UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN SECOND-CENTURY ROME

I have argued that there was no widespread, multifaceted religious movement called “Gnosticism” in antiquity, but that there was a Gnostic school of thought, one group among the several that proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth had brought salvation to human beings. In the second century, when the Gnostics emerged and became recognized as a community, Christians were still very few. When we speak of Gnostics as part of a “wider” Christianity, we must remind ourselves that Christianity itself was a small movement or collection of movements, hardly noticed in many places and in others still hard to distinguish from groups that we might identify as Jewish. Despite their small numbers, however, Christians were soon to be found in most major cities of the Roman Empire and in many midsized ones as well. Because there were so few of them, Christians were acutely aware of their differences.

From the start, Christians responded to the ministry and death of Jesus in various ways, but many of them also perceived the need to maintain not only unity with each other but also uniformity in belief and practice. An early example of this dynamic is the controversy over the circumcision of Gentile converts that erupted in the 40s, less than two decades after Jesus’ death.1 Some early believers, most notably Paul, believed that the death and resurrection of Jesus indicated that God would soon intervene in world history, bring a violent end to the current political order, and inaugurate a new kingdom of peace and justice. The arrival of this long-promised “day of the Lord,” they believed, would inspire numerous Gentiles, non-Jews, to abandon their worship of idols and turn to the God of Israel. “Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths’” (Isaiah 2:3). In line with this conviction, Paul believed that the risen Jesus had called him to take the Gospel to Gentiles, and Paul founded several Christian communities in Asia Minor and Greece that consisted entirely of non-Jews. This development appears not to have been controversial among Jesus believers at first, for the inclusion of Gentiles was part of the scenario that many Jews believed would lead to the kingdom of God. But as the years rolled on, Jesus did not return and bring his kingdom, and Christian missionary activity among Jews began to lose steam. Some Jewish believers in Jesus began to argue that Gentile believers should convert fully to Judaism by being circumcised (if they were men) and observing the Jewish Law. Paul and his allies vigorously disagreed, arguing that Gentile believers would receive their salvation solely on the basis of their faith in Jesus and the God of Israel. This disagreement posed a serious threat to the unity of the movement: for example, could observant Jewish believers eat the same (nonkosher) foods as their Gentile coreligionists?

Leading Christians met in Jerusalem to discuss this question. The early Christian sources that report this meeting disagree about the nature of the meeting and precisely what was decided. According to the earlier report (that of Paul in Galatians 2), Paul met with several other prominent Christians privately, and they agreed that there would be two early Christian missions: one led by Paul and his colleagues, directed to Gentiles, and one led by Peter, James, and others, directed to Jews. Gentile converts would not be required to be circumcised, and Paul pledged to raise money among his Gentile communities for the poorer Jewish believers in the region of Jerusalem. It seems that the parties may not have had the same understanding about what this agreement meant for table fellowship between Jewish and Christian believers, for a major fight on this issue broke out shortly thereafter in Antioch. The later report (Acts 15) depicts a more public meeting, in which Peter and James took the lead in arguing against the circumcision of Gentile converts, who were instructed only to avoid sexual immorality and the eating of certain meats; there is no mention of two missions or of a collection. In comparison with Paul’s report, the Acts account appears somewhat idealized and depicts Paul as clearly subordinate to the leaders based in Jerusalem, Peter and James. Paul’s version, on the other hand, comes not from an objective eyewitness, but from a highly partisan participant, and so has its own shortcomings.
Whichever account one follows, this incident suggests that these early Christians were willing to tolerate some diversity within their movement, but not without limits. On the one hand, the Christians understood that Jewish and Gentile believers would retain their identities as Jews and Gentiles, and thus they would have different eating practices (perhaps to the point that they at times could not eat the same foods). Paul’s report suggests even a toleration of specialized missions, targeted at differing ethnic or religious groups. On the other hand, the Christians did not want disagreement on such a fundamental question as how Gentiles could be included in the community of the elect, and they sought ways to ensure that even missions of very different characters would maintain solidarity (through Paul’s collection, for example). Diversity was acceptable—but only to a point—and unity and fellowship were to be maintained.

This example does not tell the whole story, of course. For one thing, this dispute, as central as it is in the earliest surviving Christian literature, was not the only important controversy among the first believers, as Paul’s letters demonstrate. We cannot be certain how other disagreements were settled, and there must have been still others that we do not know about at all. Moreover, even this disagreement did not engage all early Christians: other believers in Jesus may not have been aware of it or, if they were, may not have cared. We need to keep in mind that, when we consider struggles among Christians of the first two or three centuries, we are never dealing with disputes that involved Christians worldwide, as few as they were. Many arguments must have interested only small groups of believers who cared about the issues involved. It is, then, profitable to examine Christian unity and diversity in the early period at the local level, by looking at particular locales and disputes, without extrapolating from these specific studies to speaking of “Christianity” as a whole. In this chapter, I look at the city of Rome at the middle of the second century because we have good evidence for it, and we know that Gnostic teachings circulated there. The issues that Gnostic teachings raised—the identity of the God of Israel, the status of the Jewish Scriptures, acquaintance with the ultimate God—figure prominently in the works of early Roman Christian teachers.

