

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HERETICS

Discovering Orthodoxy
through Early Christological Conflicts

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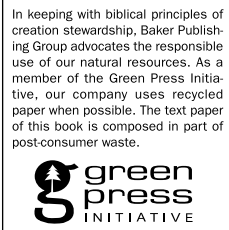
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Preface

John, my neighbor, knocked on my door; he was not happy. He had just seen in the news that then-presidential candidate and Texas governor Rick Perry had been introduced at a rally by the pastor of First Baptist Dallas. The pastor disparaged Perry's opponent for adhering to the "cult" of Mormonism. My neighbor, a lifelong Mormon, knew my Baptist affiliation, and he wanted to know, "You don't think my church is a cult, do you?!" My response involved a lot of hemming and hawing and trying to explain how not all Baptists are alike and how I research early Christian history. Finally, I got around to saying, "I don't think you're a member of a cult. I just think you're a heretic." He seemed to like that answer, and we're still friends. This book is dedicated to my neighbors and to all of the heretics in my life.

This project began when a student and fellow church member (and now friend) named Chris Kuhl asked me to "teach heresy" in Sunday school. His point was that he better appreciated his own faith after taking my Christian history class, where I very sympathetically surveyed the heretics. I agreed to teach the class on the condition that Chris teach it with me. Every week, I gave the history of a heretic, Chris pointed us to relevant biblical passages, and then we recruited Hannah Starkey (now Smith), a college student (now a medical student), to lead the discussion. The class went very well—although explaining to my tenure review committee why I was "teaching heresy" in Sunday school was a bit awkward. One Friday I was in my office preparing my Sunday school lesson when James Ernest from Baker Academic knocked on my door. He had been meeting with the real scholars on campus, but stopped to meet me and asked, "What are you working on?" "The gospel according to heretics," I answered. "That would make a great book!" he said. So here we are. Chris and Hannah, thanks for letting me steal this idea. This book is

also dedicated to them and to the many potential heretics who took this class at church (I taught it twice at University Baptist in Waco).

Thanks of course must also go to my wife and children for putting up with me during this project. It went on far too long, and I like to think out loud, so my apologies to them for having to put up with heresy in the home. My son liked to point out that I'm doing "that boring theology stuff" every time he saw me at the computer. On a happier note, he told me this week that he is ready to be baptized. My hope for him is that he will always hold to the orthodox faith, while also having the freedom of a heretic's curiosity—a *fides quaerens intellectum*, or, "boring theology stuff."

On the professional level, this work is heavily indebted to a long list of people. First, I thank James Ernest and my friends at Baker Academic for their support, guidance, and patience. Frankly, without James's expertise both in the realm of publishing and in early Christian studies, I would not have trusted myself to undertake this precarious project. Also, for his help throughout much of this project, Josh Thiering deserves much more than the meager hourly pay offered to graduate assistants. Countless little things needed to complete a project like this add up fast, and I owe him a huge debt of gratitude. Next, I thank Baylor University for supporting this project with a research leave. I also thank the dean and the faculty of Truett Seminary, who allowed me to teach this as an elective. The students who took my class also deserve a lot of credit for shaping my thinking. Our Master of Divinity students have got to be some of the best in the country. They are amazing and make this job a blast.

Several people graciously gave of their time and helped with various chapters at various stages. Lest I go on too long in listing them chapter by chapter, I will simply name them in alphabetical order: Richard Bauckham, Scott Bertand, Natalie Carnes, Denny Clark, Ronald Heine, Andrew McGowan, Scot McKnight, Kelley Spoerl, Todd Still, Andrew Teal, Sergey Trostyanskiy, Daniel Williams, and Michael Williams. They certainly deserve more mention than time will allow, for they kept me from making some serious mistakes. Obviously, they are not to blame for any problems remaining in this work, as I am sure they would each write this work or particular chapters very differently than I have done. Their feedback, nevertheless, greatly improved the project. Clare Rothschild read another essay of mine on Marcion that is as yet unpublished. Her detailed insights have been very helpful to me, even if I did not directly address them all in this work. In addition to reading my chapter on the Gnostics, Michael Williams shared copies of forthcoming essays with me that helped to supplement and inform some of my understandings of Gnostic cosmogony. I also wish to thank Fr. Nicholas March for sharing

his translation of Gregory of Nyssa's *Antirrheticus adversus Apollinarium* (thesis for Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, 2013). The work was still waiting to be bound by Hellenic College Holy Cross's library, and Fr. March graciously shared an electronic copy with me just before the completion of this manuscript. Kelley Spoerl not only read and offered feedback on my Apollinarianism chapter; she also graciously shared as-yet-unpublished work on Apollinaris that helped correct some of my assumptions about the sources and historical development of this important figure. Thanks also go to Abjar Bankhou for conversations that helped me to think more deeply about his own Syrian Christian tradition as well as the Christian encounter with Arabian expansion. This brings me to the last chapter, on Islam, which proved especially challenging. I am deeply indebted to Imam Yusuf Ziya Kavakci for his time in talking with me at length. The same goes for Zeki Saritoprak, who also was of great assistance to me with some of the primary and secondary literature. He shared some of his essays with me that proved very influential to my thinking about the dialogue between the two faiths that has taken place in the past (and could take place in the future).

Finally, let me conclude my acknowledgments with a prayer. Today, August 15, 2013, as I complete this manuscript, the morning news reports that the Egyptian military has declared a state of emergency and has marched against supporters of the ousted president. In doing so, the military opened fire on protesters. According to the Associated Press, the Egyptian Health Ministry has listed the death toll at 421. *Kyrie eleison!* Part of the backlash includes violence directed against the Copts in Egypt. The pressure and attacks against this minority Christian community have steadily increased under the recent waves of political turmoil. The Al Jazeera website has pictures this morning of St. Mary's Church in flames. The same page has a picture of Muslims standing hand in hand around another Christian church, protecting it from extremists. *Kyrie eleison!* I do not mention any of this to point fingers. Violence begets violence, and such a cycle has been going on in Egypt for a long time. Of course, there is more than sectarian violence here, and yet this scene is a staggering reminder of how serious the subject of heresy can be. I do, therefore, wish to add my voice to the prayers offered up on behalf of our sisters and brothers in Egypt. The secularists who may deny being God's children, the Muslims who deeply honor Jesus in their tradition, and the Christians who have been labeled monophysite heretics all deserve our prayers and much more. Over my desk I see a Coptic icon of Madonna and Child given to me by a friend of Egyptian descent. In my ears I hear the voice of Rachel weeping for her children.

Kyrie eleison!

Abbreviations

ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
AThR	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
BRIIFS	<i>Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies</i>
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
ByzZ	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series latina. Turnhout, 1953–
CH	<i>Church History</i>
CHRC	<i>Church History and Religious Culture</i>
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
DOP	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
EC	<i>Early Christianity</i>
ER	<i>Ecumenical Review</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church
FH	<i>Fides et Historia</i>
GCS	Die griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
GOTR	<i>Greek Orthodox Theological Review</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICMR	<i>Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations</i>
IJFM	<i>International Journal of Frontier Missions</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
JRH	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>

LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NHL	<i>The Nag Hammadi Library in English</i> . Edited by J. M. Robinson. 4th rev. ed. Leiden, 1996
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
NovT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NPNF ¹	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 1
NPNF ²	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 2
OrChr	<i>Oriens Christianus</i>
PBR	<i>Patristic and Byzantine Review</i>
PG	Patrologia graeca. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–86
PO	Patrologia orientalis
ProEccl	<i>Pro Ecclesia</i>
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
r.	reigned
R&T	<i>Religion and Theology</i>
SC	Sources chrétiennes. Paris, 1943–
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SocAnth	<i>Social Anthropology</i>
SR	<i>Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses</i>
STK	<i>Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift</i>
StPatr	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
SVTQ	<i>St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
ThTo	<i>Theology Today</i>
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
TUGAL	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
USQR	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCSup	Supplements to <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAC	<i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum</i>

Chapter Outline

What If . . . ?

Revising Orthodoxy?

Mistake #1: Sensationalism

Revising Orthodoxy?

Mistake #2: (Hyper-)Skepticism

Revising Orthodoxy?

Mistake #3: Subjectivism

Reinterpreting Orthodoxy:

A Theoretical Practice

Reinterpreting Orthodoxy:

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Rethinking Orthodoxy:

Specifying Terms

- Definitions of Heresy
- Definitions of Orthodoxy
- Characteristics of Orthodoxy
- Characteristics of Heresy

Rethinking Orthodoxy:

Specifying Claims

Recommended Bibliography

Introduction

Defining Heresy, Revising Orthodoxy

But I examined the works and traditions of the heretics, defiling my mind for a little time with their abominable opinions, but receiving this benefit from them, that I refuted them by myself, and detested them all the more.

—Dionysius of Alexandria

The rejection of heretics brings into relief what your Church holds and what sound doctrine maintains.

—Augustine

The “Gospel according to . . .” theme stems back to the earliest collection of Gospel texts. That there were four canonical Gospels, that readers had to understand that any one “Gospel” had to be clarified as “according to” someone in particular, bothered some ancient Christians.

Around 170 a Christian writer named Tatian called into question the validity of having multiple Gospels—after all, could not God have given one authorized version?—and in order to solve the problem Tatian created a supergospel (called the “Diatessaron”) that harmonized all four. To be sure, Tatian was not the first or only Christian to see the Gospels as texts that could

be reworked, and so we will return at times to Tatian and the treatment of the Gospel texts later in this book. But for now let us acknowledge that, unlike Tatian, most Christians saw no problem with the “according to” aspect of “the gospel.” For the majority of Christian tradition, any retelling or recording of “the gospel” will always be a version “according to” someone. Jesus apparently set up what we call evangelism (notice the borrowed Greek word for “gospel,” *euangelion*; i.e., “gospelization”) so that the good news would be dispersed in this “according to” strategy (see Acts 1:8). The gospel would always be according to various witnesses.

The four canonical Gospels were not the only ones, and beyond Gospel texts there were numerous expressions of the good news of Jesus Christ, such as oral proclamation, letters, and apocalyptic literature. What about the so-called heretics, who may or may not have written a gospel text, but who nevertheless always had their own particular understanding of the gospel? This book is an attempt to hear what the heretics preached about Jesus.

What If . . . ?

What if (as some say) the “orthodox” version of the story has misled us? What if people like Arius were misrepresented and maligned? At least sometimes that has certainly happened! What if the Gnostics were not wolf-like philosophers in sheep’s clothing, but well-intended disciples who utilized a different conceptual and imaginative approach to their theology? I could go on and on with such what-ifs.

