

# Historical Theology:

## Early Church Heresies

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**Acts 20:28-32**

**1 Timothy 1:3-7; 4:1-6**

**2 Timothy 3:13-17**

<sup>3</sup>Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all time handed down to the saints. <sup>4</sup>For certain people have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into indecent behavior and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 3-4)

### The Ebionites

“*Ebionism* comes from the Hebrew *ebionim*, “the poor ones”, perhaps referring to their practice of voluntary poverty.” (Needham, p. 71)

“The origins of Ebionism are obscure, but the heresy most likely traces back to the earliest days of the church. The first Christian writer to mention them by name was Irenaeus in the late second century. Other writers who wrote against Ebionism include Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, and Tertullian. The Ebionites were the heirs apparent of the Judaizers who stirred up trouble in the apostolic age (see Acts 15:1; Galatians 1:6–9; 2:16, 21).” (www.gotquestions.org/Ebionism.html)

“The Ebionites crafted their own “gospel” by revising the Gospel of Matthew; they called their book “The Gospel According to the Hebrews.” This book, which presents Jesus as a mere human, divides Jesus’ life into two parts: pre-baptism and post-baptism. According to Ebionism, at Jesus’ baptism there appeared a bright light and a voice from heaven said, “This day have I begotten thee.” In that moment, Jesus “became” Christ, according to Ebionism, and was imbued with power to fulfill the Messiah’s mission—although He remained a man, not God, throughout His ministry. According to Tertullian, the Ebionites considered Jesus to be a wise and gifted person, on the level of Solomon, but not as great as Moses.” (Ibid.)

“They regarded Jesus, not as God in the flesh, but simply as the supreme prophet, the one man who had perfectly obeyed God’s law. He became the Son of God by adoption at His baptism, and would return one day as the heavenly Son of Man to reign over the nations of the earth from Jerusalem.” (Needham, p. 71)

Ebionites rejected the writings of the apostle Paul; to them, Paul was a traitor to the Jewish faith and a heretic. (Ibid.)

“The early form of Ebionism is sometimes referred to as Pharisaic Ebionism to distinguish it from a later form known as Essene or Gnostic Ebionism, which was a more ascetic and separated from of the original.” (Ibid.)

“Ebionism lasted about two hundred years but eventually petered out.” (Ibid.)

Scripture refutes the works-based salvation taught in Ebionism.

### **Galatians 2:16**

### **Romans 3:20**

Scripture teaches Jesus pre-existence, His deity and His incarnation.

### **John 1:1-4, 14**

### **Philippians 2:6-11**

### **Colossians 1:15-18; 2:8-10**

### **Hebrews 1:1-4**

### **Marcion, Marcionites**

Marcionism was a religious movement based on the teachings of the 2nd-century heretic Marcion, “the son of the bishop of Sinope in Asia Minor. A wealthy ship owner, Marcion lived in Rome from AD 140 to 155, where he broke away from the Church and established a new form of Gnosticism.” (Needham, p. 104)

“While none of Marcion’s writings have survived to the present, we know of his teachings through several early Christian writers including Justin Martyr (AD 100—165), Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 130—200) and Hippolytus (AD 170—235). These men combatted Marcion in defense of the truth.” (<https://www.gotquestions.org/marcionism.html>)

“Marcion held to many errant views, but he is primarily known for his belief that the Old Testament Scriptures were not authoritative for a Christian. He denied that the God of the Old Testament was the same God presented in the New Testament. For Marcion, Jesus was the Son of the God of

the New Testament but not the Son of the deity described in the Hebrew Scriptures. The deities of the Old and New Testaments were, from Marcion’s perspective, literally two different gods. Marcion did not deny the existence of the god of the Old Testament (what he referred to as a Demiurge). He simply classified this god as a secondary deity, one that was inferior to the supreme God revealed in Jesus.” (Ibid.)

“Marcion wrote a book called *Antitheses* in which he set out the contradictions between Old and New Testaments (as he interpreted them), in order to prove that the God of Judaism was not the heavenly Father of Jesus Christ.” (Needham, p. 105)

“Marcion also produced his own version of the New Testament. He threw out everything that had a Jewish element, accepting only Luke’s Gospel and most of Paul’s letters. According to Marcion, Paul was the only apostle who had really understood Jesus. However, Marcion had to remove even from Luke and Paul all favorable references to Judaism.” (Ibid.)

“Marcion also affirmed a form of Docetism, a view that Jesus was not truly a man but only appeared to be human. This in spite of the clarity of verses such as **John 1:14 and 1 John 4:1–3**, which speak plainly of Jesus’ true humanity.” (<https://www.gotquestions.org/marcionism.html>)

“After being expelled from the church in Rome in AD 144 for his unorthodox teachings, Marcion formed several of his own churches, many of which retained a church government similar to the orthodox Christian churches of the time. From there, Marcion’s views began to spread.” (Ibid.)

“While it is true that most New Testament books were recognized as Scripture from a very early date, it is likely that Marcion’s truncated canon forced the church to more precisely list which books carried apostolic authority.” (Ibid.)

“Marcionism was one of the earliest rivals to the Christian church. The lesson to be learned from Marcionism is that we have no right to act as editor of God’s Word, but we must accept and believe the “whole counsel of God” (**Acts 20:27**) and “contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 1:3).” Ibid.)