The Jerusalem circumcision meeting should lead us to reflect also on the lack of any real coercive powers that any Christian leaders had to enforce decisions to which they agreed. In this case, it seems that harmony broke down rather quickly after the Jerusalem agreement: an argument flared in Antioch over whether Gentile and Jewish believers could eat the same foods, with the result that Paul broke off relations even with some of his former allies and became more of a lone apostle. In this period, only the sincere desire to remain in fellowship with fellow believers could motivate Christians to change their beliefs and practices to conform to those of others. For example, one early Christian author encouraged his addresses not to grant hospitality to traveling believers who did not share his teaching on the fleshly character of Jesus’ body (2 John 7–10). Christian opponents of this author later used the same tactic, refusal of hospitality, against his own missionaries (3 John 10). Withdrawal of fellowship and heated rhetorical denunciations were the primary strategies available to Christians who wished to pressure fellow believers to change their ways. We should not expect that the situation in Rome in the 140s to 160s was much different.

As early as we can tell, Christians in Rome gathered and worshiped in several groups, without any single dominant “Church.” We do not know how or when Christianity first came to Rome. Because it was the capital and largest city of the empire, and because travel was remarkably easy, multiple Christians could have made their way to it in the decades following the death and resurrection of Christ. And so there probably was not a single beginning to or founding apostle of Christianity in Rome, but several beginnings and founding missionaries. Our first piece of real evidence for Roman Christianity comes from the apostle Paul, who during the 50s of the first century wrote his now famous letter to the city’s Gentile Christians. Paul had not yet been to Rome and was planning to visit it, and his letter served to introduce himself and his message to the believers there, who he hoped would provide him with the means to travel on to Spain. Phoebe, a deacon of the congregation in Cenchreae (a port of the Greek city Corinth) and a financial supporter of Paul, carried the letter to Rome, perhaps on a trip that she was making for business reasons (Romans 16:1–2).

Paul’s Letter to the Romans reveals that in this early period the Roman Christian community consisted of several house churches and included many immigrants to Rome from the Greek-speaking East. The native language of Rome was Latin, but Paul wrote his letter in Greek, expecting the Christians would be able to read it. Even though Paul had never been to Rome, he was able to greet more than twenty Christians there by name in the conclusion of his letter. Some of these people he must have known only by reputation, but more of them he probably
had met personally because they previously lived in the eastern Mediterranean, where Paul had spent his life to this point. We know this to be true in the cases of Prisca, Aquila, Epaenetus, Andronicus, and Junia because Paul mentions either his personal contact with them or their previous residence in eastern areas (16:3–7). Paul refers to at least three different house churches in Rome (16:5, 14–15), but there were likely more than these. The presence of immigrants to Rome and the existence of multiple house churches are likely related to one another. As immigrants came to Rome from different cities and regions of the East, they naturally congregated with other people from their home areas, who shared personal connections and similar traditions. Some of the house churches may have reflected this ethnic diversity, as Christians from, say, western Asia Minor worshiped together. Doubtless other house churches simply gathered Christians from certain areas of the city or reflected shared worship styles, personal affinities, or even social and economic levels. As Peter Lampe has described it, a state of “fractionation” characterized Roman Christianity from the start.²

But even in Paul’s day, separation and diversity were not the entire story. To be sure, Paul’s letter gives no indication that there is a central or primary Church community in Rome, much less a single individual who was the leader of Christians there. Paul may be aware that multiple house churches and ethnic diversity have led to or could lead to tensions among the city’s Christians. He urges the Roman Christians not to judge one another in matters like eating practices and holiday observances, traditions that may reflect regional differences (14:1–12). Yet Paul assumes that the Roman Christians, despite their separation into smaller groups, know and interact with each other and think of themselves as “all God’s beloved in Rome” (1:7). He expects them to circulate his letter among the groups, and even the concern about differences in eating practices indicates that Paul and the Roman Christians think of the Christians there as somehow a single community. We see, then, what Einar Thomassen has called a “tension between decentralizing and centralizing forces,” a dynamic movement between unity and diversity that had complex and sometimes contradictory effects.³

This movement between unity and diversity characterized Roman Christianity well into the second century. Several factors continued to promote fractionation among Christians. Without any communal property of their own (despite the picture presented in Acts of the Apostles chapters 2–3), Christians continued to meet in private homes, which limited the number of people who could participate in any single meeting and also tied Christian groups to the household, where social factors like kinship, ethnicity, and wealth played an important role in identity. New immigrants continued to arrive in the city, reinforcing ethnic divisions and bringing a variety of local religious traditions. As the number of educated Christians grew, groups of Christian teachers and intellectuals arose, and theological differences joined social factors in contributing to Christian diversity. We can imagine that at some point in the second century a Christian teacher brought the teachings of the Gnostic school of thought to Rome, and the Gnostics joined the diverse stew of Romans who proclaimed salvation through Jesus Christ.

As fractionation persisted and even increased among the Roman Christians, they also developed ways to express their unity. When foreign Christians like Paul wrote to their coreligionists in Rome, they expected that the Romans had some shared way to receive such correspondence. By the turn of the second century, it appears that there may have been a secretary who was charged with handling correspondence for the entire Christian community; so we can understand the Clement of Rome who wrote a letter to Christians in Corinth in behalf of the Roman Christians in the late 90s (now known as 1 Clement). Endeavors such as charity for the poor required ad hoc arrangements of cooperation and perhaps the appointment of shared officers. The separate house-based congregations developed the custom of sending token portions of the Eucharist to each other as expressions of solidarity. It seems that there were occasional citywide meetings of leaders called presbyters (elders), teachers, and even bishops, but it is not clear how representative or frequent these meetings were or how much power they had.

