Against Marcion Priority: A Summary

James D. Tabor

The case that Marcion's shorter *Apostolikon* represents the earlier text — and that the material absent from it was added by proto-orthodox editors in the second century — faces a fundamental obstacle that has not been adequately answered by its proponents. The obstacle is not primarily one of patristic testimony, though that evidence is substantial. It is the internal reflextrive "character" of the material itself.

The passages most often tagged as having been absent from the *Apostolikon* are not a collection of loosely related additions that could plausibly have been inserted by editors working from theological motives. They are internally coherent with each other and with the letters in which they appear at a level that is extremely difficult to account for as interpolation. And when the absent passages are considered alongside the passages Marcion retained, they reveal something more damaging still to the priority thesis: together they constitute a single, continuous, unmistakable voice — with a distinct personality, a consistent cosmology, a characteristic rhetorical style, and an apocalyptic urgency that is historically specific in ways no second-century editor could have fabricated.

The Structural Argument: Romans

Take Romans alone. The groaning creation of Romans 8, the anguished cry of Romans 9:3, the irrevocability of the gifts and calling in Romans 11:29, the doxology of 11:36 — these are not independent insertions. They are threads of a single continuous argument running from chapter 1 through chapter 16. The logic of Romans 9–11 depends on Romans 8, which depends on Romans 5, which depends on Romans 3–4. Abraham in chapter 4 is not decorative — he is the structural pivot on which the entire argument about faith and righteousness turns. Remove him and the argument collapses. If a proto-orthodox editor inserted him, that editor did not merely add a passage — he restructured the entire theological architecture of the letter and did so invisibly, leaving no seams.

That is not what second-century editors do. We know what second-century editors do — we have the Pastoral Epistles, the deutero-Paulines, the Pauline overwriting of 1 Peter and the blatant forgery of 2 Peter. Not to mention the forgeries of Barnaba and Hermas—and for that matter most of the so-called "Apostolic Fathers," that try to rattle some kind of chain back to some authenticating connection to the Twelve. They are detectable precisely because they sit somewhat awkwardly in their contexts, address concerns that are recognizably second-century, and do not fully integrate with the surrounding argument. The passages the priority thesis assigns to expansion show none of those characteristics.

The Problem of Voice: Romans 9–11

Beyond the structural argument there is the problem of voice. The cry of Romans 9:3 — "I could wish myself accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers" — is not a theological proposition. It is an emotional eruption from a specific human being with a specific history. No second-century editor constructing a proto-orthodox Paul would have written it, because no second-century editor had that history or that grief. By the time proto-orthodox Christianity is consolidating in the second century, the theological drift is toward supersessionism — the church

as the new Israel, the old covenant as fulfilled and surpassed. The anguish of Romans 9–11, the insistence that Israel's gifts and calling remain irrevocable, the hope that all Israel will be saved, cuts against the second-century proto-orthodox grain, not with it. If editors were adding material to counter Marcion, they would not have added this. It does not serve their purpose nearly as well as it serves Paul's.

Apocalyptic Urgency and the Imminence of the Parousia

The absent passages do not exist in isolation from one of the most distinctive and historically datable features of the Pauline letters: their saturating apocalyptic urgency. Paul writes as a man who expects the end of the present age within his own lifetime. The appointed time has grown very short (1 Cor 7:29). The present form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:31). The night is far gone, the day is at hand (Rom 13:12). This is not rhetorical flourish — it is structural to his ethics, his mission strategy, his indifference to social arrangements, and his theology of the body and resurrection. It drives everything.

By the second century this imminent expectation had become an acute embarrassment. The Parousia had not come. The response of second-century Christianity was to spiritualize, allegorize, defer, or quietly drop the imminence. No proto-orthodox editor in the second century would have invented or amplified this feature — it was precisely what needed to be managed and softened. Yet the absent passages, read alongside those Marcion retained, breathe the same air of imminent expectation. The groaning creation of Romans 8 awaits a transformation that is cosmically imminent, not indefinitely deferred. The dead of 1 Corinthians 15 are raised because the Parousia is coming soon and they must not be left out. This is the world of the 50s CE, not the 150s.

