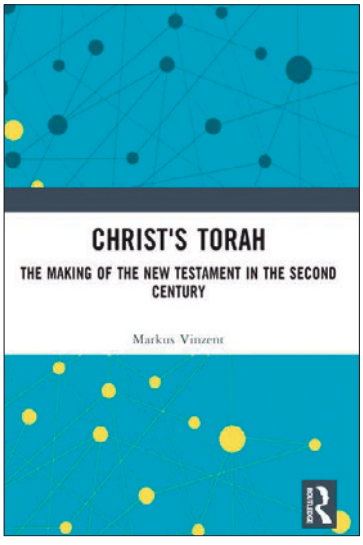
CHRIST'S TORAH



VINZENT, MARKUS (2024). *Christ's Torah. The Making of the New Testament in the Second Century.* New York: Routledge. 408 pp., 152.00 $ [ISBN 978-1-03-245702-4]

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Markus Vinzent is one of a small group of scholars who proposes that the four canonical *Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke*, and *John* are each dependent upon the 2nd century *Gospel of Marcion*, written *ca.* 140 CE. A key premise of Vinzent's dating of these texts is that they reflect the sociohistorical context brought to bear by the failed Bar Kokhba rebellion in *ca.* 135 CE. He contends, moreover, that the enterprise of creating a new collection of Christian scripture arises entirely through Marcion. In *Christ's Torah*, Vincent develops this proposal and related hypotheses as he explores the canon developed by Marcion of Sinope (*ca.* 85-160

CE), who likely coined the phrase, the "New Testament". Marcion's collection included a single *Gospel* (Vinzent argues that Marcion coined the name for that genre as well) and ten letters of the apostle Paul. Vinzent also suggests that the variant forms of Paul's letters found in Marcion's canon are closer to the originals and thus that the accepted editions were redacted accordingly.

In all, though coming to be viewed in the orthodox Christian tradition as a heretic, Marcion should be understood in the context of a tumultuous period in the development Christianity and Judaism, in which leading Christian figures were – not withstanding instances of polemical exchange – mutually dependent upon each other's ideas, as they sought to define the shared movement of which they were a part. Further, given the complexity of and limited data for this formative period, far less is really known than is commonly assumed about the development of the *New Testament* as it now is.

Christ's Torah is organized into three main sections. The first section engages the relevant patristic literature, with extended discussions on Irenaeus, Polycarp, Papias, Ignatius, and Dionysius. Irenaeus (*ca.* 135-200 CE) is seen as the oldest witness to the emergence of an authoritative collection of Christian writings, including the four *Gospels*, *Acts*, the *Pauline Epistles*, *Catholic Epistles*, and *Revelation*. Integral to Vinzent's argument for Marcion priority, he suggests that Polycarp demonstrates no awareness of the existence of the four canonical *Gospels*, and that the data in Eusebius concerning Papias suggests that "Papias offers information about a Gospel writing process which he places, at least as far as the *Gospel of John* is concerned, in the time of Marcion, hence shortly before the middle of the second century" (p. 28).

Vinzent holds that the letters of Ignatius are likely pseudonymous and post-date Marcion. Only scant references to the *Gospels of Mathew* and *John* and *Pauline Epistles* are found in the three-letter collection; more extensive references to the *Gospels* and Paul (including here the *Pastorals*), along with the *Catholic Epistles* occur in the later seven-letter expansion of the Ignatius collection, which dates, according to Vinzent, to 170 CE, "not far off from the canonical redactions of Irenaeus's broadened collection, later known as the *New Testament*" (p. 31).

Taking into further consideration Eusebius's account of Dionysius, what seems to have developed in the 2nd century is a deliberate maneuver to counter Marcion and his *New Testament* through the subsequent creation of an alternative body of authoritative texts, with four *Gospels* in place of Marcion's prior single *Gospel*; a move at odds with the general approach preferred in the second century of a single *Gospel* account. According to Vinzent, "like Irenaeus and Tertullian after him, Dionysius seems to have picked up on Marcion's original accusation [that forgeries of his single Gospel account were circulating] and turned it against Marcion himself" (p. 50).

Vinzent concludes here that Marcion's publication of his *New Testament* was likely a result of the fact that his *Gospel* had been

> "met with an outstanding reception but at the same time suffered corrections and unauthorized published plagiarisms. What Marcion had initially written was a testimony to the work and message of Jesus, setting down in writing the existing oral tradition. This he had already created back in Pontus and, after coming to Rome after the end of the Second Jewish War (after 135 CE), presented it in his house of learning. In addition, he probably already compiled a collection of ten Pauline letters, which he had brought back from Rome. After his work, which he called the 'Gospel,' had reached other teachers who – perhaps with the exception of the author of John – all taught in Rome, it was used by them, modified, and, to Marcion's particular chagrin, steered away from its initial purpose, namely to give Christians their own basis for a new code of law, a new *Torah*" (p. 75).