A Roman Christian around the year 150 would have had a variety of religious options available to her. She could worship at one of several house churches, which may have featured a diversity of worship practices and theological ideas. She could deepen her understanding of Christian teachings by studying with one of the city’s several philosophers who taught about the Jewish Scriptures and Greek and Roman philosophical traditions in light of the new revelation in Jesus. One of the options available to her must have been the Gnostic school of thought. We can explore how the Gnostics and other Christians interacted with each other by focusing on three prominent Roman Christians who most likely knew about the Gnostics’ teaching and who came into conflict with other Christians over the meaning of the new faith: Marcion, Valentinus, and
Justin. We shall learn not only that there was no single Church in Rome that could reject “Gnosticism,” but also that even a model of conflict between “proto-orthodoxy” and a variety of “other groups” fails to do justice to the complexity of Christian diversity on the ground. The Gnostics did not lose a war; rather, they were participants in a lively and often contested multilateral process of defining and redefining what Christianity might be.

Marcion: Scriptures and Withdrawal of Fellowship

Marcion, a member of a wealthy shipowning family from Sinope in Pontus (Asia Minor), arrived in Rome around 140. He made an immediate splash among Roman Christians by making a substantial donation (reportedly 200,000 sesterces) to a common fund, presumably for charity to the poor. Not much later, however, Marcion was making waves in Christian circles for other reasons—his religious teachings and his proposals for placing Christianity on a more standardized basis. Eventually Marcion would sever relations with other Roman Christians, who gave him his money back, and he would start his own international network of churches. Despite his success as a church organizer, Marcion’s writings have been lost. To reconstruct his teachings, historians must rely on the reports of his enemies. Still, the most important points in his version of Christianity seem clear enough. Marcion’s story demonstrates the limits of tolerance among early Christian groups and the importance of sacred writings to new Christian understandings of truth.4

There is no evidence that Marcion had contact with Gnostics or knew the Gnostic myth, but such seems highly probable, given how small the Christian subculture was. In any event, Marcion’s teaching presented a strikingly streamlined alternative to the Gnostic myth, while speaking to some of the same concerns. The Gnostics considered the Jewish Scriptures a flawed witness to a demonic god; still, with revelatory guidance from the higher powers, the biblical texts could furnish insight into salvation history. Marcion, in contrast, rejected the Jewish Scriptures as irrelevant to Christians, indeed contradictory to the Gospel. When Marcion compared the teachings of Jesus as he found them in the Gospel of Luke and the letters of Paul with the teachings of the Septuagint, he found contradiction after contradiction. Where Jesus preached love and forgiveness, the God of Israel appeared to recommend merely justice and retribution. Where Paul denied that Christians needed to follow the Jewish Law, the Jewish Scriptures considered righteous only those who practiced that Law. Christians other than the Gnostics had noticed these problems, which they solved in a variety of ways. Some Christians posited a development in God’s dealings with humanity: the Law had served its purpose by leading people to Christ and need not be followed in all its details any longer. Others interpreted problematic passages symbolically and not literally: God did not mean for people to follow his prohibitions of certain foods literally; rather, such commandments conveyed more general ethical or religious principles in symbolic ways. Marcion took neither of these paths, and instead concluded that the God of Israel simply could not be related to Jesus and the Gospel at all, much less the Father of Jesus.

Marcion’s view of the creator god differed sharply from that of the Gnostics. The Gnostics considered Ialdabaoth to be arrogant, foolish, and even demonic; his actions toward human beings are at the least amoral and more probably immoral. And yet Ialdabaoth does not lack any connection to the higher, truly divine God; rather, he is a kind of disfigured offspring of true divinity, and his distant awareness of true spiritual reality enables him to create this imperfect universe. Marcion’s creator god, by contrast, is not evil, but unrelentingly just. His moral demands on human beings are not really wrong—certainly people should not kill, and they should honor their parents—but he has set the bar so high, and his punishments are so severe, that mere mortal human beings cannot hope to avoid eternal damnation. His severe and uncompromising regime resembles that of authoritarian earthly rulers.5 Unlike Ialdabaoth, this creator does not have a clear relationship to the ultimate God, whom Marcion calls the Stranger. The Stranger is a divine being who is utterly transcendent and, until the arrival of Jesus, unknown to this created order. He resembles the Gnostics’ Invisible Spirit, for Marcion shared the widespread Platonicizing assumption of a perfect, transcendent God. The Stranger God’s great compassion led him to send his Son, Jesus, to meet the retributive demand of the creator god and so to save human beings. Jesus was not actually a human being of flesh and blood like ours—he only appeared to be so—rather, he was an emissary from the Stranger God, sent to offer us that God’s grace and forgiveness.

Marcion drew significant conclusions about Christian practice from his beliefs. First, he proposed a new Christian Bible: Christians would not use the Jewish Scriptures as sacred writings at all, but instead follow
only a single Gospel (similar to but not identical with the Gospel of Luke) and a collection of Paul's letters (not including all those that ended up in the New Testament). Because both the Gospel known to Marcion and Paul's letters contained passages that suggested that the God of Israel was in fact the Father of Jesus Christ, Marcion edited these texts to remove what he considered later interpolations. In undertaking this kind of editorial work, Marcion did not differ much from many other Christians. The authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, for example, had revised the Gospel of Mark in creating their works. As a scholar, Marcion sought to recover the original form of sacred documents that had suffered corruption. Nor is it likely that Marcion was unique in using only one Gospel, which was probably the practice of most Christian communities before the late second century. Second, he urged Christians to protest the oppressive world order of the creator god by abstaining from sex and from the consumption of meat and wine. Finally, he believed in an organized Church structure with the rituals of baptism and the Eucharist (celebrated without wine).

