

The Church's Scripture and Functional Marcionism

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The Scriptures are collected in what is known as the "canon," that is, a grouping of writings received as authoritative and normative for faith and life. The reception of the canon by the modern church is inhibited, it seems to me, by "Functional Marcionism." By this I mean the partial victory of Marcion in the modern church, which excludes his fundamental theological aberrations but embraces in different ways the canonical consequences of those aberrations. Those consequences have less to do with the theoretical authority of the Old Testament than with the actual determinative value of those books.

To my knowledge, the term "Functional Marcionism" is without precedent. Perhaps its closest equivalent is found in the debates about supersessionism, or the relationship between Israel and the church, understood as the former being replaced by the latter. R. Kendall Soulen¹ identifies three categories of supersessionist theology: punitive (i.e., the Jews lose their place as a punishment for rejecting Jesus), economic (i.e., the practical role of Israel is surrendered to the New Testament church), and structural, which, writes Soulen, "refers to the narrative logic of the standard model whereby it renders the Hebrew Scriptures largely indecisive for shaping Christian convictions about how God's works as Consummator and as Redeemer engage humankind in universal and enduring ways."² Functional Marcionism shares with structural supersessionism the unfortunate marginalization of the Old Testament both in the church's self-understanding as the people of God and in her understanding of who God is.

While certainly there remain those who share Marcion's dualism and Docetism in various forms, those heresies are generally rejected by Christians. And yet, though the doctrinal aberrations of Marcion are condemned, the consequent Marcionite rejection of the Old Testament is

¹ R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). See also Craig A. Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001): 442.

² Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 181, n. 6.

present even if not explicitly affirmed. The judgment of Marcion that the entire canon cannot be used in the church remains a reality of function if not always of theory. I would propose that modern functional Marcionism occurs in four variations: Reverse Marcionism, Semi-Marcionism, Hyper-Marcionism, and Unintentional Marcionism.

I. Historical Background of Marcion

The second-century Marcion, of course, held theological positions rarely explicitly shared by voices within the broader Christian church of the twenty-first century. Although his own works are not extant, we know the position of Marcion and the Marcionite church through the writings of Fathers such as Tertullian,³ Justin,⁴ Irenaeus,⁵ Origen,⁶ and others. To some extent, these sources must be read as coming from the opposing parties, and thus a certain hermeneutic of suspicion is warranted.

Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament was extensive and theologically driven. One of the earliest theologians, if not the first, to wrestle with the question of canon as a list of books received or rejected, he excluded not only the Old Testament but large portions of the New Testament as well. It has been observed that it was due to Marcion that the idea of canon as authoritative list was first considered by the orthodox church.⁷ For example, only some of Paul's letters and the Gospel of Luke were accepted by Marcion, and even those were redacted by the exclusion of all Old Testament references. As a mid-second-century thinker, Marcion was strongly anti-Semitic, a position perhaps encouraged by the debacle that was the revolt of Bar Kokhba around AD 135 and its signal of the collapse of Jewish messianic expectation.

In that context, Marcion held a dualistic theology which distinguished between a god of this world (worshipped by the Jews) and a god who is known in the gospel (worshipped by Christians and proclaimed especially

³ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*.

⁴ Justin, *1 Apologia* 58

⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.27.

⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.54; 6.53, 74.

⁷ F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1964), 252. Bruce writes, "The chief importance of Marcion in the second century lies in the reaction which he provoked among the leaders of the Apostolic Churches. Just as Marcion's canon stimulated the more precise defining of the NT canon by the Catholic Church, not to supersede but to supplement the canon of the OT, so, more generally, Marcion's teaching led the Catholic Church to define its faith more carefully, in terms calculated to exclude a Marcionite interpretation." See also K.S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode Ltd., 1955), 134.

by Paul). The creator god of the Old Testament not only created the universe, but ruled it in bloodshed and cruel justice. The Supreme God, that is to say, the God of Jesus and Paul, however, is loving, forgiving, and full of grace.

