

where issues remained unresolved until later rounds of trial and error, dogmatism and heresy hunting, led to yet further debate and partial resolution. We will not be plumbing the depths of those later debates from the fourth century and later. Their nuances are difficult for many modern readers to appreciate or even fathom. Instead, we will focus our attention on the earlier centuries, when some of the most fundamental issues of early Christian doctrine were debated: How many gods are there? Was the material world created by the true God? Was Jesus human, divine, or both? These issues, at least, were resolved, leading to the creeds still recited today and the standardized New Testaments now read by millions of people throughout the world.

In this second part of our study, we will consider various groups that held wide-ranging opinions on such matters, groups attested in numerous ancient sources, including the writings of their Christian opponents who found their views offensive at best and damnable at worst. Four groups will occupy our attention in the chapters that follow: the Jewish Christian Ebionites, the anti-Jewish Marcionites, some early Christian Gnostics, and the group we have already labeled the proto-orthodox. Once we have described the various beliefs and, to a lesser extent, the known practices of these groups, we will be able to proceed in part 3 to consider how they engaged in their battles for dominance, leading to the virtual elimination of all groups from the Christian world through the victory of the one group that then successfully declared itself orthodox.

## Chapter Five

# At Polar Ends of the Spectrum: Early Christian Ebionites and Marcionites

To say that one of the ensured results of historical scholarship is that Jesus was a Jew may sound a bit trite, like saying that one of the assured results of modern science is that paper is combustible. Still, not even a century ago, the Jewishness of Jesus was a matter of real dispute among serious scholars of ancient Christianity. Moreover, throughout the history of the Christian church, even when Jesus' Jewish identity has not been denied it has been compromised, overlooked, or ignored. No one who working in the field of New Testament scholarship today, however, sees Jesus' Jewishness as contentious on the one hand or insignificant on the other. Jesus was Jewish, and any evaluation of his words, deeds, and fate needs to keep that constantly in mind.

Of course, determining what *kind* of Jew he was is another matter, and here the scholarly debates can be prolonged and harsh for insiders and a bit perplexing for outsiders. Is the historical Jesus best understood as a Jewish rabbi, who, like other rabbis, taught his followers the true meaning of the Law of Moses? Or as a Jewish holy man, who, like other holy men, could claim a special relationship with God that gave him extraordinary powers? Or as a Jewish revolutionary, who, like other revolutionaries, urged an armed rebellion against the Roman imperialists? Or as a Jewish social radical, who, like other social radicals, promoted a countercultural lifestyle in opposition to the norms and values of the society of his day? Or as a Jewish magician, who, like other magicians, could manipulate the forces of nature in awe-inspiring ways? Or as a Jewish feminist, who, like other feminists, undertook the cause of women and urged egalitarian structures in his world? Or as a Jewish prophet, who, like other prophets, warned of God's imminent interaction in the world to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in a new Kingdom in which there would be no more suffering, sin, and death?<sup>1</sup>

All of these options have their proponents among competent scholars who have devoted years of their lives to the matter yet cannot agree about some of the most basic facts about Jesus, except that he was Jewish. That at least is a start, however, and for our purposes here it is probably enough. Moreover, most scholars today acknowledge not only that Jesus was a Jew but that he was raised in a Jewish household in the Jewish hamlet of Nazareth in Jewish Palestine. He was brought up in a Jewish culture, accepted Jewish ways, learned the Jewish tradition, and kept the Jewish Law. He was circumcised, he kept Sabbath and the periodic feasts, and he probably ate kosher. As an adult he began an itinerant preaching ministry in rural Galilee, gathering around himself a number of disciples, all of whom were Jewish. He taught them his understanding of the Jewish Law and of the God who called the Jews to be his people. Most scholars would agree that some of these disciples, probably while Jesus was still living, considered him to be the Jewish Messiah, come to deliver God's people from the oppressive power of Rome to which they were subject. For one reason or another, the leaders of his people, the power players in Jerusalem, considered him a troublemaker, and when he appeared in the capital city for a Passover feast around 30 CE, they arranged to have him arrested and handed over to the Roman governor, who put him on trial for sedition against the state and executed him on charges of claiming to be king of the Jews.

And so Jesus was Jewish from start to last. His disciples were as well: born and bred Jews. Not long after his death, some or all of them came to understand Jesus as something more than a Jewish teacher (or holy man or revolutionary or social reformer or feminist or magician or prophet or whatever else he may have been). For them, Jesus was the one who had brought about a right standing before God for others. Some of his followers thought this salvation came through Jesus' death and resurrection; others said it came through his divine teachings. In any event, his followers soon came to proclaim that the salvation brought by Jesus was not for Jews alone, but was for all people, both Jew and Gentile.

### Paul and His Judaizing Opponents

No one was more central to this proclamation to the non-Jew, the Gentile, than the apostle Paul. Paul was originally a Jewish Pharisee from outside Palestine, who had heard the Christian proclamation of Jesus, found it blasphemous, and worked to oppose it with all his heart and strength, one of the first and most forceful persecutors of the new faith (Gal. 1:13; cf. Acts 8:3). But Paul himself then had some kind of visionary experience of Jesus (Gal. 1:15-16; 1 Cor. 15:8-11) and changed from being the Christian movement's chief adversary to being its chief advocate, transformed from persecutor to proclaimer. Specifically, Paul saw himself as the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles.