Of these proposals it is the first that distinguishes Marcion most clearly from the Gnostics. The Gnostics maintained a conflicted engagement with Genesis and the sacred writings of the Jews, and their modes of teaching and writing drew openly on a long tradition of Jewish apocalypticism. In this way, the Gnostics demonstrated their roots in forms of Judaism, even as they rejected some of the core beliefs of most Jews. Marcion, on the other hand, presented Christianity as something entirely new, rather than as a growth from Jewish tradition, although, to be sure, his exposition of Christianity required Jewish tradition as its foil.

Marcion appears to have been something of an entrepreneur, both commercially and religiously, and it seems that he was eager to bring other Christian groups in Roman line into his reforms. At least some Christian communities found Marcion's teachings disturbing, and at times they broke off fellowship with him, most likely by refusing to exchange tokens of the Eucharist, only to reinstate it again. Finally, in the summer of 144, Marcion asked to meet with the city's "presbyters and teachers" and to use a passage similar to Luke 5:36–37 (putting "new wine" into "old wineskins") as the basis for a discussion of his teachings. The meeting did not go well, and fellowship between Marcion and his fellow Roman Christians came to a definitive end. His generous contribution was returned to him. Precisely who first withdrew fellowship is not clear: it may have been Marcion who "excommunicated" other Christians. But this result did not stop Marcion, who quickly developed a network of churches that spread across the Mediterranean and lasted for centuries.7

As Peter Lampe and Einar Thomassen have argued, we learn from Marcion's experience that during the middle decades of the second century the fractionated Roman Christian community generally tolerated diversity among its different groups. Marcion's complete rejection of the Jewish Scriptures and his asceticism distinguished his community clearly from other Christian circles, and yet there was no decisive break between Marcion and other Christians until Marcion himself sought to bring other communities into line with his teachings. Marcion upset the delicate balance between unity and diversity by seeking to impose greater unity and uniformity among Roman Christians than they wanted. And, of course, the beliefs and practices on which he sought to base that unity were not acceptable to other Christians. Both Marcion's theological difference and his push for unity led to withdrawal of fellowship. The withdrawal of communion could be an effective means of differentiating one's own Christian group from another, but in Marcion's case it was hardly effective in eliminating one's rival groups.

Valentinus: Adaptation of the Gnostic Myth and Personal Authority

In contrast to Marcion, there can be no doubt that the Christian philosopher Valentinus had contact with the Gnostics and was aware of their myth. Irenaeus reports that "Valentinus adapted the fundamental principles of the so-called Gnostic school of thought to his own kind of system."8 We are right to be suspicious of this claim because it is Irenaeus's strategy to denigrate Christians whose views he rejects by portraying them as the intellectual successors of other false Christians. Still, an exhaustive study of Valentinus's surviving works by Anne McGuire confirms Irenaeus's report.9 Valentinus was not a Gnostic, and it appears that he took some pains to distinguish his views from Gnostic teachings, which were only one among many sources of his own thought. But he did not simply reject those teachings; rather, he created a new myth that was less elaborate and more centered on Christ. In addition, he eschewed the pseudonymous apocalyptic mode of Gnostic writing and instead claimed his own visionary insight and philosophical authority.10
Valentinus taught in Rome from the late 130s until the 160s, nearly thirty years. According to a much later account (by Epiphanius of Salamis in the fourth century), Valentinus was born in Egypt and educated in Alexandria. Although we cannot be certain of this claim, there are several reasons that it is likely to be true, among them that it is Clement of Alexandria who has preserved many of the excerpts from otherwise lost writings of Valentinus. From these writings it is clear that Valentinus received a very good education and was well read in Platonic, biblical, Jewish, and Christian literature. In Rome Valentinus emerged as a prominent Christian teacher. Several of his students became important Christian theologians in their own right, most prominently Ptolemy of Rome, and a Valentinian school of Christian thought (with two distinct branches) continued well into the fourth century. According to one report, a Christian group in Rome came close to electing Valentinus their bishop. Rival Christian teachers criticized Valentinus and his students sharply, but there is no evidence that Valentinus himself was ever formally condemned by any organized Christian group with power to enforce its judgment. After the mid-160s Valentinus disappears into the fog of history, and we have no information about his later life and death.

Discovering what Valentinus taught is a formidable task, and scholars disagree about many important points. Unlike in Marcion’s case, where nothing of what he wrote appears to survive, we have some fragmentary quotations from Valentinus’s lost works and an entire (if short) poem. It seems almost certain that the anonymous sermon The Gospel of Truth can be attributed to Valentinus, and a portion of Methodius of Olympus’s On Free Will may represent his views. Irenaeus provides an extremely brief summary of the myth that Valentinus taught: because Valentinus adapted the teachings of the Gnostics and because Irenaeus’s real targets are the students of Valentinus, he seems concerned to present only highlights of Valentinus’s doctrines, rather than the complete myth (if there was one). With so little to work with, scholars debate how much they can use the teachings of Valentinus’s followers, especially Ptolemy, to reconstruct his thought. For example, did Valentinus’s myth include a single divine figure of Wisdom (“the Mother”), as the Gnostic myth did and Irenaeus’s summary suggests, or two manifestations of Wisdom (a “higher” and a “lower” Wisdom), as his student Ptolemy taught? However these questions are answered, we can see the ways in which Valentinus responded to Gnostic teachings by transforming them, rather than by rejecting them outright.

