

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SCRIPTURE AND IDENTITY: THE JEWISH
SCRIPTURES AND MARCION'S INFLUENCE
ON EARLY CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

RESEARCH REPORT
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MENT AND EARLY CHRISTIAN STUDIES RESEARCH REPORT

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1 - Introduction

In the Lutheran Church of Denmark, there is an ongoing debate about liturgy. One of the issues debated is whether the Old Testament should be a part of the Sunday worship. Mogens Müller, professor emeritus from the University of Copenhagen, has argued that it should not. He argues that these texts are fundamentally Jewish and hence, expressions of Judaism. Furthermore, he claims they provide a different image of God than the New Testament and that one of the New Testament's purposes, is to replace the Old Testament's image of God. Therefore he argues that these texts do not have the same authority in Christianity as the New Testament.¹ This debate has some resemblance to a debate in the second century CE.

For the New Testament writers, the Jewish Scriptures² was a source of divine revelation and authority (Joh 19:36; Rom 4:1–25; 2 Tim 3:16–17). This is no surprise, as most of the

¹ Mogens Müller, "Professor: Det Gamle Testamente hører ikke hjemme i kirkens tekstrækker," *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 30 September 2018, <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/kronik/det-gamle-testamente-hoerer-ikke-hjemme-i-kirkens-tekstraekker>. One of those who have argued against Müller is Anders Klostergaard Petersen, professor at the University of Aarhus. He argues that without the Old Testament Christianity becomes ahistorical; Anders Klostergaard Petersen, "En kristendom uden Det Gamle Testamente er historieløs," *Politiken*, 30 November 2019, <https://politiken.dk/debat/kroniken/art7506103/En-kristendom-uden-Det-Gamle-Testamente-er-historiel%C3%B8s>.

² In this report I will use the term "Jewish Scriptures" to refer to what in later Christianity became known as "The Old Testament". I use this as a collective term for the Scriptures regarded as authoritative for both Jews and Christians, without implying any specific extent or language of these Scriptures. For a discussion of this see Michael W. Holmes, "The Biblical Canon," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 408–14.

earliest members of the Jesus-movement were Jews³ and naturally regarded the Jewish Scriptures as their Scriptures. As the movement spread to all parts of the Roman Empire, however, it became dominated by non-Jews. Most continued to view the Jewish Scriptures as a source of authority, and thus they have been a part of the Christian canon throughout church history. However, in the second century, this was not a given. In this identity-forming period for early Christianity, a debate arose about the status and the interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, both with Jews and among different Christian communities.

This debate will be the focus of this report. I will be exploring the question: *How did the Jewish Scriptures influence the formation of the early Christians' identity.* To answer this question, I will first outline a few aspects of the formation of Christian identity in the second century, focusing on group identity, as well as the importance of the Jewish Scriptures in this process. Second, I will turn my attention to a second-century character, Marcion. Although he was deemed a heretic, he considered himself a follower of Christ. However, his relation to the Jewish Scriptures was very different from that of the proto-orthodox church.⁴ Therefore, I will explore how he related to these Scriptures and how this shaped his Christian identity. Finally, I will discuss how Marcion's view of the Jewish Scriptures influenced the proto-orthodox church's identity as Christians.

Unfortunately, Marcion's writings are lost, and, consequently, we only know his writings through the extensive refutations by Tertullian among others. Therefore an analysis based on his writings is not possible. What is possible is an analysis of the Marcion presented by for example Tertullian. However, to be satisfactory, more than one picture of Marcion must be presented, which would make this an extensive project and out of the

³ I use terms such as "Jews", "Judaism", "Christian" etc. to designate the different religious traditions, without implying that the full-fledged forms of the fourth or fifth century. Cf Bengt Holmberg, "Understanding the First Hundred Years of Christian Identity," in *Exploring Early Christian Identity*, ed. Bengt Holmberg, WUNT 226 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 3–5.

⁴ The classical notion of "orthodoxy" vs "heresy" has been challenged greatly in recent years as relevant for the first centuries CE, because it assumes a unity, and perhaps also an ecclesiastical structure, where in reality there was probably much more diversity. Therefore, I will in this report use the term "proto-orthodox" to designate the authors and communities that would be considered orthodox in later church history. Cf. the discussion in Karen L. King, "Which Early Christianity?," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67–71.

scope of this report. Instead, I will do a review of recent research on Marcion, with the specific focus of how researchers have viewed Marcion's relation to the Jewish Scriptures and how it influenced his Christian identity.

Adolf von Harnack has provided the classic scholarly picture of Marcion, which all accounts since has referred to. Therefore this review will begin with his analysis of Marcion. Afterwards, we will turn to the more recent debate, where Harnack has been seriously challenged, through the presentation of the two 21st century scholars, Sebastian Moll and Judith Lieu.

2 - Early Christian Identity

2.1 – Group Identity

Identity is a very elusive concept. In sociology, identity can be defined as something that: “... represents one’s self meanings, and distinguishes an individual as either similar or dissimilar to others.”⁵ A person can hold multiple identities which are exercised in different social structures. The basis for these identities can be categorized as *Person identities*, *Role identities* and *Group identities*. Person identities are controlling identities and consists of different traits or qualities which defines the person. Role identities are the identities tied to a specific role, such as mother, manager or son. These identities are both defined by the culture one lives in and by how the individual views his or her role. Group identities are the identities a person attributes to oneself through the membership of a social group, such as Christianity. The basis for group identities is twofold. Firstly, something is shared among the group members. There is some sort of similarity, which constitutes a unity. This could be a shared belief system or a shared history. Secondly, these similarities imply a difference be-

⁵ Michael J. Carter and Danielle C. Mireles, “Identity Theory,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 1.