Early on in Paul's efforts to take the gospel to the Gentile mission field, a major problem emerged. Gentiles, of course, were "pagans," that is, polythe-

ists who worshiped numerous gods. To accept the salvation of Jesus, they had to renounce their former gods and accept only the God of Israel and Jesus his son, whose death and resurrection, Paul proclaimed, put them in a right standing with God. But in order to worship the God of the Jews, did they not have to become Jewish? The Jewish God, after all, had given the Jewish Law to the Jewish people. And the way his people *knew* they were his people was by keeping his Law, a Law that gave specific guidelines, say, about how they were to worship and live together in community. This Law stipulated that God's people should avoid worshiping pagan idols and should obey certain broadly acceptable ethical regulations, such as not murdering or committing adultery. But it also indicated that his people should be set apart from all other peoples in distinctive ways, for example, by keeping the seventh day holy, free from work, so as to worship him; by following certain dietary laws and avoiding such foods as pork and shellfish; and, if they were male, by receiving the sign of the covenant God had made with his people, the sign of circumcision.

And so the problem Paul faced in converting Gentiles to faith in Jesus, the son of the Jewish God. Did Gentiles who came to believe in Jesus need to become Jewish in order to be Christian? Did they need to adopt the Jewish Law for themselves? One can imagine that it was a rather pressing issue, especially for Gentile men, the vast majority of whom were uncircumcised.

Some of Jesus' Jewish followers insisted that converts were to adopt the ways of Judaism. Paul, however, appears to have been the leading advocate of a moderating line on the issue. Paul did insist that Gentiles who became followers of Jesus had to accept the God of the Jews and worship him only. But he was equally emphatic that they did not need to adopt "Jewish ways" or, as we might call them, "Jewish boundary markers" as spelled out in the Jewish Law. They did not need to observe the Sabbath or Jewish festivals, keep kosher, or be circumcised. In fact, in Paul's view, for Gentiles to adopt the ways of Judaism meant to call into question the salvation God had provided by the death of Jesus; it was Jesus alone, not the Jewish Law, that brought a person into a right standing before God (Rom. 3:10, 8:3; Gal. 2:15-16).

Looking back on these debates, as recorded even in the pages of the New Testament, we tend to think that the matter was easily, quickly, and effectively resolved. In point of fact, even the New Testament texts that discuss the issue show that it was not such a simple affair and that Paul's view was not universally accepted or, one might argue, even widely accepted. The account of the conference that met to decide this issue in Jerusalem, part way through Paul's missionary activities among the Gentiles (Acts 15), indicates that unnamed groups of Christians argued the alternative line, that Gentile converts wanting to become Christians first had to become Jews. Even more striking, Paul's own letters indicate that there were outspoken, sincere, and active Christian leaders who vehemently disagreed with him on this score and considered Paul's views to be a corruption of the true message of Christ. Some such leaders appeared among Paul's churches in Galatia and convinced the Christian men there that

they had to be circumcised if they wanted to be full members of God's people. And they could quote Scripture to support their views, since God had given the sign of circumcision to the father of the Jews, Abraham, and told him both that it was an *eternal* covenant (not just a part-time agreement, to be annulled later) and that it applied not just to those born Jewish but also to anyone from outside the ranks of Israel who wanted to belong to the people of God (cf. Gen. 17:9-14).

Paul fired off a white-hot anger letter in response to his "Judaizing" opponents in Galatia, in which he went on the attack against these "false teachers" who, in his judgment, had corrupted the true gospel of Christ and stood accursed before God. This letter, of course, made it into the New Testament, and so most people simply take it at face value: Paul's opponents were corrupters of the Gospel and accursed by God. But surely they themselves did not see it this way. They were, after all, Christian missionaries, intent on spreading the gospel of Jesus throughout the world. One of our greatest losses is a written response from one of them. But if any such reply was made, it has disappeared forever. That does not necessarily mean, however, that, at the time, they took the minority position. One should always bear in mind that in this very letter of Galatians Paul indicates that he confronted Peter over just such issues (Gal. 2:11-14). He disagreed, that is, even with Jesus' closest disciple on the matter. What would Peter have said in response? Regrettably, once again, we can never know, since all we have is Paul's version.<sup>2</sup>

According to Paul, a person is made right with God *only* by faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, not by following any of the deeds prescribed by the Jewish Law. And this applies to both Jews and Gentiles. Since Jesus alone is the way of salvation, then anyone who tries to follow the Law in order to be right with God has misunderstood the gospel and probably lost his or her salvation (Gal. 1:6-9, 5:4). Here is a stark alternative: No one in early Christianity could surpass Paul in making an issue both clear and compelling.

At the same time, whereas only Paul's account of his confrontation with Peter and the Judaizing missionaries of Galatia survives, at one time numerous positions were represented. Even though most of the others have been lost, it is possible that not all of them have been. A close reading of our surviving sources shows that one of our Gospels, at least, appears to represent an alternative point of view.

With good reason, Matthew's Gospel is frequently thought of as the most "Jewish" of the Gospels of the New Testament. This account of Jesus' life and death goes to extraordinary lengths to highlight the Jewishness of Jesus. It begins by giving a genealogy of Jesus that extends through David, the greatest king of the Jews, to Abraham, the father of the Jews. Time and again it quotes the Jewish Scriptures to show that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah sent from the Jewish God in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures (cf. Matt. 1:23; 2:6, 18). Not only does Jesus fulfill the Scriptures here (a point Paul himself would have conceded); Matthew also insists, contrary to Paul, that Jesus' followers must

do so as well. In one of the most trenchant statements of the Gospel, found only in this Gospel in the New Testament, Jesus is recorded as saying:

Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law and the prophets; I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest stroke of a letter will pass away from the Law until all has taken place. Whoever lets loose one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do likewise will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that if your righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 5:17-20).

