Marcion and the Pauline Letters

Did Marcion Preserve an Earlier Text, or Did He Edit an Existing One?

The Situation

Around 140 CE Marcion of Sinope arrived in Rome and produced the first known Christian scriptural canon: a single Gospel and ten letters attributed to Paul, which he called the *Apostolikon*. His versions of the Pauline letters are consistently shorter than the letters found in what became the canonical New Testament. The material absent from Marcion's versions includes passages connecting Paul's gospel to Israel's scriptures, the faithfulness of the Creator God, the groaning creation awaiting redemption, the bodily resurrection, and the ongoing election of Israel. The question that has occupied scholars since the nineteenth century is straightforward: *which came first?* Did Marcion receive the letters in substantially their canonical form and cut what offended him? Or does Marcion's shorter text preserve an earlier version, with the canonical letters representing a later expansion by proto-orthodox editors?

The Older Scholarly Consensus: Marcion as Editor

From the ancient church fathers onward — Tertullian, Irenaeus, Epiphanius — the standard answer was that Marcion received the Pauline letters as they existed and deliberately excised material irreconcilable with his theology. This remained the consensus through the great age of critical scholarship. Theodor Zahn, Adolf von Harnack (whose 1921 monograph *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* remains foundational), and Willem Christiaan van Manen all worked from the assumption that Marcion was an editor working with existing texts. Harnack in particular, drawing on exhaustive patristic evidence, concluded that Marcion's Gospel was a falsified Luke and his *Apostolikon* a truncated version of the canonical Pauline collection. This position has been maintained by the dominant stream of twentieth-century New Testament scholarship, including figures such as E. C. Blackman, R. Joseph Hoffmann, Ulrich Schmid, and Dieter T. Roth, as well as the overwhelming majority of working NT scholars today.

The argument from the patristic evidence is straightforward: Tertullian, writing around 207 CE, had access to both Marcion's text and the canonical letters and systematically documented what Marcion removed. His accusations of mutilation, while polemically motivated, are specific, detailed, and traceable. No other explanation of the consistent pattern of shorter readings in the *Apostolikon* has proved more economical than deliberate theological editing by a man with documented reasons to cut.

The Marcion Priority Thesis: A Recent and Vigorous Challenge

Beginning especially in the late twentieth century and accelerating into the twenty-first, a group of scholars has mounted a serious challenge to the older consensus. The priority thesis holds that Marcion's versions of the Pauline letters — and his Gospel — are earlier, not later, than the canonical versions. On this reading, the canonical New Testament represents a second-century expansion of Marcion's text, produced by proto-orthodox editors who added material to counter Marcion's theology and root Paul's gospel within Israel's story and the Creator God's plan.

Among these are Markus Vinzent, Matthias Klinghardt, Judith Lieu, Mark G. Bilby, Jack Bull, and M. David Litwa, who accepts priority with more caution. Jason D. BeDuhn occupies a nuanced middle position: he reconstructs Marcion’s *Apostolikon* carefully from patristic attestation without fully committing to the stronger priority claim, though his work is frequently cited by priority advocates.

The key methodological argument is the principle of *lectio brevior potior* — the shorter reading is to be preferred. In standard textual criticism, scribes and editors tend to add, harmonize, and elaborate; they rarely systematically delete coherent theological content. If Marcion's versions are consistently shorter, the default should be that they are earlier, not that Marcion was an exceptionally thorough editor. Vinzent goes further, arguing that the canonical Pauline letters are themselves second-century compositions with no historical first-century Paul behind them at all — that "Paul" is a second-century construction, and Marcion's collection simply represents the earlier layer of that construction.

The Chicken or the Egg: How to Think About It

At its core this is a question about directionality. Every scholar agrees that Marcion's text and the canonical text differ significantly. The disagreement is about which direction the difference runs: built up from Marcion's shorter original, or cut down from the canonical longer text? Neither side disputes the differences. They dispute the explanation.

Those who favor the older consensus point to the theological coherence of the cuts: every passage absent from Marcion tracks a single fault line — continuity between the Creator God and Christ's gospel, Israel's ongoing election, the material creation's redemption, the bodily resurrection. This is not the random pattern of scribal omission. It is the precise theological agenda of a man whose entire system required severing Paul from Israel's God. They also point to the personal texture of passages like Romans 9:3 — "I could wish myself accursed for the sake of my kinsmen" — and ask who in the second century would have invented that cry, and why, given that supersessionism was by then the dominant drift of Christian theology.

Those who favor the priority thesis respond that the patristic sources are hostile witnesses whose testimony about Marcion's editing cannot simply be accepted at face value. They note that Marcion's shorter texts are not random abbreviations but internally coherent documents — suggesting they are wholes, not remnants. And they observe that the canonical letters' canonical reception history is itself complicated: which Paul, and whose Paul, is the "original"?

The question ultimately turns on what Paul's gospel fundamentally was — and whether the theological vision it expresses could have been generated in the second century from any Christian theological sources of which we are aware—see Robert M. Grant, *Second-Century Christianity: A Collection of Fragments*, 2nd edition (2003).

Selected sources, in chronological order: Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (J. C. Hinrichs, 1921); E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (SPCK, 1948); R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity* (Scholars Press, 1984); Ulrich Schmid, *Marcion und sein Apostolos: Rekonstruktion und historische Einordnung der marcionitischen Paulusbriefausgabe* (de Gruyter, 1995); Robert M. Grant, *Second-Century Christianity: A Collection of Fragments, revised and expanded edition* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Jason D. BeDuhn, *The First New Testament: Marcion's Scriptural Canon* (Polebridge Press, 2013); Markus Vinzent, *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels* (Peeters, 2014); Judith Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Matthias Klinghardt, *Das älteste Evangelium und die Entstehung der kanonischen Evangelien* (2015); Mark G. Bilby (trans.), Jack Bull (ed.), Markus Vinzent (Greek ed.), *Paul's Literary Metamorphosis*, LODLIB v1.01 (Zenodo, 2023), DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.8271824; M. David Litwa, *Marcion: Gospel of a Wholly Good God* (Fortress Press, 2025); Markus Vinzent, Mark G. Bilby, Jack Bull, and K. Lance Lotharp, *The Earliest Collection of Pauline Letters and the Formation of the Canonical Collection of Paul's Letters*, 3 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming); Markus Vinzent, Mark G. Bilby, Jack Bull, and K. Lance Lotharp, *From Paul to Saul: Two Collections of Pauline Letters in the 2nd Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).