Difficulties with the Old Testament account of God were not detected first or only by Marcion. They were familiar topoi in both Jewish and Christian exegetical debate” (Lieu 2015, 286). Whether or not that is the case, I can find no other early heresiologist whose

⁶ Marcion is mentioned once in the *Homilies on Joshua*, but not in relation to Marcion’s views on either allegory or violence.

critiques of Marcion directly address the interpretation of divine violence. The problem is not broached in the context of Marcion by Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 CE), Hippolytus⁷ (c. 170-236 CE), or Epiphanius⁸ (c. 315–403 CE).

Given that the issue of divine violence does seem to be a core aspect of Marcion's position, the avoidance of it by other detractors suggests that Marcion's answer was not addressing a question they saw as significant.

Conclusion

I think it is likely that Marcion was concerned about the attribution of violence to God in the OT and that concern was a significant reason for his rejection of the OT. Even for Marcion, however, the violent nature of the OT God was only one building block of a larger case.

On the other hand, I do not think that most of Marcion's detractors saw the need to grapple with the underlying problem of divine violence. They were so concerned about heretical outcomes – such as his rejection of the OT, his Docetism and his bi-theism – that they failed to take seriously the problems that motivated Marcion's speculations and failed to present an alternative resolution to those problems.

Tertullian and Origen are exceptions to this pattern. Both attempted to show that the contradictions Marcion saw in relation to divine violence were not real. In both cases, however, they failed to grasp the extent of the problem and offered alternatives that were only partially successful. That failure was in part because they continued to accept the image of a vengeful God (especially Tertullian), and in part because they could wave aside the immorality of God's violence as being merely allegorical (especially Origen).

As a result, the challenge posed by Marcion's attempt to save Christianity from the attribution of divine violence remains with the Church. Significant portions of Christendom remain wilfully ignorant of the problem while effectively disregarding the OT as a source of moral guidance and yet continuing to believe in a vengeful God.

⁷ Hippolytus dedicates several chapters of his *Refutation of All Heresies* to Marcion, the core of which asserts that Marcion's ideas stem from the pre-Socratic philosophy of Empedocles (Hippolytus 1986, chap. VII.XVII-XIX). In this work, Hippolytus shows no interest in engaging with Marcion's criticisms of the OT and simply writes off the *Antitheses* as slanderous (Hippolytus 1986, chap. VII.XXV).

⁸ Epiphanius lists the Marcionites as the 42nd in his "treatise against eighty sects", the *Panarion*. Although he comments on Marcion's life and refutes in detail Marcion's compilation of New Testament books, the *Antitheses* is never mentioned.

Without accepting all of Marcion's theology, I tentatively agree with Harnack that the canonical authority of the OT should be withdrawn (Harnack 1990, 138). That does not imply that the OT should not be read and learnt from, but that it should not be treated "as a sacred and therefore infallible document" (Harnack 1990, 137).

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