For Matthew, the entire Jewish Law needs to be kept, down to the smallest letter. The Pharisees, in fact, are blamed not for keeping the law but for not keeping it well enough. It is worth noting that in this Gospel, when a rich man comes up to Jesus and asks him how to have eternal life, Jesus tells him that if he wants to live eternally he must keep the commandments of the Law (19:17). One might wonder: If the same person approached Paul with the same question twenty years later, what would he have said? Would he have told him to keep the Law? His own writings give a clear answer: decidedly *not* (cf. Rom 3:10; Gal. 2:15-16).

It is hard to imagine Paul and Matthew ever seeing eye to eye on this issue. In any event, from a historian's perspective it is interesting to note that after they both died, advocates of their respective positions on the Law developed these views at some considerable length. By the mid-second century, we know of Christian groups taking stands on Judaism that were at polar ends of the spectrum, some groups insisting that the Jewish Law was to be followed for salvation and others insisting that the Jewish Law could not be followed if one wanted salvation. All of these groups claimed to be representing the views of Jesus himself.

### Christians Who Would Be Jews: The Early Christian Ebionites

Through sources dating from the second to the fourth centuries, we know of Christians called the Ebionites.<sup>3</sup> We do not know for certain where the name came from. The proto-orthodox heresiologist (opponent of heresy) Tertullian claimed that the group was named after its founder, Ebion. That seems like a poor guess, however, probably based on Tertullian's assumption that every heresy begins with a heretic who can be named. Other heresiologists, such as Origen of Alexandria, were probably closer to the mark when they derived the name from the Hebrew term *ebyon*, which means "poor." Origen and other proto-orthodox writers had a field day with the name, indicating that the

Ebionites were "poor in understanding."<sup>4</sup> That is almost certainly not what they thought about themselves. Possibly the name goes back to the earliest days of the community. It may be that members of this group gave away their possessions and committed themselves to lives of voluntary poverty for the sake of others, like the earliest communities mentioned in Acts 2:44–45, 4:32–37. Jesus himself, of course, was poor. Maybe these were people who took him seriously when he said they were to love their neighbors as themselves, realizing they could scarcely do so while living in relative luxury while people around them were starving.

In any event, they were called the Ebionites, and by the second century none of their opponents appears to have understood why. And since we do not seem to have any writings from anyone who belonged to the group, we cannot be certain either. This lack of primary source material is much to be regretted. Surely some of these people wrote treatises that advanced their views and defended them as necessary. But as no such writing survives, we must base our understanding on the words of their opponents, sometimes taking their claims with a pound of salt. Since some of these reports are inconsistent with others, it may be that there were a variety of Ebionite groups, each with its own distinctive understanding of some aspects of their faith.

Proto-orthodox authors clearly agree that the Ebionites were and understood themselves to be Jewish followers of Jesus. They were not the only group of Jewish-Christians known to have existed at the time, but they were the group that generated some of the greatest opposition. The Ebionite Christians that we are best informed about believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah sent from the Jewish God to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. They also believed that to belong to the people of God, one needed to be Jewish. As a result, they insisted on observing the Sabbath, keeping kosher, and circumcising all males. That sounds very much like the position taken by the opponents of Paul in Galatia. It may be that the Ebionite Christians were their descendants, physical or spiritual. An early source, Irenaeus, also reports that the Ebionites continued to reverence Jerusalem, evidently by praying in its direction during their daily acts of worship.<sup>5</sup>

Their insistence on staying (or becoming) Jewish should not seem especially peculiar from a historical perspective, since Jesus and his disciples were Jewish. But the Ebionites' Jewishness did not endear them to most other Christians, who believed that Jesus allowed them to bypass the requirements of the Law for salvation. The Ebionites, however, maintained that their views were authorized by the original disciples, especially by Peter and Jesus' own brother, James, head of the Jerusalem church after the resurrection.

One other aspect of the Ebionites' Christianity that set it apart from that of most other Christian groups was their understanding of who Jesus was. The Ebionites did not subscribe to the notion of Jesus' preexistence or his virgin birth. These ideas were originally distinct from each other. The two New Testament Gospels that speak of Jesus being conceived of a virgin (Matthew and

Luke) do not indicate that he existed *prior* to his birth, just as the New Testament books that appear to presuppose his preexistence (cf. John 1:1–3, 18; Phil. 2:5–11) never mention his virgin birth. But when all these books came to be included in the New Testament, both notions came to be affirmed simultaneously, so that Jesus was widely thought of as having been with God in eternity past (John, Paul) who became flesh (John) by being born of the Virgin Mary (Matthew and Luke).

Ebionite Christians, however, did not have our New Testament and understood Jesus differently. For them, Jesus was the Son of God not because of his divine nature or virgin birth but because of his "adoption" by God to be his son. This kind of Christology is, accordingly, sometimes called "adoptionist." To express the matter more fully, the Ebionites believed that Jesus was a real flesh-and-blood human like the rest of us, born as the eldest son of the sexual union of his parents, Joseph and Mary. What set Jesus apart from all other people was that he kept God's law perfectly and so was the most righteous man on earth. As such, God chose him to be his son and assigned to him a special mission, to sacrifice himself for the sake of others. Jesus then went to the cross, not as a punishment for his own sins but for the sins of the world, a perfect sacrifice in fulfillment of all God's promises to his people, the Jews, in the holy Scriptures. As a sign of his acceptance of Jesus' sacrifice, God then raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to heaven.

It appears that Ebionite Christians also believed that since Jesus was the perfect, ultimate, final sacrifice for sins, there was no longer any need for the ritual sacrifice of animals. Jewish sacrifices, therefore, were understood to be a temporary and imperfect measure provided by God to atone for sins until the perfect atoning sacrifice should be made. As a result, if these (Christian) Jews were in existence before the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 CE, they would not have participated in its cultic practices; later they, or at least some of them, evidently remained vegetarian, since in the ancient world the slaughter of animals for meat was almost always done in the context of a cultic act of worship.

