CHAPTER THREE

ECCLESIASTICAL CHARGES AGAINST MONTANISM

CA. 165–324 C.E.

‘Catholics’ and ‘Montanists’ disagreed about a wide variety of topics ranging from the wearing of veils to Trinitarian theology. Numerous complaints, accusations, or charges1 were leveled at the adherents of the New Prophecy by their pre-Constantinian ecclesiastical opponents. Some of these accusations were substantive; others trivial. Some charges were applicable to all Montanists; others reflected purely local disagreements. Each individual charge or accusation may be classified as being a specific example of one of three major complaints which the ‘orthodox’ repeated endlessly in various forms: (1) ‘Montanism’ was a pseudo-prophecy; (2) ‘Montanism’ introduced novelties not commanded by Christ or the apostles; (3) ‘Montanism’ taught heretical doctrines. This chapter will discuss and analyze all the known anti-Montanist charges from the period before Constantine became sole emperor of the Roman Empire in 324.

I. Pseudo-Prophecy

The earliest major complaint against the Montanists was that of false prophecy. The Anonymous, Apollonius, and the Anti-Phrygian, wrote their treatises in order to prove that what Montanus, Maximilla, and Priscilla uttered was not prophecy (προφητεία) but fake prophecy (ψεύδοπροφητεία) (Anonymous, ap. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.16.4; Apollonius, ap. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.18.1; Anti-Phrygian, ap. Epiphanius, Pan. 48.1.1–48.13.8). Similarly, almost every other early opponent of the New Prophecy, in one way or another, tried to expose the false-ness of the movement’s prophecy (e.g., Sotas, see Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.19.3; Praxeas, see Tertullian, Prax. 1.5; Serapion, ap. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.19.2–3; and Gaius, ap. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 3.31.4).

1 Throughout this book I use the terms ‘complaints,’ ‘accusations,’ and ‘charges’ interchangeably, although whenever there were formal charges, only the latter word is employed.
The anti-Montanists did not doubt that the phenomenon they witnessed or heard about in respect of Montanist prophecy was caused by a supernatural power. They granted that Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla had been inspired by a spirit: their complaint was that this spirit was not the Paraclete, as the Montanists claimed, but an evil spirit (e.g., Anti-Phrygian, ap. Epiphanius, Pan. 48.1.4b–7; 48.2.3; 48.4.4).

The Anonymous records that some of those who heard Montanus’ strange utterances thought that he was possessed by a demon, a spirit of error, but that others believed Montanus to be divinely inspired and welcomed the spirit who spoke through him (ap. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.16.8). The Anonymous attributed this contradictory response to the subtle deception of the devil (ap. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.16.9). The Phrygian Christians who recognized this deception, however, according to the Anonymous:

rebuked Montanus and forbade him to speak, remembering the Lord’s distinction, and his harsh language regarding maintaining a watchful guard against the coming of the false prophets [ψευδοπροφητῶν]. (ap. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.16.8)

The ‘Lord’s distinction’ refers to Jesus’ comment that one could distinguish false and true prophets by ‘their fruits’ (Matt 7:20). Jesus also often warned his followers to be on guard against false prophets (e.g., Mark 13:22; Matt 24:11–24).

The most interesting of Jesus’ warnings against fraudulent prophets is found in the Gospel attributed to Matthew: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt 7:15). These very words must have been used against Maximilla by opponents of the New Prophecy, for, as noted, the work by Asterius Urbanus, quoted by the Anonymous, reports her complaining: “I am being banished as a wolf from the sheep. I am not a wolf; I am ‘utterance’ and ‘spirit’ and ‘power’” (Anonymous, ap. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.16.17).

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2 All biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
4 See pp. 12–13 above.