

Rewriting and Reception in and of the Bible

Edited by

Jesper Høgenhaven,
Jesper Tang Nielsen,
and Heike Omerzu

Mohr Siebeck

Jesper Høgenhaven, born 1961; 1988 Dr. theol.; since 2007 Professor of Old Testament at the University of Copenhagen.

Jesper Tang Nielsen, born 1971, 2003 PhD; since 2007 Associate Professor of New Testament at the University of Copenhagen.

Heike Omerzu, born 1970; 2001 PhD; since 2009 Professor of New Testament at the University of Copenhagen.

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Reception as Corruption

Tertullian and Marcion in Quest of the True Gospel

Francis Watson

Writing against Marcion in the early years of the third century, Tertullian assumes that the fourfold canonical gospel has been firmly established since the days of the apostles whose authoritative testimony it enshrines.¹ Two gospels, Matthew and John, were written by apostles, and they have a certain pre-eminence over the two authored by Mark and Luke, who were *apostolici* rather than *apostoli*, disciples of the apostles Peter and Paul respectively. In spite of this differentiation, the church has acknowledged the full canonical status of all four gospels from the very first. For Tertullian Marcion's gospel is a pared down version of the Gospel of Luke, and it bears the telltale mark of all heresies: it is *belated*. Truth is of the beginning, falsehood is the later perversion of that original truth. From this perspective, Marcion's truncated Luke and his neglect of the other three gospels look perverse, a striking demonstration of heresy's sheer irrationality.²

In a certain limited sense, Tertullian's assumption of an always-already-canonical gospel collection is justified. While the boundary that divides canonical from noncanonical gospel literature is the creation of the later second century, it claims to articulate what has always been the case. The point is to assert that the reduction of the collective apostolic proclamation to definitive textual form was mandated by the Holy Spirit, who indwells the church and enacts there the divine will. The four gospel collection is presented as a gift and a given, and other attempts to put the gospel into writing are pushed out into the margins. As the gospel is read and reread within this ecclesial perspective, there is no place for speculation about alternatives. This is a matter not of unfounded theological commitments but of communal self-definition. To be Christian is to belong to a community that traces its foundation back to an event normatively attested in

¹ Tertullian engages at length with the Marcionite Gospel in book 4 of his *Adversus Marcionem* (Latin text with English translation, E. Evans, *Tertullian: Adversus Marcionem* [2 vols.; Oxford 1971]). Translations here are my own unless otherwise specified.

² It is a pleasure to dedicate this essay to Mogens Müller, in gratitude especially for the conference on »Luke's Literary Creativity« held in Roskilde, Denmark, June 2014, and for the opportunity it provided to think further about Lukan origins and reception.

the four gospel collection: that view was already shared by Tertullian in the early third century, and it remains a default position in the twenty-first.

While alternative constructions of communal identity have been marginalized, however, the concept of ›heresy‹ shows that they can never be forgotten. Indeed, in engaging at such length with Marcion, Tertullian acknowledges that views divergent from his own remain a live option. In struggling to overcome heresy, he brings that heresy to his readers' attention and invites them to judge between himself and his opponent. In spite of his confident polemical rhetoric, refuting heresy is an inherently risky activity: Tertullian is required to step outside the enclosed sphere of communal truth into a courtroom-like setting where truth must be established on neutral common ground. While Tertullian is thoroughly at home in such a context,³ his readers may judge that his attempt to prove the belatedness of Marcion's gospel is only partially successful. On the neutral ground of historical claim and counter-claim, it is less than obvious that Marcion's gospel is a perverse deviation from the fourfold apostolic one always and everywhere acknowledged by the church. Whatever dates are assigned to its individual components, the fourfold canonical collection as such is the creation of the later second century.⁴ Even if the Marcionite gospel is later than the individual gospels ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,⁵ it predates the collective decision to separate out these four texts from the proliferating mass of early gospel literature, and to create from them a single complex textual object that could not have been anticipated by any of the individual evangelists. In this perspective Tertullian's claim to represent the original apostolic truth that Marcion later falsified is problematic. Marcion reflects an earlier phase in the gospel's textual embodiment than Tertullian.

³ The tradition that Tertullian was a lawyer by training stems from Eusebius's reference to his legal expertise (*Hist. eccl.* 2.2.4). Jerome, however, says nothing about Tertullian's professional qualifications (*Vir. ill.* 53).

⁴ On the emergence of the fourfold gospel, see my *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids 2013), 411–509. Repeated attempts are made to establish an earlier second century date: see for example M. Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels* (Eng. tr. J. Bowden; London 2000), 19–24, 34–38; D. Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (New York 2000), 96–101; Th. Heckel, *Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium* (WUNT 120; Tübingen 1999), 260–265.