Marcion's positing of different gods to explain the problem of good and evil resulted in patristic (Tertullian, Hippolytus, Irenaeus of Lyons) identification of Marcionism as a form of Gnosticism. Modern scholars tend not to classify Marcion as a Gnostic, though it is possible that Marcion was influenced by an acquaintance with the Gnostic Cerdo.⁸ More likely, however, is that Marcion reached his conclusions independently of Gnostic schools.⁹ Justo Gonzales has distinguished Marcionism from Gnosticism in three ways. First, Marcion does not claim a secret knowledge. Second, Marcion does not engage in speculation on astrology, numerology, or multiple aeons, so fundamental to Gnostic systems. Finally, Marcion founds not a school but a church, thus exhibiting an interest in organization unknown to Gnostic sects.¹⁰

One doctrinal position Marcion did hold in common with the Gnostics was Docetism. For Marcion, Christ was not truly man. If Jesus had been made human, he would have become part of the lesser, creator god's world. Hence Luke, the only Gospel recognized by Marcion, was stripped not only of its Old Testament references but also of the Infancy Narratives—Jesus appears as a fully grown man in Tiberius's fifteenth year.

The Old Testament teaching was incompatible with Marcion's view of the God of Jesus. He carefully denounced the hermeneutics and

⁸ Benjamin Walker, *Gnosticism: Its History and Influence* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1983), 143, gives this summary concerning Cerdo: "Cerdo (d. 143), a Syrian gnostic, had started his career as a Simonian (follower of Simon Magus) and then branched out on his own. He taught that God the Father was merciful and good. He was the Supreme Being, but unknown, until first made known to man by Jesus. The god proclaimed in the law and the prophets of the Old Testament was the creator of the world, and inferior to the supreme being. He was a god of justice who demanded obedience. Cerdo believed that only the soul and not the body shared in the resurrection."

⁹ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 213, observes that Marcion "may well have come to similar conclusions by another route, namely, by attentive study of the Scriptures and in particular the key work for Christians, Isaiah 39-66. There he found in 45:7 the claim made by Yahweh, 'I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord, who does all these things,' and this was fundamental to his interpretation of Christianity."

¹⁰ Justo Gonzales, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 1:142-3.

interpretive method of the allegorists,¹¹ leaving no room for the kind of interpretation that understood the Old Testament as saying one thing but meaning another. In other words, he was a strict literalist. Old Testament narratives thus could not be explained as the Alexandrians explained them. They had to be taken literally, with the result that they were to be rejected. And reject them Marcion did—not just the Old Testament, but also all writings except those of Paul and Luke redacted to exclude all Old Testament references.

Marcion has been thoroughly condemned, and rightly so. Still, his distinctions between sections of the canon live on as Functional Marcionism. An icon of this is the Gideons' pocket New Testament. These small volumes may also contain the Psalms and Proverbs but otherwise limit the canon to the books of the New Testament. I am aware that production costs and portability are both issues for the Gideons' organization and that they also distribute complete texts of the Bible that include the Old Testament. But the end result is a familiar booklet minus two-thirds of the Scriptures which is, thus, symbolic of Functional Marcionism.

II. Functional Marcionism Type 1: Reverse Marcionsim

The first form of Functional Marcionism I will call "Reverse Marcionism," a form most clearly observable in American civil religion. Unlike the historical Marcion, the public face of religion in America de-emphasizes the claims of Jesus and Paul and seeks the presentation of a generic "god" to whom all can give their assent. Understandably, there is a concern for sensitivity to the pluralistic nature of American society.

Neutrality on the part of government toward religion is assured by the United States Constitution. The "Establishment Clause" in the First Amendment, however, which reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion," often receives attention to the exclusion of the immediately following "Free Exercise Clause," which continues, "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The same First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech and free assembly, yet those terms may not mean what they seem to mean when it comes to Christianity.

The god of civic religion is a god who is as Marcion described him. He is loving and embracing but lacks attributes such as justice and wrath. Unlike Marcion's god, however, the god of civic religion is not known in

¹¹ Origen, *Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei* 15.3.