Rhetorical Personality and the Storms of Passionate Argument

There is a further consideration that purely text-critical approaches tend to undervalue: the rhetorical personality of the letters. Paul argues in a recognizable and highly distinctive way. He anticipates objections and answers them before they are raised. He uses diatribe — the imaginary interlocutor — with a characteristic rhythm. He breaks into doxology at moments of theological intensity. He shifts without warning from legal argument to personal appeal to apocalyptic vision, sometimes within a single paragraph. He is capable of sustained sarcasm — "I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves" (Gal 5:12) — and of sudden tenderness. His defensive rhetoric, particularly in Galatians and 2 Corinthians, has the quality of a man genuinely wounded and fighting back, not a literary construction of apostolic authority.

This personality is consistent across all seven letters, and it is present in the absent passages as much as in those Marcion retained. The anguish of Romans 9, the exasperation of Galatians 1 when Paul recounts his independence from Jerusalem, the carefully constructed trap of the Abraham argument in Romans 4 — these do not read like theological additions. They read like the same man who wrote Philippians 3 and 1 Corinthians 9 and the Corinthian correspondence in all its turbulence. A second-century editor capable of sustaining that voice across multiple letters, invisibly and without seam, would be one of the most remarkable literary forgers in antiquity. There is no candidate.

Paul's Great Idea: The Cosmic Family of the Creator God

Perhaps most decisive of all is the theological vision that runs through both the retained and absent passages as a single unbroken thread. Paul's central conception — what might be called his Great Idea — is not forgiveness of sins, which any Jew already knew God could provide. It is something far more specific and strange: the Creator God is reproducing himself, bringing into existence through Christ a new genus of glorified, immortal, heavenly beings who will share his own image and glory. Jesus is "the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom 8:29) — the prototype of a cosmic family. The goal is glorification: the transformation of mortal Adamic creatures into Sons of God who will rule the cosmos, judge angels, and inherit all things.

This vision is inseparable from the Creator God. It requires the Last Adam, which requires the first Adam of Genesis. It requires the groaning creation awaiting its liberation, which requires the Creator whose good world is being redeemed rather than escaped. It requires Romans 9–11, because the cosmic family is being formed through the specific history of Israel and the Gentiles, not in spite of it. Remove the absent passages and you do not have a shorter version of Paul's Great Idea. You have a different idea entirely — one that sits far more comfortably in the Marcionite and Gnostic world, where the Creator is the problem rather than the agent of redemption.

This is precisely why Marcion removed what he did. His cuts were not random or opportunistic. They were theologically inevitable, because Paul's Great Idea is built on the Creator God's faithfulness to his own creation — and that is the one thing Marcion's entire system required him to deny.

Conclusion

The priority thesis ultimately requires proto-orthodox editors who were not merely theologians but literary artists of the first order — capable of inserting material into existing letters in a way that is stylistically indistinguishable from the surrounding text, theologically integrated at every level, emotionally authentic, apocalyptically urgent in a way no second-century writer sustained, and historically specific in ways that second-century writers consistently are not. The world of the absent passages is not the second century. The Bar Kochba revolt is over, Jerusalem is in ruins, the Gentile mission is mature, the collection for Jerusalem has no living institutional context, and the imminent Parousia expectation has been heavily qualified or spiritualized in mainstream Christian communities. None of that is the world the absent passages inhabit.

All of it points instead to a first-century context — one man, one decade, one coherent theological vision shaped by a specific apocalyptic Jewish matrix that was already receding by the time Marcion arrived in Rome. The simpler and historically more economical explanation remains what it has always been: Marcion received these letters substantially as they stood, found large portions of them theologically intolerable, and removed what he could not reconcile with his system. The cuts are not random. They are theologically inevitable given his two-God framework — and their internal coherence with everything he left behind is the strongest argument that they were always there.