⁵ This is denied by M. Vinzent, *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels* (StPatrSup 2; Leuven 2014), 215–282, 277: Marcion »created the new literary genre of the ›Gospel‹, for which there was »no historical precedent.« While there is no substantial evidence for Vinzent's mid-second century, post-Marcionite dating of the canonical gospels, he is right to ask why the Marcionite gospel is overlooked in conventional scholarly discussion of the ›Synoptic Problem.‹

1 The Anonymous Gospel

Valuable testimony to the state of gospel writing in the mid-second century is provided by Celsus, a severe critic of Christianity much of whose work survives in Origen's later refutation. According to Origen, Celsus states that

some of the believers, like people who get drunk and inflict an injury on themselves, have revised the gospel in its first written form, three, four, or many times, and have remodelled it so as to be able to refute objections.⁶

A threefold rewriting of an original written gospel would produce four gospels. A fourfold rewriting would also produce four gospels if Celsus supposes that the original gospel has disappeared. Yet Celsus does not refer to a collection of four gospels but to a continual rewriting and revision of a singular gospel: one text in multiple editions rather than four discrete texts. This account strikingly anticipates the modern scholarly discovery that the canonical gospels are not independent of each other and that, in their different ways, all four have come into being as older material is constantly rewritten. Even in modern scholarship, however, the four retain the individual integrity guaranteed by the assignment of evangelists' names. If one gospel is named after Matthew and another after Mark, this limits the possibility of viewing one as a second edition of the other rather than as a self-standing work. In contrast, Celsus knows of no individual evangelists' names but refers collectively to »some of the believers« who are constantly rewriting and revising the gospel text to address perceived problems in its earlier forms. The anonymous rewriting process does not cease at the third or fourth iteration but occurs »many times«, and the result is an ever increasing chaos of interrelated but contradictory material.

Making allowance for Celsus's hostile tone, his brief analysis offers a remarkably accurate account of the origins of early gospel literature in a dynamic process of writing and rewriting. If his reference to »many times« seems exaggerated, we may recall the minimal and maximal versions of the gospel ascribed to Marcion and Tatian, one associated with a shorter version of the text we know as the ›Gospel of Luke‹, the other an extensive text that sought to unite all authentic Jesus traditions in a single work – a so-called ›Diatessaron‹ that may also have incorporated a range of traditions from outside the not-yet-canonical four.⁷ For their earliest users these works were not closely associated with individual named

⁶ τινὰς τῶν πιστευόντων, φησίν, ὡς ἐκ μέθης ἦκοντας, εἰς τὸ ἐφροστᾶναι αὐτοῖς, μεταχράττειν ἐκ τῆς πρώτης γραφῆς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τριτῆ καὶ τετραχῆ καὶ πολλαχῆ, καὶ μεταπλάττειν, ἵν' ἔχοιεν πρὸς τοὺς ἐλεγχοὺς ἀρνεῖσθαι (Origen, *Cels.* 2.27; P. Koetschau, *Origenes Werke* [vol. 1; Leipzig 1899]). On this passage see H. Merkel, *Die Widersprüche zwischen den Evangelien: Ihre polemische und apologetische Behandlung in der Alten Kirche bis zu Augustin* (WUNT 13; Tübingen 1971), 9–13.

⁷ For the proposal that the ›Diatessaron‹ should be viewed as a gospel in its own right, see M. Crawford, »Diatessaron, a Misnomer? The Evidence of Ephrem's Commentary,« *EC* 4 (2013):

figures, for they seemed to embody the collective apostolic testimony to Jesus and were known simply as »the Gospel«. Writing perhaps in the third quarter of the second century, Celsus is right to underline the fluidity of the written gospel as it passes through various forms, sometimes expanding, sometimes contracting, yet continuing to proliferate as new evangelists follow Luke's example in retelling a story already available in multiple versions (cf. Luke 1:1–4).

A key feature of this early gospel transmission was its tendency towards anonymity. An author such as Clement of Alexandria can be quite precise in tracing a quotation back to a specific Pauline letter, and yet be content with the vague reference to what is said »in the gospel« [ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ] when the saying in question clearly derives from Matthew, Luke, or John.⁸ Occasionally, when discussing a passage distinctive to an individual gospel, Clement can identify it by name with the formula, »In the gospel according to ...«. ⁹ But his primary concern is with the Lord's own words and not with their literary attestation. The gospel is to be found wherever the Lord's voice is textually available, and it does not need to be tied to a specific text with a named author. This anonymity of the gospel ensures direct access to the Lord's words, transmitted across time by apostles and scribes in a manner that leaves their immediacy intact. Clement's evidence is broadly compatible with Celsus's: there is a single »gospel« distributed across a number of literary embodiments, the compilers of which are normally left anonymous.

For Marcion too the gospel is essentially anonymous. It is his critics who insist that the gospel used by Marcionite congregations is *his*, Marcion's, gospel, and that it is an abridgement of a text *they* know as the »Gospel according to Luke«. Tertullian for one is genuinely puzzled by this anonymity, although he naturally seeks to exploit it for polemical purposes.

Tertullian notes that »of the available authors Marcion seems to have selected Luke – whom he mutilates [*quem caederet*]«. ¹⁰ This was, so Tertullian claims, a particularly poor choice. Luke was not himself an apostle, and the apostle Paul who stands behind his work was himself a late addition to the apostolic company. ¹¹ Having made this inappropriate selection, Marcion makes matters worse by

362–385; F. Watson, »Towards a Redaction-Critical Reading of the Diatessaron Gospel,« *EC* 7 (2016): 95–112.