In section 2 of the book, Vinzent first engages in a comparative exercise of the four canonical *Gospels* and the single *Gospel of Marcion* (based on the reconstruction produced by Matthias Klinghardt). One significant aspect of comparison concerns the function of the character John the Baptist. A key distinction between the two is that for Marcion, the Baptist is not, as suggested in the four *Gospels*, a bridge between the law and prophets and Jesus (though Vinzent sees the *Gospel of John* as placing greater stress on the superiority of Christ, and thus is closer in this respect to Marcion). Rather, Marcion employed him "as a figure representing the last of the Jewish prophets and linked the Jewish Law and the Prophets to form the antithetical background against which he saw emerge the great prophet, Jesus Christ" (p. 129). Other points of comparison likewise reveal Marcion's attempt to sharply distinguish Jesus from the Jewish scriptures and tradition over against a more coherent relationship between the two as largely found in the four *Gospels*.

Section 2 also engages with a comparison of the *Pauline Epistles* appearing in Marcion's *New Testament* in comparison to Irenaeus's collection, the latter containing the addition of the *Pastoral Epistles*. Vinzent asks, "[a]re the language and content of Marcion's *Pauline Epistles* also closer to their author?" (p. 264). Though suggesting that further research on the matter is required, Vinzent proposes that these epistles were redacted, and the collection expanded from the Marcion version to the form eventually attested by Irenaeus, with such redactions serving to combat Marcion's view that understood the Christ movement as a complete departure from Judaism and even its antithesis, and to integrate the additional letters into the Pauline corpus.

Section 3 focuses on Marcion's theological agenda. The first central aspect of this agenda concerns his emphasis on kindness over justice. Regarding this matter, Vinzent proposes two key contexts from which Marcion's *New Testament* developed. The first is that the Jewish scriptures and extrabiblical literature portray a God who is a "furious judge and savior who executes vengeance" (p. 306). That is, the God portrayed in these texts is an inherently violent and even cruel one; he is a God that may care for Israel but generally at the exclusion of the other nations. Second, Vinzent points to the Bar Kokhba Revolt, "with its ghastly amounts of violence and bloodshed on the part of the Romans and the Jews" (p. 306). This war naturally gave rise to "the question of revenge and forgiveness, or of justice and goodness" (p. 306). Both factors were informative to the birth of "Christianity" as a separate tradition from "Judaism" (p. 306).

Accordingly, Marcion would have understood from Paul's letters "that the Christ to whom Paul bore witness was not the one designated by the Creator of this world to be the political Messiah and restorer of Jewish status. On the contrary (…) [he] understood Christ to be a universal bringer of salvation, not one who represented the Jewish law and the prophetic message (…). One who did not teach justice but rather practiced kindness" (p. 310). This version of Paul was, according to Vinzent, traced back by Marcion to Jesus himself, and he drew "the conclusion that the faithful must leave Jewish life and tradition, the Law, and the Prophets behind, and follow only the Pauline gospel of non-revenge, kindness, forgiveness, and love of one's enemies" (p. 318).

Vinzent explains that Marcion drew upon a "mixed bag" of material to develop his portrait of Christ's teaching that while still including violent rhetoric sought nevertheless to present an image of God as "a kind heavenly spirit," distinct from the "violent creator" of the Jewish scriptures (pp. 313-314). For example, in the *Sermon on the Plain* of *Marcion's Gospel*, the beatitudes diverge considerably from those found in the Jewish scriptures and even the DSS, with condemnation emphasized in the latter, and forgiveness in the former. And in contrast to the Jewish texts, Marcion presents beatitudes and corresponding woes such that the woes do not serve as a counter to the beatitudes. Only one group is ultimately envisaged in a "dynamic circular movement" with the same end goal of salvation. Vinzent explains,

> "Marcion thus abolishes the condemnatory character of the woes. They are no longer part of the righteous condemnation of a divine judge who has two scales in his hands; instead they represent forms of Christian exhortations according to which even the woes should ultimately lead to beatitude. Conversely, the beatitudes are not the privilege of a few chosen ones" (p. 329).

The second central aspect of Marcion's theological agenda concerns his view of the relationship between poverty and wealth. Many early Christians such as Chrysostom were suspicious of wealth and viewed it as inherently negative. Marcion was himself wealthy and "people in the second century were offended by Marcion's possessions and business activities" (p. 336). As Vinzent further notes, "as late as the fifth century, (…) in the *Vita Abercii*, Marcion is depicted as the prototype of the wealthy business owner who uses his resources not only for the city and the poor but for his own interests" (p. 336). But as Vinzent continues to explain, "[t]he moral philosophy [Marcion] propagated championed business and profit making in the service of a different world order (…). The amount of capital he obtained and distributed was far more than the usual social tribute common at that time, even more than the Jewish tithe" (p. 336).