Jesus of Nazareth, and access to this god has nothing to do with Christ. In fact, civic religion demands that Jesus be excluded from all religious discourse in the public forum. Who Jesus claimed to be and who his followers believe him to be – the only Son of God who was incarnate, died, and rose again for the sins of the world – is the ultimate anathema. If he is mentioned at all, it must be as “a son,” not “the Son,” and as one of multiple options for access to God. No single concept of God can claim to be the exclusively correct one. All religions are equally true. Any assertion to the contrary is unwelcome and is implicitly banned from the public forum.

In other words, despite the First Amendment guarantees, a specific religion has in fact been established and freedom of speech is abridged. The god of that religion is not the God and Father of Jesus. The god of American civil religion comes in whatever shape one might choose to give to him. He may be addressed as you see fit, but with one exception: when a civic event involving prayers is held, the expectation is that the prayer will be offered to and through any name but the name of Jesus. The *New York Times* gave the following report about a prayer that would be offered by V. Gene Robinson, “the openly gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire,” at the inauguration of Barak Obama:

“I am very clear,” he said, “that this will not be a Christian prayer, and I won’t be quoting Scripture or anything like that. The texts that I hold as sacred are not sacred texts for all Americans, and I want all people to feel that this is their prayer.”

Bishop Robinson said he might address the prayer to “the God of our many understandings,” language that he said he learned from the 12-step program he attended for his alcohol addiction.¹²

This is quite remarkable. Not only Jesus will be excluded, but also the Scriptures he has given. And this by a bishop of a Christian community in a prayer delivered, ironically, on January 18, the Festival of the Confession of Saint Peter!

What does this have to do with the church’s Scriptures and Marcionism? As I said, it is Reverse Marcionism. Often, scriptural texts will be read at civic “events” (a euphemism for civic worship services). In many – if not most – civic contexts, those texts will not be from the New Testament since they tend to mention the name that cannot be named in civic religion: Jesus. If a text is read from the Bible, it will be from the Old

¹² Laurie Goodstein, “Gay Bishop is Asked to Say Prayer at Inaugural Event,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2009.

Testament, because Christians, Jews, and Muslims all in some way recognize those books. Of course, no such restrictions are expected of minority religions, and it is quite possible to hear a reading from the Koran with references to the Muslim god, Allah, as well as prayers to that god. Yet even the Old Testament readings will not, when read to uninformed hearers, reference Messiah or the exclusivity of the Christian God. Incidentally, they also will not call anyone to repentance, since the concept of sin is as open as the concept of God.

Civic religion, therefore, approaches the idea of canon in a way similar to Marcion, but with opposite results. It is theologically driven by the generic god of the culture. It reduces the list of acceptable books and redacts those that remain. But it is the reverse of Marcionism in what its theological motivations and presuppositions are and what part of the canon remains intact: only the Old Testament, and only those Old Testament texts that do not offend civic sensibilities.

III. Functional Marcionism Type 2: Semi-Marcionism

If there is a "Reverse Marcionism" which rejects the New Testament, there is also a widespread "Semi-Marcionism." I define this as the tendency to use a pick-and-choose hermeneutic in regard to the Old Testament. In other words, the authority of the Old Testament is recognized, but those texts and teachings of the Old Testament that make the interpreter uncomfortable can be simply ignored or, perhaps, classified as belonging to a different dispensation. Though lacking unanimity in details among its adherents, Semi-Marcionites are proponents of a "canon within a canon."

An example of this is the treatment of the doctrine of original sin by American Evangelicals. About AD 405, or two-and-a-half centuries after Marcion, another teacher appeared in Rome by the name of Pelagius. His doctrine, especially as promulgated by his friend and disciple Coelestius, would occupy a great deal of the time of Augustine. Pelagius seems to have been a prominent and early Semi-Marcionite. As he read the account of Genesis 3 and the fall of humanity, his semi-Platonist worldview shaped his reading. The text and its implications for both anthropology and soteriology were stripped of determinative value. For Pelagius, original sin did not exist: the sin of Adam affected only Adam. All subsequent human beings were assumed to begin with a clean slate which would be marred not by Adam (i.e., original sin) but only by the choice and habit of sin by the individual (i.e., actual sin). Consequently, since babies are born

without the taint of sin, infant baptism was unnecessary for the remission of sin. You cannot remit that which does not exist.¹³