⁸ Clement uses the same phrase, »in the gospel« to introduce citations from Matthew (*Strom.* 6.11.95.3, citing Matt 13:47), Luke (*Paed.* 2.12.125.2; Luke 12:16–20), and John (*Paed.* 1.5.12.2; John 21:4f.). Contrast »As the apostle also says in the Letter to the Romans« (*Strom.* 2.6.29.3); »as John says in the Apocalypse« (*Strom.* 6.13.106.2). For further discussion of Clement's usage, see my *Gospel Writing* (n. 4), 418–436.

⁹ E. g. ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ κατὰ Λουκᾶν (*Strom.* 1.21.145.2), ἐν τῷ κατὰ Ἰωάννην εὐαγγελίῳ (*Paed.* 1.6.38.2).

¹⁰ *Marc.* 4.2.4.

¹¹ Taking Tertullian's tendentious statements at face value, Heckel assumes that Marcion was already familiar with the tradition of a »Gospel according to Luke« authorized by Paul (*Evangelium des Markus* [n. 4], 331–335).

excising significant parts of it, notably the whole opening section which establishes the Jewish scriptural context for Jesus' ministry (Luke 1:1–4:30). Thus the gospel now opens with a descent not from Nazareth, as in Luke 4:31, but from heaven: »In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius ..., [Christ] descended to a city of Galilee named Capernaum.«¹² This gospel contains no infancy narrative, no account of John the Baptist or Jesus' baptism, no temptation narrative, and no inaugural sermon in Nazareth with its appeal to Isaiah, Elijah, and Elisha. It also lacks a named author. In contrast to the church,

Marcion assigns no author to the gospel (*his gospel!*), as though prohibited from attaching a title while at liberty to destroy the text itself [*ipsum corpus evertere*]. And I might take my stand just here, arguing that a work is to be rejected that does not hold its head up high [*non erigat frontem*], that displays no constancy and promises no trustworthiness in the form of a full title and due acknowledgment of its author [*de plenitudine tituli et professione debita auctoris*].¹³

The Marcionite gospel has a title of sorts, and that title is simply Εὐαγγέλιον. But such a title is wholly inadequate, lacking an authorial guarantor: Εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Λουκᾶν. Anonymous writing is fundamentally untrustworthy since no-one can be held to account for it. Tertullian assumes that Marcion has mutilated an original title just as he has mutilated the original text.

This assumption is anachronistic, however. In providing his gospel edition with the short title Εὐαγγέλιον, Marcion conforms to the old tradition of gospel anonymity still perceptible some decades later in Clement of Alexandria. Gospels acquire their full titles only when they need to be co-ordinated with one another. To identify a gospel as εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ ... is to acknowledge the existence of a plurality of versions which the κατὰ-formula serves to differentiate. Where there is no perceived need for any such differentiation the term εὐαγγέλιον is fully adequate, promising its users a selection of the Lord's words and deeds that can be filled out from other related gospel texts. In Marcion's case, there is as yet no need for the κατὰ-formula or for an authorial name. The gospel genre preserves the Lord's words and deeds as mediated by the collective apostolic testimony, and anonymity represents the assurance that no purely individual perspective intervenes between that testimony and the reader. In this respect at least, Marcion's gospel exemplifies a tradition that predates the fourfold canonical gospel.

¹² »Anno quintodecimo principatus Tiberiani proponit eum descendisse in civitatem Galilaeae Capharnaum« (*Marc.* 4.7.1; cf. Luke 3:1 and 4:31). For a reconstruction of the Marcionite gospel text based primarily on Tertullian, Epiphanius, and Adamantius, see D. Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel* (NTTSD 49; Leiden 2015). There is a colloquial English translation in J. BeDuhn, *The First New Testament: Marcion's Scriptural Canon* (Salem 2013), 99–127.

¹³ *Marc.* 4.2.4.3.

2 Tertullian's Failed Syllogism

Truth predates falsehood. The church's fourfold gospel predates the single anonymous gospel according to Marcion. Therefore the church's gospel is true and Marcion's is false and heretical. That is the syllogism that Tertullian strives to establish in the opening chapters of his fourth book. The question at issue is which of the two versions of the gospel is authentic and which has been corrupted: »I claim that the true version is mine; Marcion, that it is his. I allege that Marcion's version is corrupted; Marcion, that mine is.«¹⁴ The question can be settled by appealing to the principle of precedence, the major premise in Tertullian's syllogism: authority is to be ascribed to what is earlier, and corruption is only possible later. Since falsehood is the corruption of truth and truth must precede falsehood, the true gospel will be the earlier version while the later version will be a falsification.¹⁵ If the Marcionite opponents can be forced to admit that the church's gospel predates theirs, the issue of original truth and later corruption will have been settled.

Matters turn out not to be quite so simple. If Tertullian's assumption about the priority of the fourfold gospel were true, one would expect Marcion to engage with it directly in his quest for the authentic apostolic gospel. Tertullian is surprised to find that Marcion does not do so. He gives no reasons for rejecting Matthew, Mark, and John, failing even to mention them, and he finds his authentic apostolic gospel not in Matthew or John but in the post-apostolic Luke. In asserting the priority of the fourfold gospel, the minor premise of Tertullian's syllogism is generating worrying anomalies.

