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# Outlook

## The New Testament as a collection of the 2nd century

If the New Testament represents a collection that emerged in the 2nd century, which most scholars widely agree on, even as they debate the manner in which this collection developed, then it would be appealing to read it as a whole on the historical and socio-cultural background proposed in this book. I have only been able to do this re-reading of the New Testament in a few extracts. As a focus I have chosen the heart of the New Testament, "Christ's Torah", as it is concentrated above all in the Lucan Sermon on the Plain. But it would be more than attractive to read the life narrative of Jesus, integrated into the larger collection of the New Testament, as a text against the background of the 2nd century.

As I see it, this narrative of Jesus's life and the entire New Testament were shaped by the fact that they tried to answer the questions of many people who survived the bloodiest suppression of all Jewish revolts, both for revolters and Roman troops, Jews who had to lay their dead and, in many cases driven out of their homeland, had to seek a new home in exile or in the more distant diaspora. Both Marcion and the authors of the writings found in the collection conceived by Irenaeus and then in the later codified canonical New Testament[[1]](#footnote-1) were likely to have been affected by the aftermath of this war. How much the questions of reconciliation, peace, new beginnings, of wealth and poverty have become formative for the texts is already evident from the few passages dealt with here. However, the picture would become even clearer if other texts, for example from Acts, but also from the Catholic letters and above all from Rev, were opened up as response literature for the readers who saw these texts not as individual writings, but gathered together as a collection towards the end of the second century.

No less important seems to me the need to understand the Pauline Epistles, both those considered authentic and the pseudepigraphs, as collection texts for readers of the middle and end of the second century. Here, too, the present book offers only rudiments. I hope, however, that they are sufficient to enable us to make new reading experiences ourselves, inspired by this trace. In this context, the complex question of how to interpret the different versions of Paul's Epistles, as far as we can reconstruct them in Marcion’s collection and compare them with the later canonical collection, arises no less than with regard to the Gospels. As previously suspected, the absence of such significant passages as Rom 9-11, "the huge gap" as Tertullian called it,[[2]](#footnote-2) seems to me to go back to the need for people to define their position during and at the latest after the so-called Bar Kokhba war. This was caused by facing and living with the surviving revolutionaries and their disastrous legacy as well as the Roman victors, who were not really such. If it is true that, for the first time in history, only uncircumcised Jesus-followers remained in Jerusalem, while the circumcised of this community (or these communities) had to look for new places of survival after this war, texts such as Rom 9-11 0perhaps reflect attempts at response and self-assurance in order to enable re-profiling the altered cult group(s). Similarly, one might perhaps attempt to read Rom 3:23-31, a text that is unattested to Marcion and, according to Talbert, represents in part, but perhaps also entirely, a later editorial insertion:[[3]](#footnote-3)

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"23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,[a] through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. 27 Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. 28 For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. 29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, 30 since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. 31 Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law."

This is only an exemplary quotation. Other texts, such as the so-called Pastoral Epistles, are read in recent scholarship as writings from around the mid-2nd century.[[4]](#footnote-4) The "forgetting of Israel"[[5]](#footnote-5) noted in these Pastoral Epistles can perhaps be seen as a consequence of the reduction of Christian communities to the uncircumcised after that war.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Overall, this book is meant to be an invitation to engage in the proposed, certainly unfamiliar, reading. It will also reveal the exciting new perspective that a synoptic reading, adding \*Ev to the canonical and non-canonical gospels and writings, gives us.

To date, no theological commentary on Marcion's Gospel is available, but we are now in the comfortable situation that this Gospel, which until recently was largely unexplored, has now been presented in several reconstruction attempts and has also been translated into several languages.[[7]](#footnote-7) While this book cannot and does not intend to offer such a commentary, it will show, through the selected passages of synoptic comparisons, how fruitful and innovative this new approach promises to be.

It is certainly an irony of history that despite the later rejection of the \*Ev and, if I am to be followed, its author, both were no less influential than the collection of \*Pauline Epistles that Marcion has given us. First of all, \*Ev forms the basis for the Gospels that came after it, which follow it more closely or more widely in layout and often also in textual form. Similarly, the collection of his \*Pauline Epistles, as it found its way into his New Testament, forms the template for the revised and expanded version of these Pauline Epistles that were eventually included in the collection of Irenaeus. The title itself of Marcion's collection, which he called "New Testament" for the first time, was avoided by all authors of the 2nd century and even at the beginning of the 3rd century for Irenaeus’s broadened collection, but it prevailed and advanced to become one of the best-known book titles worldwide. From the outset, Marcion did not ascribe his own name as author to either his Gospel or his collection, even though he was associated with both, as shown by his preface to the collection. But he was not the only one who took a back seat to his products and was widely forgotten in the course of history for his importance in the formation of the New Testament. Irenaeus of Lyons met a similar fate. Following Marcion perhaps, he too did not lend his name to the collection, although, if the considerations presented here prove correct, he was the mastermind behind the anti-Marcionite collection which, though not yet his own, a later generation called the "New Testament".