tween those in the group and those out of the group. The group sets up boundaries for being in the group or out of the group, and the individual finds meaning and verification by staying inside these boundaries and thus acting like the others in the group.⁶

Early Christian identities were such group identities. They shared a story, going back to the resurrection experience. They shared rituals, such as the Eucharist, and believed that they had access to the truth. All of these things had, furthermore, a common centre in the person of Jesus, who in every way was the central figure of the movement.⁷

At the same time, they defined themselves in opposition to other identities, such as Jewish, gentile and even other Christian identities. For example, when the Jesus-movement began, it was primarily an intra-Jewish movement. The members were almost exclusively Jews who, according to Acts, even still participated in the temple worship (Acts 2:46). However, during the first centuries of its existence, the early church became dominated by none-Jews. Therefore, the differences and the boundaries between the groups became more significant, and both groups started to underline these differences. They began defining themselves in opposition to one another. Several early Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr, argued in favour of the superiority of the Christian church. The church had replaced the Jewish people as the people of God.⁸

Nevertheless, Judaism and what was to become the orthodox church continued to have many similarities. They shared many beliefs, such as monotheism, ethics etc.⁹ Furthermore, they shared the Jewish Scriptures. These Scriptures, along with the emerging collection of writings which were to become the New Testament, were crucial in the formation of the early Christian identity.

⁶ Peter J. Burke, "Identities and Social Structure: The 2003 Cooley-Mead Award Address," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 67.1 (2004): 9; Carter and Mireles, "Identity Theory," 1; Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12–15.

⁷ Holmberg, "Understanding," 1–3.

⁸ Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2002), 259–76.

⁹ Skarsaune, *In the Shadow*, 259.

2.2 – Identity and Text in the Early Christian Community

In the Greco-Roman world, one of the purposes of texts were the creation of identity.¹⁰ Texts preserved the narratives that formed the identity of a community. This could, for example, be narratives of descent, of how this particular people or group came into being.¹¹ For the Christian communities, the primary identity shaping narrative was no doubt the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, the Jewish Scriptures played a pivotal role in this narrative, while of course also being essential for the identity of the Jewish community. This resulted in a struggle over the interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures.

For the Jewish communities, their Scriptures provided a decent narrative. The stories from Genesis about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, along with the exodus story, provided a shared narrative for everyone belonging to the Jewish community of how they originated. Especially the exodus narrative is emphasized over and over again throughout the Jewish Scriptures. Part of the reason for this may exactly be the group identity mechanism noted above; to mark the boundaries between those inside and outside the group. Both the patriarchal, as well as the exodus narrative, describes the people of Israel as originating outside the land of Israel. Thereby they were set apart from the neighbouring people and, even in exile, their group identity was ensured, though the land and the promises tied to it, was another important identity marker for them.¹²

For the proto-orthodox communities, the Jewish Scriptures served another purpose. The proto-orthodox claimed that they, and not the Jewish communities, had the right interpretation of the Scriptures. Jesus was considered the key to interpretation. Only in light of his life, death and resurrection could all of the Scriptures be rightly understood.¹³

Furthermore, In the Greco-Roman society, religions were valued according to their age. Only an ancient ancestral religion could be regarded as a *religio licita*. This posed a problem for the Christians. As the ties to Judaism were loosened, the surrounding society began to

¹⁰ Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 30–32.

¹¹ Kimberly B. Stratton, "Identity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, ed. Barbette Stanley Spaeth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 221–23.

¹² Stratton, "Identity," 222–23.

¹³ Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 37–45.

perceive them as a new religion.¹⁴ However, for the proto-orthodox, this was not the case. They regarded themselves as an ancient religion, in fact, Eusebius later described Christianity as the "most ancient and most authentic" religion altogether.¹⁵ They did this by claiming the Jewish Scriptures and the Jewish heroes as their own. Abraham, Moses and so on were seen as a kind of proto-Christians who were awaiting Jesus as the Messiah and were called "friends of God".¹⁶

Therefore, the Jewish Scriptures were pivotal for the identity of the proto-orthodox communities. As well as Jesus was perceived as the key to understanding the Jewish Scriptures, these Scriptures were also regarded as the background for understanding Jesus. They saw themselves as the fulfilment of Israel's history. They were the ones all the prophets had prophesied about, and the legitimate people of God. Therefore, they were the true heirs of the sacred Scriptures of Judaism.¹⁷ The Jewish Scriptures had authority over the proto-orthodox communities, and thus they were their Scriptures, although it might be too early to describe them as a canon proper.¹⁸

However, the debate was not only with the Jews. It was also an intra-Christian debate because not all early Christians shared the proto-orthodox understanding of the Jewish Scriptures. The one best known for choosing another path in this debate is the second-century figure Marcion.

3 – Marcion in Recent Research

Our knowledge of Marcion is very elusive. Already Justin Martyr, who seems to have been a contemporary of Marcion, considered him a heretic (*1 Apol.* 26; 58). This formed a tradition

¹⁴ Skarsaune, *In the Shadow*, 265–66.

¹⁵ *Hist. eccl.* 1.4.10 as cited in Josef Lössl, *The Early Church: History and Memory* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 78.

¹⁶ Lössl, *The Early Church*, 78.

¹⁷ Skarsaune, *In the Shadow*, 265–69.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the difference between "Scriptures" and "Canon" see Holmes, "The Biblical Canon," 406–8. Here Holmes distinguish between "Scripture" as religious authoritative texts and "Canon" as a list of Scriptures.

in what would become the orthodox church, resulting in Marcion being considered a heretic throughout church history.¹⁹ Therefore, his writings, as most of the writings that were considered heretical, were not preserved. Consequently, our only knowledge of Marcion is based entirely on the different pictures provided by those who opposed him in different ways.²⁰

This makes any definite knowledge of Marcion very hard to attain, which the debates of recent scholarship on Marcion also aptly demonstrates. For most of the 20th century, Adolf von Harnack gave the authoritative account of Marcion, although, this account has been seriously challenged recently. Currently, scholars disagree on how fundamental aspects of both Marcion's biography and theology should be reconstructed. In this report, we cannot engage in every debate. Instead, the different positions on Marcion's relation to the Jewish Scriptures will be our focus with occasional outlook to other aspects when relevant. However, before we dive into this debate an overall introduction to Marcion and his theology is necessary.