Initially all seems well. It is said that Marcion appeals to Paul's Letter to the Galatians so as to argue that Paul's opposition to the »pillar« apostles is a precedent for his own opposition to apostolic gospels. If apostles may err, then so too their gospels.

Marcion – encountering Paul's letter to the Galatians, where apostles themselves are criticized as not keeping in step with the truth of the gospel while false apostles are accused of perverting the gospel of Christ – strives to undermine the status of the individual gospels issued under the names of apostles or their followers, transferring the trust withdrawn from them to his own.¹⁶

Understandably, this passage has been thought to show that Marcion explicitly rejected the church's fourfold gospel, which was therefore already established by the middle of the second century.¹⁷ The argument seems compelling. Peter,

¹⁴ »Ego meum dico verum, Marcion suum. Ego Marcionis affirmo adulteratum, Marcion meum.« (*Marc.* 4.4.1).

¹⁵ *Marc.* 4.2.1.

¹⁶ *Marc.* 4.3.2, alluding to Gal 2:14 and 1:7.

¹⁷ So A. Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of an Alien God* (Eng. tr. J. E. Steely and L. D. Bierma; Eugene 1990), 28 f.

James, and John are disparagingly referred to as »the so-called pillars«, and Peter is said to deviate from the truth of the gospel at the instigation of James (Gal 2:9, 11–14). Tellingly, Paul does not claim that Peter accepted his rebuke – let alone that James did. Thus, according to Tertullian’s reconstruction of Marcion’s logic, there was a permanent breach between Paul and the three apostolic pillars which is mirrored in the breach between Luke and the other three gospels. Since Luke’s Gospel is traditionally traced back to the authority of Paul and Mark’s to that of Peter, the correspondence is remarkably close: the opposition between Paul and James, Peter, and John is reproduced in the opposition between the Pauline gospel and the Matthean, Petrine, and Johannine ones.¹⁸ Had Marcion argued along these lines, he would indeed »undermine the status of the individual gospels issued under the names of apostles or their followers« (*Marc.* 4.3.2).

Unfortunately for Tertullian, Marcion fails to develop any such argument. »His« gospel – that is, the gospel used in congregations he founded – is anonymous. It does not bear his own name, nor is there any assumption of an indirect Pauline authorship by way of Luke, Paul’s disciple. In its anonymity, the gospel embodies the collective apostolic testimony: to set Paul against other apostles would be as damaging to Marcion’s position as it would be to Tertullian’s. It is only from Tertullian’s perspective that Marcion *ought to have* exploited Paul’s opposition to the pillars to justify his own apparent rejection of gospels associated with them. *If* the fourfold gospel was immediately and universally accepted, *then and only then* is an explanation needed for the anomalous Marcionite use of Luke alone. Such an explanation lies ready to hand: Marcion’s privileging of Galatians suggests that he aligns Luke with Paul and the other three gospels with apostles whom Paul criticizes. Some such view was evidently taken by later Marcionite Christians contemporary with Tertullian himself, with whom he engaged in debate.¹⁹ In an early third century polemical environment in which the

¹⁸ The tradition of ascribing Pauline authority to Luke is exploited by Tertullian, *Marc.* 4.2.4–5. Tertullian assumes that Marcion has *selected* Luke from among a four gospel collection already acknowledged by the church: »Nam ex iis commentatoribus quos habemus Lucam videtur Marcion elegerisse quem caederet« (4.2.4). This claim is taken at face value by Harnack, *Marcion* (n. 17), 28.

¹⁹ *Marc.* 1.2.1–2; cf. *Praescr.* 23. Other Marcionites do not seem to have appealed to Gal 2 to justify their rejection of the church’s gospels. In the *De Recta in Deum Fide* attributed to »Adamantius« and dating from the late third or early fourth century, a character in the dialogue asks the Marcionite representative »why you disparage Matthew and John, whose names are recorded in scripture, and whom Christ sent out to preach and proclaim the Gospel, but accept Paul, for whom you have no proof« (2.12a). In response, the Marcionite affirms that Matthew and John were authentic preachers of the gospel but denies that they wrote the gospels attributed to them by the church (2.12b). Here true apostles (Matthew, John) are impersonated by false apostles, rather than the apostolic »pillars« (Peter, James) straying from gospel truth. For introduction and English translation (quoted here), see R. Pretty, ed., *Adamantius, Dialogue on the True Faith in God* (Gnostica; Leuven 1997). On Adamantius see also J. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge 2015), 115–124; Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 347–395.

fourfold gospel was an established fact, the Paul of Galatians 2 would seem a formidable ally. Yet, as Tertullian rightly acknowledges, a distinction must be made between Paul's criticism of genuine apostles and his denunciation of judaizing false apostles.²⁰ Marcion himself is only concerned with the ψευδαπόστολοι, a term derived from 2 Cor 11:13 and applied to the judaizing teachers of Gal 1:7 »who wish to pervert the gospel of Christ«. ²¹ These opponents of Paul perverted the gospel of Christ by confusing it with Judaism and its scriptures, and it was to counteract this disastrous confusion and differentiate the law from the gospel that Marcion compiled his *Antitheses*.²²