To what Scriptures did these Ebionites appeal in support of their views? What books did they revere and study and read as part of their services of worship? Obviously they retained the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) as the Scripture par excellence. These people were Jews, or converts to Judaism, who understood that the ancient Jewish traditions revealed God's ongoing interactions with his people and his Law for their lives. Almost as obviously, they did *not* accept any of the writings of Paul. Indeed, for them, Paul was not just wrong about a few minor points. He was the archenemy, the heretic who had led so many astray by insisting that a person is made right with God apart from keeping the Law and who forbade circumcision, the "sign of the covenant," for his followers.

The Ebionites did have other "Christian" texts as part of their canon, however. Not surprisingly, they appear to have accepted the Gospel of Matthew as

their principal scriptural authority.<sup>6</sup> Their own version of Matthew, however, may have been a translation of the text into Aramaic. Jesus himself spoke Aramaic in Palestine, as did his earliest followers. It would make sense that a group of Jewish followers of Jesus that originated in Palestine would continue to cite his words, and stories about him, in his native tongue. It appears likely that this Aramaic Matthew was somewhat different from the Matthew now in the canon. In particular, the Matthew used by Ebionite Christians would have lacked the first two chapters, which narrate Jesus' birth to a virgin—a notion that the Ebionite Christians rejected. There were doubtless other differences from our own version of Matthew's Gospel as well.

We do not know what the Ebionites called their version of Matthew's Gospel. It may have been identical with a book known to some early church writers as the Gospel of the Nazareans. Nazarean was a name sometimes used for groups of Jewish Christians, of which there were others besides the Ebionites.<sup>7</sup>

We have evidence of yet another Gospel authority used by some or all groups of Ebionite Christians. The evidence comes to us from the fourth-century writings of a vitriolic opponent of all things heretical, Epiphanius, orthodox bishop on the island of Cyprus. In a lengthy book that details and then fervently attacks eighty different heretical groups, Epiphanius devotes a chapter to the Ebionites and quotes a Gospel that they are said to have used.<sup>8</sup> He gives seven brief quotations—not nearly as many as we would like, but enough to get a general sense of this now lost Gospel.<sup>9</sup> For one thing, this particular Gospel of the Ebionites appears to have been a "harmonization" of the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Evidence that it harmonized the earlier sources comes in the account that it gave of Jesus' baptism. As careful readers have long noticed, the three Synoptic Gospels all record the words spoken by a voice from heaven as Jesus emerges from the water; but the voice says something different in all three accounts: "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17); "You are my Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11); and, in the oldest witnesses to Luke's Gospel, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" (Luke 3:23). What did the voice actually say? In the Gospel of the Ebionites, the matter is resolved easily enough. For here the voice speaks three times, saying something different on each occasion.

The antisacrificial views of the Ebionites also come through in some of the fragments that Epiphanius quotes. In one of them, the disciples ask Jesus where he wants to eat the Passover lamb with them (cf. Mark 14:12), and he replies, "I have no desire to eat the flesh of this Passover Lamb with you." In another place, he says somewhat more forthrightly, "I have come to abolish the sacrifices; if you do not cease from sacrificing, the wrath of God will not cease from weighing upon you."

Where there is no sacrifice, there is also no meat. Probably the most interesting of the changes from the familiar New Testament accounts of Jesus comes in the Gospel of the Ebionites description of John the Baptist, who, evidently, like his successor Jesus, maintained a strictly vegetarian cuisine. In this Gos-

pel, with the change of just one letter of the relevant Greek word, the diet of John the Baptist was said to have consisted not of locusts [meat!] and wild honey (cf. Mark 1:6) but of pancakes and wild honey. It was a switch that may have been preferable on other grounds as well.

This Gospel of the Ebionites was evidently written in Greek (hence the ability to change the locusts into pancakes), based to some extent on Matthew, Mark, and Luke (hence the harmonizing tendency). It would have been used by Ebionite Christians who no longer knew Aramaic, who were, therefore, living outside of Palestine. And it would have included the Ebionites' own perspectives on the nature of true religion (hence the condemnation of animal sacrifice)—all the more reason to regret that we have such scant access to it, one more Gospel lost to posterity, destroyed or forgotten by the proto-orthodox victors in the struggle to decide what Christians would believe and read.

### Christians Who Spurn All Things Jewish: The Marcionites

Living at the same time and also enjoying the unwanted attention of proto-orthodox opponents, though standing at just the opposite end of the theological spectrum, were a group of Christians known as the Marcionites.<sup>10</sup> In this instance, there is no question concerning the origin of the name. These were followers of the second-century evangelist/theologian Marcion, known to later Christianity as one of the arch heretics of his day, but by all counts one of the most significant Christian thinkers and writers of the early centuries. We are better informed about the Marcionites than about the Ebionites, because their opponents took them more seriously as a threat to the well-being of the church at large. As I have intimated, potential converts from among the pagans were not flocking to the Ebionite form of religion, which involved restricting activities on Saturday, giving up pork and other popular foods, and, for the men, undergoing surgery to remove the foreskin of their penises.

The Marcionites, on the other hand, had a highly attractive religion to many pagan converts, as it was avowedly Christian with nothing Jewish about it. In fact, everything Jewish was taken out of it. Jews, recognized around the world for customs that struck many pagans as bizarre at best, would have difficulty recognizing in the Marcionite religion an offshoot of their own. Not only were Jewish customs rejected, so, too, were the Jewish Scriptures and the Jewish God. From a historical perspective, it is intriguing that any such religion could claim direct historical continuity with Jesus.