These questions are not simply intellectual gymnastics; much less are they conspiracy theories in the making. The best historical studies of the last century have found evidence to suggest that our understanding of the “heretics” is so one-sided as to need revising. This book attempts to take this scholarly reassessment seriously, extensively revising our understanding of each heresy. Beyond an understanding of the heresies themselves, such a study of the various unorthodox alternatives that shaped traditional Christian thinking offers those who wish to understand their own orthodoxy a more complete picture.

If our orthodoxy was forged in the fires of heretical debate, then we had better understand who and what these heresies were. Otherwise, our “orthodoxy” may be a doctrinal equivalent of the emperor’s new clothes. On the other hand, what-ifs are hypotheticals that cannot be answered. Therefore some clarifications need to be made about this project of listening to the heretics.

Revising Orthodoxy? Mistake #1: Sensationalism

Let us list some things that this book is *not* trying to do. First, it is not trying to be sensational. Every Easter, the popular media offers specials on “what really happened to Jesus.” Even historians who know better can easily be tempted to be sensational for the sake of being sensational, and it must be admitted that a book entitled *The Gospel according to Heretics* looks dangerously close to playing that game. This title, however, was chosen because it captures the dynamic found in the ancient christological debates: the good news of salvation found in Jesus Christ depends very much on how one understands orthodoxy and heresy. Instead of catchy titles and simplistic answers, we are trying to read the ancient Christian writers, acknowledging all their diversity and complexity. The “gospel” is understood here to be the intersection of Christology and soteriology (the doctrine of salvation).

It may also alleviate some fears if I spoil the ending of this book: I think the “heretics”—even if they were not evil, wicked deviants—were wrong. At times, I am almost persuaded by certain so-called heretical doctrines (e.g., monophysitism), and at still other times I have to admit that I belong to a tradition that holds to a certain “heretical” practice (e.g., iconoclasm). Nevertheless, at the end of the day, I see the heresies as heresies because the teachings are inadequate and unconvincing.

To be sure, not all the “heretics” were heretics: many did not say what their opponents claimed they said. Nevertheless, in the chapters that follow, the teachings known as heresies will be found to fall short of the orthodox answers. On the one hand, I am trying to “take the heretics seriously,” as Majella Franzmann put it, and even to inquire what can be learned from their silenced voices.¹ On the other hand, while the heretics do need to be reincorporated into the history of early Christianity, reincorporating them into the theology of current Christianity may be another matter altogether. Franzmann concludes by asking, “Why should the paradigm of one Christian group be axiomatic for the history and analysis of the entire movement?” The obvious answer is that it should not be, and neither should the orthodox paradigm be replaced by the heretical, which Franzmann acknowledges: “To allow minority heretical groups a voice that overwhelms the voice of the orthodox would present a similar lack of balance as pertains currently.”² What follows in this book is not new and improved orthodoxy, but a supplement to our understanding. There is a place for studying orthodoxy, or traditional

1. Majella Franzmann, “A Complete History of Early Christianity: Taking the ‘Heretics’ Seriously,” *JRH* 29, no. 2 (2005): 117–28.

2. *Ibid.*, 128.

views of Christ.³ The current study, however, is not simply asking the straightforward questions, who was and is Jesus? Instead, we are asking why certain Christian groups understood Jesus the way they did.⁴

Revising Orthodoxy? Mistake #2: (Hyper-)Skepticism

Second, this book is not undertaking historical criticism just to be critical. To answer this question about why the heretics said what they said, we must go against the grain of traditional Christian thinking, and this certainly will cause some to balk, and perhaps with good reason. Can we simply dismiss everything reported about the heretics? No. Obviously not. The rationale for when and how to revise our history needs some ground rules.

That one of the orthodox made a claim about a certain heretic does not mean we can dismiss said claim and assert the opposite. For example, if an orthodox writer claims a certain heretic was immoral, denied the resurrection, and rejected the practice of baptism, we cannot simply assume that the heretic in question lived a morally perfect life, believed in physical resurrection, and practiced full immersion. It is possible that any combination of those three accusations is true or false or is less than the whole truth or something other than the truth. We are not looking to undo the orthodox claims about heretics; we are trying to read them closely. The need is not for an antagonistic reading of “orthodox” sources, but an honest and critical reading of them.

This need for a critical reading arises simply because of the admitted bias of the orthodox sources. They explicitly claim to be attacking what they think is a false and even dangerous teaching. The orthodox writers, therefore, have tried to tip the scales in their favor as much as possible—something everyone did at that time. Their heretical opponents, it should be noted, were usually using the same tactic. The current study, however, hopes to rebalance the scales. Since we have heard the orthodox side of the story, and since in many

3. Classic studies include J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978); Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. J. S. Bowden (London: Mowbray, 1965), 456–91, and vol. 2, *From the Council of Chalcedon to Gregory the Great (590–604)*, trans. Pauline Allen and John Cawte (London: Mowbray, 1965). A helpful “new map” (as the author calls it on p. x) is Christopher A. Beeley, *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), for Beeley not only finds many heretics to have been more orthodox than previously thought; he also finds more diversity among the orthodox than is often admitted.

4. For a broader, but less critical, example of such an approach, see Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1984).

instances the heretical side has been deleted from the historical records, let us instead scrutinize the so-called orthodox account.

Revising Orthodoxy? Mistake #3: Subjectivism

Another word of caution. When the modern Protestant liberal movement attempted to uncover the historical Jesus, it used a set of criteria that resulted in a picture of a Jesus who remarkably resembled a modern Protestant liberal. As Albert Schweitzer famously critiqued, these scholars looked down the long well of history only to find their own reflection staring back at them.⁵ The current revisionist trend of reading the heretics in a sympathetic light is in danger of making the same mistake.

We cannot read the reports of heretical mistakes and think, “Surely, [*insert heretic here*] did not think that! That would have been foolish.” This will be tempting, for example, when we read about the myths of the “Gnostics”: surely people of average intelligence did not believe that different aeons emanated down over and over again until one of them shed a tear, which dried into eye crust, which formed the material gunk that later became earth (see chap. 3). While this sentiment represents our intuitive response, such assumptions prove to be wrong. Our best studies suggest some so-called Gnostics did in fact believe exactly that. Our incredulous impulse is driven by our modern preconceptions of what a “person of average intelligence” (i.e., me) would or would not believe. To make such psychological assumptions is entirely unacceptable in a historical study. Such assumptions risk anachronism, ethnocentrism, and egocentrism. Times are different; people are different. We need another set of criteria besides “WWID?” (What Would I Do?).

Since I have brought up the subject of liberalism, allow me to compare the sometimes notorious German liberal method of historical criticism and the present project. Whereas liberalism subjects the Scriptures to what has been labeled a hermeneutic of suspicion, the approach of the current project is not *just* a hermeneutic of suspicion. I make the distinction because of the

5. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910). To be sure, more evenhanded “quests” are still ongoing; see the criteria for such an endeavor that have received widespread acceptance in John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 167–83. For a moderately optimistic view as to how much data can be uncovered, even if the data stems from the “Christ of faith,” see the approaches of James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), esp. 335–36; and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), esp. 114–47, 472–508.

problems in which the historical-critical approach to Scripture has mired itself. Many, even many self-described liberals (or now “postliberals”), have bemoaned the hermeneutic of suspicion as not so much a method as a blank check to question whatever one wants to call into question. In such a climate, the main point of scriptural study gets lost.⁶

The primary difference between applying a hermeneutic of suspicion to Scripture and applying it to the orthodox opponents of the heretics is that the orthodox writers attempted to portray the heretics in the worst possible light. Any uncritical reading of these sources, any hermeneutic of trust, will inevitably be misled. Therefore, given the drastic difference in tone between the orthodox writers and the Gospel writers (for example), the former corpus merits a more critical stance.

Just how the hermeneutic of suspicion can be utilized in a more methodologically consistent way is beyond the scope of what can be said here. It should be used (and is used in what follows), but for now suffice it to say that any approach to the early Christian writings that simply calls into question whatever it wants to call into question is doomed to lack credibility.⁷ Instead of simply questioning the traditionalist view for the sake of questioning, I will attempt to show why any given item needs to be called into question.

Reinterpreting Orthodoxy: A Theoretical Practice

To explain how we can read the heretics, we need a few words about facts and a critical interpretation. First, a critical examination of such central tenets does not necessarily require a “true objectivity,” as if such a thing were possible, as if one could become an agnostic and start from a blank slate. Although I admittedly start from a subjective position (the position of faith), my faith still questions. As a wise man once told me, “It’s okay to doubt your beliefs, but it’s not okay to believe your doubts” (thanks, Dad).⁸ In short, this work is a free and open examination of those central tenets of the faith by a person of faith. In the classical Christian tradition of Augustine and Anselm, this

6. See esp. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

7. This is often the critique, for example, of Gerd Lüdemann, *Heretics: The Other Side of Early Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

8. For doubt as a structural necessity for faith, see both Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 131–32; and Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 18–19. Also cf. the paradoxical wisdom of Augustine, *On the Trinity* 9.1: “Let us doubt without unbelief of things to be believed.”

endeavor is called “faith seeking understanding.” What is not normal in the classical tradition is to lean past the authoritative voices of the early church and listen to those early groups who have been labeled “heretics” by the winners, but who simply called themselves “Christians.” Can we learn anything from them? We certainly can try.

When we try to reread texts in a new light, we face certain challenges. There is simply no owner’s manual for how to do this. To borrow a pop-culture analogy, in the film *The Matrix*, characters can easily learn how to fly a helicopter: since their brains are plugged into a computer, they simply download a digital copy of the pilot’s manual. Philosophically, this same concept was articulated by the Enlightenment thinker John Locke (not to be confused with the guy from the television drama *Lost*). Locke argued that our minds are a blank slate, or a *tabula rasa*, and when we see, hear, smell, read, and so on, we more or less download that information onto our minds (not his description, of course).

In a post-Enlightenment era, Locke’s view is no longer credible. That is, unless Morpheus frees you from the Matrix; but remember, that has not happened to most of us. All of us are trapped in what Paul calls “this body of death” (Rom. 7:24) or what Jean François Lyotard (a more recent philosopher) called “the postmodern condition.”⁹ We do not download “facts”; rather, we interpret them. The famous critic of modernity Friedrich Nietzsche confidently concluded that there are no such things as facts, only interpretations. When you read the Bible, for example, you read it through the lens of your experiences. If you are rich or poor, black or white, male or female, Egyptian or American, the chances are you will read the very same text in a very different way. The same occurs when we read our earliest Christian texts.

I mention this “postmodern condition” in order to make clear what this project is doing. This is an attempt to *reinterpret* the heretics in a different light. I do not begin with this pessimistic view of what one can (not) know so as to cause despair. When one encounters the wall of interpretations and accepts that we will never scale it to find “facts,” it is tempting to give up. Why try to say anything, if anyone can say whatever anyone wants? Such a cry of dereliction, while understandable, is not the final word.

