

## POLYCARP AND MARCION: A NOTE

Those who identify Marcion as the false teacher against whom Polycarp writes in his *Letter to the Philippians* continue to face difficult problems. Among these is the fact that Polycarp does not bother to name his enemy, and we still do not have the necessary irrefutable evidence to do it for him. Harrison was far too optimistic when he was unable to see "what more Polycarp could have said, to show that the False Teaching he had chiefly in view was that of Marcion—short of naming him."<sup>1</sup> This is surprising in view of Harrison's own admission that the "best known, most characteristic," "most outstanding," and "main" elements of Marcion are not even referred to by Polycarp.<sup>2</sup> These are the doctrine of two gods and the rejection of the OT. Harrison and Knox argued that "these two features of Marcion's thought had not yet emerged when Polycarp wrote."<sup>3</sup> But is not that simply another way of saying that the false teacher at Philippi cannot be identified with Marcion?

In his interesting and bold new book on Marcion, Hoffmann makes the same point: "If the most characteristic of Marcion's opinions had still to be formulated, how can we be certain that the proscribed teaching is Marcionism?"<sup>4</sup> But Hoffmann goes on to argue that if there are no explicit references to these two doctrines in Polycarp's attack, they can at least be inferred.<sup>5</sup> Therefore there is no reason to believe that Marcion learned them from Cerdo in Rome about 150 as in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3, 4, 3. Hoffmann regards the connection with Cerdo as legendary since Marcion was already a mature teacher when Polycarp wrote his letter ca. 130.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Hoffmann thinks Marcion began his teaching career before Ignatius' martyrdom in 117<sup>7</sup> and makes good use of Knox's point that Justin Martyr in 150 "tells us that Marcion had made disciples among men of many nations and that he was still teaching even then (*kai nun eti*)."<sup>8</sup> Knox then goes on to point out that nothing from this passage precludes the possibility that Marcion was teaching as early as

<sup>1</sup> P. N. Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1936) 197.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 183. Harrison is followed by John Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1942) 11.

<sup>3</sup> Knox, *Marcion* 11.

<sup>4</sup> R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1984) 52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 54.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 44–52.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

<sup>8</sup> Knox, *Marcion* 8; Hoffmann, *Marcion* 45. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 26, says Marcion was then teaching ditheism.

120 or 110.<sup>9</sup> Knox is quite right, but that alone does not prove that Polycarp deals with Marcion in his letter.

It does seem odd on the face of it that Polycarp does not deal *explicitly* with the most characteristic features of Marcion's theology (ditheism and a repudiation of the OT) if he knew them or knew Marcion. Polycarp is certainly able to be direct and explicit, as in 7:1 of his letter, which begins: "For whoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is Antichrist." Indeed, Schoedel devotes his considerable notes on 7:1-2 to showing that Polycarp is *not* opposing Marcion.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, there is 6:3 (to which Hoffmann refers more than once) about the prophets who foretold the coming of the Lord. Schoedel<sup>11</sup> points out parallels in Acts 7:52 and *1 Clement* 17, 1 (Lightfoot<sup>12</sup> mentions Acts 7:52 also, as well as Ignatius of Antioch *Phil.* 5, 9) and suggests that the theme in Polycarp is less polemical than traditional. At any rate, one swallow does not a summer make, and one OT prophecy cannot transform a Polycarp into a Justin Martyr or constitute a meaningful and obvious attack against Marcion's view of the OT. If it were an attack, it would be remarkably weak (Schoedel uses the word "anemic"<sup>13</sup>).