Since Marcionite Christianity was seen as a significant threat to the burgeoning proto-orthodox movement, the heresiologists wrote a good deal about it. Tertullian, for example, devoted five volumes to attacking Marcion and his views. These volumes are primary sources for the conflict, to be supplemented by attacks mounted by Tertullian's successors, including Epiphanius of Salamis.

One still needs to sift through what is said; you can never rely on an enemy's reports for a fair and disinterested presentation. And once again, Marcion's own writings and those of his survivors were long ago relegated to the trash heap or bonfire. Still, we appear to get a fairly good sense of Marcion's life and teachings from the polemical sources that survive.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Life and Teachings of Marcion*

Marcion was born around 100 CE, in the city of Sinope, on the southern shore of the Black Sea, in the region of Pontus. His father was said to have been the bishop of the church there—an altogether plausible claim, as it can make sense of Marcion's intimate familiarity with the Jewish Bible, which he later came to reject, and his full understanding of certain aspects of the Christian faith from an early period in his life. As an adult, he evidently was wealthy, having made his money as a shipping merchant or possibly a shipbuilder.

Later reports indicate that he had a falling out with his father, who proceeded to remove him from the church. The rumor mill indicated that it was because he had "seduced a virgin." Most scholars take that as a metaphorical seduction—that Marcion had corrupted members of the congregation (the church as the virgin of Christ) by his false teachings.

In any event, in 139 CE Marcion appears to have traveled from his native Asia Minor to the city of Rome, which, as the capital and largest city of the empire, appears to have attracted all sorts, including all sorts of Christians, in this period. He made a good impression on the church there—already one of the largest churches in the world (if not *the* largest)—by donating 200,000 sesterces for the church's mission.<sup>12</sup> Although recognized for his munificence, Marcion appears to have had bigger designs. But he lay low and worked out his plan over the course of five years, bringing it forth in two literary productions.

Before discussing these books, I should say a word about the theology Marcion developed, which was seen as distinctive, revolutionary, compelling, and therefore dangerous. Among all the Christian texts and authors at his disposal, Marcion was especially struck by the writings of the apostle Paul, and in particular the distinction that Paul drew in Galatians and elsewhere between the Law of the Jews and the gospel of Christ. As we have seen, Paul claimed that a person is made right with God by faith in Christ, not by doing the works of the Law. This distinction became fundamental to Marcion, and he made it absolute. The gospel is the good news of deliverance; it involves love, mercy, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption, and life. The Law, however, is the bad news that makes the gospel necessary in the first place; it involves harsh commandments, guilt, judgment, enmity, punishment, and death. The Law is given to the Jews. The gospel is given by Christ.

How could the same God be responsible for both? Or put in other terms: How could the wrathful, vengeful God of the Jews be the loving, merciful God of Jesus? Marcion maintained that these attributes could not belong to one

God, as they stand at odds with one another: hatred and love, vengeance and mercy, judgment and grace. He concluded that there must in fact be two Gods: the God of the Jews, as found in the Old Testament, and the God of Jesus, as found in the writings of Paul.

Once Marcion arrived at this understanding, everything else naturally fell into place. The God of the Old Testament was the God who created this world and everything in it, as described in Genesis. The God of Jesus, therefore, had never been involved with this world but came into it only when Jesus himself appeared from heaven. The God of the Old Testament was the God who called the Jews to be his people and gave them his Law. The God of Jesus did not consider the Jews to be his people (for him; they were the chosen of the other God), and he was not a God who gave laws.

The God of the Old Testament insisted that people keep his Law and penalized them when they failed. He was not evil, but he was rigorously just. He had laws and inflicted penalties on those who did not keep them. But this necessarily made him a wrathful God, since no one kept all of his laws perfectly. Everyone had to pay the price for their transgressions, and the penalty for transgression was death. The God of the Old Testament was therefore completely justified in exacting his punishments and sentencing all people to death.

The God of Jesus came into this world in order to save people from the vengeful God of the Jews. He was previously unknown to this world and had never had any previous dealings with it. Hence Marcion sometimes referred to him as God the Stranger. Not even the prophecies of the future Messiah come from this God, for these refer not to Jesus but to a coming Messiah of Israel, to be sent by the God of the Jews, the creator of this world and the God of the Old Testament. Jesus came completely unexpectedly and did what no one could possibly have hoped for: He paid the penalty for other people's sins, to save them from the just wrath of the Old Testament God.

But how could Jesus himself, who represented the nonmaterial God, come into this material world—created by the other God—without becoming part of it? How could the nonmaterial become material, even for such a good and noble cause as salvation? Marcion taught that Jesus was not truly a part of this material world. He did not have a flesh-and-blood body. He was not actually born. He was not really human. He only *appeared* to be a human with a material existence like everyone else. In other words, Marcion, like some Gnostic Christians, was a docetist who taught that Jesus only "seemed" to have a fleshly body.

Coming "in the *likeness* of sinful flesh," as Marcion's favorite author Paul put it (Rom. 8:3), Jesus paid the penalty for other people's sins by dying on the cross. By having faith in his death, one could escape the throes of the wrathful God of the Jews and have eternal life with the God of love and mercy, the God of Jesus. But how could Jesus die for the sins of the world if he did not have a real body? How could his shed blood bring atonement if he did not have real blood?

Unfortunately, we do not know exactly how Marcion developed the details of his theory of atonement. Possibly he, like some Christians after him, thought that Jesus' death was a kind of trap that fooled the divine being who had control of human souls lost to sin, that the God of the Jews was forced to relinquish the souls of those who believed in Jesus' death, not realizing that in fact the death was only an appearance. But we do not actually know how Marcion worked out the theological niceties.