Vinzent then engages in comparisons between Marcion's *Gospel* and *Luke* (cf. 18:18-30; 16:19-31), highlighting that while each warn of wealth and emphasize the need to provide for the poor, Marcion's Jesus, in contradistinction to the portrait of him in *Luke*, is both *Torah* critical and avoids a totalizing condemnation of the wealthy. Vinzent concludes on the matter,

> "Even Marcion seems to have made the topic of ownership, property, and poverty one of the central themes of his life. (…) in [his Gospel] he tried to show how one should deal with such wealth. In the second century, indeed, his movement praised itself for counting a number of martyrs, who sacrificed their own lives in order to follow the Jesus portrayed by Marcion. [Marcion] wove his ideas of investing in divine goods, innovation, progress, and the dynamism of capital into his pamphlet and manifesto, to which he significantly gave the name 'New Testament' and which endowed the young cult he called Christianity with its own holy scripture" (p. 344).

A fourth section briefly summarizes implications of the analysis throughout the preceding three sections and offers an invitation to readers to (re)consider the historical developments surrounding the origin of Christianity and the *New Testament* in particular.

In all, this volume represents one of the most substantive treatments to date on Marcion priority, along with the view that, rather than being dismissed as an early heretic, he should be credited as a pivotal Christian figure centrally involved in the birth of Christianity as a distinct movement from Judaism. Moreover, he is the agent responsible for this movement's earliest *Gospel* and first collection of sacred texts we know as the *New Testament*.

The question of Marcion priority might evoke something of the causality dilemma as expressed in the proverbial question, "what came first, the chicken or the egg?". Did Marcion redact *Luke* or is it the other way around?[1] Is Marcion's collection of Paul's letters more original or did these likewise undergo redaction to suit his theological agenda? Complicating that question is the fact that we do not have an extant manuscript of *Marcion's New Testament* and are instead reliant upon quotations contained in the patristic literature, principally Tertullian and Epiphanius, and in the context of polemical refutations. Thus, what his *Gospel* and especially collection of Paul's letters (quotations from which are far scanter in the relevant literature) contained is not entirely clear.

Notwithstanding this complication, it should initially be observed that Vinzent's thesis for Marcion priority relies on a series of debatable historical hypotheses concerning the relevant patristic literature. For example, if the letters of Ignatius are not in fact pseudepigraphic and dated late, then his thesis is more difficult to sustain, since the three-letter collection of Ignatius seem to contain direct quotations from the *Gospel of Matthew*.

While this volume seeks to understand Marcion's view in its historical context, I did find that some of the argumentation lacked adequate hermeneutical distance and thus, perhaps subtly, affirmed, or at least insufficiently clarified Marcion's significantly misinformed understanding of 1st century Judaism and its sacred texts. To be fair, such misunderstandings are not wholly unique to Marcion among second and third century Christian writers, even those representing proto-orthodoxy. However, unlike the proto-orthodox Christians, Marcion's means of dealing with his understanding of the Jewish scriptures was to completely sever them from the Christian tradition.

While risking over-simplification, Vinzent's readers might be inspired to ask: Did what had become Christian orthodoxy arise as a response to a "Marcionite-styled" Jesus who seems curiously more committed to Platonism than the larger Jewish tradition? Or is the reverse more likely? That is, the eventual rise of highly distorted interpretations of the teachings of a thoroughly Jewish Jesus and Paul, which were then confronted by leaders in the movement who represented a more authentic tradition predicated on those teachings.

It is still possible that regardless of Marcion's views his gospel was the first one written. Of course, the question of Marcion priority would have to properly contend with all the arguments advanced for early (1st century) authorship of the

1. It is also possible that Marcion and Luke wrote independently from a common source.

canonical *Gospels*. Arguments outside of early attestation are not discussed in this volume. I will only briefly mention here my skepticism that – despite the relative success of Marcionism and general diversity of sects and beliefs laying claim to the Christian tradition within the early stages of the movement – a firmly-grounded, common tradition in possession of written *Gospels*, in addition to Paul's letters, *Acts*, and other texts that would eventually be found in the Christian canon, did not already exist well before the mid-2nd century.

In any case, as Vinzent points out, we do not have the privilege of certainty and therefore critical exploration of all such historical possibilities should be welcomed. Accordingly, this volume represents an important contribution and thought experiment on Marcion priority and the shaping of early Christianity along with its authoritative writings.