

The New Marcion

Rethinking the “Arch-Heretic”

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It seems we are always rethinking Marcion; and each new Marcion reflects a remapping of our understanding of broader developments in early Christianity. Several rethinking, from Adolf von Harnack’s portrait of Marcion as a biblical theologian and proto-Luther,¹ to more recent attempts to highlight possible connections to gnostic trends, have been undertaken on the same familiar data we have had for more than a century. Indeed, not a single new source on Marcion has come to light since Harnack’s definitive study of the 1920s. Perhaps because those sources remain overwhelmingly polemical, it has remained tempting for some to merely surrender to them and revive the traditional image of Marcion as the “arch-heretic,” a man accurately characterized by his enemies in both his deeds and motives. Yet we need not surrender our critical judgment of these sources or despair of discerning anything new in them. The long familiar sources may still have some genuinely new data to offer, provided that we approach them with fresh perspectives and resist imposing our expectations on them. Marcion’s scriptural canon—consisting of the *Evangelion* and the *Apostolikon*—has a story to tell if we reopen the question of Marcion’s exact relationship to these texts.

The state of that question has been a key indicator of shifts in the course of scholarship on Marcion in the last two centuries. Before Harnack, Marcion’s biblical texts held more interest than Marcion himself. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they were considered a possible window into early stages of composition and redaction prior to the emergence of the catholic versions;² and then, in the conservative reaction that set into Marcion scholarship in the second half of the nineteenth century, they were dismissed as bastardized products of the heretic’s redactional knife. Harnack was more interested in Marcion than in his Bible, and was willing to accept the traditional polemical charge that he edited the Gospel of Luke and Paul’s letters, because by doing so he acquired precious data on Marcion’s thinking. After all, quotations from

1. Harnack, *Marcion*.

2. Throughout this article I use “catholic” to refer to the version of biblical texts used in mainstream non-Marcionite Christian communities, and found in modern New Testaments.

Marcion's only known composition, the *Antitheses*, were few, but every edit of Luke or Paul potentially helped to map the topography of Marcion's positions. Critics such as Tertullian and Epiphanius provided a starting point as they posited Marcion's motives for "mutilating" or "cutting" the text. Yet they remained puzzled by some of his apparent choices, and beginning with Harnack it has become a favorite pastime of Marcion researchers to come up with explanations and underlying theological motives for each and every textual variant between Marcion's biblical texts and the catholic versions. This exercise has continued despite mounting evidence of its fundamental folly: the discovery of more and more "Marcionite" readings in catholic biblical witnesses, the recognition that no proposed theological motives could be shown to have been consistently applied throughout Marcion's texts, and the general critique of "if I were a horse" speculative methodology.

Harnack's interests influenced subsequent researchers to look upon the *Evangelion* and *Apostolikon* as products of Marcion's handiwork, to be read in light of his views. But such an approach assumes what still needs to be proven, because we really do not know the exact relationship Marcion had to these texts other than his decision to include them in the sacred scriptures of his community. We have only the word of his enemies that he had a hand in editing them as well, and such a charge needs to be critically assessed. In order for such an assessment to be made, the *Evangelion* and *Apostolikon* need to be approached in their own right, as "anonymous" texts, so to speak, and compared with catholic versions of the same works, in order to inventory their distinctive themes and emphases and determine whether they correspond to Marcion's views. When that effort is made, it quickly becomes apparent that Marcion's critics cannot have been right, and we consequently need to reverse the historical relationship that has been imagined between Marcion and the *Evangelion* and *Apostolikon*: thinking of Marcion not as their editor, but as their reader, interpreter, and canonizer. We can no longer look upon these texts as the editorial outcome of Marcion's ideology, but rather must consider them to be the textual basis from which that ideology arose, by the same selective and creative reading by which other Christianities arose around Marcion on the basis of similar textual (and, before Marcion, predominantly oral) resources.

I do not come to this proposal arbitrarily, but do so in the face of a major historical problem. Because the fact is that, if Marcion is responsible for these texts as their editor, then we will be forced to question everything we think we know about his theology, and dismiss nearly everything his opponents claim about it. In their contents, the *Evangelion* and *Apostolikon* do not reflect a "Marcionite" world-view and retain elements directly at odds with what is reported of Marcionite teaching. On the other hand, there would be nothing at all out of the ordinary for a man of Marcion's time to accept the authority of texts he had no hand in crafting, and simply interpret them in accord with his distinctive views. We have ample examples of the latter among Marcion's

contemporaries and later Christian leaders. Of course, we must be prepared as well to rethink Marcion's ideology as his enemies report it; but that is not the issue here. Instead, by dispensing with the myth of Marcion as a "mutilator" of biblical texts and placing the origin of the *Evangelion* and *Apostolikon* in their true historical setting before Marcion canonized them, we are able to refocus attention on those things we can be sure Marcion actually did: shift Christian authority from a personal to a textual basis through the creation of the first Christian scriptural canon.