Even if we accept Nietzsche’s claim that “there are no facts, only interpretations,” we can also move past him with Clifford Geertz and insist that some interpretations are better than others.¹⁰ Another proponent of the postmodern

9. Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

10. David N. Gellner, “Religion, Politics, and Ritual: Remarks on Geertz and Bloch,” *SocAnth* 7, no. 2 (1999): 136.

condition is Jacques Derrida, who championed deconstruction, according to which every meaning and interpretation is open to being dismantled and reinterpreted—if not *ad infinitum*, then *ad nauseum*!¹¹ For this approach, he was often accused of nihilism, the notion that there is *no* meaning to anything. To be fair to poor Derrida, he never claimed this himself; instead, he claimed that there was always *more* meaning than any one interpretation lets on. What is usually missed in critiques of Derrida is how Derrida went on to insist that despite the inevitable insufficiency of any interpretation, an interpretation must be made nonetheless. One must “go for it,” or to use Derrida’s preferred, controversial terminology, one must “make the cut” (i.e., like circumcision).

Interestingly, Derrida toward the end of his life reclaimed his own circumcision; that is, he reclaimed his own Jewish heritage and confessed to his secret life of “prayers and tears.” In said “confession” (or, again in his Derridean way, his “Circumfession”), Derrida chose to interact with none other than a writer from the early church, a former heretic turned heresy hunter, Augustine.¹² If Derrida can do it, so can you!

If all of this philosophical justification is a bit too abstract for our purposes, perhaps the reader will indulge me as I retell a joke I heard from my friend Jon Harrison, a mathematical physicist (Baylor University).

Once upon a time, a politician, a statistician, and a mathematical physicist were riding on a train through Scotland. They all looked out the window and saw a black sheep. The politician said, “Look, Scottish sheep are black!” The statistician said, “No, one Scottish sheep is black.” The mathematical physicist corrected them both: “No, at least one side of one Scottish sheep is black.”

The point of this mathematical attempt at humor (sorry, Jon) is to clarify what methodology we wish to use. The method of a politician (generalizing from specifics) will certainly get it wrong. On the other hand, the temptation to limit ourselves to some sort of mathematical precision (talking only about one side of one sheep) will render us virtually unable to say anything, if not

11. For the understanding of Derrida given here, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

12. In the book with Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. G. Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Interestingly, many so-called postmodern thinkers made the same “religious turn”: Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 4 (unavailable to the public; see Elizabeth A. Clark, “Foucault, the Fathers and Sex,” *JAAR* 56, no. 4 [1988]: 619–41); and Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confessions of Augustine*, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), to name a few prominent examples.

make us look just plain cowardly—after all, the odds are good both sides of that sheep were black. The middle way of interpreting “facts” (which is still different from the statistician, who was simply less mathematically precise) is not a science but an art.

While the task of undertaking history as an artful interpretation may seem daunting, the reader should take comfort. The recent trend toward revisionist history has produced surprisingly fruitful results. While this debate is still ongoing and may appear (or even be) somewhat chaotic at the moment, I ask the reader to jump into this stream of thought and join in the attempt to reinterpret the early Christian period.

Reinterpreting Orthodoxy: A Traditional Practice

While there is no rulebook for how to reread the early church, as evidenced by the lack of consensus on any given point in the discipline of early Christian studies, some who have gone before us have blazed trails we can follow. Christianity has always recognized how any new expression of the gospel must be tethered to the historical tradition that came before. This began with the original Jesus community, which claimed to be witnesses to Jesus, but within which conflict quickly arose between various Christian groups that claimed to be heirs to the apostles. Through this period of contested claims, all parties fought to show how their own view aligned with the traditional one, and during the period of the ecumenical councils this claim to tradition grew even more pronounced.

Even in the Protestant Reformation, the emphasis on *sola scriptura* was never meant to replace the classic expression of the Christian faith.¹³ Instead, Protestants claimed that late medieval Catholicism had somewhere steered off course. It is true that much unfortunate rhetoric against the pope as anti-christ resulted in confusion among Protestants about the role of Christian history. Luther himself brought this historical revision to the forefront in his work *On the Councils and the Church* (1539). Luther underscored how the church’s traditions sometimes need to be, and often have been, corrected. This historical approach set a new trajectory for Reformation and even Enlightenment thinking.

In 1699 Gottfried Arnold, himself a good Lutheran, boldly entitled his book on church history *The Impartial History of the Church and the Heretics*. His attempt to be “impartial” and listen to the heretics was not as objective as

13. For this view, see D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

Arnold thought, for he was criticized for being too sympathetic to the heretics, and so his “unbiased” history was in fact still biased, only in the opposite direction from that of the traditional telling of the story. Nonetheless, Arnold set the stage for modern historians to endeavor to reread the early church.¹⁴ In the wake of an Arnoldian era of church history, Walter Bauer later became a leading voice in this discussion. Bauer rejected the older model of a united and unambiguous orthodoxy from which heretics deviated. Alternatively, Bauer hypothesized, “Perhaps—I repeat, perhaps—certain manifestations of Christian life that the authors of the church renounce as ‘heresies’ originally had not been such at all, but, at least here and there, were the only form of the new religion—that is, for those regions they were simply ‘Christianity.’”¹⁵ Today, most scholars have replaced Bauer’s caution with confidence: instead of early orthodox Christianity, we must speak of numerous, heterogeneous *Christianities*.

Reinterpreting Orthodoxy: A Transparent Practice

Following in the wake of Luther, Arnold, and many others, we will reexamine ten major heresies and attempt to take seriously an “impartial” approach. Since true objectivity is impossible, I have tried to be as transparent as possible about my interpretations and rationale in each chapter that follows. I have cited the primary sources as much as possible, but since the debate is how to read the given primary sources, I have also referred to secondary sources about matters that are contested. Two factors constrained my use of these sources. First, space would not allow inclusion of all of the secondary literature, and so I have kept the scholarly debates and references to a minimum. My use of these sources has also been truncated by the desire to make this work as accessible as possible for those new to the academic debates. It is hoped, however, that the secondary discussions have been adequately heard and represented. Where secondary sources are cited, either they provide the reader with helpful further discussion on the issue at hand or they credit a scholar with a particular interpretation. Second, and again because the audience in mind will include nonspecialists, the sources are almost strictly in English. I

14. For an excellent review of Christian historians such as Arnold, see Philip Schaff and David S. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 1:27–54. For an excellent review of Christian historians such as the Schaffs, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

15. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Kroedel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), xxii.

have consulted the critical editions of the primary sources (see bibliography), but where possible I have used and listed the English translation. Hopefully, the following chapters have heard the primary sources afresh, or at the least offered the readers the opportunity to do so on their own.

As much as we want to avoid some of the extremes of revisionist history and sensationalism mentioned above, there is no escaping the need to rethink our understanding of the ancient heretics. Some history needs revising. Rethinking the traditional version of things, however, can be difficult. For example, in a 1976 essay revisiting Athanasius's teachings, G. C. Stead cautiously addressed the subject:

To an extraordinary degree the faith of Athanasius has become the faith of the Church, and to criticize him must look as if we wished to shatter the rock from which we were hewn. Nevertheless I have come to think that the methods used by Athanasius in defending his faith will not serve to commend eternal truths to the present age; and it is for the Church's ultimate good that we seek to show where their weakness lies.¹⁶

While many today still sympathize with Stead, his cautioning also sounds somewhat outdated. For one thing, virtually the whole guild of early Christian studies has embraced the so-called revisionist approach. Furthermore, Stead's statement merely begs the question: is Athanasius—or are any of the fathers of the church—the church's "rock"? Of course not, and Stead knows it. His point is that such respected voices may seem disrespected when read with a critical eye. Disrespect, however, is not the intent. Instead, the point is honesty. When we talk about orthodoxy, let's be honest. To do so, we need to be clear in what we mean by "orthodoxy," and so we must define a few terms.

Rethinking Orthodoxy: Specifying Terms

The reader may have already noticed that I have had to put certain terms like "orthodoxy" and "heresy" in quotation marks. I will avoid this annoying practice as much as possible, but it has to be acknowledged that terms like these do need qualification.

Definitions of Heresy

The Greek word *haireisis* simply means "faction" or "party." Ancient philosophy students would claim to be "of Plato" or "of Pythagoras," to name

16. G. Christopher Stead, "Rhetorical Method in Athanasius," *VC* 30 (1976): 136–37.

but two examples. They were of that “heresy,” or faction. Later Christian authors, however, began using the term in opposition to the “catholic,” or universal, church. They, the “heretics,” were of the wrong party because they broke away and formed their own “faction” and taught wrong teachings. This use of the word, however, was an accusation against the so-called heretical group, and that group most likely disputed the charges.

For example, in the early second century, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, admitted, “For there are some who are accustomed to carrying about the Name maliciously and deceitfully while doing other things unworthy of God. You must avoid them as wild beasts.”¹⁷ In other words, the people Ignatius labeled heretics identified themselves by “the Name,” calling themselves followers of Christ, or Christians. Similarly, Augustine bemoaned the fact that “heretics . . . have the Christian name . . . they too at any rate are called Christians.”¹⁸

Both the orthodox and the heretics called themselves Christian. We will see in many of the chapters that follow that the so-called heretics call themselves orthodox and call their opponents heretics. Since these terms are contested, they become very difficult to define.

Definitions of Orthodoxy

The term “orthodoxy” itself needs to be defined, or at least disambiguated. This word can mean any one of the following:

1. The Eastern Orthodox Church, as opposed to the Roman Catholic Church or any Protestant denomination—a meaning rarely used in this book.
2. The orthodox church or party, as opposed to the heretical, false church—this meaning is often used in this book. The problem for this definition has to do with who gets to decide which party can claim to be the true church and which party gets labeled the wrong or heretical church.
3. The correct doctrine, as opposed to false teaching, or “heresy”—this meaning is often used in this book. The Greek word *orthos* means “straight,” “right,” or “correct,” and the word *doxa* means “opinion” or “teaching.” Add these two together and we have *ortho-doxy*. The problem for this definition is the same as above. Who gets to decide which teaching is the correct and which is the false?

17. *To the Ephesians* 7.

18. *City of God* 18.51.

Because terms like “orthodoxy” and “heresy” are contested, it becomes impossible to offer objective and stable definitions. Perhaps we could find alternative categories.

One attempt at new terminology occurs when scholars distinguish proto-orthodoxy from orthodoxy to indicate the early Christians who taught correctly before correct doctrine had been defined by the ecumenical councils. For our study, however, this practice gives too much preference to those later periods. Another attempt to find new categories is the common practice of differentiating between orthodox, heretical, and heterodox views. This last term implies the writers whose teachings did not meet approval later, but who could not have known that they were saying something unorthodox in their own day. Again, this is a step in the right direction, but it still gives too much authority to later voices.

Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Instead of asking, “What is orthodoxy?” we should ask, “Who gets to define what is orthodox?” As for this last question, the now-cliché answer is, “The winners.” In the present book, we would like to hear how orthodoxy was defined by “the losers.” To hear the losers, or heretics, is admittedly an impossible task in most cases—after all, they are all dead and their books were mostly burned. As a starting point, historians now assume that even the most pious and dogmatic statements from church history, such as the acts of the ecumenical councils, were “propaganda.”¹⁹ To be sure, this is only to say that all views are biased, and so this observation cannot be used to dismiss those councils. Historians also assume that the theological declarations contained within those acts represent the sincere faith of those who espoused them. The issue today is whether the declarations about who is orthodox and who is heretical can be reassessed.

We want to reread certain sources because there are problems in those sources. First, not all texts mean the same thing when using the word “heresy.” As already discussed, the term originally meant a party or faction, but it later came to imply something more sinister. The very fact that the concept of heresy has a history should cause us to pause and reevaluate the sources. Can earlier writers be held accountable to a later standard? For example, New Testament authors never used the word “Trinity.” Does that make them untrinitarian? Not necessarily. It does, however, beg the reader to attempt to read those texts on their own terms and in their own context. The same can and should be done for all primary sources.

19. See Thomas Graumann, “‘Reading’ the First Council of Ephesus (431),” in *Chalcedon in Context: Church Councils 400–700*, ed. Richard Price and Mary Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 28.

Another reason that some texts need rereading is that—to put it bluntly—some texts cannot be trusted. History is written by the winners, and too often the winners are violent and oppressive.²⁰ This claim suggests that we should define orthodoxy as violence. Even when the orthodox were not physically violent, they were rhetorically violent.²¹ This claim, in turn, suggests that we should define orthodoxy as rhetoric. Even if the orthodox were not malicious but products of their time, they were part of a violent culture.²² This third claim suggests that we should define orthodoxy as culture. While these definitions need to be supplemented, the benefit of all of them is that they avoid the older understanding of orthodoxy as a static thing, like right statements. The sources are clear that terms like “Trinity” were late and developed their own meaning. What is more, this older definition is not old enough: it is a modern definition of orthodoxy, not the ancient definition that the early Christians themselves used.

In short, no single definition of heresy was ever fixed, agreed on, and therefore stable enough to use in a critical analysis. Perhaps we could learn more about defining heresy by defining its opposite. Let us look at a few of the ideas that ancient Christians used to define “orthodoxy.”

Characteristics of Orthodoxy

For many early Christian writers, a key characteristic of being orthodox was to be ancient. “Ancient” was variously defined as apostolic (i.e., the same as the original apostles) or traditional (i.e., the same as that which has always been handed down from generation to generation). Paul admitted to being a latecomer. He was a last and least apostle, the “last of all, . . . one untimely born” (1 Cor. 15:8), but he insisted that “the good news [*euangelion*] that I proclaimed to you” (1 Cor. 15:1) was the same as that which had been “handed

20. According to Averil Cameron, “The Violence of Orthodoxy,” in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, ed. Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 102–14.

21. See the following influential works: Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Rebecca Lyman, “A Topography of Heresy: Mapping the Rhetorical Creation of Arianism,” in *Arianism after Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth-Century Trinitarian Conflicts*, ed. M. R. Barnes and D. H. Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 45–62; and Virginia Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

22. Rebecca Lyman, “Natural Resources: Tradition without Orthodoxy,” *ATHR* 84 (2002): 67–80; Lyman, “Hellenism and Heresy,” *J ECS* 11 (2003): 209–22; along different lines, Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

on” since the beginning (1 Cor. 15:3). The noun from the Greek verb translated “handed on” is *paradosis*, the equivalent of the Latin *traditio*—tradition. Orthodoxy is traditional.

The content of this apostolic tradition is the same gospel (*euangelion*) and the same preaching (*kērygma*) that Paul’s colleagues preached elsewhere (see Gal. 1–2). This content can be summarized: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4). This summary, however, cannot be understood as exhaustive. Surely, Paul preaches about the God that Jesus called Father! Surely Paul preaches about the Spirit of Christ sent to the believers! Of course, the point is that such summaries are exactly that: the summary of the whole gospel preached since the original apostolic times and still preached by those who hold to the tradition. Anyone who deviates—even from seemingly ancillary parts of this gospel, such as the *koinōnia*, fellowship or communion, that results from it—is to be considered “accursed” (Gal. 1:8). Paul’s Greek term for accursed, *anathema*, will be used against all who deviate from this tradition in the generations that follow.²³

Later Christians will develop this kind of thinking to respond to various teachings deemed deviant. The classical creeds, such as the Nicene, were understood to stand in a direct line of succession from the earliest *kērygma*. Before there were precise creeds, formulated by official teachers and councils of the church, many Christian writers invoked the Rule of Faith.

This rule looks to us like a creed. It is triune in outline—belief in “God the Father Almighty . . . and Jesus Christ . . . and the Holy Spirit”—but was not a creed for those who used it. At least, it was not an official declaration of any council, and the precision of the statements themselves was not the issue. Many second- and third-century Christians cited this same rule but with slightly altered wording and emphases. The claim that this rule was believed by everyone everywhere since the apostolic times is certainly an exaggeration. It was a compelling argument against unorthodox teachers who did not align with this rule. What may be more accurate is that Paul’s “tradition,” the later “rule,” and the creeds all refer to the same content: the gospel.

What about the Bible? Counterintuitive to many modern Christians, especially Protestants, is the fact that the gospel, the tradition, and the creeds all preceded the Bible. Of course, by “the Bible” we mean the bound book of specific Jewish and Christian Scriptures. If, instead of the Bible, we asked about

23. It is worth noting that the only group later deemed “heretics” mentioned in the New Testament is the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6, 15). But very little is known of this group (see Kenneth A. Fox, “The Nicolaitans, Nicolaus, and the Early Church,” *SR* 23, no. 4 [1994]: 485–96).

“the Scriptures,” then we would find more overlap and mutually informed content. The fact remains that the books that made it into the church’s Bible were the ones that met the “rule” of the church, orthodoxy. The Greek writers preferred to call the Rule of Faith by the name “the Canon of Truth.” The “canon” as we think of it today—the books that made it into the Bible—is inverted from the order in the ancient Christian thought: the canon was the rule, the standard of orthodoxy that had to be met, in order for certain books to be included in the church’s practice and preaching.

To be sure, this is a complex issue and raises a lot of questions, but the point is that in the earliest Christian centuries one couldn’t simply say orthodoxy is the teaching that is true to the Scriptures, because both the Scriptures and their interpretation were being contested.²⁴ The often-ill-defined core of the Christian faith—not a creed, not a set of Scriptures, but the gospel of Jesus Christ as known in the apostolic preaching and tradition—was the stated difference between orthodox and unorthodox. These characteristics of orthodoxy have their opposite in the stated characteristics of heresy. (If the reader feels like we are going back and forth between orthodoxy and heresy, that’s because we are. But we’re almost done, so bear with me.)

Characteristics of Heresy

If orthodoxy is classically defined as ancient and traditional, then heresy by default is novel and deviant.²⁵ The alleged motivations of heretical deviation are numerous and usually malicious. The most innocent explanation is that heretics were overly curious.²⁶ Only slightly better is the claim that heretics were simply stupid.²⁷ They are still curious, but are too stupid to find the orthodox answers.

The more sinister accusations include claims about the heretics’ immorality. For example, Valentinus was jealous of not being selected bishop (Tertullian, *Against Valentinus* 4.1), and the Gnostics on the whole were libertines (see chap. 3). Similarly, the heretics never suffered martyrdom (according to

24. For those concerned about this approach being taken too far, see the counterarguments of Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

25. Best summarized by Tertullian, *Prescript against Heretics* 29.

26. E.g., Hippolytus, *Against Noetus* 16.6: “Are you not satisfied to be told that the Son of God was made manifest for your salvation, if you would have but faith? But in your meddling curiosity do you look for how he was born according to the Spirit?”

27. E.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letter* 102: “What could be more unreasonable than this . . . [i.e., Apollinarianism—see chap. 6]? . . . For though it has a certain sophistical grace through the quickness of its antithesis, and a sort of juggling quackery grateful to the uninstructed, yet it is the most absurd of absurdities and the most foolish of follies.”

Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16.12)—except for when they did (e.g., Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16.21). The devil is working behind the scenes when it comes to heretics, as he did with Judas (cf. John 13:2).²⁸ Tragically, the rhetoric of the church sometimes quickly devolved into using anti-Semitism (cf. John 8:44), claiming that heretics were a “second Judaism.”²⁹ The hyperbolic nature of such accusations is obvious, for the same heretics are often accused of “hellenizing,” or using Greek philosophy. The accusations are undoubtedly unfair caricatures, but they all illustrate the deviancy inherent in any heresy. Heresy is a deviation from the truth.

The problem with such characterizations of heresy is that the heretics themselves would likely claim they were traditional and not novel—see the Bauer thesis, mentioned above. This is especially the case when certain questions were unclear in earlier sources. Therefore, while these characterizations do help us clarify what the early Christians meant by “heresy,” they still do not define the content of that heresy, or its orthodox alternative. At this point, we have seen the generalizations made by the early Christian writers about orthodoxy and heresy. The discussion can now proceed to look to the specific heresies themselves to see how these terms were used on a case-by-case basis.

Rethinking Orthodoxy: Specifying Claims

Since we cannot begin our investigation with a predetermined and undisputed definition of either orthodoxy or heresy, we will have to proceed by looking to see how each heretic and teaching came to be seen as unorthodox. Every case is different. While strategies of refuting heresy are borrowed and repeated, there is no simple pattern for how to recognize and attack heresy, writ large. The same emphasis must be made about how to analyze each heresy. Some heretics are almost entirely unattainable to us except in the version of their opponents (e.g., the Ebionites and Eutyches). Others left a surprising number of sources for us to hear their views firsthand (e.g., the so-called Gnostics and Nestorius). Therefore, each chapter will have to begin afresh with another person and another context.

In order to aid the reader, each chapter begins with a simple summary. This is usually the view expressed about the heretic by the orthodox opponents. Each summary is then supplemented with a closer investigation into the accused heretic and the alleged heresy. The heretic in most cases probably did

28. E.g., Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church* 1.3; Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Definition* 2.

29. E.g., Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letter* 101.

not actually teach the heresy named after him. For example, Nestorius most likely did not teach “Nestorianism.” An alternate name is given, therefore, for the actual teaching in order to differentiate what Nestorius himself said (according to our best sources) from the Nestorian heresy (known from the hostile sources). Again, every case is different: Arius probably taught the heretical doctrine of subordinationism, but even then the term needs to be used instead of “Arianism” because many, if not most, of those deemed “Arians” never read anything by Arius. The heretical doctrine is the main issue, even if it was attached to a certain “arch-heretic” (as the founders of heresy were called), and even if historians doubt the credibility of the accusation against the accused heretic.