3.1 – Introduction to Marcion

Marcion was a native of Pontus, a Roman region in the northern part of Asia Minor.²¹ We do not know when he was born, although several suggestions have been given.²² It is relatively certain, however, that he arrived in Rome at some time in the middle of the second century.²³ Most of Marcion's activity was probably centred in Rome. According to antique sources, this led to his excommunication from the church of Rome and subsequent forming

¹⁹ Judith Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 15–25.

²⁰ Lieu, *Marcion*, 7–9.

²¹ Paul Foster, "Marcion: His Life, Works, Beliefs, and Impact," *ExpTim* 121.6 (2010): 269–70.

²² Sebastian Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, WUNT 250 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 26.

²³ Foster, "Marcion," 272. Foster argues for the traditional association of Marcion with 144/145 CE, either as his arrival in Rome or his break with the Roman church. However, this precise dating has been questioned recently, cf. Lieu, *Marcion*, 295–98.

of his church.²⁴ Although it has been disputed whether the ecclesiastical structures necessary for such a scenario was present in Rome at the time (see section 3.4.1), a distinctive Marcionite church certainly did form at some point and lasted several centuries afterwards.²⁵

Marcion's theology is the backdrop of these disputes. The background and point of departure for this theology is disputed, as will be evident from the discussion below. However, some overall characteristics are commonly agreed upon.

First and foremost, Marcion distinguished between two gods. One god is the creator of this world and associated with the Jewish Scriptures. Marcion had a thoroughly negative view of this creator, as well as the entire creation.²⁶ Humankind is created by the creator god and is thus his. They are subject to his laws and will be judged by him.²⁷

The other god is conversely foreign to the creation and associated with the New Testament writings. This god is the father of Jesus. He intervenes from outside this world, with no prior association with it, to free humankind from the bonds of the creator.²⁸

What Marcion perhaps is best known for today is his supposed assembling of a New Testament canon. This canon would have consisted of the gospel of Luke, simply called the *Gospel*, as well as ten Pauline letters, called the *Apostolikon*, all of which he had redacted. The extent of this redaction is very debated, but he probably made alterations to some extent.²⁹ The influence this had on the formation of the New Testament canon has often been

²⁴ Foster, "Marcion," 272–73.

²⁵ Foster, "Marcion," 278–79.

²⁶ The exact characterization of the creator is disputed, however, that Marcion had a thoroughly negative view of him is beyond questioning. Some of the different views will be presented below.

²⁷ Cf. Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Eugene, Ore: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 72–73.

²⁸ Foster, "Marcion," 277.

²⁹ Cf. Judith Lieu, one of the more critical scholars: Lieu, *Marcion*, 183–269.

discussed.³⁰ Likewise, the influence of the Pontic has been traced in several other areas.³¹ So also in the question of the role of the Jewish Scriptures for the proto-orthodox church, which I will discuss in section 4. First, however, we turn to how scholarship currently views Marcion's relation to the Jewish Scriptures, beginning with a presentation of Harnack's opinion before moving on to two current scholars.

3.2 – Adolf von Harnack: Marcion Rejected the Jewish Scriptures

Adolf von Harnack was very fascinated with Marcion. He wrote about him several times, most importantly in his monograph *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremdem Got.*³² It was this monograph that shaped how Marcion was viewed for most of the 20th century.³³

3.2.1 – Rejection of the Jewish Scriptures

Harnack's main thought was that Marcion was a dedicated student of Paul. Paul was his starting point and his interpretation of Paul was the background for all of his theology.³⁴ Marcion was so dedicated to Paul that he was convinced that he was the only real apostle. All the other apostles had been so closely associated with the people of Israel and the Jewish Scriptures, that they had distorted Jesus original message. Therefore, Jesus chose Paul as his real apostle so he could preach his message.³⁵

According to Harnack, Marcion's interpretation of Paul was first and foremost grounded in the contrast between *Law* and *Gospel*. The Pontic radicalized Paul's understanding of this

³⁰ E.g. E.C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: SPCK, 1948); John Barton, "Marcion Revisited," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2002), 341–54.

³¹ Lieu, *Marcion*, 293–95.

³² Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium Vom Fremdem Gott* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1924). In this report, I will use the English translation, which was translated by John Steely and Lyle Bierma (see n. 27).

³³ For a brief overview of research on Marcion in the 20th century after Harnack see Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 5–9.

³⁴ Harnack, *Marcion*, 1.

³⁵ Harnack, *Marcion*, 25–28.

contrast and made it into a contrast between two gods, the creator god of the Jewish Scriptures, and the alien god of his New Testament. Thus, for Marcion, the gospel was something radically new. It was the message of an alien god, which is strange to this world. This led Marcion to his rejection of the Jewish Scriptures. These were the witness of the creator god and therefore they were not authoritative for the followers of Christ.³⁶

Especially two parables of Jesus were important for Marcion in reaching this conclusion. First, it was the parable of the wineskins (Luk 5:36–39³⁷). Marcion interpreted this parable as a rejection by Jesus of the Jewish Scriptures. The old was not to be used anymore, the message of the alien god could not be understood while still retaining the Jewish Scriptures. The other parable was about the good and the bad tree (Luk 6:43–45). Here again, the Jewish Scriptures were the bad tree which could not yield good fruits, while the Gospel was the good tree yielding good fruits. Both parables thus underlined that the Jewish Scriptures were not to be used in the church.³⁸ Harnack also sees the interpretation of these parables as the source of the conflict between Marcion and the Roman church. The Pontic had been a member of the Roman church and had even given the church a large gift, but disagreement over the interpretation of these parables led the church to excommunicate him.³⁹

