

Epicurus, Marcion the Heretic, and Tertullian

Post by “ScottW” of June 8, 2024 at 8:48 AM

First, some explanatory context before I present some, at least to me, unexpected references to Epicurus in an early Christian apology by Tertullian titled “Against Marcion”.

As explained by [Brave search’s AI](#):

“Tertullian, a Christian theologian and apologist, wrote a series of five books against Marcion, a prominent early Christian heretic. Marcion, a disciple of the apostle Paul, rejected the Old Testament and the God of the Old Testament, considering Him to be a cruel and unjust deity. Instead, he posited the existence of a separate, benevolent God, who was the creator of the New Testament.”

Marcion seems to have been active around 140-155 CE. “Against Marcion” was probably written around 208 CE.

I’ll quote Tertullian where he mentions Epicurus. The quotes below are translation’s from the original Latin. I’ve just highlighted and italicized where I thought it helpful.

[Book 1, Chapter 25:](#)

“If (Marcion) chose to take any one of the school of Epicurus, and entitle him God in the name of Christ, on the ground that **what is happy and incorruptible can bring no trouble either on itself or anything else** (for Marcion, while poring over this opinion of the divine indifference, has removed from him all the severity and energy of the judicial character), it was his duty to have developed his conceptions into some imperturbable and listless god (and then what could he have had in common with Christ, who occasioned trouble both to the Jews by what He taught, and to Himself by what He felt?), or else to have admitted that he was possessed of the same emotions as others (and in such case what would he have had to do with **Epicurus, who was no friend to either him or Christians?**).

...

When, therefore, (Marcion's god) felt both a will and a desire for man's salvation, he certainly occasioned some concern and trouble both to himself and others. This Marcion's theory suggests, **though Epicurus demurs.**”

[Book 2, Chapter 16:](#)

“We are taught God by the prophets, and by Christ, **not by the philosophers nor by Epicurus**. We ... **are very far from thinking as those do who refuse to believe that God cares for anything.**”

[Book 4, Chapter 15:](#)

“Well, then, in this case, no sin ought to have been charged against the Jews: they were rather deserving of praise and approbation when they maltreated those whom the absolutely good god of Marcion, after so long a time, bestirred himself to destroy. I suppose, however, that by this time he had ceased to be the absolutely good god; he had now sojourned a considerable while even with the Creator, and **was no longer (like) the god of Epicurus purely and simply.**”

[Book 5, Chapter 19:](#)

“But (once for all) let Marcion know that **the principle term of his creed comes from the school of Epicurus, implying that the Lord is stupid and indifferent; wherefore he refuses to say that He is an object to be feared.**”

I found these references to Epicurus in this work to be curious. Nothing of Marcion’s original work survives beyond a few quotes in polemics like this one from his adversaries, so it seems difficult to tell if Tertullian was aware of Epicurean influences on Marcion, or if the parallels between Epicurus’ purported conceptions of God and Marcion’s were just a convenient rhetorical strategy to discredit him with Christian readers.

There are a number of other early works attempting to refute Marcion; Tertullian’s is the only one that I’ve read thus far. Likewise, I’ve scanned through [Norman Dewitt’s “St. Paul and Epicurus”](#) which makes no mention of Marcion, if I’m not mistaken.

Have we found in Marcion an unexpected friend, in the philosophical sense, of Epicurus? With such scanty evidence it’s difficult to say, but it’s interesting to me to see the influence of Epicurean teaching at this early stage of Christianity and that Tertullian felt the need to argue this way.

I did a quick search across the site and found a few references to Marcion in other [forum posts](#) so it seems others of us have had similar thoughts.

I hope you find this enjoyable!