

# The Rich Man Who Knew Three Heavens

*Cerdo, Marcion*

*This is Part 3 of the Gnostic Series. Read Parts [1](#), [2](#), and [4](#).*

by [Jillian Becker](#) (October 2023)



*The Apostle John and Marcion of Sinope (according to R. Eisler, *The Enigma of the Fourth Apostle*, Methuen & Co., 1938, p. 158, plate XIII)*

*This essay is the third in my series on Gnostic sects of the early centuries C.E. In the first, *The Father of Heresy*, and the second, *The Big Bang of Basilides*, I explain briefly, for the reader who wants an*

*explanation, what Gnosticism is.*

**Marcion, son of the Catholic** bishop of Sinope (a Black Sea port in Anatolia), was a very rich ship builder. The dates of his birth and death are uncertain, but he was probably born c.85 C.E. and died c.160. Repudiated by his father for committing some unrecorded offense, he left his homeland and only returned to it in his old age.

He was the founder of a significant Gnostic Christian sect. In or about the year 142 he established himself as a religious leader in Rome, which became and remained the center of widely spreading Marcionite Christianity.

What drew Marcion away from Catholicism to Gnosticism was the teaching of Cerdo, who had first followed and then diverged from the teaching of Simon Magus. There were stormy arguments between Cerdo and the Catholic authorities in Rome, and in the year 138 the outraged Catholics declared Cerdo a heretic.

Cerdo preached that Jehovah was not the Father of Jesus Christ. But he did not, as many other Gnostics did, anathematize the God of the Jews, or replace him with an evil Demiurge. While he did not hold Jehovah to be good, he did not declare him to be evil, merely just—and justice was not good enough, being hard, unforgiving, often harsh. Jehovah was the Creator of this material world and wrongly believed that he was the only god. He did not know that far above him was the True Father, unknown and unknowable except by the spark of the Gnosis (the Knowledge) deep within individual souls, notably his own. The True Father was good.

Marcion called the Known God the Cosmocrator. The Unknown God, he taught, only became known to mankind after the revelations of St. Paul—of whom Marcion was and remained a staunch votary. Paul had preached, and Marcion maintained, that the Law of the Jews had been superseded by the dominion of Christ and

therefore the Jewish scriptures must be abandoned.

In Marcion's theogony, there are three planes of the universe: The highest plane or third heaven, is the home of the Unknown God, whose existence was "first revealed by Paul." (In what way Paul did this is not clear—though a trace of such a doctrine might be perceived in his claim that he knew "a man in Christ" who was 'caught up to the third heaven' [II Corinthians 12.2]).

Next down is the plane of the Cosmocrator, God of Genesis and the Law, whose "visage is like the Devil's" —distorted, as it were, by an insatiable appetite for justice.

The lowest plane contains the Earth and its visible heaven where dwells the (female) Power of Matter—in Greek, *Hyle*.

The Cosmocrator's creation of the World is carried out much as described in the Book of Genesis, except that he does it in partnership with Hyle. It is she who, when he has fabricated Adam out of dust, breathes a living spirit into him. The Cosmocrator, in fear that Adam might worship Hyle, forbids his creature to worship any other gods but himself on pain of death. But Hyle has many gods appear to Adam, and as he cannot recognize which one of them is his Master whom he dare not fail to worship as commanded, has no choice but to worship them all. By this device, Hyle leads Man astray from obedience to the Cosmocrator and draws him instead to herself. The Cosmocrator, angered by the defection of humankind, punitively thrusts the souls of all men into Hell—indiscriminately (in contradiction to his just character) —as soon as their earthly lives come to an end, condemning them to remain there for twenty-nine ages. But the good Unknown God, the remote Stranger, sends down his Son, the Christ, to "take on the likeness of death" (i.e. *seem* to die as the man Jesus, who *seemed* to have a physical body, but did not really) in order to descend into Hell, rescue all the souls of men—also indiscriminately—and take them up to the third heaven.

It was because his way to Hell lay downwards through this world, this life, that Christ came to earth. While he sojourned here, he did good. As the Good Stranger's emissary he was instructed, "Heal lepers, raise the newly dead, and open the eyes of the blind, so that the Lord of Creatures will see thee and bring thee to a Cross. Then, at thy death, descend to Hell and bring them hence."

When the Cosmocrator, the Lord of Creatures, became aware that this was what was happening at the crucifixion, his wrath was great. "He tore his garment, rent in twain the veil of the Temple, and covered the sun with darkness." But he was helpless to intervene, and Christ emptied Hell.

Christ descended a second time, appeared in his divine form before the Cosmocrator, and charged him with the shedding of innocent blood, the blood of Jesus (although it was not real). He demanded justice from him "for the death I suffered" (though he only *seemed* to suffer it). Only then did the Lord of Creatures learn of the divinity of Jesus and that there was another God above himself who had sent his Son to redeem mankind. When he had fully comprehended these revelations, he supplicated Christ for forgiveness, confessed that he had sinned, but pleaded in mitigation that he had killed him in the person of Jesus unwittingly, "not knowing he was a god." Wanting to make recompense, he bid Christ 'take all where thou wilt, until all believe in thee.' Then Christ decreed that all who believed in him would be saved. To Paul he revealed the conditions and price—the blood of Jesus Christ—for mankind's salvation, and Christ himself sent Paul to preach the redemption. So, Marcion taught, "the Good God has purchased us with a purchase price from the God of Creatures." Therefore the God of Creatures, who was the God of the Law, should no longer be worshipped, his laws no longer obeyed, and the books of his Law, which had been given to his chosen people the Jews, no longer held holy.

The Catholic Church abominated Marcionism, but took one idea

from Marcion which contributed greatly to the success of Catholicism and all the forms of Christianity that were to spring from it in heresy or rebellion or reformation: the idea of a Christian bible.

Marcion put together a canon of Christian documents: a version of the Gospel of Luke titled the *Evangelikon*, and ten of the epistles attributed to St. Paul collectively called the *Apostolikon*. The existence of the canon prompted the realization in the Catholics that a body of scripture was vitally necessary to the validation and spread of doctrine and could be as important to the survival of the Church as a structured hierarchical constitution. The Marcionite Church had both, and its consequent strength made it a serious rival to Catholicism. Scholars reckon that at the height of its popularity it had as many adherents as the Catholic Church. It lasted for about three hundred years. When imperial Rome adopted Catholic Christianity as a state religion in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, Marcionism began to fade away.

The Catholic Church would almost certainly have assembled a scriptural canon if Marcion had not set the example. But it is authoritatively argued (not without disagreement), that the Catholics set about compiling a canon *because* Marcion had compiled his. The resulting *New Testament* affirms with its title, in contradiction to Marcion and St. Paul, that the Jewish Bible—the ‘*Old Testament*’ —is indispensable to the Christian story.

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