Just as it is tempting to abandon the categories of orthodoxy and heresy altogether, it will be tempting to abandon labels like “Ebionites,” “Gnostics,” and “Arians” (each for unique reasons). To erase these labels altogether, however, will cause more problems than it solves in the current study. Since we are reviewing the primary sources to see how they can be reinterpreted, we must begin with the terms used by these sources, only we will try to unpack them and see past the veneers of misrepresentation and libel. Also, while the labels themselves may do a disservice to the history of the controversy in question, the labels came to have a life of their own in later theological discussions. The term “adoptionism” as used of the Ebionites, as best I can tell, is a complete misnomer. Nonetheless, both the category of adoptionism and that of Ebionism need to be retained because they are used against later heretics like Paul of Samosata. A similar phenomenon can be found with docetism and the much later Manichaeans, and other teachings also seen to compromise the full humanity of Christ.

Lastly, since this work is a work of reinterpretation, others may not agree with all of my interpretations. Wherever possible, I have tried to represent views on which a majority of scholars agree. At times, however, I have ventured away from the flock and offered my own reading. I have tried to indicate these moments in each chapter with the various notes, since the nonspecialist still deserves to have these admitted up front. Some will want more nuance and more sources, and others fewer or different sources. For these shortcomings, I can only plead for patience and point to the limitations of space and time.

In all of the chapters that follow, the parameters are set by the question of Christology. Christology, of course, cannot be completely disentangled from other doctrines, and so other questions do arise. For example, Christology does not simply ask who Jesus is but also seeks to know what Jesus does. Therefore, the other major doctrine that remains in the purview of this study is soteriology, or the doctrine of salvation. I do not, however, undertake a

full investigation into atonement theory, because that takes us beyond the scope of these sources. Theological questions about the nature of God and anthropological questions about the nature of humanity are unavoidable and often take center stage, but they always do so because Christ's divine nature and/or human nature is in question. Other larger doctrines, such as ontology, cosmology, and epistemology, are discussed, but not exhaustively. These major themes, despite their far-reaching ramifications in our thinking and despite the dizzying display of diverse forms in the sources, all nicely intersect in the theme of the gospel. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ, but it is according to heresy.

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**Summary:
Marcionites**

**Key Doctrine:
Supersessionism**

- Jesus = God 2.0
- The God of the Old Testament = bad, mean, judging; but the Jesus-God of the New Testament = good, nice, loving

Key Date

- 144: Marcion is condemned by Christians in Rome

1

Marcion

Supersessionism

Marcion . . . a wolf from Pontus.

—Justin Martyr

Marcion . . . a mouse from Pontus.

—Tertullian

We should not mistake the accusations of Marcion’s opponents for the substance of his opinions.

—Joseph R. Hoffman

In the middle of the second century, Marcion approached the highly revered bishop Polycarp, asking for approval and “recognition.” In response, Polycarp retorted, “I ‘recognize’ you. You’re the firstborn of Satan!”¹

1. As reported by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4 (my loose translation). It should be noted that many recent scholars reject the historicity of this scene.

What did Marcion do or teach to deserve such a biting one-liner? From Polycarp's perspective (and the perspective of the orthodox party that would emerge), Marcion blasphemed God, meaning he taught the following.

1. Marcion denounced the God of the Old Testament; and so he
2. rejected the Jewish Scriptures, and so he also
3. claimed creation to be evil.

Such teachings, however, must not have been seen as blasphemy or heresy by all. For example, many Christians—called “Marcionites” by their opponents—followed Marcion. In fact, some in the early church bemoaned the spread of Marcion's teachings over the whole earth.² It is telling that an outsider would hardly be able to distinguish “catholic” churches from “Marcionite” churches.³ For that matter, long after Marcionism had been rejected by the catholic party, bishops worried that new converts would not be able to tell the difference between a Marcionite church and a “catholic” one.⁴ Our outline of Marcion's “blasphemies,” of course, is the version told by the non-Marcionite Christians. We must, then, try to hear Marcion's side of the story. Before we can do so, let us begin with what we know of Marcion's life.

Just the “Facts,” Marcion, Just the “Facts”

Marcion comes from the town of Sinope in the region of Pontus, which was located on the southern shore of the Black Sea (modern-day Turkey), but his impact on Christian history occurs when he arrives in Rome.⁵ Exactly when he was born and died cannot be known, but he arrived in Rome by 144.⁶ As for his background, we can list not so much facts as accusations, since all we know of him comes from his opponents. The “facts” are as follows.

2. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 26.5–6; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.19.2. In the middle of the fourth century Epiphanius claims “Marcionites” can be found in Italy, Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, Cyprus, Thebaid, and Persia (*Panarion* 42.1.2).

3. See, e.g., the non-Christian Celsus's accusations in Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.27; 6.52–53, 74; and cf. the accounts of Marcionite martyrs below.

4. See Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 18.26; cf. Theodoret of Cyrhus, *Letter* 113.

5. The town of Sinope and the account of Marcion's debate in Rome are known only in the later sources (although cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.1.5), and so they are debatable. It is hard to see why anyone would invent Sinope in particular, however, and so most scholars accept it.

6. The date of 144 is based on Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.19.2.

“Catholic”

In the early Christian centuries, the term “catholic” did not mean Roman Catholic. The word more simply meant “universal” or, literally, “according to the whole” (Greek *kata* + *holos*). Early Christian writers claimed to belong to the whole church in order to distinguish themselves from the heretics, who were understood as belonging to rogue sects. Before long, “catholic” becomes the precise title for churches that are non-Marcionite, or non-Gnostic, or some other such distinction. The catholic party is said to be the one true church. On the other hand, these sects claim the opposite: they belong to the true church, and their opponents have deviated from the true teachings of the true church. In general the term “catholic” will be used here to refer to those who were considered such by later generations, although there will be times when the problems with the label will be called to the reader’s attention.

- a. He was wealthy. Or, this may be a way to discredit him (cf. Matt. 19:16–22; James 5:1).
- b. His wealth came from being a shipowner. Or, this too could be a contrast with Jesus’s first disciples (cf. Mark 1:20).
- c. He gave a very large gift to the church in Rome on his arrival there. Or, this could be portraying Marcion as one who bribes (cf. Exod. 23:8; Acts 8:20).⁷
- d. His mentor was a renowned heretic named Cerdo. Or, Marcion’s ideas sound like Cerdo’s ideas, and this connection is the surest way to discredit him.⁸
- e. His father was a bishop, who excommunicated him in Sinope for raping a virgin.⁹ Or, Marcion’s teachings violated the “virgin Bride” (i.e., the church)—later Christians simply misunderstood.

7. But of course the Christians gave the money back (see Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.4.3; 5.17.1)—or, Tertullian does not wish to make unnecessary enemies, and so he will assume that the money was returned to Marcion. This accusation is also problematic because the sources do not agree as to the details of this account: Epiphanius (*Panarion* 42.1.7–8) insists that no one in Rome received him into the fellowship but that he was instead recognized as a heretic from the beginning and there was a later debate between him and the elders.

8. Unlike later sources, Justin (*1 Apology* 26) does not know Cerdo, but he nevertheless offers the common accusation that Marcion descended from earlier heretics, namely Simon the Magician and Menander.

9. Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* 6.2. Notice this information was not known to Tertullian himself, who certainly would have capitalized on it (see where Tertullian makes similar claims against Apelles in *Prescript against Heretics* 30). The same can certainly be said of Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, if not also Justin.

- f. Marcion repented of his teachings late in life, but died before making things right with the church. Or, no one knows what happened to him, and reports of Marcion's own rejection of Marcionism would refute any who might be tempted by this heresy.
- g. Marcion was a pescetarian.¹⁰ Or, . . . well, there is no "or" this time. What motive could someone have for making this up? Perhaps, since Christians are "little fish" (i.e., they have the fish symbol of ICHTHUS on their chariots),¹¹ Marcion gobbles them up.¹² No "orthodox" opponent, however, used this "fact" against him.

Most scholars accept points (a)–(c) as facts, while (d) is debated, leaving (e) and (f), which are generally assumed to be slander. The last point, (g), is just mentioned here because it might one day win the reader a game of Church History Trivial Pursuit.

In Rome Marcion may have been accepted into the church, only later being declared a heretic when he presented his teachings to the leaders of the church. Why and how he presented these matters is unclear. Whether Marcion himself was even "excommunicated" (or for that matter, whether anyone could function as a "pope" or "bishop" of some sort in order to excommunicate him at this time) is itself debatable at best. Perhaps Marcion simply left Rome when his teachings were attacked by others. We cannot be sure. What we do find in the sources, however, is an immediate and outright rejection of his teachings as "heresy."

The Heresy: A Portrait or Caricature?

When it comes to his teaching, we can proceed on firmer ground for the following reason. While his opponents attempt to show the absurdities in his thinking, they nevertheless portray Marcion as having his own consistent logic. Since Marcion's teachings make sense on their own terms, we can understand both why he would have held such beliefs and why his opponents rejected them.

Because the anti-Marcionite writers used rhetorical flourish to discredit Marcion, we must take a critical stance toward their claims. For example, we

10. Cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.14.5; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.18.

11. *Ichthus* is the Greek word for fish. Christians found the letters to be an acronym for Christ: *I*esous *C*Hristos *T*Heou *h*Uios *S*oter, which means "Jesus Christ God's Son Savior."

12. This may sound like a stretch, but compare Tertullian, *On Baptism* 1, regarding another heretic.

Tertullian (ca. 160–220)

Tertullian wrote the most extensive work against Marcion (uncreatively entitled *Against Marcion*). He writes from Carthage in North Africa and is famous for his wit and biting rhetoric. He was formerly understood to have been a Roman lawyer, a priest, one who despised philosophy, and he was even said to have converted to the Montanist heresy later in life. This picture of Tertullian, however, has been

heavily revised in recent decades. Because he writes so extensively against Marcion and because he is relatively close to Marcion's time, he is the primary source for our understanding of the Marcionite heresy. Most other "orthodox" opponents of Marcion provide only a few paragraphs about him and his teaching. Thus, Tertullian's work will be used repeatedly throughout this chapter.

will explore how Marcion allegedly cut and pasted the New Testament to fit his teachings. When Tertullian—the most elaborate source on Marcion—first reports this in his work *Against Marcion*, he does so in highly embellished terms: after reporting how cold the climate of Pontus is, and how barbaric the people of Pontus are, he exclaims, “Even so, the most barbarous and melancholy thing about Pontus is that Marcion was born there . . . !”¹³ He then likens Marcion to the vermin said to infest the region, claiming Marcion is a “Pontic mouse” that “gnaws” away at good things, namely the holy books. Clearly, Tertullian ridicules Marcion in order to discredit him. Of course, we need not fault Tertullian; this approach represents the norm for debate in the ancient world; we can probably assume that Marcion would have used similar rhetoric in response. We can ignore Tertullian as far as Marcion's barbarity. Can we also dismiss Tertullian's claim that Marcion—like a mouse—“gnawed away” at the Scriptures? Should we not question whether Marcion ever edited the New Testament as the anti-Marcionite writers claim? Here, as we will see below, the problem is more complex. Tertullian, it is widely assumed, had copies of Marcion's texts at hand, and so he may be a reliable source for Marcion's actions, a matter that will be debated below.