Marcion as a Receiver—not a Redactor—of Texts

Those opposed to Marcion, including groups ancestral to later Christian orthodoxy, produced a string of writings against him, his teachings, and his NT—more than against any other rival form of Christianity prior to the fourth-century christological and Manichaean controversies.³ These polemical writings report a number of specifics about Marcion's theology, of which the core appear to be three: (1) he believed that the God of Jesus was a different, higher, deity than the creator God of the Jewish religion; (2) he believed that Jesus was a divine being who came to earth to invite people to the blessed realm of this higher God; and, (3) he believed that the exit from this earth did not involve either physical resurrection or judgment (other characterizations of his views may be largely deductions on the part of anti-Marcionite writers based on these three positions). None of these three core beliefs are reflected in any obvious way in the *Evangelion* or *Apostolikon*. More to the point, given the accusation made by some (not all) critics that he "mutilated" these texts in order to make them conform to his views,⁴ they contain explicit references to God as creator, to Jesus as a human being, and to physical resurrection and judgment. Something appears to be amiss.

3. Eusebius of Caesarea's list of anti-Marcionite works (*Hist. Eccl.* 4.24–25) includes compositions by Dionysius of Corinth, Theophilus of Antioch, Hippolytus of Rome, Philip of Gortyna, and Modestus, as well as additional references to Justin Martyr (4.11, 18; cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.6.2) and Rhodo (*Hist. Eccl.* 5.13). All of these works are lost. Jerome's report of anti-Marcionite writings depends largely on Eusebius, and in most cases he probably had not personally read the treatise in question. We should probably add to this list of anti-Marcionite writers Ammonius of Alexandria, of whom Jerome reports a treatise, "On the Harmony of Moses and Jesus" (*Vir. Illus.* 55). The list can almost certainly be expanded by the inclusion of several pseudepigraphical works that likely have an anti-Marcionite purpose. On this topic, see esp. Rist, "Pseudepigraphic Refutations." With respect to the Pastoral Epistles, Hoffman, *Marcion*, 291–95, effectively marshals the evidence of their anti-Marcionite subtext.

4. Many other critics of Marcion (e.g., Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Ephrem Syrus) say nothing about any tampering with texts, as noted by Gregory, *Reception of Luke*, 183–92, who astutely observes that "Irenaeus and Tertullian may in fact be unrepresentative" (185) in this regard, due to their particular interest in establishing the fourfold gospel—a concern not shared by earlier figures or by representatives of eastern Christianity where the fourfold gospel was not so closely identified as the hallmark of orthodoxy (185ff.).

Naturally, it was easy within later Christian orthodox discourse to believe that a “heretic” would be capable of editing “scripture” to suit his own views. By definition, those views were in error, and therefore he would have to manipulate his sources in order to get them to support his error. Yet other heretics largely escaped this charge (until the Manichaeans). If this was a polemical false accusation, why was it not used more widely? The answer may be related to just how early a figure Marcion was and his preservation of gospel and epistle texts in a form prior to their second-century standardization. Tertullian, writing three generations after Marcion, assumed that he had taken an already existing set of Christian scriptures, matching the set in use in Tertullian’s community, and had rejected some of them, while retaining only those suited to his heresy. But we are able to recognize immediately the anachronism in Tertullian’s assumption, which wrongfully superimposes the state of the Christian scriptures in his own time onto Marcion’s.⁵

Take Marcion’s *Apostolikon*, for instance. Having assumed that the thirteen epistles of Paul accepted in his own community had already been established as “scripture” in the time of Marcion, Tertullian naturally concluded that Marcion had deliberately omitted Paul’s Pastoral Letters (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus). But we now know that Marcion’s Pauline collection contained the same ten letters circulating among many non-Marcionite churches of his time, without the Pastorals, whose earliest certain citation occurs only a generation or two after Marcion. On the other hand, Tertullian made no comment on the order of letters in the *Apostolikon*, because he wrote at a time when no fixed order for them had been set (outside of the Marcionite community) that would serve as a point of contrast. By the time of Epiphanius, however, Paul’s epistles had come to have a standard order (from longest to shortest), and with it came a new point of contrast to be read back anachronistically into Marcion’s supposed motives for “rearranging” them. Modern researchers have followed Epiphanius ever since in suspicions about Marcion’s motives for giving priority to Galatians in the *Apostolikon*. This priority of Galatians, however, now has been shown to have occurred also in the ten-letter Pauline collection circulating among non-Marcionite Christians in Syria, undercutting the assumption that Marcion was responsible for it.