What we do know is that he based this entire system on sacred texts that he had in his church. These included, but were not limited to, the writings of Paul. Tertullian indicates, for example, that Marcion was particularly attracted to the saying of Jesus that a tree is known by its fruit (see Luke 6:43-44): Good trees do not produce rotten fruit, and rotten trees do not produce good fruit. What happens when the principle is applied to the divine realm? What kind of God creates a world wracked with pain, misery, disaster, disease, sin, and death? What kind of God says that he is the one who "creates evil" (Amos 3.6)? Surely a God who is himself evil. But what kind of God brings love, mercy, grace, salvation, and life? A God who does what is kind and generous and good? A God who is good.

There are two Gods, then, and according to Marcion, Jesus himself says so. Moreover, Jesus explains that no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the old wineskins burst and both they and the wine are destroyed (Mark 2:22). The gospel is a new thing that has come into the world. It cannot be put into the old wineskins of the Jewish religion.

### *Marcion's Literary Productions*

Once Marcion had worked out his theological system, he incorporated it into his two literary works. The first was his own composition, a book that no longer survives, except in the quotations of his opponents. Marcion called the book the *Antitheses* (Contrary statements). It was evidently a kind of commentary on the Bible, in which Marcion demonstrated his doctrinal views that the God of the Old Testament could not be the God of Jesus. Some of the book may well have consisted of direct and pointed antithetical statements contrasting the two Gods. For example, the God of the Old Testament tells the people of Israel to enter into the city of Jericho and murder every man, woman, child, and animal in the city (Joshua 6); but the God of Jesus tells his followers to love their enemies, to pray for those who persecute them, to turn the other cheek (Luke 6:27-29). Is this the same God? When Elisha, the prophet of the Old Testament God, was being mocked by a group of young boys, God allowed him to call out two she-bears to attack and maul them (2 Kings 2:23-24). The God of Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me" (Luke 18:15-17). Is this the same God? The God of the Old Testament said, "Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree" (Deut. 27:26; 28:58). But the God of Jesus ordered him, the one who was blessed, to be hanged on a tree. Is this the same God?

Many Christians today might be sympathetic with Marcion's view, as one often hears even still about the wrathful God of the Old Testament and the loving God of the New. Marcion, however, drove the idea to its limit, in a way many moderns could not accept. For him, there really were two Gods, and he set out to demonstrate it by appealing to the Old Testament. In this book of *Antitheses*, Marcion showed that he was not willing to explain away these passages by providing them with a figurative or symbolic interpretation; for him, they were to be taken literally. And when so read, they stood in stark contrast with the clear teachings of Jesus and his gospel of love and mercy.

Marcion's second literary creation was not an original composition but a new edition of other texts. Marcion put together a canon of Scripture, that is, a collection of books that he considered to be sacred authorities. Marcion, in fact, is widely thought to have been the first Christian to have done so, to construct a closed, that is, a finalized, canon of Scripture, long before the New Testament that we know was established. Some scholars think that Marcion's decision to create a canon may have spurred on efforts of proto-orthodox Christians to follow suit.

Of what did Marcion's canon consist? First and most obviously, it did not include any of the Jewish Scriptures (the "Old" Testament). These were books written by and about the Old Testament God, the creator of the world and the God of the Jews. They are not sacred texts for those who have been saved from his vengeful grasp by the death of Jesus. The New Testament is *completely* new and unanticipated.

Marcion's New Testament consisted of eleven books. Most of these were the letters of his beloved Paul, the one predecessor whom Marcion could trust to understand the radical claims of the gospel. Why, Marcion asked, did Jesus return to earth to convert Paul by means of a vision? Why did he not simply allow his own disciples to proclaim his message faithfully throughout the world? According to Marcion, it was because Jesus' disciples—themselves Jews, followers of the Jewish God, readers of the Jewish Scriptures—never did correctly understand their master. Confused by what Jesus taught them, wrongly thinking that he was the Jewish Messiah, even after his death and resurrection they *continued* not to understand, interpreting Jesus' words, deeds, and death in light of their understanding of Judaism. Jesus then had to start afresh, and he called Paul to reveal to him "the truth of the gospel." That is why Paul had to confront Jesus' disciple Peter and his earthly brother James, as seen in the letter to the Galatians. Jesus had revealed the truth to Paul, and these others simply never understood.

Paul understood, however, and he alone. Marcion therefore included ten of his letters in his canon of Scripture, all, in fact, of those that eventually came to be found in the New Testament with the exception of the Pastoral epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. We may never know why these three were not included as well. It may be that they were not as widely circulated by Marcion's time and that he himself did not know of them.<sup>13</sup>

Paul, of course, speaks of his "gospel," by which he means his gospel message. Marcion, however, believed that Paul actually had a Gospel book available to him. As a consequence, Marcion included a Gospel in his canon, a form of the Gospel of Luke. It is not clear why Marcion chose Luke as his Gospel, whether it was because its author was allegedly a companion of the apostle Paul,<sup>14</sup> or because it showed the greatest concern for Gentiles in the ministry of Jesus, or, perhaps more plausibly, because it was the Gospel he was raised on in his home church of Sinope.

In any event, this Gospel along with the ten Pauline letters formed Marcion's sacred canon of Scripture. Even such a short canon—no Old Testament and only eleven other books—created a problem for Marcion, for these eleven books do appear to affirm the material world as the creation of the true God, they quote passages from the Old Testament, and they show ties with historical Judaism. Marcion was fully aware of this problem and worked hard to resolve it. In his view, the reason these books had such passages is not because their authors were deceived into thinking that Judaism was important to the message of Jesus. No, it was only after the authors had produced these works that the offensive passages had been inserted into copies of their books, inserted by scribes who still did not understand Jesus' true message.