On the other hand, the earliest respondents to Marcion, such as Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, could not have fabricated pure lies, since Marcion's followers were still around to object. So what do we really know about Marcion's teaching?

13. *Against Marcion* 1.1 (the translation is from Evans [p. 5], but I have added a punctuation mark).

Marcion's "Bible"

Marcion's Bible probably had only two books in it: the *Euangelion* and the *Apostolikon*. The *Euangelion*, which simply means "Gospel" in Greek, is the Gospel according to Luke, only much shorter than our version of Luke. In general, Luke's references to the Old Testament have been deleted. Marcion's version begins with Luke 3:1 and then skips to Luke 4:31 and following. In other words, there is no birth narrative, and nothing of Jesus's life before he began preaching. The *Apostolikon*, or Apostle's Writings, is a book

of Paul's letters. Only ten are included in it, and they are—in order—Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Laodiceans (= our Ephesians), Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians. Marcion also wrote a work called *Antitheses*, which probably functioned as a preface to his Bible. This work contrasted examples of God's actions in the Old Testament with Christ's teachings. The point was to demonstrate how the Old Testament view of God was incompatible with a Christian view.

Marcion's Canon: Reduce, Reuse, Reject

The traditional view is that Marcion's key mistake was rejecting the Old Testament and parts of the New Testament that rely heavily on it, including three of the Gospels. Luke is the only Gospel he uses, but he still must edit certain parts (i.e., those that quote Jewish Scripture). Or, as Irenaeus claimed, Marcion "mutilated" or "circumcised" the Gospel of Luke—quite an ironic charge!¹⁴ Marcion's apostle is Paul, who is, after all, "the apostle to the gentiles," or non-Jews. However, even with Paul's letters, Marcion had to censor references to the Old Testament, which to Irenaeus was to "dismember" or "castrate" Paul—even more ironic (cf. Gal. 5:12).¹⁵ Also, Marcion rejected Acts, perhaps because Acts claims too much of the Old Testament and shows the Jewish roots of the early church.¹⁶

14. *Against Heresies* 1.27.2. "Mutilate" is the word choice of the ANF translation. The Latin manuscript preserves the word *circumcidens*. Cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.2.4: *caederet*.

15. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.2.4. ANF = "dismember"; the Latin is *abscidit*. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.1.9, claims, "That these [Paul's epistles] have suffered mutilation [*mutilatas*] even in number, the precedent of that gospel [of Luke], which is now the heretic's, must have prepared us to expect."

16. See Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.2.7. The notion that being Jewish was the problem is misleading: Marcion constantly attacks the actions of the Jews' God, not the Jews themselves, leaving no grounds on which to accuse him of anti-Semitism. See John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford

Therein, it is said, Marcion has compiled the first Christian canon. No Hebrews (of course!). No James, Peter, John. No Revelation. What remained was an abridged Luke and ten edited letters of Paul. From Marcion's slimmed-down canon, one might assume that his heresy lay in rejecting the church's Bible. That assumption, however, may be the reverse of his logic.

The earliest Christians simply had no Bible—at least they had no modern, bound book with a set number of books in it. Instead, the earliest Christians often differed as to which books (or better: “writings” [Latin = *scripturae*]) they read, sang, and celebrated in their gatherings. In comparison, Marcion's “narrow canon” is not all that different from the “canon” of some other Christians from his time.¹⁷ There is some debate as to whether Marcion selected and edited *the* canon (as Irenaeus and Tertullian thought he did), or whether he simply made logical conclusions from a “canon” he had received.¹⁸ For the current discussion, the question of Marcion's “heresy,” rather than being about the canon, is better understood in terms of theology and Christology.

The Gospel according to Marcion

Christians from his time understood Marcion's heresy not so much in terms of a rejection of Scriptures but in terms of Christology. The principle matter for the anti-Marcionist writers lay in the question of whether the Creator-God of the Old Testament was one and the same as the Christ of the New Testament. In other words, Marcion's primary mistake, or heresy, was in terms of his doctrine of Christ.¹⁹

Question: What does Marcion understand to be the character of Jesus?
Answer: Love.²⁰ A love so complete it is self-sacrificial. So far, so good. From

University Press, 1983), 171–72; and Heikki Räisänen, “Marcion and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism: A Reappraisal,” *Temenos* 33 (1997): 121–35.

17. Cf., e.g., the writings of Ignatius and Polycarp, whose known “canons” are roughly the same as Marcion's.

18. A view championed by John Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942). The trend in scholarly debate is certainly moving toward the latter option. For bibliography, see Judith M. Lieu, “‘As Much My Apostle as Christ Is Mine’: The Dispute over Paul between Tertullian and Marcion,” *EC* 1 (2010): 43–45; Lieu, “Marcion and the Synoptic Problem,” in *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, ed. P. Foster, A. Gregory, J. S. Kloppenborg, and J. Verheyden (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 740–44.

19. A similar argument was made by Barbara Aland, “Marcion-Marcionites-Marcionism,” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1:523–24.

20. Marcion's lost work *Antitheses* apparently began with this fundamental contrast between the God of love in Christ and the Creator-God (the “demiurge”). See Tertullian, *Against Marcion*

this starting point, Marcion devotes himself to this God of love revealed in Christ. After he has started with Christ, Marcion then looks to the Old Testament and finds a very different God: a God who demands retaliation (e.g., Exod. 21:24; cf. Matt. 5:21) and even genocide (e.g., in 1 Sam. 15), allows polygamy (e.g., with Jacob), requests child sacrifice (esp. see Gen. 22), summons she-bears on children (e.g., 2 Kings 2:24), and does countless other deplorable—or at least unloving—acts. Marcion’s understanding of the gospel is one of love and acceptance sent from heaven, and so any God who acts contrary to this must be foreign to the God met in Christ, or as Marcion put it, “beneath” the God of Christ.

So far, we can readily sympathize with Marcion: no close reader of the two Testaments in a Christian Bible has failed to recognize certain themes that seem incompatible. Also, if Paul made it clear that gentiles do not need to adhere to Jewish laws (circumcision, food laws, holy days, etc.), then the law (or at least the Jewish scriptures’ witness to God) and the gospel (or at least the “New Testament” or “New Testimony”) are antithetical.

Marcion has concluded both that Christ is not the Creator-God and that Christ is better than the Creator-God. The claim that Christ is better, good, and loving seems to demand that the Creator-God is less good, if not evil. After this conclusion, there arises another series of questions for Marcion.

1. If Jesus is not the evil Creator-God, then what does this mean about creation itself? Is it also evil?
2. If Jesus is not the Creator-God and creation is evil, what about our created bodies? Did Jesus take up a real body?
3. If Jesus is not the Creator-God and creation is evil, what about the things we do in our bodies?

Marcion’s followers, we are told, ridiculed creation. Marcion’s own stance is not so clear. Let us discuss each question in more detail.

What about Creation Itself?

As to whether God created the world, Marcion finds as many evils in the world as he does in the Old Testament. Therefore, he blames creation itself on a different god (called the “demiurge”—meaning “one who makes”). After all, so the logic goes, this mess we call the cosmos cannot be the fault

4.6.1. A reconstruction of this work can be found in Wayne A. Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald, *The Writings of St. Paul*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2007), 286–88.

Are the Old and New Testaments Incompatible?

Readers should be wary of simplistic assertions as to whether the Old and New Testaments are incompatible. This idea seems to suffer from the same fallacy as Marcion's view: if two things seem incompatible, then they must be incompatible. The vast majority of early Christians could not accept such a notion after believing in the incarnation of God. The temptation to reject the Old Testament and its view of God has persisted to the modern era in thinkers like Adolf von Harnack, who tried to delete the entire Old Testament from Protes-

tant theology. Tertullian's response to Marcion still rings true: "Antitheses for the most part are produced by diversity of purposes, not of authorities" (*Against Marcion* 4.24.1). In other words, different purposes or actions were carried out by the same God. Whereas the "orthodox" interpreted the Scriptures' alleged contradictions as God working in different ways at different times, Marcion understood the contradictions as reflecting two different gods.

of the loving God known in Christ. Marcion allegedly prooftexted the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus teaches that bad fruit comes only from bad trees (Luke 6:43). All of the bad things that the creator/demiurge "made"—nay, even claimed to make (cf. Isa. 45:7; Jer. 18:11)—must imply that the creator/demiurge is bad.

Once again, we must pause to consider whether this traditional reading of Marcion does him justice (pun intended). According to Marcion, the Creator-God is concerned with righteousness. Is the Creator-God "just" or just plain evil? For the orthodox writers, however, there is no separating justice/judgment from goodness/mercy. To be just is to be good. Marcion was not so sure. It is likely that Marcion himself preferred the God of love known in Christ over the evil Creator-God known in the Old Testament. Later, followers found this unconvincing, since parts of the Old Testament show God being just. It is later Marcionites, not Marcion, who concerned themselves with the Creator's future judgment.²¹ As for the past creation, we can conclude that Marcion believed it at best flawed and imperfect, and perhaps downright "evil." The good news, according to Marcion, is that Christ has come to rescue us from the trap (i.e., the created order) in which the evil Creator-God has us. The world is a trap, not just because God made it and us in it, but because this world leads to death of the body and of the soul.²²

21. Sebastian Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 49–54.

22. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42.3.5.

Marcion's "-isms" #1: Docetism

"Docetism" comes from the Greek *dokeō*, "to seem or appear." It teaches that Christ only appeared to have a body and that he was in fact a hologram, a ghost (or "phantasm"). This heresy is generally associated with Gnosticism (see chap. 3), but Marcion is usually assumed to hold to this teaching as well. This assumption, however, is like so many other traditional depictions of Marcion in that it is an accusation made against him by his earliest opponents (see the next section).

