MARCUS GNOSTICUS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT: 
EUCHARIST AND PROPHECY

J. REILING

Any study of the phenomenon of false prophecy in the first and second century A.D. has to deal with Irenaeus' account of Marcus the Gnostic in the 13th chapter of the first book of his Adversus Haereses. In my study of the 11th Mandate of the Shepherd¹ I dealt with some aspects, such as the criteria by which the prophets are judged, the δαιμον παρεδρος which appears to inspire the prophet, and the state of mind of the women whom Marcus initiated into the mysteries of prophecy. The bizarre phenomenon of the prophet, celebrating the Eucharist, spelling out his symbolisms of words and numbers was not taken into account. In this paper I attempt to investigate Marcus himself and his sacred acts and to determine his place in the history of early Christianity. Firstly, a remark about the sources. The first source, of course, is Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I 13, known to us not only in the Latin translation, but also from Epiphanius, Panarion 34. Epiphanius expressly points out that he did not want to duplicate Irenaeus' work, and that therefore he did his utmost to προς ἔπος ἐκθέσθαι the data compiled by him, and this he does faithfully.² His text differs on some points from Irenaeus in Latin and I will come back to that whenever it is relevant to our survey.

A further source is Hippolytus Elenchus VI 39-41. It must be doubted whether, beside Irenaeus, this is an independent source, certainly with regard to the data about eucharist and prophecy. He summarizes Irenaeus' story and adds some brief comments. At no point does he appear to have had original information about Marcus. In the Greek and the Latin versions, Irenaeus remains our only source.

Before starting out on our journey through the text, some remarks about Marcus himself. Irenaeus introduces him as alius ... ex iis qui sunt apud eos, and, as appears from the praefatio, these are of περι Πτολεμαον; furthermore, Marcus regarded himself as emendator magistri, and this magister is of course Valentinus himself. Elsewhere,

² Epiphanius, Panarion 36, 1.
he calls himself μήτρα καὶ ἐκδοχεῖον τῆς Κολορβάσου σιγῆς (I 14, 1) but who or what Κολόρβασος is, is not certain. According to Harvey (ad loc.) and Hilgenfeldt, he was a pupil of Valentinus. According to others, a.o. Leisegang, the word, supposedly a Hebrew word, means Tetras, fourness. All told, a datum from which nothing of substance can be derived with regard to Marcus’ life. Concerning time and place of his activity, too, our information is rather slight. Irenaeus relates (13, 5) that he had an affair with the wife of a deacon τῶν ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ τῶν ἡμετέρων who had received him into his house with open arms. Disciples of Marcus pottered about ἐν τοῖς καθ’ ἡμῖν κλίμασι τῆς Ῥοδανούσιας, that is the Rhône area (13, 6). Hieronymus reports that Marcus was an Egyptian, and that he introduced his combination of voluptas and scientia first in Gallia and later in Spain, but no further confirmation can be found for this. From the fact that Irenaeus relates his story in the present tense, Hilgenfeldt concludes that Marcus is his contemporary, but Irenaeus makes use of the present tense in a number of other places as well. Harvey (ad 13, 1) believes that Marcus must have been a contemporary of Valentinus. If the truth lies somewhere in between, we can date Marcus’ floruit at approximately 160-170 A.D.

The report about Marcus and his pupils comprises more than just the eucharist and his performance as a prophet, and it seems expedient to indicate the other things in a few words. Their gnosis is imbued with a curious symbolism of letters, syllables and numbers which, to my knowledge, are not found with other Gnostics. The origin of this symbolism has not yet been explained in a satisfactory way, indeed, it has not yet been thoroughly investigated either. Furthermore, the diversity of traditions and practices of the Marcosians concerning ἄπολυτρωσίας, as described in ch. 21, is striking. An ἄπολυτρωσίας is necessary for those who have received the perfect gnosis. It can take place in a bridal chamber in the form of a πνευματικὸς γάμος; it can happen in the form of an immersion with various baptismal formulas followed by an anointment with myrrh. Others think baptism superfluous, and anoint the head with a mixture of olive oil and water, and then with myrrh. Still others reject all

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3 Die Ketzergeschichte des Urchristentums, Darmstadt (repr.) 1963, 369.
4 Die Gnosis, Leipzig (without year), 326.
5 Hieronymus, Epistula 75, 3.
6 Loc. cit.