

The threat of Gnosticism and of Marcion and Montanism

A. The threat of Gnosticism

1. One of the most significant threats to the faith in the early centuries AD was that of Gnosticism. Though there were several forms of Gnostic thought, most depended on the idea that the soul was imprisoned within the human body and could obtain salvation only through special knowledge or gnosis (γνῶσις). This knowledge not only informed the adherent of their apparent cosmic origins and the nature of the physical world, but also instructed them of the means to escape from this world and its powers of darkness and return to their former higher realm.
2. It is not difficult to see how this teaching might adopt a syncretistic relationship with Christianity, indeed, there are clear indications in a number of New Testament passages that this had already begun to take place in the second half of the first century. However, by the middle of the second century it was flourishing and met stern opposition by leading men such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus.
3. Until 1945, most of our knowledge of Gnosticism had come from the writings of those who opposed it. However, in that year a complete Gnostic library was discovered at Nag Hammadi by the Nile in Upper Egypt. Dating from about AD 400, the library consisted of about fifty treatises written in Coptic. We will return to these Nag Hammadi documents a little later. For now we are concerned only with what witness these documents, and the writings of those who opposed this teaching, shed on our knowledge of which New Testament books were known to, or used by the Gnostic leaders.
4. As the library at Nag Hammadi has demonstrated, the Gnostics had many of their own 'special' books in which their secrets were hidden. However, in order to influence others and to give credit to their claims to being 'Christian' they needed also to reinterpret what had previously been revealed by God to his apostles and prophets and recorded in the documents that make up the New Testament.
5. As early as AD 130 Basilides, a Gnostic writer, refers to passages found in Matthew, Luke and Romans. By the end of the second century Gnostic writers had demonstrated a knowledge of virtually every New Testament document, though with the notable exception of Acts. There was certainly no consensus as to which canonical books were considered to be authoritative within Gnostic circles, but most were known to them. As Metzger says,
 - a) "... the role played by Gnostics in the development of the canon was chiefly that of provoking a reaction among members of the Great Church so as to ascertain still more clearly which books and epistles conveyed the true teaching of the Gospel." ¹

B. The threats of Marcion and Montanism

¹ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 1987: 90

1. Much the same could be said of other dangers that threatened the integrity of the Gospel. Indeed, opposition to the faith has often provided occasion for those who love the truth “to examine their own presuppositions and to state more clearly what they already believed.”² It is worth briefly considering two further significant challenges faced by the second century Christian community, each of which influenced the development of the New Testament canon in opposite directions.

2. Marcion

a) A wealthy Christian ship-owner from Sinope, on the Black Sea, Marcion was excommunicated in July, AD 144 by leaders of the Christian community in Rome over his strange teachings which had likely been influenced by a brand of Gnosticism. According to Irenaeus, these included:

(1) Complete rejection of the Old Testament which could not be reconciled with the teachings of the New Testament.

(2) A distinction between a Supreme God of goodness and a lesser God of justice, Christ being the messenger of the Supreme God.

(3) A rejection of all teaching that hinted of contact with Judaism or the Old Testament Scriptures.

(4) A belief that Jesus had only the appearance of being human, and so could therefore not have been born of a woman.

b) Marcion went on his way, presumably assisted by his great wealth, propagating his strange brand of Christianity that by the end of the second century had become a significant threat to the Christian faith.³

c) As a result of this, Marcion accepted only a small number of New Testament documents as authoritative and those he did accept, he edited to remove all traces of anything connected with the Old Testament. His canon consisted of two parts:

(1) The *Evangelion* = the Gospel of Luke (beginning at 3:1)

(2) The *Apostolikon* = Galatians; Corinthians (1 and 2); Romans; Thessalonians (1 and 2); Ephesians (which Marcion called ‘Laodiceans’); Colossians; Philippians; and Philemon.

d) Although this canon is obviously deficient from a standpoint of orthodoxy, it nevertheless contributed to the lengthy process of forming a fixed canon, recognised as being the accepted rule of faith.

3. Montanism

a) In the second half of the second century, there began a movement which became known as the Phrygian heresy (due to its place of origin) or

² Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament*, 1965: 126

³ See Metzger, 1987: 90-99

Montanism (after its founder). Montanus had been a pagan convert who, soon after his conversion, fell into a trance and began to speak in an ecstatic fashion. Eusebius explains:

- (1) "... a recent convert, Montanus by name, through his unquenchable desire for leadership, gave the adversary opportunity against him. And he became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying in a manner contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning."⁴
 - b) The main tenet of Montanism was the continuance of divine revelation which had begun under the Old Testament, carried on in the time of Christ and his apostles, and which had continued, reaching its peak, through the religion of the Holy Spirit beginning with the activity of Montanus himself.
 - c) Many of their utterances were written down and collected as sacred documents - much in the style of the prophets of old - and the movement spread across the empire. Their ceremonies aroused considerable emotional enthusiasm, their stand against a growing ecclesiastical hierarchy were popular among the people, and their prophecies concerning the imminent end of the world proved persuasive.
 - d) Though many of their 'prophecies' were written down, their appeal to authority was the Spirit and the gifts or revelation. As such they posed no long-lasting threat to the growing recognition of the New Testament canon. Their love of prophetic literature, however, likely had a negative effect on the way in which some viewed other apocalyptic literature at that time, including the book of Revelation.
4. Where Marcion had essentially provoked believers "to recognise the breadth of the written corpus of authoritative writings,"⁵ the teachings of Montanism influenced believers to move towards adopting a restricted and ultimately closed canon of Scripture.

⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5, 16:7

⁵ Metzger, 1987: 106