Marcion did, however, acknowledge the historicity of the Jewish Scriptures. He saw them as reliable accounts of the Jewish people's history. He acknowledged the existence of a creator god, who had created humans and acted with the world, as the Jewish Scriptures testified.⁴⁰ Yet this was also the grounds of his critic of the Jewish Scriptures. They only testified to the creator god, which he despised, and not to the alien god. In these Scriptures, Marcion found a god he characterized as basically just, but at the same time petty. The law testified to a god who gave his laws and will judge his creation by them, and who therefore is just. However, it also testified to a god who is over-particular and interacts with his creation without mercy. Thus, the creator god was not fundamentally evil, but as he was also

³⁶ Harnack, *Marcion*, 21.

³⁷ The references are to canonical Luke, and not to Marcion's version, which we do not have.

³⁸ Harnack, *Marcion*, 22.

³⁹ Harnack, *Marcion*, 15–20.

⁴⁰ Harnack, *Marcion*, 23.

not almighty, his reign became that of a despot. Therefore, his justice and reign were evil.⁴¹ In contrast to this god, the redeemer god was goodness itself. He was characterized by love and mercy, most clearly demonstrated by his redemption of humans, without any prior relation or obligation towards them.⁴²

3.2.2 – *Consequences for Marcion*

Thus, according to Harnack, Marcion abolished the Jewish Scriptures as his Scriptures and inserted his New Testament instead. His main work, “Antithesis”, were to be read with the Jewish Scriptures and demonstrated the many differences between these, which he saw as the law, and his New Testament, which was his gospel.⁴³

Second, Marcion’s church became fundamentally ascetic. Most prominently through the total rejection of any sexual relationship, even inside of marriage. This was due to Marcion’s fundamental disgust for the world and creation, as the work of the creator god.⁴⁴

Thus, according to Harnack’s description, Marcion’s and his church’s Christian identity was essentially based on their understanding of being a radically new community. They understood themselves as being the real interpreters of Paul and as servants of the alien redeemer god, who was completely unknown to the world, but, in Jesus, had revealed himself. Furthermore, they understood themselves as in opposition to the creator of the world they lived in and therefore tried to remove themselves from it through asceticism.

3.2.3 – *Critic of Harnack*

There has been much criticism of Harnack in recent years, and all of it cannot be elaborated here. Later I will touch on some of the details in Harnack’s picture of Marcion. Here, however, I will focus on the general criticism.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Harnack, *Marcion*, 69–70.

⁴² Harnack, *Marcion*, 79–82.

⁴³ Harnack, *Marcion*, 53–56; 97–98.

⁴⁴ Harnack, *Marcion*, 96–98.

⁴⁵ For the details see especially section 3.3

Harnack's reconstruction of Marcion is based on his confidence in having understood him. Harnack was convinced that he knew how the Pontic thought and therefore he could know for example which redactions Marcion would have made in his New Testament, even when he had no evidence for the redaction.

In many ways, however, Harnack's reconstruction says more about him than about Marcion. Harnack saw Marcion as a second-century reformer, comparing him to Martin Luther, especially in the importance of 'Law and Gospel'. He saw in him a meaningful companion, particularly in his theological project of abolishing the Old Testament as a part of the Christian canon.⁴⁶ Thus, although Harnack described some aspect of Marcion's thought accurately, he reconstructed him in his image, similarly as it had been done in the first quest of historical Jesus.⁴⁷ He was overly confident in his analysis and ability to reconstruct Marcion.⁴⁸ Therefore we will now turn to a presentation of the more recent scholarship on Marcion.

3.3 – Sebastian Moll: Marcion Interpreted the New Testament in Light of the Old
 Sebastian Moll describes the aim of his monograph, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, a published version of his doctoral thesis, as an attempt to provide a new complete picture of Marcion to replace Harnack's outdated reconstruction. Therefore, Moll's rather short monograph endeavours to give a comprehensive picture of the Pontic ranging from his life to the Marcionite church.

3.3.1 – *The Jewish Scriptures are Important*

Moll disagrees with Harnack on the point of departure for Marcion's theology. Rejecting Harnack's assessment that it was a distinction between Law and Gospel, he instead argues

⁴⁶ This theological project is most clearly expressed in Harnack's famous thesis: "The rejection of the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake which the great church rightly avoided; to maintain it in the sixteenth century was a fate from which the Reformation was not yet able to escape; but still to preserve it in Protestantism as a canonical document since the nineteenth century is the consequence of a religious and ecclesiastical crippling" Harnack, *Marcion*, 134.

⁴⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, 2. ed. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 210–16.

⁴⁸ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 1–3.

that the core background for Marcion's theology was a hatred of the world and creation.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Moll sees Marcion as a Biblicist and argues that this was fundamental for him. For Moll, this is a description of Marcion's method, which he describes as: "... the method of using the Bible as the only basis for one's theology, usually combined with a very literal understanding of it."⁵⁰ Consequently, Moll interprets Marcion as not concerned with philosophy or allegory, but rather reading the biblical texts as they were and using them in his description of the two gods.⁵¹

Thus, for Marcion, the god of the Jewish Scriptures was real, and these writings gave an accurate testimony of him. Moll argues, with Harnack, that Marcion believed the testimony of the Jewish Scriptures and that he had a fundamentally literal understanding of them.⁵² However, whereas Harnack understands the Pontic as an interpreter and disciple of Paul, Moll argues that the Jewish Scriptures are the basis for Marcion's interpretation. He bases this argument on the fact that no sources suggest that Marcion altered or where selective with these Scriptures in any way, while he, according to Moll, at the same time seriously redacted his New Testament. This suggests that Marcion understood his New Testament based on his interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, rather than the other way around. Therefore, claims Moll, Marcion could not have excluded the Jewish Scriptures from his canon.⁵³

Thus, Moll also interprets Marcion's association with Paul radically different from Harnack. He sees Marcion and Paul almost like opposites, where soteriology is the only category with even a remote similarity.⁵⁴ He acknowledges that Marcion referred to Paul, and

⁴⁹ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 59; 77–78.