Although Marcion believed Christ was a God of love and not judgment, there is no evidence that Marcion taught universalism. According to an early account, he believed that Jesus descended into hell and saved all those condemned by the Creator-God (Cain, the Sodomites, etc.).²³ The rest (i.e., the Jews) distrusted this manifestation of a Savior and thought it a test of the Creator-God. They remained in hell, waiting in vain for the Creator-God to be good. Rather than "Love wins," Marcion says, "Love tried." It is the way in which Christ "tried" that provides us with a glimpse of how Marcion answered the next question.

What about Created Bodies, Especially Jesus's Body?

Marcion believed created matter was evil, and so he must have said the same for human bodies, including Christ's body—according to the traditional view. The premise about creation itself being evil, however, has now been nuanced: creation is not so much evil as not-good/imperfect. Should we not rethink Marcion's view of the body as well?

Third-century Christian writers repeatedly assert that Marcion denied the incarnation and preferred to think of Jesus as simply pretending to appear in the flesh (something known as "docetism," which we will discuss in chap. 3), and so scholars generally assume this to be the case.²⁴ These writers, however, have less firsthand information than is often thought, and they all depend on Irenaeus's brief statements about Marcion, in which he conflates Marcion with other docetists.²⁵

There is credible evidence that Marcion:

23. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27.3; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42.4.4.

24. E.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.3.12; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 10.15; Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* 6.1–2.

25. *Against Heresies* 1.27.2; 3.11.3; 4.32.2; cf. 5.1.2.

1. denied Christ's birth and asserted that Christ instead "came down" straight from heaven to Capernaum (see Luke 4:31, which begins Marcion's Luke), and
2. denied a bodily resurrection and preferred a "spiritual body" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:44) in the afterlife.²⁶

Orthodox opponents could use these two denials to assume that Marcion also denied that Christ had a body. These same opponents further add motive to Marcion's denial.

In graphic terms, Tertullian blamed Marcion for abhorring human bodies, which Marcion thought were simply "full of &#\$*#!"²⁷ Marcion, therefore, must have been repulsed by the notion of Christ being "formed from a woman's blood . . . [and his being] spilt upon the ground through the sewer of a body, with a sudden attack of pains along with the uncleanness of all those months."²⁸ Clearly, Marcion thinks that the flesh is disgusting. While the logic sounds sound, the problem is that Marcion himself never said the body was a sewer. This is Tertullian's rhetoric about Marcion, not a quote from Marcion himself. Tertullian also claimed, "If, being the Son of man, he is of human birth, there is body derived from body. Evidently you could more easily discover a man born without heart or brains, like Marcion, than without a body, like Marcion's Christ. Go and search then for the heart, or the brains, of that man of Pontus."²⁹ This obviously charged rhetoric has been taken as unfair regarding Marcion's brain, but accurate concerning Jesus's body. Why? We can no longer depend uncritically on Tertullian's rhetoric, for we may as well accept that Marcion's own body was brainless—the original zombie! The reason for doubting such rhetoric as historically accurate is found in several conflicting statements made by Marcion's opponents: Marcion did in fact believe in the crucifixion of Christ in the flesh.³⁰ Although not born of woman, and not raised in a physical body, Christ came in a real (not docetic) body.³¹

Once again, it is worth setting Marcion's thoughts within their wider context of the early to mid-second century. That one could draw the same conclusion about Christ's lack of birth and lack of a physical resurrection

26. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27.2; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 10.15.

27. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.10.1. Evans's translation, "packed with dung," is the G-rated version.

28. *Against Marcion* 4.21.11.

29. *Against Marcion* 4.10.15–16.

30. E.g., Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.11, 14; 2.27; 4.26.1.

31. It is interesting to note that Christ *could* be incarnate without being born. Marcion may have assumed Jesus to have been human—body and all—but that the incarnation was simply Christ's way of communicating with every-body (pun intended).

Marcion's "-isms" #2: Gnosticism

The question of Marcion's docetism also raises the question, "Was Marcion a Gnostic?" Such a question, however, assumes there is a set definition of "Gnosticism." Like docetism, this problem will be discussed further in chapter 3. The debate related to Marcion, however, is one that plagues scholarship. The ancient orthodox opponents of Marcion portrayed him as just another evolution of Gnostic thinking. Thus, either he is a student of Cerdo or of Valentinus, or his students developed his thoughts further toward their inevi-

table and logical conclusion, full-blown Gnosticism, or both. This picture, however, is not compelling. Instead of the typical Gnostic mythologies with genealogies of aeons and emissions, which lead to the created realm, Marcion simply viewed God as a God of love and grace, not of law and judgment (as the Jews viewed God) *nor* as one of mythological fancy (as the Gnostics viewed him). Labeling Marcion a Gnostic is entirely unhelpful at this point, for one can no longer assume any of the other so-called Gnostic tenets.

from reading Mark's Gospel exclusively may be disconcerting to some readers, but it is worth pointing out because these ideas were more widely held in the first two centuries than the clean-cut categories of orthodox versus Marcionite would suggest.³²

To recap, in accordance with Marcion's view that matter is not so much evil as a dead end, Marcion preached a gospel about an unborn but incarnate Christ. Christ died to free humans from the Creator-God's judgment, and Christ's spiritual resurrection is the hope for his followers' spiritual resurrection as well. In other words, the body—whether it be Jesus's or ours—is neither here nor there. The point is to save the soul. What, then, does that imply for Marcion's ethics? That is, what about what we do in our bodies?

What about Our Actions in Our Bodies (a.k.a. Ethics)?

Even though Marcion viewed creation and our created bodies as amoral—neither good nor bad—he still had clear teachings about what Christians should do in their bodies. Morality mattered to Marcion. The sources about his ethics are all negative; that is, they survive in the form of accusations

32. In a striking admission, Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 3.8) argues that Marcionism preceded Marcion in an earlier (much earlier) period: ". . . that Christ was a phantasm: except that this opinion too will have had other inventors, those so to speak premature and abortive Marcionites whom the apostle John pronounced antichrists."

against Marcionite practices. The two issues in particular that Marcion is attacked for are his views on marriage and his view of food. On both items, his opponents utilized the already-discussed accusation: Marcion hates the flesh.

One recurring accusation against Marcion is that he “hates” marriage. Even more interesting, Marcion’s opponents claim that he teaches celibacy out of spite: if Marcionites refused to enter into the law of marriage and produce more earthly bodies, this would annoy the Creator-God, who established the laws of marriage and created their earthly bodies.³³ While some scholars accept the claim that Marcion rejected marriage out of a childish obstinacy, others find the claim to be another example of slander.³⁴ In Marcion’s time, ascetic practices such as celibacy were highly regarded by many—if not most—Christians. The key question was whether Marcion *prohibited* marriage.³⁵

The only sources attesting to Marcion’s teaching on marriage claim he forbade it entirely. While it is tempting to side sympathetically with Marcion and dismiss this accusation as more character attack, it must be admitted that nothing in the sources calls this accusation into question. Many Christians from this period took Paul’s (and Jesus’s) preference for celibacy a step further and mandated celibacy. It is probable that Marcion did exactly that. This ban on marriage may have been motivated by a “hatred” of the flesh, as Marcion’s opponents claimed, but the widespread practice among Christians who had no such disdain for the body allows us to assume Marcion held to celibacy as an important aspect of Christian bodily practice, without attributing an unorthodox motive.

The second of Marcion’s teachings regarding the actions of the body is a strict view of fasting.³⁶ Just as many early Christians practiced celibacy, so also many (if not most) regularly fasted. Unlike his teaching on celibacy, this teaching of Marcion’s is not said to have overstepped any direct commandment of Paul. Marcion “preaches” fasting.³⁷ So then, what is the big deal? Again, it has to do with his motivation: hatred for the Creator-God (if not the flesh

33. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.3.12; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.23.6; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 10.15.

34. Moll, *Arch-Heretic Marcion*, 133, accepts this motive. However, Andrew McGowan, “Marcion’s Love of Creation,” *J ECS* 9, no. 3 (2001): 295–311, insists that the heresiologists misrepresent Marcion’s ascetic practices as “hatred of creation/Creator,” because Marcion wrote before a time when the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* had been unambiguously and unanimously defined. Moreover, McGowan insightfully notes that Marcionite “hatred” of the world, like Paul’s attitude toward the world, was as much political as it was metaphysical.

35. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.7.6: “. . . matrimony, which Marcion, of stronger character than the apostle, forbids.”

36. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.14.5; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.18.

37. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42.3.3.

Marcion's "-isms" #3: Encratism

The heresy known as encratism taught a strict form of Christian living, and it rejected marriage. Encratism is a heresy because it contradicted Paul's clear teaching: marriage is permitted (1 Cor. 7:9), even if celibacy is preferred (1 Cor. 7:7–8). Paul's views, however, spread through multiple outlets in the second century, such as in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which was written in the decades following Marcion. In that story, Paul's enemies accuse him of destroying marriages, but Paul himself nowhere actually forbids anyone to marry in the text. The really tricky part is that Paul does sound like he destroys marriage: he tells married men to "have wives as not having them" (5)—and yes, that means exactly what you think it means. In this account Paul also says "virgins . . . should not marry but remain as they are" (11). While it is tempting to dismiss the apocryphal text as a misrepresentation of Paul,

these two statements turn out to be almost verbatim quotes from Paul himself (see 1 Cor. 7:29 and 7:40, respectively). Whether or not the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* rightly interpreted and emphasized Paul's preference for celibacy is beyond the concern of our discussion. The relevant point here is that it illustrates how easily one could interpret Paul as advocating this teaching in the second century. To assume that the author of the *Acts* is a Marcionite, or responding to Marcion, is to accept the "orthodox" depiction of this teaching as unique to Marcion. Instead, the evidence strongly suggests that Marcion held to a common practice among first- and second-century Christians. See also 1 Corinthians 9:5, 15; Matthew 19:12 (cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.11); Revelation 14:4; 2 *Clement* 10.5; *Shepherd of Hermas* 2.4; 6.3; 29.6; 32.1–2, 38 as early examples.

made by him). One late account claims, "For fasting on the Sabbath he gives this reason: 'Since it is the rest of the God of the Jews who made the world and rested the seventh day, let us fast on this day, to do nothing appropriate to the God of the Jews.'"³⁸ This statement may even be a later Marcionite defense of the practice. Simply differentiating a Christian fast from a Jewish fast is not a "Marcionite" stance. Instead, differentiating Christian practices from Jewish ones seemed to be a common Christian trope.³⁹ While Marcion's opponents could interpret his strict teaching on fasting as malicious, this accusation more likely records just how much attention Marcion gave to the practices of the flesh.

38. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42.3.4.

39. Cf. Matt. 6:2, 5, 16; *Didache* 8.1.

Aside from the attacks on Marcion for his view of marriage and meals, there is also the curious report about Marcionite martyrs that helps inform our understanding of Marcion's teachings about the flesh. The premise that Marcionites actually died for the faith is one that "orthodox" writers certainly would have contested, if they could have. Therefore, these reports are generally assumed to be historically reliable.⁴⁰ Two points can be drawn from these reports. Marcionites' sacrifice of their own bodies suggests that Marcion's teachings on the flesh did in fact take seriously one's actions and practices in the body.