If Paul's criticism of true apostles extends beyond a disagreement about practice to the substance of the gospel itself, this would reflect badly on Christ himself who chose those apostles: that in essence is Tertullian's response to contemporary Marcionite opponents who avail themselves of the Galatians 2 scenario.²³ His response to Marcion himself is different, acknowledging Marcion's belief in an original apostolic gospel:

If however the apostles composed a pure gospel [*integrum evangelium*], being criticized only for inconsistent conduct, and if false apostles corrupted [*interpolaverunt*] their truth, from whom our copies are derived, where are we to find that authentic apostolic text [*germanum apostolorum instrumentum*], which was subjected to adulteration but once illuminated Paul and through him Luke? If it has been so utterly destroyed – as though by some deluge, obliterated by a tidal wave of forgers [*inundatione falsariorum oblitteratum*], then even Marcion does not possess the true gospel.²⁴

Here the *reductio ad absurdum* is less significant than the sudden clear grasp of Marcion's own logic. Marcion claims to possess the collective apostolic gospel, of which the text that came to be known as the *Gospel according to Luke* is the de-based second edition. It is we, catholic Christians, who view Marcion's gospel as an abbreviated and anonymized version of the text known to us as Luke's Gospel. From our perspective, the selection of just this gospel as sole source of the authentic apostolic one is hard to understand. If a single gospel must be selected at all, why not the unproblematically apostolic Matthew or John? Yet, as Tertullian acknowledges, we must learn to see things from Marcion's point of view. Here the gospel is not associated with Luke or any other named individual – even Paul or Marcion himself. Those who assert the Lukan connection are speaking about a text that differs significantly from the authentic apostolic gospel, and their as-

²⁰ *Marc.* 4.3.4.

²¹ Tertullian's use of the Greek term is probably drawn from Marcion (*Marc.* 4.3.4).

²² *Marc.* 4.4.4. Marcion's *Antitheses* are best understood as a preface to his gospel, as Lieu argues, *Marcion* (n. 19), 272–289, esp. 283–285. Lieu rightly questions the assumption that Marcion's *Antitheses* formed a substantial independent work.

²³ *Marc.* 4.3.4. The application of this point to Marcion himself is purely hypothetical. Lieu's claim that the conflict between Peter and Paul »certainly did play a focal role for Marcion« does not seem to me to be warranted (*Marcion* [n. 19], 283).

²⁴ *Marc.* 4.3.4.

signment of an author is itself a secondary development with little or no basis in early tradition.²⁵ For Marcion, then, there is a single authentic gospel, a written record of the apostolic testimony that predates the conversion of Paul. Tertullian supposes that Marcion would date it within the reign of Tiberius, immediately after the momentous events of that emperor's fifteenth year (cf. Luke 3:1).²⁶ Anyone who undertakes to rewrite this gospel along judaistic lines falls under the Pauline anathema, directed against those who propagate a gospel *beyond* (παρά) what was originally proclaimed and received (cf. Gal 1:8 f.).

There remains the issue of the other three gospels. If Marcion had rejected them, it would not be hard to see why. The very existence of individual gospels associated with Matthew, Mark, and John would deny the final authority of the original collective apostolic gospel. The problem lies in Marcion's silence:

Marcion must be questioned [*flagitandus*] about the gospels he omits in his exclusive appeal to Luke, as if those others had not also been in circulation among the churches from the very beginning just as Luke's has ... Given that the other gospels were in circulation among the churches, why does Marcion not mention them, listing corrections if they have been corrupted or acknowledging them if they are sound [*aut emendanda si adulterata aut agnoscenda si integra*]?²⁷

Tertullian is genuinely perplexed by his opponent's lack of engagement with gospels other than Luke. The problem is of his own making, reflecting the ahistorical assumption that all four canonical gospels were instantly recognized everywhere and by everyone. His syllogistic argument has failed, undermined by its own internal tensions and contradictions. Its major premise, that truth predates falsehood, is common ground between the two disputing parties. For both of them, the original apostolic truth has been subject to later corruption – as evidenced for Marcion by the church's »Luke« and for Tertullian by Marcion himself. The problem lies with the minor premise, that the church's fourfold gospel predates Marcion's single apostolic one. Whatever the dates of the individual texts, the four gospel construct itself is clearly later than Marcion's gospel edition – as Tertullian unwittingly confirms by his puzzlement over Marcion's silence.

In assuming that the gospel is the product of an anonymous apostolic collectivity, Marcion is representative of general Christian opinion in the early-to-mid-second century. Where he is innovative is in his insistence on *antithesis* – a sharp differentiation between the old Jewish scriptures and the new Christian ones which counteracts the disastrous legacy of those who wrote the law into the gospel. Marcion's, then, is the first *canonical* gospel – if the function of a canon is to draw a line separating truth from falsehood. It is not clear that the fourfold

²⁵ *Marc.* 4.3.5.

²⁶ *Marc.* 4.4.5.

²⁷ *Marc.* 4.5.4–5.

canonical form is indebted to Marcion, either directly or even indirectly.²⁸ The two versions of the canonical gospel are better seen as parallel developments. What is clear is that the four gospel form is later. Tertullian's major premise is turned against him.