⁵⁰ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 78.

⁵¹ Cf. Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 58–72.

⁵² Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 79–82.

⁵³ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 82–83.

⁵⁴ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 70–71. Although even here Moll argues that Marcion does not concord with the Pauline dialectic of sin and grace. Cf. Harnack's understanding (section 3.2.1) which Moll follows.

saw him as the only genuine apostle, but this is rather because of Paul's importance and status. Marcion wanted to claim this status and endorse his position by using a recognized authority and at the same time discredit the other apostles.⁵⁵

With this understanding of the Jewish Scriptures, it is clear that the view of the creator god, which we shall turn to now, had to be based on these Scriptures depiction of him.

3.3.2 – *The Evil Creator*

Marcion derived all elements for his description of his first god from his interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures. He was first and foremost creator of this world. Furthermore, he was the god of the Jews, while also being the giver of the law and the judge of his creation.⁵⁶ Above all, however, Marcion himself, according to Moll, did not distinguish between a just and a good god, as Harnack claimed. Instead, Moll argues that, for Marcion the creator god was evil.

Moll bases this argument on his reading of Roman gnostic Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*. Moll dates this letter to around 150 CE, which would mean that it was written a few years after Marcion's break with the Roman church and make it one of the earliest witnesses to his teachings.⁵⁷ In this letter, which is only known to us through Epiphanius' work *Panarion* from the fourth century, Ptolemy refers to two different positions on who has given the law. The first position claims that it was given by God the Father, while the other claims it was given by the devil, which is also identified as the creator of the world (*Pan* 33.3.2).⁵⁸ Moll argues that this second position is an accurate depiction of Marcion's beliefs because Ptolemy is very close to him in time, and also lived in Rome, which makes it probable that he had first-hand knowledge of Marcion's teachings. Furthermore, Ptolemy himself argues, against the two other positions, that the law was given by a just god (*Pan* 33.7.3-5). If this was also

⁵⁵ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 84–86.

⁵⁶ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 58–62.

⁵⁷ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 14–17. Moll dates Marcion's arrival in Rome between 144 and 145 CE; Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 31–45.

⁵⁸ Cf Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 16–17.

Marcion's position, it does not make sense that Ptolemy would misrepresent it.⁵⁹ Thus, according to Moll, Marcion himself thought of the creator god as an evil god, and not a just god. His system was strictly dualistic.⁶⁰

Marcion's hatred of the world led him to a completely negative evaluation of the creator god. All aspects of this God mentioned above was essentially evil traits. Furthermore, in the same way, Marcion founded his doctrine in the Jewish Scriptures, he also used the evil creator god as his 'thesis' to which the good redeemer god was the 'anti-thesis'.⁶¹ They are each other's opposites and it was specifically to wage war against the creator, that Jesus came as the good god's Messiah.⁶²

3.3.3 – Consequences for Marcion

To sum up Moll's interpretation of Marcion, he argues that Marcion based his theology on his interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures. These, and the evil god he found in them, became the scapegoat for his hatred of the world, while Jesus, as the representation of the good god, became his saviour out of this hated world. Thus the Jewish Scriptures was foundational for the Pontic's thought and an essential part of his canon.

According to Moll, this led to a basically world renouncing attitude among Marcion and his followers. They saw themselves as in opposition to the creator god and it was their purpose to defy him. This was done partly by rejecting sexual relationships altogether, as Harnack also asserted, but also by deliberately violating the commandments of the creator god, for example by deliberately not keeping the sabbath.⁶³

⁵⁹ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 48–49.

⁶⁰ According to Moll this system developed in later Marcionite teaching, forming different types of tripartite systems, which introduced the notion of a just god, although this just god most often was represented as a cruel or wicked judge; Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 50–58.

⁶¹ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 82–83.

⁶² Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 64–69.

⁶³ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 129–33.

3.3.4 – Critic of Moll

Moll's reconstruction of Marcion successfully points out many of the weaknesses in Harnack's and gives a viable alternative. It can, however, be questioned whether he might have overreacted to some of Harnack's positions. Moll is certainly right in arguing that the Jewish Scriptures was important for the formation of Marcion's dualistic theology and that he viewed them as the words of the very real creator god.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, it might be an overstatement when he says that: "... Marcion could never have actually excluded the Old Testament from his church"⁶⁵ With Marcion's very negative view of the Jewish Scriptures, it seems unlikely that he would have considered them as religious authoritative texts. He certainly did not think them irrelevant, but their relevance seems mostly to be as the Scriptures of the enemy god and as the negative foil for the understanding of the good god. Thus, based on Moll's overall depiction of Marcion, it seems more likely that he understood himself in opposition to the Jewish Scripture than in continuation of them.⁶⁶

Furthermore, Judith Lieu also criticizes Moll for using the ancient sources uncritically. Specifically, she argues Moll bases too much on his reading of Ptolemy. According to her, it is far from certain that Ptolemy argues against Marcion, which would significantly weaken Moll's interpretation, that Marcion thought the creator evil. Instead, she argues that this god is most consistently presented as just, and therefore it is most likely this way Marcion thought of him.⁶⁷

With this presentation of Moll's approach to Marcion and critic of Harnack, we will now turn to Judith Lieu's very different method.

