NOTES ON GNOSIS

BY

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1. MARCION AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

It is a well known fact that in his Antitheses Marcion delivered a vigorous attack on the character of the God of the Old Testament, the creator of this world. This attack involved a good deal of searching the scriptures, as we learn from Tertullian, Adversus Marcionem 2, 21–24, Origen, De principiis 4, 2, 1 (p. 307 Koetschau), and Clementine homilies 2, 43–44 (pp. 52–52 Rehm). The lengthy Clementine list may be an expansion made by later Marcionites, though it is impossible to reach certainty in the matter.

Most of the texts cited or alluded to are concerned with the activities and attitudes of Yahweh, as might be expected in view of Yahweh's more anthropomorphic character as compared with Elohim. These are the texts usually criticized by ancient critics of the Old Testament and defended by such allegorizers as Philo. Thus the anger, jealousy, and inconstancy of Yahweh were denied by Philo, especially in his treatise Quod Deus sit immutabilis; Philo argued that Yahweh's regret for having made man was allegorical; he proved that Yahweh was not ignorant by treating the questions "Where are you, Adam?" and "Where is your brother?" (Gen. 3, 9; 4, 9) as calls to repentance; and he explained away such problems as Lot's relation to his daughters, and the plundering of the Egyptians, seemingly approved by God.

These instances show that the questions raised by Marcion were

2 Quod Deus sit immutabilis 21; Quaestiones in Genesim 1, 95.
3 Leg. alleg. 3, 51–54; Quaest. in Gen. 1, 45. 68.
4 Quaest. in Gen. 4, 56; Vit Mos. 1, 141–42.
not new. What was new was the intensity with which Marcion raised them, and his absolute refusal to admit the possibility of allegorical exegesis as a way out.⁵

Along with this attack on Yahweh's character there is an inconsistent theological doctrine which later Marcionites seem to have abandoned. This doctrine is to the effect that the unknown supreme God is good, while the creator is just (dikaios). It is difficult to see how Marcion can have maintained this doctrine, in view of his criticisms of the Old Testament, but it is a fact that he did so. Where did he get it?

The answer to this question is probably to be found in the Judaism to which Marcion was so hostile. According to Philo, God's name theos (Elohim) refers to his creative power and to his goodness, while kyrion (Yahweh) refers to his royal power and to his punitive actions.⁶ As Marmorstein has shown, this teaching corresponds to the older haggadic doctrine that the name Yahweh is used of the judgeship or rulership of God, while Elohim refers to his love and mercy.⁷ Here, then, we find the source of the distinction which Marcion made. And it is significant that, as Marmorstein also notes, later rabbinic teaching reversed this analysis. Yahweh was the name indicating God's love and mercy (cf. Exodus 34, 6), while Elohim referred to judgment.⁸ The change apparently took place in the age of R. Meir, in other words, in the time of Marcion.

It has sometimes been observed that in Marcion's mythology — should we call it haggada? — there is a singular story which resembles Cainite teaching. This is the story of the Savior's descent into the underworld, where Cain and other Old Testament sinners gladly heard him while Abraham and other saints thought that God was as usual testing them.⁹ The Cainites too held that Cain and other Old Testament sinners were redeemed, but they took the further step of arguing that they were really saints. They were saints because they were opposed to Yahweh, the creator of the world.

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⁷ The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God I (London, 1927), 66.
⁸ Ibid., 43.
⁹ Irenaeus, Adv. haer. 1, 27, 2, p. 218 Harvey.