Marcion’s opponents, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius, likewise assumed that their communities’ manuscripts of Luke and Paul’s epistles preserved the “original” text, and any difference found in Marcionite manuscripts was due to Marcionite duplicity. They noted, for example, that Marcion’s *Evangelion* was shorter than the Gospel of Luke, to which it had an obvious

5. It is one of the weaknesses of Harnack’s study that he follows Tertullian’s presumptions, at least as far as a pre-Marcionite four-gospel canon is concerned. Campenhausen criticizes Harnack’s mistake and notes that John Knox had already effectively corrected it (Campenhausen, *Formation*, 149 n. 6; see also the extensive n. 40 on 156–59).

literary relationship, and accused him in the words of Irenaeus of “removing all that is written [in Luke] respecting the generation of the Lord, and setting aside a great deal of the teaching of the Lord, in which the Lord is recorded as most clearly confessing that the maker of this universe is his Father.”⁶ Tertullian and Epiphanius were honest enough to admit that what Irenaeus claimed was not altogether true: despite the fact that Marcion’s texts were shorter, they still contained many passages that contradicted Marcion’s views.⁷ That fact did not cause them to rethink the accusation, however; they merely concluded that Marcion had been inept in his efforts to purge the catholic text of its confirmation of orthodox views. At the same time, Tertullian and Epiphanius often labored to explain why a passage had been omitted (e.g., the Good Samaritan story), when it did not seem to have any consequence for or against Marcion’s views.

The mistake made by Harnack and other modern researchers has been to take Tertullian’s and Epiphanius’ guesswork as informed. The hypothetical nature of their comments makes it clear, however, that they had not a single word from Marcion about his supposed editorial decisions—no comment at all about “omitted” passages, and only theological interpretation and application of the “retained” content. Modern scholarship has been laboring under the vain illusion that Tertullian and Epiphanius might know things about Marcion’s editorial principles that we cannot know directly, because they had access to Marcion’s original writings. Whatever Marcion wrote—in the *Antitheses*, for example—apparently did not include anything about choosing or redacting texts. None of our sources quote words of Marcion where he actually claims to have “corrected” or “restored” an original text from a “corrupted” version. A passage highlighted by Harnack, where Marcion is paraphrased referring to an “interpolation” at the hands of “pseudo-apostles,” does not refer to texts at all but to the “gospel” as the Christian *kerygma*, which Marcion found to be ideologically compromised with Judaism in the practice of the Roman Christian community, where everything was being interpreted in the context of deep engagement with the Jewish scriptures: “that gospel ... that Marcion by his *Antitheses* accuses of having been falsified (*interpolatum*) by the upholders of Judaism with a view to its being so combined in one body with the law and prophets that they might also pretend that Christ had that origin.”⁸ It is Tertullian himself who anachronistically reframes Marcion’s comments by taking them as referring to a gospel text, which he merely hypothesizes to be Luke: “If that gospel which among us is ascribed to Luke is the same (gospel) that Marcion accuses

6. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.27.2.

7. Irenaeus did observe generally how little Marcion’s texts supported his positions (*Adv. Haer.* 1.27.4).

8. *id. evangelium ... quod Marcion per Antitheses suas arguit ut interpolatum a protectoribus Iudaismi ad concorporationem legis et prophetarum* (*Adv. Marc.* 4.4.1–5, Evans translation).

in his *Antitheses* ...” Clearly, then, Marcion did not name Luke in his work, nor in any way identify it by a specific comparison of textual content. Otherwise, Tertullian would not be forced to hypothesize. Yet a surprising number of modern researchers, beginning with Harnack, treat Tertullian’s guesswork as fact, and suppose that Marcion had indeed commented on interpolated gospel texts that he restored to ideological purity by his editorial work.⁹

Despite a number of questioning voices going back to the very beginning of modern critical study of the Bible, most have simply accepted the polemical claim that Marcion edited out portions of the texts he received. When it comes to the evidence contrary to this claim, modern commentators have either embraced Tertullian’s answers—that Marcion was an incompetent editor or cleverly left in passages contrary to his views to allay suspicions that he had tampered with the text—or have worked to come up with ideological motivations for Marcion’s editorial decisions that went unrecognized by Tertullian and others. The common supposition has been that the polemical testimony to Marcion’s editorial activity is basically reliable, and fundamental, and everything else is to be explained in accord with it. Few researchers seem to have considered the fact that writers such as Tertullian were in no position to know the state of texts in or before the time of Marcion, nor did they have any independent information that would have told them whether Marcion’s or their versions of these writings were the earlier one.¹⁰ Even Tertullian himself acknowledged that he could not actually prove the priority of his community’s versions of the texts over Marcion’s. For his part, Harnack too was forced to admit that, “No definite statements by Marcion exist concerning the grounds for proceeding as he does in his critique of individual passages from the Gospel or Apostle.”¹¹

9. Harnack’s assertion that “Never and nowhere has M[arcion] asserted that he *discovered* anew the unfalsified gospel in an exemplar, but always only that he has *restored it again*” (Harnack, *Marcion*, 250, with his original italics), can only be characterized as a figment of Harnack’s imagination. The use of “always” suggests a plurality of passages where Marcion asserts such a restoration, but in fact Harnack has in mind only the single passage from Tertullian discussed here. Moreover, in quoting the passage he leaves off the conditional “if” (*si*), and quotes Tertullian’s words selectively as “the Gospel, said to be Luke’s which is current amongst us . . . , Marcion argues in his *Antitheses* was *interpolated by the defenders of Judaism*, for the purpose of a conglomeration with it of the law and the prophets” (Harnack, *Marcion*, 41 n. 4, trans. Steely and Bierm, 149 n. 6). This is scarcely a creditable way to use historical sources.