For example, Valentinus took from the Gnostics the idea that the created material world is the result of some sort of mistake or error by a feminine figure. He did not, however, portray this world in unrelentingly negative terms, but stressed its dependence on God and its ultimate meaninglessness, even unreality. According to Irenaeus, Valentinus agreed with the Gnostics that the ultimate God unfolds himself into a series of emanations, one of which “revolted” or “turned away” and “became lacking,” resulting in the generation of the material world. In The Gospel of Truth, this turning away from knowledge of the ultimate God is personified as Error, the feminine origin of materiality. Valentinus’s Error combines and adapts the figures of Wisdom and Ialdabaoth in Gnostic myth. Because the material world has its origin in error or ignorance, it is ultimately not real, for the only true reality is God, and other beings are real only to the extent that they participate in God through knowledge of him. God, then, underlies and is present in and with all things that truly are. Valentinus’s poem or hymn “Summer Harvest” evokes the dependence on God of everything that exists:

I see in spirit that all are hung
I know in spirit that all are born
Flesh hanging from soul
Soul clinging to air
Air hanging from upper atmosphere
Crops rushing forth from the deep
A babe rushing forth from the womb.

Valentinus’s strong emphasis on the inmanence of God differentiates him from the Gnostics and supplements the Platonist distinction between spirit and matter with a kind of Stoic pantheism (although the Stoics were materialists and would not accept that matter is not ultimately real).

Two fragments show Valentinus in dialogue with Gnostic accounts of the creation of Adam. In one passage, Valentinus considers how it is that statues, paintings, and other artifacts become representations of gods and thus “objects of awe” for the human beings that made them. He ad- ducts as a parallel example the creation of Adam by angels: Adam’s speech terrified the angels because it indicated the presence of a seed of higher essence deposited in him by the Word of God. Adam represented the divine archetypal human being in a powerful way, so that the angels were amazed and frightened. Valentinus inherited from the Gnostics the
ideas that Adam was created by lower divine beings, that the higher divine power placed within him a seed of divinity without the knowledge of the lower creators, and that Adam’s speech or upright stature displayed his superiority to his creators. But Valentinus’s creating angels are not as demonic and hostile as are Ialdabaoth and the rulers of Gnostic myth, and Valentinus emphasizes the divine presence that makes up for the imperfection of the material creation. Moreover, it appears that the divine agent who transmits divine essence to humanity is not Wisdom or Forethought, but the Son or Word of God, whom Valentinus refers to also as God’s “name.” The lower angels may have failed to reproduce the eternal form of divine humanity in creating the material Adam, “yet the name completed the lack within the act of modeling.” Although he accepted Gnostic ideas that the material creation is highly imperfect and the work of lower beings, Valentinus reduced the antagonism between humanity and its creators, and he stressed the work of God’s Word to complete or fill the imperfection of materiality.

In comparison to the Gnostics, Valentinus placed Jesus Christ much more at the center of his thought. The Word of God is a prominent aeon in the divine fullness as Valentinus envisioned it, and according to one ancient source, Valentinus saw a vision in which the Word appeared to him in the form of an infant. He had such a strong sense of the divinity of Jesus that he considered the possibility that Jesus’ body did not digest foods in the same manner as did ordinary human bodies. The sermon The Gospel of Truth includes an extensive meditation on the relationship between the Son and the Father. As the name of the Father, the Son reveals the Father to created beings. Jesus’ crucifixion is the climactic moment of divine self-revelation: “He was nailed to a tree and became fruit of the Father’s acquaintance. Yet it did not cause ruin because it was eaten. Rather, to those who ate of it, it gave the possibility that whoever he discovered within himself might be joyful in the discovery of him. And as for him, they discovered him within them—the inconceivable, uncontained, the Father, who is perfect, who created the entirety.” Here the crucifixion, as the moment in which gnosis of God becomes possible, looks backward to the Fall in Eden and forward to the Christian Eucharist. By eating the body of Christ, Christians participate in the crucifixion of Christ and gain knowledge of God and of themselves, for God is within them as the inconceivable origin of all that truly is. In contrast to the Eden story, this knowledge brings joy and life, not regret and ruin. The Gnostic author of The Gospel of Judas mocked the Eucharist as ignorant worship of a false God, but Valentinus celebrated it as the means of joyful discovery of God and self.

Valentinus differed from the Gnostics as well in how he presented his teaching as authoritative. The Gnostics, we have seen, attributed their literary works to authoritative figures of the past, whether very distant (Adam, Zoroaster) or more recent (John the Apostle), and these works were mostly revelations from divine beings. Even though it must have been the Gnostic authors themselves who received the visionary insights that they sought to communicate in their literature, they did not claim these insights for themselves, but presented their works as wisdom from above or from antiquity. Valentinus, however, invoked his own mystical experience as the basis for his teachings. As we have seen, he reportedly had a visionary experience in which the Word of God appeared to him as an infant. In The Gospel of Truth, he announced, “I have been in the place of repose”; true children of God, he said, “speak of the light that is perfect and full of the Father’s seed.” For Valentinus, the Christians who have gained acquaintance of God have discovered themselves, for they are in God and God is in them: such Christians can speak the wisdom that all God-inspired philosophy teaches, which is “the utterances that come from the heart, the law that is written in the heart.” They are themselves “texts of truth, which speak and know only themselves.” The visionary insight that Valentinus claimed was available to any who follow the path of knowledge that Jesus has made available.