If Marcion's gospel now seems to predate the church's fourfold one, does this mean that he is right and the catholic church in error? The premise that truth lies in what is original extends far beyond Tertullian. It remains a basic assumption of many modern theologies, both conservative and radical, biblicistic and critical. If this premise is true, then the four gospel collection is undermined by its relative lateness. A claim to truth stemming from the final quarter of the second century might seem at a disadvantage compared to one that may be traced far back into the first, perhaps even to that fifteenth year of Tiberius. Alternatively, we might choose to reject not only Tertullian's minor premise – that the fourfold gospel has been universally recognized from the beginning – but also his major premise, that the beginning is also necessarily the moment of truth. If the fourfold gospel is viewed as the outcome of the community's decision about what is to count as ›apostolic‹ and normative, its credibility is in no way called into question by a late date, or indeed by any of the other ambiguities which surround it. Theology apart, the fourfold gospel remains an intransigent social fact.

3 On the Originality (or otherwise) of the Marcionite Gospel

The Marcionite community believes that its gospel dates back to the time of Tiberius, in the immediate aftermath of the events it records, and that the text that circulates elsewhere under the name of Luke is a later corrupted version of their authentic primitive text. Within the catholic community, Tertullian asserts that the four canonical gospels go far back into the apostolic age and that the later corruption is Marcion's, who ignored or rejected three of them and ›mutilated‹ the other by depriving it of its opening chapters and title. The two parties recognize that one of the two similar gospels is the basis for the other, but the question is whether the shorter has been expanded by the longer or whether the longer has been abbreviated by the shorter. Each redactional process – expansion or abbreviation – is deemed illegitimate by those who believe it has taken place.

Tertullian dates the Marcionite gospel to the reign not of Tiberius (14–37 CE) but of Antoninus (138–161 CE).²⁹ Most modern scholars endorse his opinion and trace this gospel back to Marcion himself, with a preference for a date earlier rather than later in the Antonine period. Most of these scholars would also accept

²⁸ Marcion's influence on the formation of a New Testament canon is argued by Harnack, *Marcion* (n. 17), 130–132, and H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Eng. tr. J. A. Baker; Philadelphia 1972), 148, 171 f., 203 f.

²⁹ *Marc.* 4.4.5.

a date for Luke in roughly the 80s, although first century datings for the canonical gospels may still be influenced by the old authorship traditions from which critical scholarship is supposedly independent.³⁰ Even a relatively late date for Luke would still leave him comfortably earlier than Marcion – unless one supposes that Marcion inherited his gospel edition rather than creating it himself, or that Luke is to be dated close to his absolute *terminus ad quem* of say 150 CE. The view that Luke's gospel may postdate and be dependent on Marcion's is of course a minority one, not least because it would shatter all commonly accepted approaches to the so-called synoptic problem.³¹ While I do not myself believe this minority view to be true, it may be of value to compare the two gospels, to identify the (hypothetical) redactional procedures and ideological commitments that would lead from one to the other, and to outline a case for Lukan priority based on evidence rather than supposition.

In reconstructing the Marcionite gospel the crucial information is provided less by Tertullian than by Epiphanius, the fourth century heresiologist, in part 42 of his *Panarion*. Epiphanius recounts how

some years ago, wishing to learn about the falsehood this Marcion had invented and what his absurd teaching was, I took up his own books which he had mutilated, his so-called Gospel and Apostolic Canon. From these two books I made a series of extracts and selections of the material which would serve to refute him ...³²

A total of 78 enumerated passages is culled from the Marcionite gospel, of which 43 identify weak points that can – in Epiphanius's opinion – be exploited for anti-Marcionite purposes.³³ For example: the Marcionite gospel retains the incident where a penitent woman washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, kissing them as she did so (cf. Luke 7:36–38). Ergo Marcion's docetic

³⁰ On the assumption that Luke-Acts is the work of a companion of Paul, L. T. Johnson suggests that Luke was written »probably between 80 and 85 but possibly earlier« (*The Gospel of Luke* [Sacra Pagina; Collegeville 1991], 2). The years 80–85 are also proposed by J. A. Fitzmyer (*The Gospel according to Luke, I–IX* [AB; New York 1970], 57). W. G. Kümmel rightly criticizes a dating of Luke-Acts to the 60s, but he is wrong to assume that a date »between 70 and 90« necessarily follows from this (*Introduction to the New Testament* [rev. edn.; Eng. tr.; London 1975], 150 f.).

³¹ For this minority view, see Vinzent, *Marcion and the Dating of the Gospels* (n. 5); M. Klinghardt, »Markion vs. Lukas: Plädoyer für die Wiederaufnahme eines alten Falles,« *NTS* 52 (2006): 484–513, and »The Marcionite Gospel and the Synoptic Problem,« *NovT* 50 (2008): 1–27. According to BeDuhn, the supposedly Marcionite gospel actually predates Marcion and should simply be referred to as the Euangelion (*First New Testament* [n. 12], 78–92).

³² *Pan.* 42.10.2. Greek text, K. Holl and H. Lietzmann, *Epiphanius, Ancoratus und Panarion* (3 vols.; GCS; Leipzig 1915–1933). Eng. tr., F. Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (2 vols.; Leiden 1987–1993).