10. Already noted by researchers in the mid-nineteenth century, the same point has been made in more recent times by Robbins, “Socio-Rhetorical Look,” 92; and Gregory, *Reception of Luke*, who hypothesizes that “the tradition of Marcion as a mutilator of Scripture arose only later because Irenaeus and Tertullian assumed that Marcion must have received his copy of *Luke* in the same form that they received theirs and, consequently, that he had reduced his to suit his own purposes” (p. 295; cf. his full discussion of the issues in 173–96). Joseph Tyson similarly has stressed the anachronistic and heresiological assumptions governing the viewpoint of our sources that makes their testimony on this question meritless (Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts*, 39).

11. Harnack, *Marcion*, 64 n. 1, trans. Steely and Bierm, 150 n. 19; English slightly corrected according to Harnack’s original German.

There is nothing inherently implausible about the idea that Marcion could have edited his scriptural texts to make them more representative of what he valued and considered important. In fact, he lived at a time when gospels were still being actively composed, often by reworking, merging, and elaborating on earlier gospels. The problem with attributing this sort of authorship to Marcion comes from an examination of the *Evangelion* and *Apostolikon* themselves, which simply do not show themselves to be texts carefully tailored to Marcionite positions.

In the *Evangelion*, for instance, only one God is mentioned, and nothing is said of a distinct demiurge responsible for this world, as found in Marcionite belief. Moreover, God plays a direct role in managing the earth: he feeds the ravens (12:24)¹² and clothes the grass (12:28) gratuitously, and so can be relied upon to feed and clothe human beings, too. He knows people's mundane needs and will supply them without being asked (12:29–31). Jesus discusses the resurrection from the dead (20:35), and his own resurrection has a physical character (24:39, 41–42), in contrast to Marcionite rejection of the idea of physical resurrection. Jesus repeatedly presumes a judgment to which people will be subject (6:24–25; 11:4; 12:5; 12:8–10; 12:47–48; 13:27–28; 16:22ff.; 17:2; 21:34–35; 22:22), even though the Marcionites refused to associate God or Jesus with any sort of judgment. In apparent disjunction with Marcionite ideology, Jesus advocates or affirms Torah law repeatedly (5:14; 10:26–28; 16:19ff.; 17:14; 18:20–22). When Jesus and his followers violate Torah law, such as Sabbath restrictions, it is not presented as a denial of the validity of such restrictions, but as a qualification of them supported by precedent from elsewhere in Jewish scripture (6:3) or by a supervening principle (6:9) in typical rabbinic fashion. Jesus also observes Passover (22:8; 22:15) and speaks positively of “the prophets” (6:23; 11:47–48). He refers to John the Baptist (although his baptism of Jesus is not reported) as “a prophet and more than a prophet” (7:26), who explicitly fulfills the prophecy in Mal 3:1 (7:27), and whose authority implicitly derives from the same sources as Jesus' (20:3–8), an idea sharply at odds with Marcionite views. Jesus cites David's actions (6:3) and words (20:42) as authoritative, and Elisha likewise serves as an exemplar (4:27, placed between 17:14a and 17:14b in the *Evangelion*).

Similarly, in the *Apostolikon* Paul directly quotes Jewish scripture authoritatively no less than twenty-five times. The experience of Moses and Israel from Exodus and Numbers, including its identification of Christ with the rock that traveled with them, remains in place (1 Cor 10:1–10). Likewise, Christ is identified as the Passover sacrifice (1 Cor 5:7). God is creator of all things (1 Cor 8:6), fashioner of the human body (1 Cor 12:24) and of animal and plant bodies (1 Cor 15:38). The God of Genesis is the same God who shines in the hearts of believers (2 Cor 4:6). There appears to be no alteration of Paul's description of

12. The versification of Luke is used to refer to the parallel content of the *Evangelion*.

his cooperation with the Jerusalem leadership and their partnership in a dual mission to Jews and gentiles in Gal 2:1–10. Believers are true Jews (Rom 2:28–29) and need to join Israel to be reconciled with God (Laod[= Eph] 2:11ff.). The Law is sacred, spiritual, just, *and* good (Rom 6:12–14), and the Ten Commandments are cited twice (Rom 13:19; Laod[= Eph] 6:2).¹³ Christ brings retribution (2 Thess 1:8) and God sends error, misleading people so that they might be judged (2 Thess 2:11). If Marcion did edit these texts but found nothing problematic in such themes, perhaps we have been misinformed about his views. On the other hand, if his views have been reported more or less accurately, then clearly he did not edit these texts in light of them.