In order to present the Scriptures in their original pristine form, then, Marcion was driven by the logic of his system to edit the passages that affirmed the material world as the creation of the true God, that quoted the Old Testament, that smacked of Judaism. In a manner reminiscent of the later Jefferson Bible, Marcion removed all the passages offensive to his views. In the words of his proto-orthodox opponent, Tertullian, Marcion interpreted his scripture "with a pen knife" (*Prescription*, 38).

### *Marcion's Fate*

Once Marcion had completed his literary creations, he strove to have his views accepted by the Christian world at large. Possibly that was part of the motivation for his relocation to Rome, the capital city, in the first place. It appears that Marcion called a council of church leaders together in Rome to present his views—the first such Roman church council of record. But after hearing what he had to say, the Roman elders, rather than welcoming his views with open arms, chose to excommunicate him from their community, refunding his large donation and sending him on his way. Marcion left the church of Rome, momentarily defeated but none the worse for wear and none the less convinced of the truth of his gospel.

Marcion returned to Asia Minor to propagate his version of the faith, and he was fantastically successful in doing so. We cannot be sure exactly why, but Marcion experienced an almost unparalleled success on the mission field, establishing churches wherever he went, so that within a few years, one of his proto-orthodox opponents, the apologist and theologian in Rome, Justin, could

say that he was teaching his heretical views to "many people of every nation" (*Apology* 1.26). For centuries Marcionite churches would thrive; in some parts of Asia Minor they were the original form of Christianity and continued for many years to comprise the greatest number of persons claiming to be Christian. As late as the fifth century we read of orthodox bishops warning members of their congregations to be wary when traveling, lest they enter a strange town, attend the local church on Sunday morning, and find to their dismay that they are worshipping in the midst of Marcionite heretics.<sup>15</sup>

### **Christianities in Contrast and Competition**

We might do well in this, our opening move into some of the diverse forms of Christianity of the second and third centuries, to consider a set of contrasts between the two groups of Christians we have considered here. Both the Ebionites and the Marcionites claimed to be followers of Jesus and through him of the true God; both of them thought that Jesus' death was the way of salvation (on this they would disagree with other groups—cf. the Gospel of Thomas); both of them claimed to trace their views back to Jesus through his apostles. But in most other respects, they stood at opposite ends of the theological spectrum.

- The Ebionites were Jews who insisted that being Jewish was fundamental to a right standing before God. The Marcionites were Gentiles who insisted that Jewish practice was fundamentally detrimental for a right standing before God.
- The Ebionites insisted there was only one God. The Marcionites maintained that there were two.
- The Ebionites held to the laws of the Old Testament and saw the Old Testament as the revelation of the one true God. The Marcionites rejected the laws of the Old Testament and saw it as a book inspired by the inferior God of the Jews.
- The Ebionites saw Jesus as completely human and not divine. The Marcionites saw Jesus as completely divine and not human.
- The Ebionites saw Paul, with his teaching of justification by faith in Christ apart from the works of the law, as the arch heretic of the church. Marcion saw Paul as the one and only true apostle of Christ.
- The Ebionites accepted a version of Matthew as their Scripture (without its first two chapters, which show that Jesus was born *of a virgin*), possibly along with other books, such as their own Gospel of the Ebionites. Marcion accepted a version of Luke as his Scripture (again, possibly without its first two chapters, which show that Jesus was *born*), along with ten letters of Paul.

Here we have two groups with diametrically opposed views, both claiming not just to be Christian but to be *true* Christians. Both ultimately came to be condemned as heretical, not just by each other but also by the group that defeated them both, the proto-orthodox Christians who established themselves as dominant and determined what future Christians would think about God, Christ, salvation, and the Bible.

What if it had turned out differently? What if the Ebionites had won these battles, or the Marcionites?

From a historian's perspective, with all the advantages and disadvantages of hindsight, it has to be admitted that it is difficult to imagine either of these groups establishing itself as one of the dominant religions, let alone the "official" religion, of the Roman Empire in the way proto-orthodox Christianity eventually did.

If the Ebionites *had* established themselves as dominant, then things would be radically different for Christians today. Christianity would be not a religion that was separate from Judaism but a sect of Judaism, a sect that accepted Jewish laws, customs, and ways, a sect that practiced circumcision, observed Jewish holy days such as Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana and other festivals, a sect that kept kosher food laws and probably maintained a vegetarian diet.

As a sect within Judaism, Christianity would have had its principal battles internally with other Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah; anti-Semitism as it developed, with Christians opposing Jews, members of a different religion, might well have never occurred. What we think of as historical developments from the fall of ("Christian") Rome to the early and later Christian Middle Ages would never have transpired as they did, nor would the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, historical developments that arose out of a specific set of circumstances of medieval Christianity. One could argue that the modern world would have been totally unrecognizable.

All of this, of course, is rank speculation. We have no idea what exactly might have happened, whether life in our world would have been better, worse, or about the same. But it would have been wildly different. At the same time, as I have pointed out, it is hard to imagine it happening at all. Ebionite Christianity was at a serious disadvantage when it came to appealing to the masses. It attracted some Jews and some non-Jews who found Judaism appealing. But such people were never in the majority in the ancient world. The idea of large-scale conversions to a religion that required kosher food laws and circumcision seems a bit far-fetched. Had Ebionite Christianity "won" the internal battles for dominance, Christianity itself would probably have ended up as a footnote in the history of religion books used in university courses in the West.

In any event, Ebionite Christianity was "left behind" at a fairly early moment in the history of the church. Proto-orthodox fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian mention it and say a few things about it, but they do not see it as a serious threat, already by the end of the second century.