3.4 – Judith Lieu: Marcion as Part of the Second Century

Judith Lieu's main purpose, with her monograph *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, is to locate Marcion inside his second-century context. She argues that to recover and explain

⁶⁴ Harnack does not seem to disagree with these conclusions as we have seen above.

⁶⁵ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 83.

⁶⁶ Cf. Joseph Tyson's critic in his review of Moll's monograph: Joseph B. Tyson, "The Arch-Heretic Marcion," *CBQ* 74.1 (2012): 167–68.

⁶⁷ Judith Lieu, "The Arch-Heretic Marcion," *JTS* 64.1 (2013): 247–50; Lieu, *Marcion*, 343–49.

Marcion we must understand him within his context, in much the same way as the third quest of the historical Jesus is trying to do. She prefers a contextual model for approaching Marcion, rather than one that first and foremost seeks to use him as an explanation of other second-century developments.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Lieu stresses that we only know the Pontic through others account of him, and these accounts are polemical. They almost all want to paint Marcion as a heretic which distorts the images they give.⁶⁹

Therefore, Lieu does not provide us with a systematic presentation of the historical Marcion. In her opinion, this is not possible.⁷⁰ Instead, she investigates the different 'Marcions' that emerge from the different accounts and through this, she tries to show that much of Marcion's thought can be firmly located inside his second-century context.⁷¹

Lieu touches on many aspects of Marcion's thought and his context. For the present purposes, however, I will only give a brief overview of the social context she places the Pontic in, as well as his use of the Jewish Scriptures.

3.4.1 – Marcion's Context

Traditionally Marcion's social context in Rome has been viewed as that of a church. Marcion is seen as part of the proto-orthodox church community in Rome, when he arrives there. Shortly after, however, he is excommunicated from it and therefore forms his church.⁷² Lieu provides a very different picture of Marcion's social context. She does this by asserting that Marcion context was very similar to that of Justin Martyr, which we have a much more certain knowledge about. Therefore, she investigates Justin context and uses this to conclude what Marcion's context would have been.⁷³

⁶⁸ Lieu, *Marcion*, 293–95.

⁶⁹ Lieu, *Marcion*, 7–9.

⁷⁰ Lieu, *Marcion*, 9.

⁷¹ Lieu, *Marcion*, 438–39.

⁷² E.g. Foster, "Marcion," 271–73. Cf also Moll and Harnack's accounts: Harnack, *Marcion*, 10–15; Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 43–45.

⁷³ Lieu, *Marcion*, 293–302.

Lieu argues that an ecclesiastical structure, necessary for the traditional view, was not present at the time. Rather she views Marcion as part of the Christian environment in Rome, where there was a certain amount of pluralism, with many different teachers present.⁷⁴ She argues that both Justin and Marcion were such teachers and that they are thus best viewed in the context of a 'school' rather than that of a 'church'. In this context, there was room for debates and the sharing of both questions and solutions, although the debate could also be heated and different teachers could denounce one another. However, whether this had ecclesiastical consequences is difficult to determine according to Lieu. This context of fluidity in questions and solutions between different teachers in the Roman community also help us understand Marcion relation and use of the Jewish Scriptures, which we now will turn to.

3.4.2 – Addressing Contemporary Challenges

Lieu describes Marcion's relation to the Jewish Scriptures similarly to Harnack and Moll. Marcion saw these as reliable depictions of the creator god.⁷⁵ Furthermore, he found challenges in them, such as inconsistencies or contradictions. These could, for example, be that the supposed all-knowing god did not know where Adam was when he hid in the garden of Eden (Gen 3:9).⁷⁶

Lieu, however, argues that this approach was rooted in how philosophers and intellectuals of the day in general critically read authoritative writings. Here there was a general assumption that these authoritative writings, whether they be those of Homer or the Jewish Scriptures, could not be at fault. Answers to questions regarding God, the universe and human existence were sought in them. Nevertheless, problems were also found in them, for example, a moral considered dubious in the second century, and therefore they had to be interpreted, often implying allegorizing, to meet contemporary concerns.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Lieu, *Marcion*, 303–6.

⁷⁵ Lieu, *Marcion*, 365.

⁷⁶ Lieu, *Marcion*, 357–58.

⁷⁷ Lieu, *Marcion*, 306–11.

Many of the questions and challenges Marcion found in the Jewish Scriptures, which he saw as proof of the creator's inabilities and inferiority, were also exposed and addressed by his contemporaries. Both Jewish and Christian writers were aware of these problems and sought to provide solutions to them through interpretation. However, Marcion did not accept these solutions. He is accused of refusing to read both allegorically and Christologically. Lieu argues, however, that the latter properly reveals most about Marcion's differences to the proto-orthodox interpreters, as the accusation of refusing allegory was common and as Marcion, at least in some cases, used some form of allegory.⁷⁸

Thus, Lieu argues that the Pontic was not unique in the questions he asked of the Jewish Scriptures, rather it was his answers that were unique. Instead of defending the God of the Jewish Scriptures against these problems, he used them to accuse the creator. The availability of solutions, from both Jewish and Christian exegetes, suggest, Lieu contends, that the foundation for Marcion's cosmology and his relation to the Jewish Scriptures was not primarily his reading of these Scriptures.⁷⁹

3.4.3 – Critic of Lieu

Lieu's work on Marcion is very comprehensive. She makes detailed use of an excess of primary sources, which makes her method persuasive. However, there are also some challenges to her work. For Lieu it is only Marcion as he was perceived by his opponent, that stands out from the rest of the second century – we only know Marcion as the heretic he was made.⁸⁰ The 'real' Marcion, as Lieu presents him, is in many aspects just an expression of his time, with his demotion of the creator god as almost his only distinctive feature.⁸¹

In this way Lieu almost erases Marcion from history. She has a valid point in that his opponents argued against their perception of him, but she seems overly pessimistic in how

⁷⁸ Lieu, *Marcion*, 357–65.