What exactly is missing from the *Evangelion* relative to Luke and the *Apostolikon* relative to the catholic version of Paul's letters? What makes the shorter versions of these texts found in Marcion's canon different? The *Evangelion* contained no birth story—a tendentious edit in favor of Marcion's high christology? One can scarcely assume so, given that two of the four canonical gospels likewise lack birth stories. It also lacked Jesus' baptismal encounter with John, his reading from Isaiah in the synagogue, some of the more developed stories Jesus tells (such as the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son), and several other short passages. But no clear or consistent ideological element connects the missing passages, and arguably no concept found within them is omitted in what remains in the *Evangelion*. We see in the latter, as in Luke, the same interest in women, concern for the lower classes, and radical ethic. In the *Apostolikon*, Marcion's text lacked the bulk of Romans 9–11 and all of 15–16, and a few shorter passages, some (not all) of the discussion about Abraham in Galatians, as well as a brief set of clauses from Colossians. On its own, the omission of Romans 9–11 could be interpreted in light of Marcion's views, but the other absent passages fail to sustain this impression, and do not distinguish themselves ideologically from content that remains.

The differences in Marcion's texts, however, quite often correspond with passages where modern scholarship has either proposed a possible secondary addition to the canonical text or found rather striking aporias in the sense. Researchers have identified the passages as problematic in some way or otherwise distinct from their context, quite apart from any consideration of the evidence of Marcion. Luke's birth narrative shows some continuity of themes with the rest of the gospel, but is written in a very different style, with an anomalous degree of literary dependence on the Septuagint, and has long been suspected of being a late addition to the gospel. Paul's discussion of the Jewish people in Romans 9–11 has struck many as a separate set piece appended to an argument essentially completed in Romans 8. Examples such as these suggest that the dif-

13. The abbreviation Laod refers to the Epistle to the Laodiceans, by which name Marcion knew the epistle found in modern New Testaments as the Epistle to the Ephesians.

ferences between Marcion's version of the texts and those found in today's NT have their explanation in ideologically neutral literary development occurring in early Christianity, as gospel texts were revised and expanded with additions and the familiar letters of Paul were assembled from various epistolary selections and fragments.

Why not press on, then, to argue that Marcion preserves more original versions of these texts and that the catholic texts of Luke and Paul represent second-century ideological, anti-Marcionite redactions? There are two reasons why I do not think we can do this, one general and the other based upon very specific details in the texts.

The general objection is the problem why the supposed additions to Luke and Paul are not more clearly anti-Marcionite in character. Since other pseudonymous writings of the period, while avoiding anachronistically naming Marcion, direct more or less transparent attacks upon him, why would a mid-second-century redaction of Luke and Paul not similarly offer prophetic criticism of future heretics who will deny that God is the creator or that Christ had a physical resurrection? It is true that adding more quotes of the OT, a birth narrative, and certain details to the resurrection narrative may subtly work in this direction. But subtlety was not a hallmark of most second-century Christian literature. The catholic versions have relatively more material that would make sense primarily to a readership steeped in the Jewish religion than do Marcion's versions, and that is all we can really say.

The second argument has to do with the problem of harmonizations in the text of the *Evangelion* and Luke. By using Marcion's text for comparison, we are able to identify a number of passages where the text of Luke has been conformed to that of Matthew, while the text of the *Evangelion* shows greater independence. Since the historical trend is for independent readings to precede harmonized ones, this evidence would support the idea that Luke represents a later edition of the *Evangelion*. However, there are also a number of passages where the reverse is true, where it is the wording of the *Evangelion*, not that of Luke, that appears to be brought into harmony with the wording of Matthew.¹⁴ Once we have ruled out likely misquotation by our sources (by comparison with how they quote the same passage elsewhere), it is impossible to account for Luke not sharing these harmonized readings if it were based on the *Evangelion*, which already contained them.¹⁵ It seems, therefore, that Luke and the *Evangelion* were subjected to separate and independent harmonizing textual influence, which would mean, as John Knox surmised, that the derivation of

14. Harnack enumerated thirty-four harmonizations to Matthew and Mark in the *Evangelion* not found in witnesses to Luke. Wilshire, "Canonical Luke," 252–53, lists thirty-two.

15. This problem is highlighted in Wilshire, "Canonical Luke."

either text directly from the other seems to be ruled out on strictly text-critical grounds.¹⁶ They must represent the end products of two lines of transmission going back to a common foundation.