Perhaps Marcion taught his followers to deny the flesh any gratification through marriage and meals, and perhaps he taught his followers to allow their flesh to be tortured because Marcion simply hated the flesh made by the Creator-God. On the other hand, given that so many, if not most, Christians valued celibacy over marriage, simplicity over indulgence, and martyrdom over apostasy makes it difficult to fault Marcion's motivation as heretical. Now that we have reviewed Marcion's teachings, at least as can be known by reading against the grain of his opponents' claims, let us attempt to encapsulate the orthodox response to Marcion and then draw some conclusions about this early Christian heresy.

The Orthodox Response

The "orthodox" response to Marcionism took many forms and was argued on many fronts. Here we will attempt to pull all of these threads together and provide a streamlined summary of the substance of "orthodoxy." The opposition to Marcionism arose primarily in regard to his view of Christ and secondarily regarding his use of Scripture. The primary concern had to do with the question "Who is Jesus?" The secondary was "How do we know who Jesus is?" Both are christological, but for those keeping track, the more exact categories of this christological "heresy" are the ontological and the epistemological. The ontological question has to do with "being," "nature," and "substance," signified by the "is" in the question "Who *is* Jesus?" The epistemological question has to do with knowledge and how knowledge is acquired, signified by the "know" in the question "How do we *know* who Jesus is?" The two are undoubtedly intertwined, but for the present purposes I will discuss each question in turn.

40. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.24.4; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16.21. However, see Justin, *1 Apology* 26.5: "But we do know that they [the Marcionites] are neither persecuted nor put to death by you, at least on account of their opinions."

The “orthodox” response to Marcion’s “heresy” about who Jesus *is* can be summarized as follows: there is one God, Jesus. Even for Tertullian, when introducing Marcion’s heresy as presenting “two Gods . . . the Creator . . . and his own,” this is framed as a christological problem.⁴¹ For Jesus is the “one Lord” by whom, in whom, and through whom all things are made (cf. John 1:3; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 2:10; Rev. 4:11). The God known in Jesus Christ is the same God seen in the Old Testament.⁴² When the Old Testament God spoke, it was the preincarnate Word that was heard.

Marcion’s primary error is to deny that Christ is the Creator. For example, the third-century writer Rhodo and the fourth-century writer Epiphanius explicitly denounce Marcion for separating the *Logos*, or Word, of the Lord from the *Archē*, who made the world (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1; 1 John 1:1).⁴³ Today, the Greek word *archē* is usually translated as “beginning,” as in “In the beginning . . .” The term, however, could also mean “source” (*archē*) or “ruler” (*archōn*), and so many Christians from Marcion’s era understood the *Logos* to be the very same being as the *Archē*.⁴⁴ Marcion and the orthodox party disagreed only as to the relationship between the *Logos* and the *Archōn* (now clearly meant as Ruler over creation). While the proper interpretation of John 1:1 is beside the point (for I doubt your biblical studies professor would approve of either interpretation), this example shows how Marcion’s attempt to separate Christ the Word from the Creator-God/*Archōn* was rejected by the wider church.

The streamlined answer to Marcion given here, that Jesus is YHWH, is admittedly so nuanced in the orthodox texts that it is often difficult to see. For one thing, the orthodox would not have used the Hebraic name YHWH itself; rather, they would have used the Greek word that translates it, *Kyrios* (“LORD”) or simply the term “God” without attempting to invoke God’s proper name. For another thing, the full definition of the doctrine of the Trinity is yet to be forged against an array of heresies.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the orthodox writers—unlike Marcion—clung to a strict monotheism and read the Old

41. See *Against Marcion* 1.2.

42. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.27.

43. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.13.3–4; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42.4.1.

44. See Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *John 1–10*, ACCS (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 3–7.

45. One concern about claiming “Jesus is YHWH” would be modalism, that is, that the Father and the Son (and the Spirit) are the same person, only appearing in different ways at different times (see chap. 4). Such a view is certainly not espoused by the early orthodox party’s claim that Jesus is the Old Testament God known as YHWH. The only possible way to make such an accusation is to assume that the Old Testament God is the Father, and not the Son—an almost-unanimous assumption held by readers today, but one the early church did not share. Such a reading of the Old Testament is more Marcionite than it is orthodox.

Testament christocentrically, something they learned from the New Testament documents, where “Jesus is LORD,” that is, the God of the Old Testament.⁴⁶

This response about who Christ *is*, as we mentioned above, was coupled with debate about *how one knows* Christ. The orthodox response reaffirms—or perhaps, only after Marcion, fully recognizes—the importance of the Hebrew Scriptures even for the mission to the gentiles. The God known in Jesus Christ is the selfsame demiurge who created the world and the selfsame God who elected the descendants of Abraham.

Answering Marcion’s use of Scripture was not a simple task, since there were many problems. The matter of which Scriptures were to be used and which could be rejected has already been discussed. Even if the traditional perspective is rejected and even if one were to accept that Marcion-like canons were common in the early second century, it is apparent that in response to Marcion, the progress of canonization comes into question. For one thing, the use of the four Gospels—all four and no more—will emerge after Marcion’s time. Also, the collection of texts, such as Paul’s letters, the “catholic” epistles, and so on will become more common after Marcion, resulting in whole books (or codices, a development from the use of scrolls). Then, aside from canonization, there remains the matter of how to use the Scriptures. Tertullian accused Marcion of reading the Scriptures selectively: “You take note of [God’s] vengeance: think also of when he is indulgent.”⁴⁷ Even in a sympathetic reading of Marcion as a product of his time, one can see that his reading of the two Testaments was simplistic. For one thing, the Old Testament repeatedly speaks of God as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Exod. 34:6; Ps. 103:8; etc.). It is, moreover, in the New Testament, even in Luke and Paul (Luke 22:7–20; Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 5:7; etc.), where God practices child sacrifice. The matter is more complex, of course, but that is exactly the point that Marcion ignored. The orthodox insisted that Jesus be understood as the God of the Old Testament, (perceived) warts and all.

By separating the substance of the orthodox argument (“Jesus is LORD”) from the form of the orthodox response (“Marcion is an idiot”), the reader

46. Examples from Marcion’s opponents include Justin Martyr, *Against Marcion* (cited in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.6.2); Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.2, 9–10; 5.12.6; 5.17.1; 5.18.3; and Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.22.16. A very keen observation is made on this point by Epiphanius (*Panarion* 30.10.8). In the New Testament, the clearest claim that Jesus is YHWH is found in the “I AM” sayings of Jesus in John (8:24, 28, 58). But even Mark, with its allegedly low Christology, invokes this imagery (e.g., 1:3; 6:47–51). For Paul, see esp. his application of Isa. 45:23 to Jesus in Phil. 2:9–11. To be sure, the early Christians were not univocal in understanding Jesus as Lord to be YHWH, but such a formula represents a core conviction widely shared by the earliest believers (e.g., Jude 4–5).

47. *Against Marcion* 2.17.

can, I hope, use these abbreviations as mental flash cards to be compared with other Christologies discussed in the rest of this book and beyond.

At the beginning of this chapter, “Marcionism,” or the gospel according to Marcion, is said to be the belief that Jesus is God 2.0. Of course, as with all oversimplifications, “God 2.0” poorly represents Marcion’s thought. Marcion’s “Marcionism” is his teaching that in Christ someone or something has surpassed and replaced the God who created the world and who called Israel. Marcion’s “heresy” is supersessionism.

Supersessionism usually takes the form of church/Israel relations, especially in terms of a replacement. The church, so it is said, has replaced and surpassed Israel. The range of supersessionisms is too vast to cover presently, but in general the logic of replacement is the key issue. After the church is said to replace Israel, one can easily assert that the new covenant replaces the old covenant, baptism replaces circumcision, the Lord’s Supper replaces sacrifice, Sunday replaces the Sabbath, and so on and so forth. These replacements are all allowed if, and only if, one accepts a theological supersessionism. If Christ supersedes and replaces YHWH of the Old Testament, then Christ can ignore Old Testament teachings and institutions. If not, but all of YHWH’s commands are simply replaced, then God is fickle. For orthodoxy, however, one must reject Marcionism, and if one accepts that Jesus is YHWH incarnate, who fulfills the law both physically and spiritually, then one must embrace YHWH’s word in the Old Testament as well.⁴⁸ How to do so, of course, is hotly debated.⁴⁹

The early church generally looked to the spiritual meaning of the Old Testament. The sacrifices were never meant to be understood on a merely physical level; rather, God’s people were to offer clean hands and a pure heart. Circumcision was always to be understood as indicating a circumcision of the heart. The whole nation of Israel itself was to be a kingdom of priests, for not all Israel according to the flesh is truly Israel.⁵⁰ The key in all

48. In this understanding, it must be clear that YHWH in the Old Testament is not God the Father, as is so often assumed in contemporary Christian readings. Rather, the Father is the one who sends his Son, but it is the Son who is manifested. Cf. John 5:46.

49. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), is helpful on this point in that he accounts for Marcionism (see esp. p. 17).

50. E.g., 2 *Clement* 14.2: “Moreover, the books and the apostles declare that the church not only exists now but has been in existence from the beginning. For she was spiritual.” In other words, Israel is not replaced. The spiritual Israel is (and always was) the church, and vice versa. Those familiar with *Epistle of Barnabas* will recognize this pattern, although that author held to a curious view that the physical covenant was immediately and irrevocably broken at Sinai. Likewise, Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.16, explain

of these interpretations is to listen to the Word of God, whether he spoke to the prophets of old or in the flesh. No supersessionistic reading is permissible in light of the belief that there is but one God, whose fullness is revealed in Christ. Tertullian insisted, “That man from Pontus has seen fit to invent a second god, while denying the first. . . . It ought to have been possible to confine my argument to this single theme, that the god brought in to supersede the Creator is no god at all.”⁵¹ Marcion’s allowance for the Creator to be “superseded” by Christ results in a radical departure from what the majority of Christians had known in their faith and practice. In this light, Christology and Christianity as a religion can be rightly understood: Christianity is not merely a sect within Judaism, although according to a sociological model it was so; it is an affirmation of the God of Judaism, now said to be known in Christ. We will return to Christianity’s relationship to Judaism in the next and final chapters of this work. For now, at the core of all his thoughts on the canon, the cosmos, and the flesh, Marcion’s heresy is a christological one, a denial that Jesus is Lord.

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how this rationale is applied to all the law in its spiritual sense. The law is not superseded but is understood as it was always meant to be understood.

51. *Against Marcion* 2.1.