What does this mean for modern semi-Marcionism? Perhaps the dominant voice in American Christianity today assumes the same separation of Old and New Testaments as did Marcion, with the same results as Pelagius. That mystical, indefinable moment of attainment of an "age of accountability" denies the implications of the sin of Adam as children are held to be sinless until that time. Baptism of infants is unnecessary and brings nothing to the child. Even when the more mature individual is baptized, that baptism is a non-sacramental "outward sign of an inward grace." It is simply a step the person takes toward exercising his ability to lead a holy life. Sin is not inherent in the human being but is instead a bad habit to be overcome.

This is combined with variations of dispensationalism, theories which assign applicability to biblical texts only in certain dispensations.¹⁴ In other words, dispensationalism fails to understand the canon as one narrative, one story, one Scripture. All this rests upon the notion that the inspired text of the Old Testament is not to be taken as determinative for the doctrines of Christianity. This form of Functional Marcionism generally does not share the theological motivations of Marcion. Instead, while the Old Testament is acknowledged as being inspired, its teachings are read through Pelagian eyeglasses. The end result is not dissimilar from Marcion: a functionally reduced canon.

IV. Functional Marcionism Type 3: Hyper-Marcionism

A third form of Functional Marcionism is what I will term "Hyper-Marcionism." Unlike historical Marcionism, this approach toward the Scriptures does not necessarily acknowledge divine inspiration, nor is it

¹³ For a fuller discussion see Daniel L. Gard, "Saint Augustine and Pelagianism," in *A Justification Odyssey* (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 2002).

¹⁴ *The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism*. A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (September 1989), 45: "4. Dispensational premillennialism underestimates, and even ignores, the significance of Biblical typology. All prophecy points to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment. He is the antitype of the Old Testament types. When the reality to which the Old Testament points does come, one cannot revert back to the 'shadows,' such as the Old Testament temple (Col 2:16-17; Heb 10:1). 5. The compartmentalization of Scripture into distinct dispensations seriously overlooks the Law/Gospel unity of the Old and New Testaments. For example, it makes a radical distinction between the Mosaic 'law' period and the church age of 'grace.' The relationship between the Old and New Testaments is that of promise and fulfillment, not one of distinct dispensations."

necessarily averse to allegorical interpretation. Like Marcion, however, it does impose theological presuppositions on the biblical text, rendering it functionally limited at best. I call this "Hyper-Marcionism" because it stands in judgment of any text, any book, either testament, or the Scriptures in their entirety.

What are those theological presuppositions? They are the classic starting points for critical studies. For example, the assumption is made that there can be no predictive prophecy, resulting in a reading of the Old Testament that is in absolute discontinuity with the New Testament. The Old Testament reflects Israelite thinking about God; the New Testament reflects Christian thinking about God. The person of Jesus offers no unifying theme—any Old Testament prophetic texts claimed by the New Testament to speak of Jesus are nothing more than misappropriations of Hebrew thought to bolster the early church's mythology about Christ. This is Functional Marcionism with no pretense: no Scripture is of value for anything or anyone except as a document for those with antiquarian interests. It is also Functional Marcionism with at least the virtue of consistency: both the Old and New Testaments are rendered equally suspect and therefore functionally useless as canon for the church.

This Hyper-Marcionism has important implications for anyone who approaches the Bible. Whether one watches PBS, the History Channel, or any other public media treatment of religion, all assume a critical reading of Scripture. For example, one of the more hotly contested issues in contemporary American society is that of "marriage" between homosexuals. *Newsweek's* December 15, 2008, issue had as its cover "The Religious Case for Gay Marriage." Lisa Miller writes:

Social conservatives point to Adam and Eve as evidence for their one man, one woman argument—in particular, this verse from Genesis: "Therefore shall a man leave his mother and father, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh." But as (Barnard University professor Alan) Segal says, if you believe that the Bible was written by men and not handed down in its leather bindings by God, then that verse was written by people for whom polygamy was the way of the world. (The fact that homosexual couples cannot procreate has also been raised as a biblical objection, for didn't God say, "Be fruitful and multiply"? But the Bible authors could never have imagined the brave new world of international adoption and assisted reproductive technology—and besides, heterosexuals who are infertile or past the age of reproducing get married all the time.)¹⁵

¹⁵ Lisa Miller, "Our Mutual Joy," *Newsweek* (December 15, 2008), 30.