⁷⁹ Lieu, *Marcion*, 366. Lieu finds it difficult, if not impossible, to find the starting point for Marcion's thought and suggest that it is wrong to look for a single one; Lieu, *Marcion*, 323–24.

⁸⁰ Lieu, *Marcion*, 433–34.

⁸¹ Lieu, *Marcion*, 434–35.

much truth their accounts of him contains. If Marcion's theology and approach were so similar to that of his contemporaries, the manifold and strong reactions to him has to be explained. Especially the contemporary Justin Martyr's very strong reaction to Marcion seem odd if he was part of a diverse 'school' environment in the Roman Christian community, and no ecclesiastical consequences had been levelled against him.⁸²

Finally, in her analysis of questions levelled against the Jewish Scriptures, where she concludes that Marcion asked many of the same questions as to his contemporaries, it is a weakness that Lieu is only able to cite either Jewish sources or Christian ones that are later than Marcion. References to Philo among others, of course, demonstrates that Marcion was not the progenitor of these questions. What it does not exclude, however, is Marcion being one of the first to bring these questions into the Christian arena. This weakens her rejection of using Marcion as an explanation for second-century developments while opening the door for Moll's theory; that Marcion provoked a shift in the debate about the status of the Jewish Scriptures in the Christian communities (see section 4).⁸³

3.5 – Conclusion on Marcion

The relation of Marcion to the Jewish Scripture that emerges from this brief survey of Marcion research is a multiform one. It seems clear that Marcion certainly did consider these Scriptures authoritative as far as conveying the truth about God. However, for Marcion, it did so in a primarily negative way. He despised the creator god of the Jewish Scriptures, because of the many problems and inconsistencies he found in his actions. Therefore, the Jewish Scriptures did not have a moral or religious authority for him.

Although this conclusion has some resemblance to that of Harnack, there is, nonetheless an important difference. Harnack found the background for Marcion's treatment of the Jewish Scriptures in his interpretation of Paul. It was his radicalized Paulinism that led him to reject the Jewish Scriptures. However, as Moll has argued, Marcion rather seems to have in-

⁸² Cf. the critic of both Sebastian Moll and Levi Baker in their respective reviews: Sebastian Moll, "The Minimised Heretic," *JEH* 67.4 (2016): 834–41; Levi S. Baker, "Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century," *JETS* 62.2 (2019): 426–30. Cf. Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 43–44.

⁸³ Cf. Moll, "The Minimised Heretic," 837–39.

terpreted the other way around. It was his interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, as a representative of the creator god, that conditioned his interpretation of the Gospel. The clearest indication of this is that Marcion redacted his *Gospel* and *Apostolikon*, and not the Jewish Scriptures.

Lieu has also convincingly shown that Marcion was not alone in his quarrels over the Jewish Scriptures. Many others had pointed out the same challenges and inconsistencies as Marcion had, especially in the Jewish communities. What made Marcion unique was his rejection of the different interpretive solutions available, primarily of an either allegorical or Christological nature. Instead, he chose to read and interpret literally, based on his dualistic perception of the divine. He probably viewed the creator as primarily just, but he seems to have regarded this justice as conditioned by the creator's petty nature. Therefore, in reality, the creator acted evilly and was certainly the enemy for Marcion.

Marcion's understanding of the Jewish Scriptures, along with his theology as a whole, presumably led him and his followers to perceive themselves very differently than the proto-orthodox church. They viewed themselves as a radically new community, whose allegiance was to the foreign god. They identified themselves in opposition to the creator, his creation, and his commandments. Thus, they preached a radical asceticism, even abstaining from any sexual relation, along with deliberately breaking the creator's commandments, to defy him.

4 – Marcion and Early Christian Identity

As we have seen so far both for Marcion and the proto-orthodox, the Jewish Scriptures was pivotal in the formation of their respective theology and identity. However, the emergence of Marcion and especially his attitude towards the Jewish Scriptures may also have influenced the proto-orthodox church's identity.

First, the fact that Marcion only survives till this day as the heretic he was considered by the proto-orthodox church, testifies to his influence in the formation of an early Christian identity in the proto-orthodox church.⁸⁴ Part of the formation of a group identity, as we

⁸⁴ Lieu, *Marcion*, 433.

have seen above, is often to draw boundaries around the group. Besides defining themselves up against the Jewish people, this was also done through condemning Marcion, as well as many others, as heretics. Through this designation, the proto-orthodox church could define itself as those who had truly understood and preserved the message of Jesus. Marcion and other heretics were cast as representatives of the devil or demons.⁸⁵ Thereby they were rhetorically mystified into a uniform 'other', and thus forming a boundary, up against which the insiders could define themselves as 'orthodox' regardless of their internal diversity.⁸⁶

Marcion's relation to the Jewish Scriptures was also used to this end. An example is Tertullian's association of Marcion with another outsider group, namely the Jews. According to Tertullian, Marcion expects the messianic prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures to be fulfilled by a Messiah sent by the creator. This Messiah will be a liberator and restorer of the Jewish nation. Tertullian likens this to the Jewish interpretation although they only have half the error that Marcion has, presumably because they do not preach two different gods (*Marc. III.16*).⁸⁷ This association of Marcion with the Jews contributed in placing him outside the boundaries of proto-orthodox Christianity and thus in defining a shared 'we' inside the proto-orthodox community, as those who rightly interpret the Jewish Scriptures.⁸⁸

The second influence of Marcion's relation to the Jewish Scriptures on the formation of the proto-orthodox Christian identity also had to do with boundary formation, this time up against Judaism. Moll has argued that the Pontic's critic of the Jewish Scriptures, where he exposed its inconsistencies as well as its contradictions to the gospel, forced a shift in attitude towards the Jewish Scriptures.⁸⁹ Moll conducts a survey of different second-century conceptions of the Jewish Scriptures among different Christians. Here he finds that before Marcion, represented by Ignatius of Antioch's letters as well as the *Letter of Barnabas*, it was taken for granted that the Jewish Scriptures were Christian Scriptures. Moll argues that

⁸⁵ E.g. Justin's refutation of Marcion in *1 Apol.* 26:5.