What about Marcionite Christianity? Here one can both imagine and argue for real success within Christianity itself. Marcionite Christianity was a forceful movement in the early church, and one can readily see why. It took what most people in the empire found most attractive about Christianity—love, mercy, grace, wonder, opposition to this harsh, material world and salvation from it—and pushed it to an extreme, while taking Christianity's less attractive sides—law, guilt, judgment, eternal punishment, and, above all, association and close ties with Jews and Judaism—and getting rid of them. Had Marcionite Christianity succeeded, the Old Testament would be seen by Christians today not as the Old Testament but as the Jewish Scriptures, a set of writings for the Jews and of no real relevance to Christianity. So, too, Christians would not see themselves as having Jewish roots. This may well have opened the doors to heightened hostilities, since Marcion seems to have hated Jews and everything Jewish; or possibly even more likely, it may have led simply to benign neglect as Jews and their religion would have been considered to be of no relevance and certainly no competition for Christians. The entire history of anti-Semitism might have been avoided, ironically, by an anti-Jewish religion.

Once again, other aspects of the history of the West would have been quite different, but it is not easy to see how. Certainly, the intellectual tradition of Christianity would have been distinctly different, as the Old Testament would not have been an issue of ongoing concern, and figurative, spiritual, allegorical modes of interpretation might not have developed within Christian circles (as Marcion was a literalist), leading to a history of literary analysis and a set of reading practices entirely different from what we have inherited. Economic and political history might have turned out to be quite different, since there would have been nothing in the sacred Scriptures, for example, to oppose lending money at interest or to promote the system of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Who knows what would have happened to the environment, given the circumstance that so much of modern environmental concerns stem ultimately from a conviction, filtered through many layers, but with Judeo-Christian roots, that God is the creator of this world and that we are its caretakers. Different, too, would have been so much of modern socialism, even (odd as it may seem) so much of Marxist theory, as it is ultimately rooted in notions of economic justice, fairness, and opposition to oppression that trace their lineage back to the Hebrew prophets.

But once again, it is impossible to know where we would be if Marcionite Christianity had won the internal debates among Christian groups. At the same time, even if the Marcionites had established their supremacy within Christianity, it is extremely difficult to imagine them succeeding in becoming the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, the way proto-orthodox Christianity did. This is because of a unique feature that made Christianity initially palatable to Roman religious tastes (and to become ultimately successful, of course, something first has to be palatable). Unlike today, in the ancient Roman world there was wide-ranging suspicion of *any* philosophy or religion that smacked

of novelty. In the fields of philosophy and religion, as opposed to the field of military technology, it was the *old* that was appreciated and respected, not the new. One of the most serious obstacles for Christians in the Roman mission field was the widespread perception—and it was entirely valid—that the religion was “recent.” Nothing new could be true. If it were true, why was it not known long ago? How could it be that no one until now has understood the truth? Not even Homer, Plato, or Aristotle?

The strategy that Christians devised to avoid this obstacle to conversion was to say that even though Jesus did live just decades or a century or so ago, the religion based on him is much, much older, for this religion is the fulfillment of all that God had been predicting in the oldest surviving books of civilization. Starting with Moses and the prophets, God had predicted the coming of Jesus and the religion founded in his name. Moses lived four centuries before Homer, eight centuries before Plato. And Moses looked forward to Jesus and the salvation to be brought in his name. Christianity is not a new thing, of recent vintage, argued the (proto-orthodox) Christian thinkers. It is older than anything that Greek myth and philosophy can offer; it is older than Rome itself. As an ancient religion, it demands attention.<sup>16</sup>

By embracing “true” Judaism, that is, by taking over the Jewish Scriptures and claiming them as their own, Christians overcame the single biggest objection that pagans had with regard to the appearance of this “new” religion. Had Christians not been able to make a plausible case for the antiquity of their religion, it never would have succeeded in the empire.

But what about Marcion and his followers? They claimed that Jesus and the salvation that he brought were brand-new. God had never been in the world before. He was a Stranger to this place. There were no ancient roots to this religion, no forerunners, no antecedents. The salvation of Christ came unlooked for and unexpected, unknown to all ancient philosophy and unlike anything found in ancient religion. Given the reverence for antiquity in antiquity, in its quest for ultimate dominance, Marcionite Christianity probably never had a chance.

## Chapter Six

# Christians “In the Know”: The Worlds of Early Christian Gnosticism

No form of lost Christianity has so intrigued modern readers and befuddled modern scholars as early Christian Gnosticism. The intrigue is easy to understand, especially in view of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library (see pp. 51–55). When that group of fieldhands headed by Mohammed Ali uncovered this cache of books in Upper Egypt, the world was suddenly presented with hard evidence of other Christian groups in the ancient world that stood in sharp contrast with any kind of Christianity familiar to us today. There was no Jesus of the stained glass window here, nor a Jesus of the creeds—not even a Jesus of the New Testament. These books were fundamentally different from anything in our experience, and almost nothing could have prepared us for them.

### The Nag Hammadi Library

The library contained a wide array of books, many of them with understandings of God, the world, Christ, and religion that differed not only from the views of proto-orthodoxy but also from one another.<sup>1</sup> There were new Gospels recording Jesus’ words, some of them containing his secret and “truer” teachings, delivered after his resurrection from the dead, Gospels allegedly written by his disciples Philip and John the son of Zebedee, by his brother James, by his twin brother Thomas. Even though forged, these books were obviously written seriously and meant to be taken seriously, as providing a guide to the truth. So, too, the other books in the collection, including several different and internally diverse mystical reflections on how the divine realm came into being. Most of these documents assumed that there was not simply one God over all who had created the world and made it good. Some of them were quite explicit: This