Miller raises a truly Hyper-Marcionite discussion of the value of biblical texts when she writes:

Twice Leviticus refers to sex between men as "an abomination" (King James version), but these are throwaway lines in a peculiar text given over to codes for living in the ancient Jewish world, a text that devotes verse after verse to treatments for leprosy, cleanliness rituals for menstruating women and the correct way to sacrifice a goat—or a lamb or a turtle dove. Most of us no longer heed Leviticus on haircuts or blood sacrifices; our modern understanding of the world has surpassed its prescriptions. Why would we regard its condemnation of homosexuality with more seriousness than we regard its advice, which is far lengthier, on the best price to pay for a slave?¹⁶

Miller exemplifies the end product of critical studies: a Bible (in her case both Old and New Testaments) which is to be read and studied but which has no real function in determining matters of faith and life. This form of Functional Marcionism has one virtue: it has no pious pretenses acknowledging the normative function of the canon. That virtue ultimately becomes Hyper-Marcionism's great liability: it robs the church of any source of truth except the individual's religious ideas.

V. Functional Marcionism Type 4: Unintentional Marcionism

The fourth and final type of Functional Marcionism is perhaps the most difficult to identify because it does not have the strong theological motivation of other types. Its adherents do not, as a rule, denigrate the Old Testament as unworthy of God or as without a role in the life of the church. Quite the contrary, they maintain the inspiration, inerrancy, and significance of the entire Christian canon with great fervor. Yet the Old Testament remains something of a lesser literature than the New Testament. It is a purer Functional Marcionism because it is unintentional.

One might term Unintentional Marcionism "Marcionism by Benign Neglect." Two aspects of the Lutheran liturgical tradition might illustrate this. Until the appearance of *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)*,¹⁷ the rich usage of Old Testament texts in the liturgy went by unnoticed. So much of the liturgy is citation of the Old Testament, and yet nothing indicated the source of those liturgical texts. Though familiar through repeated usage, their origin remained unknown. *LSB*, however, among its other virtues, has biblical texts noted throughout.

¹⁶ Lisa Miller, "Our Mutual Joy," 30.

¹⁷ Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

This may help overcome a tradition of ignoring the Old Testament in liturgical practice. Since *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Lutheran Worship*, Lutheran congregations have had the Old Testament reading restored to the liturgy.¹⁸ But before these hymnals, the Old Testament was considered optional at best. It is notable that *The Lutheran Hymnal (TLH)*, still in use in some congregations, does not provide for an Old Testament lesson in either the Order of Morning Service or the Order of the Holy Communion. Both an Epistle and a Gospel reading are mandated, but not the Old Testament.¹⁹ In fact, the lectionary of *TLH* lists two sets of readings for both Gospel and Epistle, but only one for the Old Testament. And even that one Old Testament reading for each Sunday appears typeset in a center column indicating its optional character.

The hymnal of my own childhood in a predecessor body to the ELCA is more explicit. The *Service Book and Hymnal* does acknowledge that there is an Old Testament, but it provides in the rubrics, "Here the Minister *may* read the appointed Lesson from the Old Testament" (emphasis added).²⁰ On the other hand, the rubrics provide, "Then *shall* the Minister announce the Epistle for the Day" (emphasis added) and "Then *shall* the Minister announce the Gospel for the Day" (emphasis added).²¹

Perhaps the liturgical tradition reflects the ancient and honored Lutheran homiletical tradition of preaching only on the Gospel reading on Sunday morning. There is much to commend that tradition, but it assumes that the congregation will gather at other times of the week when the Epistle or the Old Testament might serve as sermon texts. Such is no longer the reality. It is a rare Lutheran congregation that offers services at any time other than Sunday morning, except perhaps a mid-week Advent or Lenten service. And it is rarer still to find attendance at the same level during any mid-week service.