Already in 1783, Johann Salomo Semler made such a proposal, that both the *Evangelion* and Luke go back independently to a common proto-Luke.¹⁷ Semler put forward the intriguing suggestion that the version that Marcion adopted as the *Evangelion* arose in the context of the gentile mission and that its relatively lesser Judaic material compared to Luke finds its explanation within the context of this intended audience. The lack of clear ideological differences between the two recensions, or any clear agenda of “correction” from one to the other, suggests that some such pragmatic cause, rather than an ideological one, explains the co-existence of two versions of the gospel. It is a bad habit of the historical study of Christianity to imagine that everything in the development of distinct varieties of Christianity was ideologically driven. Issues of practice or even ethnic and cultural differences played a role in initiating divergent forms of Christianity. A pragmatic differentiation of the gospel text into two versions, intended for audiences with different cultural backgrounds and locations, could subsequently have consequences in the development of disparate ideologies. In this scenario, the *Evangelion* helps to explain the background and basis of Marcion’s views, rather than representing an outcome of them.

Of course, there are many passages in the *Evangelion* and *Apostolikon* that either explicitly support Marcionite views and practices or can be read in their favor with a little exegetical imagination—all of which also appear in the catholic versions of Luke and Paul’s epistles. Here is where I think there is still much to be done to free our readings of early Christian literature from the eisegetical burden of later orthodoxies. Marcion could with justice point to various elements of the Jesus traditions and the writings of Paul that favored his positions over those of his rivals in the battle over the Christian movement. Each side was reading the texts selectively, highlighting certain elements and subordinating or eliding others in light of their respective dominant oral traditions.

Marcion himself may have been merely a capable organizer of a wing of the Christian movement in existence before him and around him, and that would best explain his rapid success. He may have been the product of a gentile Christianity already separated to a large degree from its Jewish roots, rather than an innovator in that direction. Or should we rather think that Paul’s ef-

16. Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament*, 156. Yet Knox suggests that the *Evangelion*’s apparent harmonizations to Matthew and Mark might not be harmonizations at all, but might reflect an original text more closely dependent on the common Synoptic tradition, while Luke represents a text worked over literarily, polished and rephrased in a way that de-harmonized it, so to speak (156 n. 42).

17. Semler, *Neuer Versuch*, 162–63. A modification of this hypothesis, retaining the notion of some editorial activity by Marcion on a proto-gospel from which Luke also derives, is found in Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament*; Gregory, *Reception of Luke*, 193–96.

fort to sharply separate and insulate his gentile communities from the influence of Jewish-Christian apostles had failed utterly and that Paul's legacy had been all but forgotten until Marcion revived its fortunes? I think not. Just as a comparison of Luke and the *Evangelion* suggests that the latter had a prehistory before Marcion, so the evidence regarding the letters of Paul in relation to the *Apostolikon* points to a pre-Marcionite interest in assembling a corpus of Paul's writings that Marcion inherited rather than created. These literary resources apparently originated and had readers among gentile Christians who took seriously the words of Jesus that "the Law and Prophets were only until John" and Paul's insistence that "Christ is the end of the Law." But the theological and metaphysical setting of such ideas awaited a systematizer like Marcion, just as other Christian communities awaited alternatively a Valentinus or an Origen. Meanwhile, such texts as they had on hand played a secondary role relative to a dominant—and considerably fluid—oral tradition. Marcion set out to change that.

Marcion as a Canonizer of Text(s)

It has long been understood that Marcion resolved certain ambiguities he found in Christianity through the bold polarities of his theology. But it remains underappreciated just how much the authority he placed in texts subverted all prior expectations of the Christian movement. Nothing necessitates that a religion, founded by individuals and spread through personal contacts, develop a written sacred literature or that such a literature assume an authority superior in theory to any living voice of the faith. In past ages where illiteracy predominated, a written codification of a religious community's faith would have remained directly accessible to few, and treated by the rest more as a symbol and reference point for the tradition rather than something they regularly consulted. The earliest Christians lived in an oral society that only flirted with literacy, and transmitted the teachings of Jesus and the exemplary stories about him primarily by word of mouth. The written word entered their world only sporadically, and even then only as a script to be read aloud. There were always a small number of more literate followers of Jesus who sought to put his ideas into conversation with textual traditions, but they could hardly be representative of the spirit of the larger movement.

Its fixity and referentiality gives text distinct advantages in shaping our perception of the time and place from which it comes, with the result that the writer, however idiosyncratic in his or her own time, wins out historically over the now silenced voices of illiterate contemporaries. The study of early Christianity continues to suffer from this bias towards text, because that is literally all we have. But our conceptualization of what early Christianity was like needs to compensate for it by comparison to other religious clubs and associations of the Roman world. Against this comparative background, the conscious,

deliberate adoption of text as a defining feature of a religious community marks an atypical, dramatic transition in the shape of belief and the character of authority over it.