According to Clement of Alexandria, Valentinus’s students promoted his authority in another way. They asserted that he had been a student of Theudas, who had been a disciple of Paul. If this report is true, then Valentinus presented himself not only as the recipient of an extraordinary level of the insight that Christianity makes accessible to all, but also as a trained philosopher. An ancient teacher often legitimized his or her teaching by producing an intellectual pedigree that traced his or her academic tradition through a succession of brilliant teachers back to a founder whom many others admired, such as Plato or Zeno, or, for Christians, Paul or Jesus himself. This succession was sometimes the conduit for a secret oral tradition that contained doctrines more advanced than those found in available written texts of the school. Rival teachers competed with one another, often through personal attacks on another’s lifestyle and academic pedigree; this kind of polemic is not surprising, given the personal nature of the teacher’s authority. The teacher’s authority could continue after death through the dissemination of his or
her philosophical treatises and scriptural commentaries and the publication of idealizing biographies by his or her students. In Valentinus’s case, his disciples and their communities seem to have conducted worship using hymns that Valentinus had composed, and to have drawn from and commented on his writings. In distinction, then, to the Gnostics and in competition with rival versions of Christianity, Judaism, and philosophy in general, Valentinus cloaked himself in a highly personal type of authority, combining visionary insight and an impressive academic lineage.

Although we know that Valentinus and his teachings aroused opposition from some other Christian leaders, Valentinus himself evinced an optimistic openness, even missionary zeal, toward others, whether they were Christians outside his immediate community of followers or not Christians at all. “Unto those who are weary give repose; and awaken those who wish to arise,” he exhorted his followers. “For it is you who are unsheathed intelligence.” On the other hand, he counseled neglect of those who had fallen away from the group: “Do not focus your attention upon others, that is, ones whom you have expelled.” It is unlikely that Valentinus saw himself and his followers as a special or elite group within a wider Christian community; rather, he believed that he was teaching a message for all people, or as he might put it, for everyone whose name is written in the book of the living. Indeed, unity and harmony are major themes of The Gospel of Truth: the aeonic emanations of the Father enjoy a gracious unity with each other and with God, who is their completion; only ignorance of each other and of God disrupts this unity. The analogy with human beings (themselves emanations of the Father) is clear: “For now their affairs are dispersed . . . . It is by acquaintance that all will purify themselves out of multiplicity into unity . . . . it is fitting for us to meditate upon the entirety, so that this house might be holy and quietly intent on unity.” Valentinus then tells a parable about how the coming of the Word causes a great disturbance among a set of jars in a house: some break, some are found to be empty, some are full. Einar Thomassen has plausibly suggested that this parable can be read as an allegory for how Christians groups responded in diverse ways to the stirring message of saving gnōsis that Valentinus offered.

Valentinus’s near election as a bishop (if true) indicates that at least some Roman Christians outside his own school acknowledged him as a gifted Christian teacher, even if others condemned his views. We shall see in Chapter 5 that the later school of Christian thought that was indebted to him would have a subtle and complex relationship to other Christian groups, but Valentinus’s vision was one of unity. He himself was never condemned for his teachings both because many Christians found them acceptable and because at the time there was no central Christian authority that could have issued and enforced such a condemnation. Recall that no central authority condemned Marcion, either. Rather, he and other Christians discontinued fellowship after a meeting that he initiated. Valentinus illustrates another possible response to the Gnostic school of thought—adaptation and inclusion. He drew insights from the Gnostic myth, adapted it to his own views, and articulated a visionary method of unity that sought to include all Christians. His own personal authority of insight and learning gave his message its persuasive power.

Justin Martyr: Heresiology and Rejection of Gnostic Myth

Like Marcion and Valentinus, the Christian teacher Justin came to Rome from elsewhere. He was born in Flavia Neapolis in Palestine (modern-day Nablus) to a pagan family. At some point he became a Christian, but Justin presented that decision as the natural step in his pursuit of philosophy, the culmination of a search for truth and wisdom that had led him to other schools of thought, including the Pythagoreans and the Platonists. “Thus it is I am now a philosopher”—so he concluded the story of his journey to Christianity—and he looked the part by wearing the distinctive cloak of the working philosopher. In Rome Justin rented an apartment above a bath, where he taught anyone who wished to study Christian philosophy with him. As H. Gregory Snyder has pointed out, “A location over or around a bathhouse would have offered several distinct advantages to a teacher such as Justin: relatively plentiful amounts of light, availability of important services, the status and convenience of being located near a local landmark, and . . . a generous amount of quiet, relative to other possible locations.” Like Valentinus, then, Justin was an independent teacher of Christianity whose claim to authority depended on his learning and charisma, not on an official position in a Church.

Unlike Valentinus, however, Justin did not find in the Gnostic myth insights that he could adapt to his own views; instead, he rejected
Gnostic teachings and those of Valentinus and Marcion, and in the process he helped to invent what we now call “heresy.” As we have seen, the Gnostics were known as the “Gnostic school of thought” or gnosikê hairesis. Hairesis was a mostly neutral term that indicated that a field of study, such as medicine, included within it different schools of thought: a hairesis shared allegiance to a set of doctrines or to an original teacher. In religious or philosophical settings, hairesis could also have a purely descriptive sense: the Jewish author Josephus claimed to follow “the hairesis of the Pharisees,” and Clement of Alexandria argued that “the most accurate gnosis and the truly best hairesis reside in the only true and ancient Church.” Shared intellectual heritage might be all that held a school together socially. That is, the term need not imply an organized social group that held meetings and had a strong sense of membership. But we have seen indications that at least some Gnostics did in fact form a social group with shared rituals and a sense of communal identity. Different schools of thought within a field like medicine would certainly argue with each other, and the polemics could become heated and personal, but the existence of different ways of thinking about medicine was neither surprising nor unusual.