History is difficult to divide into orthodoxy and heresy. In any case, the beginnings and the creation of the New Testament prove that the cross-fertilisation of scholars was intense and mutual. In difficult post-war times, followed by pandemics, teachers in the second century were struggling to find a new orientation in what was certainly a confusing situation at the time. Neither Judaism nor Christianity existed as abstract or institutional entities, but the often different Jewish and soon Christian cult practices continued to differentiate themselves after external pressures had grown considerably in the first two centuries and the cultural and linguistic differences of Jews and Christians within the Roman Empire and beyond multiplied and deepened.

Without a doubt, the teachers in Rome, Alexandria and elsewhere were no less competitors than those in university and college chairs in the world today. However, they were also no less dependent on each other, read each other, profited from the insights and perspectives of others and sat with their proposals on the shoulders of their ancestors, much as they do today. Whether dwarfs or giants is not even decisive here, since a perspective-dynamic view of history shows that highs and lows are essentially a matter of geographical and temporal distance. Much more important than assessments and judgements about origins and authorities is the intensive conversation that has taken place in the writings and into which this book attempts to provide a little insight. I am fascinated again and again by the serious discussion and the esteem expressed therein, which characterised most of the teachers of the 2nd century. The fact that for the most part, unfortunately, only controversial literature has been handed down to us clouds our judgement of this period and says more about what kind of descriptions attract the curiosity of a readership in the long term, and what falls into oblivion as time-bound writings of usage. It would be a desirable outcome if the disciplinary boundaries between the subjects dealing with the literature considered here were to soften and if, in close cooperation, many of the issues and problems addressed could be tackled together. Certainly, what has been presented here will not convince everyone, especially those who approach this literature from other perspectives, but I would be grateful if they in particular could engage with the considerations presented.

Moreover, it is my concern that even non-specialists should feel how little is certain, how little is encrusted and how immensely exciting the examination of the New Testament in historical perspective can be - an examination that is by no means about quisquilia or nuances, but which is about the foundations of world religions and the societies connected with them, indeed about such central issues as the distribution of life resources, of poverty and wealth, of justice and kindness. In this sense, this book aims to make a small contribution to the understanding of people living today in a world in which religions, institutions, cultures and countries often appear like monoliths and seem to promote movements of separation. A closer look at their foundations leads to the realisation that many of these demarcations were historically conditioned, perhaps even once useful and helpful in some respects, but must be examined again and again for their necessity and meaningfulness. At least as far as the New Testament examined here is concerned, it can be said that it stands on far less securely believed foundations than has been assumed so far. In my opinion, most of its content and context still remains to be discovered.

1. Codification meant here in the double sense of norm and codex. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tert., Adv. Marc. V 14,6. Of these chapters, only a few verses seem to have been present in Marcion’s \*Rom, see J. BeDuhn, The First New Testament. Marcion's Scriptural Canon (2013), 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Ibid. 298. Vgl. C.H. Talbert, A Non-Pauline Fragment at Romans 3:24-26? (1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. M. Theobald, Israel-Vergessenheit in den Pastoralbriefen. Ein neuer Vorschlag zu ihrer historisch-theologischen Verortung im 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr. unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Ignatius-Briefe (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One such is attested at least for Jerusalem, cf. Euseb. Euseb. Caes., Hist. Eccl. IV 5,3. Whether this reduction also happened elsewhere is unclear, but at least Marcion seems to have substituted baptism for circumcision, see M. Vinzent, Marcion’s Roman Liturgical Traditions, Innovations and Counter-Rites: Fasting and Baptism (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. M. Klinghardt, The Oldest Gospel and the Formation of the Canonical Gospels (2021); C. Gianotto and A. Nicolotti, Il vangelo di Marcione (2019); M. Klinghardt, The Oldest Gospel. Preface by David Trobisch (2018); M. Klinghardt, Das älteste Evangelium und die Entstehung der kanonischen Evangelien (2015); J. BeDuhn, The First New Testament. Marcion's Scriptural Canon (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)