One window into the predominantly oral form taken by authoritative traditions in earliest Christianity can be obtained, ironically enough, from the texts produced by other Christians roughly contemporary with Marcion's own lifetime. When those writings make reference to the teachings of Jesus, "the custom is to refer not to documents" but to free-standing sayings known and remembered in the community, "applied rather than quoted, in the strict sense of that word; and never are they explained or 'expounded' in their fixed form like a sacred text."¹⁸ No distinction is made between sayings now known from gospel texts and so-called *agrapha*, free-floating sayings of Jesus in the oral tradition. Writers such as Barnabas, Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, and Polycarp certainly know of the existence of Christian texts, but it is of no interest to them to cite these texts as sources of authority. Papias is the earliest writer to explicitly comment on individual gospel texts, but he does so to critique them as limited, incomplete, and ambiguous compared to the full riches of the oral tradition.

In the face of strong disagreement over the Christian message to be distilled from such fluid oral resources, Marcion can be understood to have sought to codify and secure an authoritative body of knowledge in a written form that would serve as a reliable touchstone of faith. Thus, Marcion could have taken the step to form a distinctively Christian canon, in the words of Helmut Koester, as a "conscious protest against the still undefined and mostly oral traditions to which the churches of his day referred as their dominical and apostolic authority."¹⁹

Marcion lived at a time when the ambiguities of the Christian relationship to an equally emerging "Judaism" were beginning to sort themselves out. Marcion presented himself as safeguarding an original and authentic form of Christian faith against innovations that subordinated its message to the weight of the substantial Jewish tradition, which threatened to claim a kind of "parental rights" over its prodigal religious offspring. Contrary to the image of a Christian movement that headed in a straight line away from its Jewish origins, modern research has increasingly drawn attention to how much Christianity and Judaism "co-evolved" and the degree to which "orthodox" Christianity might even be said to represent a historical "convergence" with Jewish religious views and values, in contrast to other forms of Christianity, such as Marcionite and Manichaean Christianity, where such a convergence never occurred.²⁰ If Marcion came from a gentile Christian community already substantially sepa-

18. Campenhausen, *Formation*, 121.

19. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 37.

20. See Becker and Reed, *Ways that Never Parted*; Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*.

rated from a Jewish religious background (such as the one described by Pliny the Younger in Marcion's time and place), he may have understood himself to be anchoring resistance to such a developing convergence, rather than leading a radical break from an existing religious identity. "Hence Marcion is better viewed as a conservative or traditionalist than as an innovator," suggests Harry Gamble,²¹ summing up an assessment of Marcion offered by John Barton.²² Yet this may be an unnecessary either/or. As with contemporary religious leaders who see themselves as "fundamentalists," anchoring a conservative position typically requires innovation—the creation or reformation of what will count as authoritative tradition.

Marcion's scriptural innovation can be understood as a direct consequence of his stance as a conservative or traditionalist over against ongoing developments in Christian doctrine and ethos. In closing a canon, Marcion suddenly and exponentially elevated the status of particular texts, and launched them into an undeniably superior authority relative to any others in a way no one before him had dared to do.²³ That is, he accentuated their place as scripture precisely by including them within a limited canon. In doing so, he set boundaries on what could be used as touchstones in evaluating various positions put forward as "Christian," narrowing the range of permissible variety with the Christian movement. Marcion's shift to text and canon ran closely parallel to a similar development taking place among non-Christian Jews in his time, as the rabbinic movement established its biblical canon and began to cite and comment on it directly. Marcion, likewise, closed the door to further composition of scripture within his Christian community, and initiated the era of the biblical commentary with his *Antitheses*.

By rooting authority in text, Marcion displaced it from the personal and individual. This shift implied that the personal authority of Christian teachers, even Marcion himself, could no longer be self-sufficient, but should be dependent on and subordinated to an impersonal, objectified repository, on the basis of which any claim on the tradition would have to be made and assessed. Marcion's act of canon-making was simply the first of a whole set of subsequent efforts to define Christianity through rival canons. If larger Christianity showed itself reluctant

21. Gamble, "New Testament Canon," 292.

22. Barton, *Holy Writings*, 35–62.

23. Barton's suggestion that Marcion did not necessarily regard these texts as sacred scripture, but rather "abolished the category of 'Scripture' altogether" (Barton, *Holy Writings*, 40) is poorly grounded on the assumption that Marcion felt free to edit them (which is unproven), and at the same time ignores the many historical examples of a religious leadership simultaneously redacting and sacralizing a text as authoritative. Nevertheless, his suggestion invites further investigation of what status exactly Marcion's canon had for his followers and to which if any of the contemporary Christian views of scripture it approximates. Given the historical and cultural context in which this canon was originally promulgated, they may have viewed it more in terms of the Hellenic "classic" than in those associated with "revelation."

and slow to follow Marcion's example, it suggests that many non-Marcionite Christians (for several centuries) preferred a more open-ended exploration of the possible meaning of Christianity, attentive to a greater plurality of voices that were treated as authoritative, if not as decisively so as those settled on by Marcion.