From the earliest years of Christian history, however, some Christians were aware of diversity and disagreements within their movement, and they sought to contain such divisions, which contradicted the notion that they formed a single body of Christ. Paul condemned “factions” (hairesis) among Christians as “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19–20). Paul lamented that when Christians in Corinth gathered for the Lord’s Supper there were “divisions” (schismata) among them, although he admitted that there may be some value in such quarrels: “There have to be factions (hairesis) among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine” (1 Corinthians 11:18–19). The divisions among the Corinthian Christians that Paul condemns here appear to have been based in social and economic differences rather than on different teachings, and so here a hairesis simply means a “faction.”

In the second century, however, some Christian authors tied the existence of factions more closely to differences in doctrines. The author of 2 Peter depicted the dying Apostle Peter as predicting the appearance of “false teachers, who will secretly bring in destructive hairesis,” meaning here perhaps “ways of thinking” rather than “divisions” (2 Peter 2:1). Ignatius of Antioch praised the Christians in Ephesus because “you all live according to truth and no hairesis exists among you; rather, you do not even listen to anyone unless he speaks about Jesus Christ in truth” (To the Ephesians 6.2). He exhorted the Trallian Christians to “make use only of Christian food and avoid any foreign plant, which is hairesis” (To the Trallians 6.1). These authors attribute factionalism to false teaching, that which is both opposed to the truth and foreign to Christianity (as they define it). Without using the term hairesis, the author of 1 Timothy in the New Testament attributed some false teachings to demons (1 Timothy 4:1), and he warned against “what is falsely called gnosis” (6:20). (From this phrase Irenaeus got the title of his book.)

Before Justin, then, some Christians had associated hairesis with factions and false teachings, and others had suggested that demons could inspire erroneous doctrines. No one, however, had put these ideas into a single package, so to speak.

It is not clear how much of this previous Christian literature was known to Justin, but the imagery and associations that they contain appear in his new conception of “heresy.” He reports that Jesus had predicted, “There shall be divisions (schismata) and factions (hairesis).” This saying does not appear in any of the Gospels that we know and may be a conflation of Paul’s statements about “divisions” and “factions” in 1 Corinthians. In any event, when he used the term hairesis, Justin combined the philosophical concept of “school of thought”—and its associated ideas of an original teacher and shared doctrines—with the Christian distrust of “factions” and diverse teachings as “foreign” and even demonic. Here no “school of thought” could be the source of Christian truth, nor could one call the true Christian Church a “school of thought,” as Clement did. In fact, Justin wrote a now lost work entitled Against All the Schools of Thought That Have Arisen and another book specifically against Marcion (also lost). With Justin the essential elements of the Christian idea of “heresy” and the practice of heresiology fell into place.

Justin argued that “schools of thought” or, as we may now put it, “heresies” were not really Christian, even if their adherents may have claimed to be so. People like Marcion, Valentinus, and their followers may have called themselves Christians, but Justin and those like him called them by the names of the men who originated their teachings. They were not “Christians,” but “Marcionites,” “Valentinians,” and so forth. Justin admitted that such people not only called themselves Christians but also were recognized as such by others. Still, he said, they are not really Christians, but “godless and impious members of a school
of thought (haireistai).” True Christians, by contrast, are “completely right-thinking.” This distinction between what people or things are called and what they really are is a key part of Justin’s notion of heresy: heretics simply are not what they claim to be or what naive others may think they are, that is, Christians. They have their origin not in Christ, but in later human teachers, or rather in the demons who inspired those teachers.

Like Valentinus, Justin did not reject non-Christian philosophy but believed that the classic works of Greek and Roman culture contained truths that are also found in Christianity. Valentinus seems to have attributed this phenomenon to the interior illumination that he believed came from acquaintance with God, what he called “the law that is written in the heart.” And thus “publicly available books” often teach the same things as Christian books. Justin, however, claimed that the Word of God, even before his incarnation in Jesus, was partially available to certain wise teachers in the form of “seeds.” The teachings of Plato, Socrates, and others approximate those of Christ, for each spoke according to the partial knowledge that the Word made available to him. The entire Word was present in Christ, and thus (true) Christians possess the entirety of truth and can claim as their own whatever right teaching non-Christian philosophers have espoused. Although the argument is different, Justin’s approach to the discovery of truth is remarkably similar to that of Valentinus: reading and learning from a variety of traditions and texts, both men were open to discerning within them the revelation of the Word. Both were creating a new Christian philosophy, casting their intellectual nets widely to gather truth from the best of what came before.

While Valentinus’s net included the Gnostic myth, Justin’s did not: his concept of heresy portrayed any Christians who held a low opinion of the Creator God (as he put it, those who “blaspheme the Creator of the universe”) as demonically inspired counterfeiters both of wholly true Christianity (taught by Justin) and its partially true relative, non-Christian philosophy. Both heresy and philosophy, in his view, are varied imitations of Christianity, but while philosophy’s diversity and approximation to Christianity results from its origin in only partial seeds of the Word—it’s almost, but not quite Christianity—heresy comes from the demons. The demons, Justin explained, not only oppose Christ and his present-day followers, but also fought against those persons before Christ, like Socrates, who spoke the truth by the Word. In Justin’s view, such heretics as Marcion and Valentinus were only the latest means by which the evil spirits were doing battle against the Word of God. Certainly the Gnostics would find the idea of demonic rulers opposing the work of the true God familiar, although they would be alarmed to find themselves portrayed as demonically motivated.