¹⁸ The Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978), 62, 82, 103, 128; The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 140, 164, 183. The three-year lectionary introduced with these hymnals (*LBW* 13–41, *LW* 10–123) gives prominence to Old Testament lessons that relate to the Gospel lesson of the day.

¹⁹ The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 10, 20.

²⁰ The Lutheran Churches cooperating in The Commission on the Liturgy and Hymnal, *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1958), 3.

²¹ *Service Book and Hymnal*, 3.

Even when a congregation hears readings from all three (that is, Gospel, Epistle, and Old Testament), there seems to be some reluctance to preach on the Old Testament. I make this assertion without particular evidence beyond personal observation. Several reasons might lie behind this. First is the name itself: "Old" Testament. In many ways, this name is unfortunate, since it may bring to mind the concept of "outmoded," when in fact it is merely an indicator of age. Some refer to the "Hebrew Bible" as juxtaposed to the "Christian Scriptures" (i.e., the New Testament), but this is hardly an improvement, since it distinguishes the Old Testament from the Christian Scriptures as if the Bible were a set of documents that belong to two different groups. I suppose that "Older Testament" and "Newer Testament" might be better. Or perhaps "Hebrew Scriptures" and "Greek Scriptures" might also be an improvement. None of these suggestions will likely gain much currency, and the traditional designations of "Old" and "New" will certainly continue to be used.

Second, there is a myth about Judaism which is widespread in Christianity. It sees later Rabbinic writings—especially the Talmud—as authoritative for interpretation of the Old Testament. In fact, one often hears Old Testament figures such as David, Isaiah, and others referred to as "Jews." This is an anachronism of epic proportions, since the term "Jew" does not come into existence until the Babylonian exile. These figures can rightly be called "Israelites" or "Hebrews," as the Bible itself refers to them. Judaism is a post-exilic development from the old Israelite religion. At the time of Jesus, Judaism was highly fractured into differing sects—we know them from the New Testament as Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and others. All Jewish sects related to the Scriptures in different ways, as well as to the Second Temple, either positively or negatively. But of them, only the Pharisees survived the disasters and the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70 and the defeat of Bar Kokhba around AD 135. From Pharisaic tradition sprang the Mishnah and Talmud, the foundation of what we know as Rabbinic Judaism today.²²

This misreading of Judaism has subtly influenced much Christian reading of the Old Testament. It is as if the Old Testament was a Jewish book that we Christians can at best visit as foreigners to its pages. The New Testament writers do not have that problem, least of all Saint Paul. Writing to the Gentile congregation at Corinth, Paul reflected on the Exodus and wrote:

²² Perhaps the best analysis is the classic work of Jacob Neusner in *Judaism. The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981).

I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (1 Cor 10:1-4)

For Paul, the Israelites of the Exodus were the fathers of the Gentile Christians. Moreover, Paul even interprets the following Rock as being none other than Christ himself. It is for this reason that he writes, "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). Similarly, Paul affirms the importance of the Old Testament for the Christian community in his Epistle to the Romans: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4). It seems that Paul believed the words of Jesus: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39).

Some cannot get beyond the distinctions implied by having two "testaments," one older and one newer. The unity of the people of God is acknowledged, but its implications for understanding the people, places, events, and institutions of the Old Testament remains problematic and thus might be left only as background to the New Testament. One example might be drawn from the opening chapters of the Scriptures, the story of creation and the fall found in Genesis 1-3. Unlike Hyper-Marcionism, Unintentional Marcionism fully acknowledges the historicity of the accounts. Unlike Semi-Marcionites, Unintentional Marcionites believe these chapters to be theologically significant. They point to Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel," as the first Gospel, or *Protoevangelium*. They also read the results of Eve's hearing of the word of promise when she bore a son, Cain, and declared, "I have gotten a man—the LORD" (קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת־יְהוָה). But the connection of promise and faith on the part of Eve to Christian faith is not made, and Eve is consigned to some place outside the Christian church. Thus, it is sometimes said that another believing and confessing woman, the Virgin Mary, was "the first Christian" rather than her ancestress Eve. Though Eve erred in identifying Cain as the promised Seed, the fact remains that she believed the promise. Her faith was in the one who would defeat Satan for her. How was she not a Christian? Likewise, how are all the Old Testament saints not Christians?