³³ *Pan.* 42.11.6 (list of Marcionite readings); 42.11.17 (*Scholion* and *Elenchus*, i.e. Marcionite readings followed by Epiphanius's anti-Marcionite comment). See Lieu, *Marcion* (n. 19), 193–196.

christology is false: you cannot wet, wipe, or kiss the feet of a phantom.³⁴ Interspersed within the passages selected for polemical reasons are 35 further passages where Marcion's gospel and Luke's deviate from one another. While it is possible or likely that his list is incomplete and that it contains secondary readings, most of the deviations correspond closely to Marcion's key theological emphases; there seems little reason to doubt Epiphanius's accuracy here. Of the 35 variants, 22 are omissions, ranging from a single word to entire pericopes.³⁵ Otherwise there are ten substitutions of words or phrases³⁶ and three additions, one apparently incorrect.³⁷ To Epiphanius's critical eye, this gospel is like a cloak full of moth holes.³⁸

Not included in the list is Marcion's »Great Omission«, the absence from his text of most of Luke 1–4, which Epiphanius has already mentioned separately. At the beginning of Marcion's gospel,

all that Luke composed »from the beginning« – his »inasmuch as many have attempted«, and so on, and the account of Elizabeth and the angel's announcement to Mary the Virgin, about John and Zacharias and the birth at Bethlehem, the genealogy and the narrative of the baptism – all this he cut out and turned away from [περικόψας ἀπεπήδησεν], and made this the beginning of the Gospel: »In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar«, and so on.³⁹

Epiphanius (and Tertullian) may well be right to claim that the Marcionite gospel is the work of Marcion himself and that it is no more than an abridged version of Luke. Yet it is important to remember that this account was contested within Marcionite communities. Members of these communities believed that their gospel was the original and authentic apostolic one, composed in the immediate aftermath of the events it narrates. Marcion recovered, republished, and promoted it, but he was not its author and it is absolutely not dependent on the text ascribed elsewhere to Luke. The opposite is the case: in this so-called »Gospel according to Luke«, the original gospel has suffered judaizing additions which amount to the disastrous conflation of gospel and law against which Paul fought so hard. For catholics, Luke is Paul's disciple; for Marcionites, he is Paul's opponent. Both parties accept that one of the two rival gospels is a corrupted version of the other, but where one of them finds excisions the other sees interpolations.

³⁴ *Pan.* 42.11.6 (no. 10) = 42.11.17, *Scholion* 10.

³⁵ Omissions of a word or a phrase occur at Luke 10:21 (no. 22 in Epiphanius's list); 12:8 (no. 30); 17:10 (no. 47). Most of the omissions are more extensive: Luke 8:19 (no. 12); 11:29–32 (no. 25); 11:49–51 (no. 28); 12:6 (no. 29); 12:28 (no. 31); 13:1–9 (no. 38); 13:29–35 (no. 41); 15:11–32 (no. 42); 18:31–34 (no. 52); 19:29–46 (no. 53); 20:9–18 (no. 55); 20:37 f. (nos. 56, 57); 21:18 (no. 58); 21:21 f. (no. 59); 22:16 (no. 63); 22:35–38 (no. 64); 22:49–51 (no. 67); 23:43 (no. 72).

³⁶ Substitutions occur at Luke 5:14 (no. 1); 6:17 (no. 4); 7:23 (no. 8); 11:42 (no. 26); 12:32 (no. 34); 12:38 (no. 35); 13:28 (no. 40); 17:14 (no. 48); 18:19 f. (no. 50; also an addition here); 24:25 (no. 77).

³⁷ Additions are said to occur at Luke 9:40 (no. 19, *sic*); 23:2 (nos. 69, 70).

³⁸ *Pan.* 42.11.3 (ἱματίου βεβρωμένου ὑπὸ πολλῶν σιτηῶν).

³⁹ *Pan.* 42.11.4–5.

In an attempt to find a neutral terminology, we will refer to the Marcionite gospel as the *M* gospel and to the catholic »Luke« as the *L* one.

It is the first great excision or interpolation that establishes the distinctive characters of the *M* and *L* gospels. According to *M*, Jesus is a heavenly being who descends to earth in the fifteenth year of Tiberius without announcement or preparation. His human existence is shaped by no prior context, for he brings his own context with him and that context is the world of the unknown Father he comes to reveal. Entering into human embodied existence, he derives nothing from it. He does not originate as we do from the indignities of conception, birth, and growth; he has no parents or genealogy, and he was never a child or adolescent. More specifically, he enters the Jewish cultural sphere with its sacred texts (law and prophets), its personnel (Pharisees and priests), and its institutions (synagogue and temple). This is the sphere of the deity who created this material world, and whose stranglehold on human existence Jesus comes to break. In the *L* gospel, however, these dichotomies are almost entirely absent. Although miraculously conceived, Jesus otherwise experiences an entirely normal human development, both biologically and culturally. When he reaches maturity, the mission entrusted to him is viewed as the fulfilment of the law and the prophets rather than their abolition. Thus the *L* gospel opens with an elaborate depiction of the comprehensive context that produces Jesus, on which he remains dependent. This linear continuity between law and gospel is diametrically opposed to the *M* gospel's insistence that Jesus derives his being exclusively from above. Given the close textual relationship between the two gospels, we may say that each represents a reaction and protest against the other, irrespective of their order of composition. It is a case of sibling rivalry.