Yet there is a way to strengthen the hypothesis that Polycarp actually did identify the false teacher with Marcion: one could assume that Polycarp did not attack Marcion's view of the canon simply because in the main he agreed with it. One can substantiate such an interpretation by pointing out with Blackman that in 12, 1 of his epistle, Polycarp "definitely" ranks Ephesians 4:26 as Scripture.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, then, he would regard the entire Pauline corpus in the same way, as Scripture. I have tried to defend this judgment<sup>15</sup> and am pleased that Kümmel regards such an interpretation as possible, if not likely.<sup>16</sup>

Actually, the elevation of Paul's letters to the status of Holy Scripture in 12, 1 of Polycarp's letter should come as no surprise to anyone who notices Polycarp's use of Paul in the rest of the epistle. Because I have presented the evidence elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> I shall not repeat most of it here, although I continue to be impressed and surprised by the high and indeed unique status which Polycarp accords both to Paul and to his epistles.

<sup>9</sup> Knox, *Marcion* 11-12; Hoffmann, *Marcion* 51-52.

<sup>10</sup> William R. Schoedel, *Polycarp, Martyrdom of Polycarp, Fragments of Papias*, Vol. 5 of *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Robert M. Grant (Camden, N.J.: Thomas Nelson, 1967) 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 20, 22.

<sup>12</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* 2/2, sec. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1885) 917.

<sup>13</sup> Schoedel, *Polycarp* 23.

<sup>14</sup> E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: S.P.C.K., 1948) 30.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Merritt Nielsen, "Polycarp, Paul and the Scriptures," *Anglican Theological Review* 47 (1965) 199-216.

<sup>16</sup> Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 484, n. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Nielsen, "Polycarp" 210 ff.

It should be noted in this regard that while Polycarp mentions "apostles," the only one he names is Paul, and he sets Paul off from the rest by the intensive use of *autos* in 9, 1: Polycarp exhorts the Philippians to exercise all endurance which they saw before their own eyes, not only in the blessed Ignatius and Zosimus and Rufus, but also in others among them *kai en autō Paulō kai tois loipois apostolois*.

While Polycarp does not regard Paul as the only apostle, Paul is clearly the only *important* apostle. It is also the case that while Polycarp has not removed the OT from his canon, it cannot be compared in importance with the Pauline collection. Robert Grant pointed out that the OT was "practically unknown" to Polycarp,<sup>18</sup> and more recently Schoedel has called Polycarp's use of the OT "slight."<sup>19</sup>

What does all this mean in terms of Marcion? Marcion may very well be the false teacher of *Philippians* in part simply because there is no clear attack against Marcion's views on the canon. Since Polycarp largely accepts these views, he would hardly attack them. In common with many Paulinists,<sup>20</sup> Polycarp was already stressing the Pauline corpus as Scripture to the near exclusion of the OT, just as he was already stressing the authority of Paul to the near exclusion of the other apostles. In terms of the canon, this is near to what we regard as Marcionism, but maybe when Polycarp wrote, it was *exactly* Marcion's view of the canon. It could very well be that at this relatively early date Marcion had not fully developed his position. In common with Harrison, we have no reason to believe that Marcion's views sprang complete from his brain before he left Sinope, like Athena from the head of Zeus.<sup>21</sup>

If Marcion were the false teacher of *Philippians*, we could expect Polycarp to attack Docetism and stress the marriage relationship against Marcion's asceticism (4, 2). Moreover, we would expect Polycarp to make it plain that he shares his opponent's high view of Paul, both as *the* apostle and as the author of Scripture. Finally, we would expect Polycarp to refrain from an obvious onslaught against Marcion's thinking on the OT simply because the two were not that far apart. Are not all of these expectations fulfilled in Polycarp's letter?

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<sup>18</sup> Robert M. Grant, "Polycarp of Smyrna," *Anglican Theological Review* 28 (1946) 145.

<sup>19</sup> Schoedel, *Polycarp* 5.

<sup>20</sup> Charles M. Nielsen, "The Epistle to Diognetus: Its Date and Relationship to Marcion," *Anglican Theological Review* 52 (1970) 77-91; Charles M. Nielsen, "Papias: Polemicist against Whom?" *Theological Studies* 35 (1974) 529-35; Charles M. Nielsen, "Scripture in the Pastoral Epistles," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 7 (spring 1980) 4-23.

<sup>21</sup> Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles* 184.