

I can now, at long last, start talking about the kinds of textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament that I covered in my 1993 book, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture (I did a second edition, updating the discussion with a new Afterword in 2011). From the surviving documents of the period, there appear to have been five major competing Christologies (= understandings of who Christ was) throughout the Christian church, and I will devote a post or two to each of the first four. Docetism, the subject of this post, understood Christ to be a fully divine being and therefore not human; Adoptionism understood him to be a fully human being and not actually divine; Separationism understood him to be two distinct beings, one human (the man Jesus) and the other divine (the divine Christ); Modalism understood him to be God the Father become flesh. The fifth view is the one the “won out,” the Proto-orthodox view that Christ was both human and divine, at one and the same time, that he was nonetheless one person and not two persons, and that he was distinct from God the Father, both of them being God but there being only one God.

As you can tell, it was a complicated set of debate. But by later theological standards rather basic.

Docetism, as I have indicated on the blog before, derives its name from the Greek word “DOKEO,” which means “to seem” or “to appear.” It is not clear whether

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It is not clear whether the proponents of a docetic view called themselves this, but it seems rather unlikely. It is more probably a term used *of* them by their theological enemies, who mocked them for saying that Christ was not really a human being, but only “seemed” to be one. He was, for them, instead, fully divine, a deity who came to the earth only in the “appearance” of human flesh.

There were probably some Gnostics who held some such views (I have described Gnostics on the blog before: if you need a refresher, just search for the term and you'll see the posts). And there were almost certainly some unnamed groups that held to it - including an unnamed group attacked already in the New Testament book of 1 John and another one attacked (assuming, as I do, that it was a different group) in the letters of Ignatius. But it is a view possibly best known in the writings of the (in)famous teacher and theologian of the second century, Marcion.

Here is what I say about Marcion and his followers (Marcionites) in my brief introduction to their views in my textbook The New Testament.

Consider another Christian group, this one scattered throughout much of the Mediterranean in the mid- to late second century, with large numbers of congregations flourishing especially in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Their opponents called them “Marcionites” because they subscribed to the form of Christianity advanced by the second-century scholar and evangelist **Marcion**, who himself claimed to have uncovered the true teachings of Christianity in the writings of Paul. In sharp contrast to the Jewish Christians east of the Jordan, Marcion maintained that Paul was the true apostle, to whom Christ had especially appeared after his resurrection to impart the truth of the gospel. Paul, according to Marcion, had begun as a good Jew intent on obeying the Law to the utmost, but the revelation

of Christ showed him beyond doubt that the Jewish Law played no part in the divine plan of redemption. For him, Christ himself was the only way of salvation. Marcion argued that Paul's writings effectively set the gospel of Christ over and against the Law of the Jews, and that the apostle had urged Christians to abandon the Jewish Law altogether.

For Marcion and his followers, the differences between the religion preached by Jesus (and his apostle Paul) and that found in the Jewish Scriptures were plain to see. Whereas the Jewish God punishes those who disobey, they claimed, the God of Jesus extends mercy and forgiveness; whereas the God of the Jews says "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," the God of Jesus says to "turn the other cheek"; and whereas the Old Testament God tells the Israelites to conquer Jericho by slaughtering its entire population—men, women, and children— the God of Jesus says to love your enemies. What do these two Gods have in common? According to the Marcionites, nothing. For them, there are two separate and unrelated Gods, the God of the Jews and the God of Jesus.

Marcionite Christians maintained that Jesus did not belong to the wrathful and just God of the Jews, the God who created the world and chose Israel to be his special people. In fact, Jesus came to save people from this God. Moreover, since Jesus had no part in the Creator, he could have no real ties to the material world that the Creator-God made. Jesus therefore was not actually born and did not have a real flesh-and-blood body. How, then, did Jesus get hungry and thirsty, how did he bleed and die? According to Marcionites, it was all an appearance: Jesus only seemed to be human. As the one true God himself, come to earth to deliver people from the vengeful God of the Jews, Jesus was never born, never got hungry or thirsty or tired, never bled or died. Jesus' body was a phantasm.

Some similar views about Jesus, as I've indicated, were found in other groups as well, both before and after Marcion. My sense is that even today there are Christians who are sympathetic with such views, since in their judgment, at the end of the day, Christ is REALLY God. Whether he was REALLY human is a bit harder to say. Or rather, people say it, but don't always buy it. But the early proto-orthodox church fathers bought it. If Christ wasn't human he couldn't die for the sake of other humans, and if he didn't really have flesh and blood, he couldn't shed his blood for the sake of others. For the Proto-orthodox, this was a very important issue indeed. And it came to affect scribes who were copying their manuscripts of the New Testament.



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