As I noted earlier, this form of Functional Marcionism is unintentional. It does not share Marcion's theological motivations. It assumes the usefulness of the Old Testament for the church but fails to utilize fully the older Scriptures as a living and definitive sacred text for the church. Its effect is a functionally reduced canon.

VI. The Effects of Unintentional Marcionism

One practical example of the ramifications of neglect of the Old Testament is the debate about the ordained ministry occurring with some regularity among Lutherans in America. We are told that "everyone is a minister" and, more often than not, the "priesthood of all believers" is cited as doctrinal support. If one takes seriously the unity of the Scriptures and the canonicity of the Old Testament, then the roots of New Testament ministry can be seen in the Old Testament.

The *sedes doctrinae* for discussions of the priesthood of all believers is, of course, 1 Peter 2:9. If Peter is to be the source for "everyone a minister," then it is reasonable to ask about Peter's basis for his words. Peter clearly cites a Greek version of Exodus 19:5-6. He speaks of a "chosen race" and "a people for his own possession," paraphrasing the MT and LXX at Exodus 19:5b, "you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine." Peter's reference to Christians as "a royal priesthood, a holy nation" simply cites the LXX of Exodus 19:6a, "βασιλειον ιεράτευμα, ἔθνος ἅγιον."

Exodus 19:5b-6a

You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סֹגְדֵי מַלְאָכִים כִּי־לִי קִלְיָאֵרֶץ:
וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיֶי-לִי מְמַלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים וְגַי קָרוֹשׁ

ἔσεσθέ μοι λαὸς περιούσιος ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν ἐμὴ γάρ ἐστιν πᾶσα ἡ γῆ ὑμεῖς δὲ ἔσεσθέ μοι βασιλειον ιεράτευμα καὶ ἔθνος ἅγιον.

1 Peter 2:9a

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.

ὑμεῖς δὲ γένος ἐκλεκτόν, βασιλειον ιεράτευμα, ἔθνος ἅγιον, λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν.

The idea of a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" did not originate with Peter in the New Testament, nor does it signal something new and different from the Old Testament. Its New Testament meaning must be in the context of the continuing people of God if the hermeneutical principle of "Scripture interprets Scripture" is true.

What is that context? Clearly, ancient Israel did not as an entire nation serve as priests. On the contrary, a particular tribe, the Levites, was set apart to serve in priestly functions. Moses, the author of Numbers as well as Exodus, wrote this in Numbers 3:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle. And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death." And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the LORD." (Num 3:5-13)

The post-exilic Chronicler affirms this as well:

And their brothers the Levites were appointed for all the service of the tabernacle of the house of God. But Aaron and his sons made offerings on the altar of burnt offering and on the altar of incense for all the work of the Most Holy Place, and to make atonement for Israel, according to all that Moses the servant of God had commanded. (1 Chr 6:33-34 [Eng 6:48-49])

Several points should be noted. First, while all Israel are priests (Exodus and 1 Peter), the Aaronites and Levites are distinguished from all Israel. Second, while the Levites have responsibility to care for the Tabernacle and later the Temple, only Aaron and his sons are to approach the altar—anyone else is to be put to death (Num 3:10). Finally, the Levites (including the sub-tribe of Aaron) do not exist apart from all Israel—they are the substitute for "every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel" (Num 3:12).