“Marcionism died out in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.” (Needham, p. 105)

### **Manichaeism**

“This was a new form of Gnosticism, invented by a Persian named Mani (216-77). Mani called himself “the apostle of Jesus Christ”, and claimed he had received a new revelation which brought together all the truths of all previous religions. Deeply influenced by the Gnostic leader Marcion, Mani taught that the whole universe could be explained as a conflict between the two equal and eternal forces of Light and Darkness. Human beings must recognize that they are a mixture of these two forces, and devote their lives to purifying themselves from all Darkness. They will be helped by the agents of Light, who include Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus and Mani himself. To purify themselves, people must abstain from everything that binds them to the physical material world, property, meat-eating, and marriage – like all Gnostics, Mani saw physical matter as an evil force. Mani was also a typical Gnostic in rejecting the Old Testament. He placed a great emphasis on reason, and claimed he could

establish all his teachings by rational proof. He divided his followers into two groups, the “elect” and the “hearers”. The elect had to obey Mani’s ascetic moral and religious code very strictly, and were regarded as priests; but the hearers, whose main duty was to attend to the needs of the elect, were allowed to practice a less disciplined lifestyle.” (Needham, p. 161)

“Manichaeism was a zealous missionary faith, and it spread quickly through the Empire, especially in Syria and Africa, Its followers were called *Manichees*. Christians and Pagans alike feared and opposed them. This last flowering of the Gnostic movement in the early Church period also spread throughout Persia, the land of Mani’s birth, and its missionaries reached as far as India and China. In southern China, Manichaeism survived until the 16<sup>th</sup> century.” (Ibid.)

“Manichaeism spread both east and west from Persia. In the West it was vigorously fought by the Christian church and Roman emperors. Opposition was in Africa under Augustine, who for nine years had been a Hearer. Augustine challenged Manichaeism by denying Mani’s apostleship and condemning his rejection of biblical truth.” (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, p. 684)

### **Acts 4:12**

### **Galatians 1:6-9**

### **Montanism**

“Montanus, a young convert to Christianity, came on the scene in the region of Asia Minor known as Phrygia in about AD 170, when he started to prophesy. He was joined by two prophetesses, Priscilla and Maximilla. They claimed that the Holy Spirit (or the “Paraclete”, as they preferred to call Him) was speaking in a new way to the

Church directly through them, and this was the fulfillment of Christ's promise in John 14:16, "I will pray to the Father, and He will give you another Helper [in Greek, Paracletos], that He may remain with you forever," and John 16:12-13, "I have many more things to say to you, but now you cannot bear them. However, when the Spirit of Truth has come, He will guide you into all truth." The Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, had now come to the Church in Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla (they claimed), and was now leading believers into the promised fullness of truth. Montanist referred to their movement as "the New Prophecy." (Ibid.)

"Eusebius, a church historian born around A.D. 260-270, wrote the following of Montanus: "In his lust for leadership, he became obsessed and would suddenly fall into frenzy and convulsions. He began to be ecstatic and speak and talk strangely, and prophesied contrary to that which was the custom from the beginning of the church. Those who heard him were convinced that he was possessed. They rebuked him and forbade him to speak, remembering the warning of the Lord Jesus to be watchful because false prophets would come" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.16.1)." (<https://www.gotquestions.org/montanism.html>)

"The Montanist prophets offered no new doctrinal revelations. Their main message was the nearness of the second coming of Christ; as Maximilla prophesied, 'After me, there will be no more prophecy, but the End.' In light of this imminent return of the Lord, Montanists taught a severe moral code: among the distinctive teachings of the New Prophecy were an absolute ban on second marriages in all circumstances, an obligation to frequent fasting, and "xerophagies" (eating only dried food), the veiling of virgins, the rejection of forgiveness for serious sins committed after baptism, and commands from the Paraclete that Christians must never seek to escape

persecution and martyrdom but embrace them eagerly. It was in this area of ethical behavior, rather than theological doctrine, that Montanism produced "new revelations". (Needham, p. 113)

Visions, revelatory dreams, speaking in tongues, prophetic utterances of prediction and of divine comfort and rebuke, and other extraordinary religious experiences also abounded among the Montanists. They renamed their community of Pepuza in Phrygia "Jerusalem". They may have believed Pepuza to be the spot where Christ would descend from heaven and reign over the earth; but it seems more likely that they renamed it "Jerusalem" simply to make the point that Pepuza was a holy community, the dwelling place of the Paraclete in Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla – a *spiritual* Jerusalem. (Ibid.)

"Montanism spread in many parts of Asia Minor, and took root in Italy, France, and North Africa. It won the support of Tertullian. The Church as a whole rejected Montanism decisively. In Asia Minor the Church excommunicated all Montanists in a series of local councils of bishops – the first such councils we know of in Church history. Forced out of the Catholic Church in both Eastern and Western parts of the Empire, the Montanists lived a separate church life of their own, surviving until the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Africa and the 6<sup>th</sup> century in Phrygia. (Ibid.p. 114)

"Some Montanists fell into the "Sabellian" heresy, which taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were not three distinct persons, but only one person acting in three different ways. The majority of the Montanists were in fact orthodox in their doctrine of the Trinity; their greatest theologian, Tertullian, was an ardent foe of Sabellianism." (Ibid. p. 119)

**Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:20-22**

**Acts 2:1-21; Ephesians 1:13-14**

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