Justin developed his idea of heresy explicitly in response to Christian diversity, something that he viewed with somewhat more subtlety than my discussion thus far might indicate. Justin discusses other disagreements among Christians in his Dialogue with Trypho, which depicts a fictitious conversation between Justin and a Jew named Trypho. In one instance Trypho himself notes that there are Christians who disagree with Justin about whether it is acceptable to eat meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods. The fact of Christian diversity is so clear that Justin felt compelled to include it in his text and even to portray an outsider as observing it. In another passage Trypho expresses skepticism that Justin honestly believes that the resurrection of the dead will be followed by a period during which resurrected Christians and pre-Christian Israelites will live in a reconstructed Jerusalem on earth, perhaps because he knows that it is not a widely shared belief even among Christians. In the first case, Justin bluntly condemns the eating of sacrificial meat as a demonically inspired practice and includes Christians who endorse it among those who blaspheme the Creator God and so are false Christians or heretics. Here Justin takes the hard-line position of the author of Revelation (2:20) rather than the more nuanced view of Paul (1 Corinthians 8:4–6). In the second case, Justin admits that “many pure and pious Christians” do not share his belief about a post-resurrection existence in Jerusalem. But then he brands as heretical those Christians who deny the resurrection of the dead and instead believe that the soul ascends to heaven immediately at death: such Christians also blaspheme the God of Israel. In any event, Christians who are “entirely right-thinking” agree with Justin on all the particulars of the resurrection. Here we see that Justin did not consider every point of doctrine a matter of “Christianity” versus “heresy” or the teaching of the Word versus that of the demons. Rather, it was blasphemy against the Creator, the God of Israel, that indicated heresy.

Justin’s focus on the status of the Creator God as the flashpoint of heresy is understandable when we consider that Justin’s teaching about God was not completely different from the beliefs of his opponents. The Gnostics, Marcion, Valentinus, and Justin all agreed that to speak of only
one God is too simple. All believed that the ultimate God was remarkably transcendent and not really accessible to human knowledge and that therefore some lower mediating divinity was required. The Gnostics, Valentinus, and Justin all used the term Word (logos) among others to identify this mediating God, who interacts with the created order in a way that the highest God cannot. It was, then, necessary for Justin to highlight as sharply as he could how his teaching differed from these other Christians, and he seized on the status of the Creator. Marcion, the Gnostics, and Valentinus stressed the imperfection of the Creator: he is ignorant and hostile to humanity (Gnostics), or unrelentingly righteous and lacking in mercy (Marcion), or simply lower and less spiritual than the ultimate God (Valentinus). In contrast, although Justin insisted that the Word was “another” God, one who was distinct in number from the ultimate God, and who could engage in such lesser activities as appearing in a burning bush, he pointedly referred to the high God as “the Creator of all things.”

The Word may have been God the Father’s agent in making and guiding the universe, but the creation is the work of the ultimate God. Justin’s “heresy” marked difference where others might have seen similarity.

Justin condemned the Gnostics, Marcion, Valentinus, and others as heretics, false Christians, but he had no authority to enforce his views on other Christian groups in Rome. Justin was just one of a variety of teachers and other leaders who offered insight into God and the human condition in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, it would be wrong to imagine Justin defending some preexisting thing such as “Christianity” or “the Church” against heretics and pagan critics. Instead, although he claimed to teach truth that was old as creation, Justin, just like the Gnostics, Marcion, and Valentinus, was creating (or recreating) something new, his own version of the new/old philosophy, Christianity. In so doing he debated with other reinventors of Christianity, disagreeing politely with some (the “pure and pious Christians” who held different views of the future eschatological era) and rejecting others as not Christians at all (the “heretics” who held different views of the Creator God). But Justin did not represent an official Church or a “mainstream” Christianity, nor did he have any power to define Christianity or its doctrines other than his ability to persuade others.

Later Christians identified Justin as “orthodox” and Marcion and Valentinus as “heretics”; modern scholars, trying to avoid such language and the value judgments it implies, nonetheless have usually called Justin “proto-orthodox” and Marcion and Valentinus representatives of “Gnosticism.” But such categories fail to capture the complexity of these early Roman Christians. On the one hand, the teachings of Marcion and Valentinus differed significantly from those of the Gnostics and of each other, and neither considered himself a member of “the immovable race” or “the seed of Seth”; in contrast to the Gnostics, they celebrated varying forms of a Christian Eucharist and did not observe a baptism of five seals. On the other hand, Justin can hardly be distinguished from either Valentinus or Marcion as clearly as the label “proto-orthodox” implies. Justin shared Marcion’s intolerance for certain alternative Christian views, and he even more closely resembled Valentinus: both were independent Christian philosophers who offered their learning and insight to interested students; both appreciated the presence of Christian truth in non-Christian philosophy; and both placed at the center of their thought the Son or Word of God, who alone reveals the Father and became incarnate in Jesus. The vehemence with which Justin denounced Marcion and Valentinus as “heretics” is an indication of their similarity to him as much as their distance.

There were very few Christians in Rome in the 140s, but despite or perhaps because of their small numbers, the differences among them appeared to some of them to loom large as they sought a balance between unity and diversity. Marcion, Valentinus, and Justin developed a set of responses to the Gnostic sect and/or each other that enabled them to fashion their own identities as religious leaders within not only the wider Christian community but also the larger pluralistic religious and philosophical culture of Rome. These strategies included outright rejection of alternative views through the rhetoric of heresy (Justin), withdrawal of fellowship and the establishment of self-consciously independent communities (Marcion), adaptation of the Gnostic myth and greater integration of it with other Christian literature (Valentinus), and more personal or philosophical modes of authority and legitimation of teaching (Valentinus and Justin). Christians in the following decades would borrow, develop, and augment these strategies as they sought to invent and reinvent Christianity in part by differentiating themselves from competing versions of it.