⁸⁶ Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 295–97.

⁸⁷ Cf. Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 63; Lieu, *Marcion*, 413.

⁸⁸ See section 2.2

⁸⁹ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 157–58.

it was obvious for them that the Gospel of Jesus was in complete concordance with the Jewish Scriptures. For Barnabas, this is shown through his thorough allegorical interpretation, whereby he also claims the Jewish Scriptures, along with the status as the people of God, from the Jewish people.⁹⁰

After Marcion, Moll sees a shift in this attitude. Through a survey of Ptolemy, Justin Martyr, and Apelles, he argues that the continuity between the Jewish Scriptures and the Gospel now had to be defended, as Justin and Ptolemy does, or completely abandoned as Apelles does.⁹¹ Moll claims that this shift in attitude was provoked by Marcion. His radical critic of the Jewish Scriptures and the contrasts Moll argues he displayed in his *Antitheses* between the Jewish Scriptures and the Gospel,⁹² required a response. He had exposed the divergences so effectively that continuity between them no longer could be assumed.⁹³

Against this interpretation, Lieu argues, as we have seen, that the problems Marcion exposes in the Jewish Scriptures were already addressed by his contemporaries.⁹⁴ This should caution any certain conclusions on Marcion's influence in this matter, although it does not exclude his influence altogether, as one who seriously brought these questions into the Christian discussion.⁹⁵ More certain, however, is it that the response to the problems Marcion raised, influenced writers in the orthodox tradition's view of the Jews.

As we have seen, Marcion's solution to the inconsistencies he found in the Jewish Scriptures, was a negative view of the creator god. The proto-orthodox, however, could not accept this solution, as they viewed the Creator and the Father of Jesus as being the same.⁹⁶ Therefore, one of the solutions instead was anti-Judaism. For example, Tertullian argues that the laws in the law of Moses, which Marcion regarded as evidence of the inferiority of the creator god, instead was given because of the inferiority of the Jewish people (*Marc.*

⁹⁰ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 135–43. Cf. section 2.2

⁹¹ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 143–57.

⁹² Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 107–14.

⁹³ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 143; 157–58.

⁹⁴ See section 3.4.2

⁹⁵ Cf. my critic of Lieu in section 3.4.3

⁹⁶ Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 147–48.

//.18). Tertullian is by no means the only author who chooses this solution and thus it seems plausible that Marcion became a facilitator for the development of anti-Jewish rhetoric in the early Christian communities.⁹⁷

Thus, the problems Marcion exposed, along with his radical solution, furthered the Christian separation from the Jewish communities. This process was already well underway, as evident already in the *Letter of Barnabas*.⁹⁸ Even before Marcion, the proto-orthodox were already in several ways using the Jewish community as a boundary up against which they could form their identity.⁹⁹ Therefore, Marcion's influence on this should not be overstated, but it seems probable that he played a part in the process' continuation.

5 – Conclusion

The debate surrounding the Jewish Scriptures in the second-century seems to have been very formative for different Christian groups. The interpretation of them was a decisive factor in their understanding of Jesus. For Marcion, they were understood as the Scriptures of the creator god, whom he regarded as the enemy. Therefore Jesus could not be this god's Messiah. Instead, he came from outside of creation, to liberate humankind from the creator. Thus Marcion's interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures fuelled his understanding of important theological themes, such as Christology, soteriology, creation theology, ethics, and of course theology proper. It is difficult to acutely determine the preconditions for Marcion's interpretation, but the Jewish Scriptures seems to have had a profound impact on his theology.

For the proto-orthodox communities, the Jewish Scriptures were seen as witnesses to the only God. They saw in them countless prophecies pointing to Jesus and used Jesus as the interpretive key for the Jewish Scriptures. Thus they saw themselves in continuation of

⁹⁷ Heikki Räisänen, "Marcion and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism: A Reappraisal," *Temenos* 33 (1997): 121–35; Moll, *The Arch-Heretic*, 147–52.

⁹⁸ The dating of this letter is uncertain, however, the *terminus ante quem* seems to be the Bar Kochba revolt. Therefore it is certainly before Marcion. Cf. Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2007), 370–75.

⁹⁹ Cf. section 2.1.

the Jewish Scriptures, and the divine economy they found therein, which had found its culmination in the Gospel story. They were part of the shared material the proto-orthodox defined themselves around.

However, the Jewish Scriptures were also used to draw up boundaries up against which the proto-orthodox communities could identify themselves. Convicting Marcion a heretic, among other things because of his negative evaluation of the Jewish Scriptures, helped define them as the true followers of Christ. Furthermore, to answer Marcion's exposure of inconsistencies and contradictions between the Jewish Scriptures and the message of Jesus, the proto-orthodox increased their anti-Jewish polemic. The process of separation from and boundary formation up against the Jewish communities had already begun before Marcion. He seems, however, to have advanced the process.

For the present debate, this, in my opinion, also suggests a retaining of the Old Testament in the Christian churches. While this book, of course, is Jewish in both origin and content, a pivotal part of Christian identity, now as well as in the second century, is to interpret Jesus in continuation of the Old Testament. If not, it could easily, as it did for Marcion, have profound consequences in many theological areas, as is also evident from Müller's view of the relationship between the testaments. While Christianity's history of anti-Semitism should exclude a reiteration of the anti-Jewish polemic and the deprivation of Judaism's right to their canon, in the church, the Old Testament, nonetheless, also have to be understood as a Christian book.

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