Though all are priests by virtue of their election by God, only those appointed by God to serve in the holy office may do so. Holders of the holy office are set apart as stewards not of what is their own but of the mysteries of God. Thus the Augsburg Confession states, "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry; that is, provided the Gospel and the Sacraments" (AC V), and "It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments without a

regular call" (AC XIV). Pastors come from the people of God and are set apart to perform the priestly duties of the people of God. It is a divine vocation within the church which derives its meaning and function from the Lord who calls. And it is the one office whose holders serve as stewards of the mysteries of God.

Many other effects of Functional Marcionism exist, but I will limit myself to two examples. Why does the church seem so enamored of statistics and numbers, and why does she seek to be like the culture around her? Our forefathers in ancient Israel also were often fascinated by head-counting, as if they could measure their success through such things. Every time they elevated the importance of numbers over faithfulness to their calling as the people of God, they met disaster. The problem was not in taking a census, for example. Rather, it was in why they did so.²³ Numbers are insignificant to the Lord of Israel, whose power and care go beyond comparative statistics. For Israel, both the ancient Hebrews and the modern church, the only statistic that matters is, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut 6:4). Everything else is unfaithfulness at worst and meaningless at best.

Not only does the church ignore the Old Testament to her own peril in matters of statistics, she also does so when she seeks to organize herself in ways foreign to the biblical witness. Certainly the church on earth is given great freedom in how she structures herself, since the Old Testament monarchy continues in the final Son of David, who reigns forever. Israel is no longer a single kingdom but the spiritual kingdom existing alongside the temporal kingdom.²⁴ Ancient Israel erred greatly when they tried to be like the nations around them. The modern church is just as endangered when she chooses to function by the rules of the surrounding culture. The loss of full canonical witness is more than a loss of ancient literature—it is the loss of the vivifying word of God to his pilgrim people in their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, from Baptism to eschaton.

VII. Toward Reclaiming the Canon

There is only one continuing people of God, whether they lived before or after the incarnation. Though we distinguish between ancient Israel and the church, that distinction is not as absolute as it might at first appear.

²³ See Daniel L. Gard, "The Chronicler's David: Saint and Sinner," in *CTQ* 70 (2006): 233–252.

²⁴ For a helpful explanation of this terminology, see Cameron A. MacKenzie, "The Challenge of History: Luther's Two Kingdoms Theology as a Test Case," *CTQ* 71 (2007): 3–28.

Truly, salvation is always by grace through faith, whether that faith is placed in one yet to come or the same Christ who has already come. The church is Israel and Israel is the church at a most fundamental level. The story of Jesus, which is the story of his people, spans the pages of the whole canon, not just the final third.

The core and center of the Scriptures is the person of Jesus. All that the Old Testament conveys points us to him.²⁵ The Old Testament is more than a series of specific prophecies that find their fulfillment in the person of Jesus, with everything else simply “filler.” All of the Old Testament, just as the New, is focused on him. He is “Israel reduced to one.” The offices of Christ—Prophet, Priest and King—are understandable only in light of the Old Testament offices. Conversely, the Old Testament offices are understandable only in light of the incarnation. Everything that took place before the incarnation is focused on him as much as everything that has happened since or will happen in the future is focused on him.

The continuity of the two testaments, and the continuity of the ongoing people of God, is all about Jesus. Reading the Old Testament is reading the word of Jesus who spoke by the prophets.²⁶ He connects the history of ancient Israel with modern Israel, the church. From Genesis to Revelation, there is one narrative, one story, one Scripture. Marcion erred not just in the breadth of his de-canonization of the entire Old Testament but in his de-canonization of any of it. If the church is to be faithful to her own understanding of the Scriptures as the only source and norm for faith and life, the Old Testament must be an equal partner to the New Testament. For, indeed, they are not two but one Scripture, united in their witness to Christ.

²⁵ The LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations (*The End Times*, 12.) notes: “These observations presuppose that since God is the one Author of all Scripture, an organic unity exists within and between the Old and New Testaments, both with respect to their content (the doctrine of the Gospel in all its articles) and their function of making people wise unto salvation. The hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture necessarily presumes this unity.”

²⁶ See also Charles A. Gieschen, “The Real Presence of the Son Before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology,” *CTQ* 68 (2004): 105-126.