Marcion's decision to name the first volume of his NT *Evangelion* shows him affirming and making explicit Mark's implicit idea that the Christian message needed to be anchored in the life and deeds of Jesus. Others following Mark had written such narratives, but Marcion may have been the first to use the term as the title of a specific textual account of Jesus' life, as Harnack first suggested,²⁴ and the more systematic investigation of Helmut Koester supports.²⁵ Before Marcion, the term *evangelion* referred generally to the content of Christian teaching, and indeed free-floating words of Jesus with minimal context seem to have been the preferred resource employed in communicating the Christian *evangelion*. But Marcion fixed on a narrative account of Jesus as best claiming this designation, and he may have intended in this way to safeguard the meaning of Jesus' words and limit their possible interpretation through the specific context in which he supposedly uttered them.

As much as Marcion may have valued the relative fixity and stability of text, the sources on his NT show that it exhibited the same fluidity of text typical of all early Christian literature. More than a hundred years ago, Theodor Zahn noted variant readings between the various reporters of Marcion's texts.²⁶ More recently, John Clabeaux and Ulrich Schmid have sifted these variants in the *Apostolikon* against the quotation habits of our sources, as have David Salter Williams and Dieter Roth in the *Evangelion*, and shown that many of them must have been in the Marcionite manuscripts they had before them.²⁷ The most interesting of these textual variants involve the evidence of harmonization to Matthew referred to above; in many cases these harmonizations appear to have occurred in some copies of the *Evangelion* and not others. If Marcion had indeed edited the *Evangelion*, or even just used a single exemplar as the master text from which all Marcionite copies were made, we should not see any variation in harmonization to Matthew among the different copies of the *Evangelion*. Since Marcionite copyists would not be familiar with Matthew, all such harmonizations should have occurred before the incorporation of the *Evangelion* into Marcion's NT canon. Therefore, the existence of such variation in harmonized readings in our witnesses to the *Evangelion* suggests that, at the time Marcion

24. Harnack, *Marcion*, trans. Steely and Bierm, 24 and 149 n. 3.

25. Koester, "From Kerygma to Written Gospels"; Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 37. Cf. Kelber, *Oral and the Written Gospel*, 144–48.

26. Zahn, *Geschichte*, 613.

27. Clabeaux, *Lost Edition*; Schmid, *Marcion und sein Apostolos*; Williams, "Reconsidering Marcion's Gospel"; Roth, "Towards a New Reconstruction."

canonized it, it existed in multiple copies that in their pre-Marcionite transmission had met with varying degrees of influence from Matthew.²⁸

What this means is that even Marcion may not have fully appreciated the implications of the “textual revolution” with its new valuation of the fixed text. He apparently found it sufficient to identify which texts in circulation should be considered authoritative, without carefully monitoring their acquisition and incorporation into canonical sets for use in his communities to be sure that their texts were completely consistent. As a result, multiple copies full of variant readings came into use in Marcionite communities. For all his focus on the merits of stabilizing Christianity in text, Marcion apparently did not fully make the mental shift from the oral to the written gospel and realize the issues regarding the proper fixity of a literary text. It is only when a text has been declared authoritative, and so much rests upon exactly what it says, that the concern arises to establish a fixed form of it.²⁹ As the inventor of a canon, Marcion had not yet been shaped in his own thinking by “canonical” considerations of just how much was at stake in variant readings.³⁰

Canonization brought with it a fundamentally new attitude towards the text, opposed to fluidity and further adaptation. In the generation after Marcion, it was still possible for Tatian to re-edit Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John into a new gospel, the *Diatessaron*, and many less successful gospel reworkings date to roughly this period. But the followers of Marcion had already shut the door on this further literary innovation, and by the end of the second century Irenaeus put forth a similar argument against new gospels on behalf of non-Marcionite Christians. These were arguments about the ultimate resort of authority, carried out among a literate elite of Christian leadership. Most believers remained illiterate, but they could appreciate the symbolism and ceremony of their leaders’ appeal to a sacred text as a reference point of authority that could not change and that transcended any individual’s claim to be the arbiter of Christian truth.

28. Compare Schmid, *Marcion und sein Apostolos*, 15–16, who speaks in general terms of the possibility of textual variants, including even perhaps some of the significant omissions, in the manuscripts on which Marcion based his NT.

29. See Chapman, “How the Biblical Canon Began,” 49.

30. Much the same happened two centuries later when mainstream Christianity followed suit: the many variants in the existing manuscripts were carried over into the NT collections now given the status of canon. By this time, each text could have existed in hundreds of copies, and the infrastructure simply did not exist to exert textual control on this scale.

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