Close though they are to one another, ideological differences can break out even in the most minor textual variants. Thus *M* contains a passage that reads:

And he [Jesus] was told, »Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see you«. But he said to them, »My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.«⁴⁰

For *M*, Jesus' reply makes it clear that the people standing outside were imposters, falsely claiming a familial relationship with him. Jesus' origin is from above, and he has no human relatives. In *L*, on the other hand, the narrator endorses Jesus' biological kinship to others by providing an introduction lacking in *M*: »Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him for the crowd« (Luke 8:9). In contrast to the *M* gospel's sharply antithetical formulation, *L*'s Jesus has two sets of mothers and brothers, one biological, the other spiritual.

⁴⁰ Luke 8:20 f.; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 12: »He did not have ›his mother and his brothers‹, but only ›Your mother and your brothers.‹« See Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 297 f.; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 145 f.

When Jesus is brought before Pilate, the accusation in the *L* gospel has two distinct elements, whereas there are four in *M*:

We found this man perverting our nation, *and destroying the law and the prophets* [καὶ καταλύοντα τὸν νόμον καὶ τοὺς προφῆτας] and saying that he himself is Christ a king, *and turning away the women and children* [καὶ ἀποστρέφοντα τὰς γυναῖκας καὶ τὰ τέκνα].⁴¹

The second additional element here may suggest that the *M* community places particular emphasis on the participation of women and children. The first additional element takes us to the heart of the ideological conflict between the twin gospels. In *L*, as we have noted, Jesus comes not to destroy but to fulfil. Scriptural figures and groups are cited approvingly. Jesus anticipates his hearers' grief on seeing »Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and yourselves cast out«. According to *M*, the passage should run: »... when you see *the righteous* in the kingdom of God and yourselves *kept* out [ὑμᾶς δὲ κρατουμένους ἔξω].«⁴² If *M* here rewrites *L*, then Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be kept out of the kingdom of God just as they have been cast out of the gospel text. If *L* here rewrites *M*, the conflation of law and gospel is entirely characteristic. Among *L*'s other scriptural role models are the people of Nineveh, who repented at the preaching of Jonah, and the Queen of the south, who undertook a lengthy journey to hear the wisdom of Solomon. None of these has any place in the *M* gospel, which lacks the entire passage.⁴³ Similarly absent from *M* are the *L* passages where Jesus states that his death and resurrection are determined by Jewish scripture. *L*'s Jesus goes to Jerusalem so that »everything written of the Son of man will be accomplished«. ⁴⁴ The point is elaborated on the road to Emmaus: »O fools and slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken ...« Instead of »all that the prophets have spoken«, *M* has, »all that I have spoken [πᾶσιν οἷς

⁴¹ Luke 23:2; *Pan.* 42.11.6: »69. After ›We found this fellow perverting the nation«, Marcion added, ›and destroying the law and the prophets«. 70 The addition after ›forbidding to give tribute: is ›and turning away the wives and children.« See Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 336 f.; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 190. The reading »and destroying the law and the prophets« is also attested in some Old Latin MSS, although usually in the form, »... et solventem legem *nostram* et prophetas« (*b e ff² i l q*); only *c* lacks »nostrum« and agrees fully with the reading attributed to Marcion. A longer version of the second additional element (›... and turning away the women and children«) is found in Old Latin mss. of Luke 23:5, where the accusations of v. 2 are renewed. Here it is said that Jesus incites the people throughout Judea and Galilee, »et filios nostros et uxores avertit a nobis, non enim baptiza[n]tur sicut [et] nos [nec se mundant]« (*e* longer text, *c* shorter). See A. Jülicher, *Itala: Das Neue Testament in Altlateinischer Überlieferung. III Lucas-Evangelium* (Berlin 1954), 256 f.

⁴² Luke 13:28; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 40. See Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 318 f.; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 169 f.

⁴³ Luke 11:29c–32; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 25: »The saying about Jonah the prophet has been cut out [παρακέκοπται]. Marcion had ›This generation, no sign shall be given it.‹ But he did not have anything about Nineveh, the Queen of the south, or Solomon«. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 310; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 161.

⁴⁴ Luke 18:31–34; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 52 (omission of Luke 18:31–33). Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 326 f.; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 177 f.

ἐλάλησα ὑμῖν]«. ⁴⁵ Once again, the *M* gospel speaks of a Jesus whose word is decisive in and of itself and who needs no additional support from some sacred past.

M differentiates the unknown Father whom Jesus reveals from the creator deity responsible for the present world. Thus Jesus' prayer is addressed to the »Lord of heaven« rather than the »Lord of heaven and earth«, as in *L*. ⁴⁶ It can hardly be the creator deity of whom Jesus speaks when he says, »No-one knows who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him« (cf. Luke 10:22). ⁴⁷ Here and elsewhere, however, *L* scatters references to the creator that are absent in *M*. It is said of God that he is mindful of sparrows, ⁴⁸ that he makes flowers grow, ⁴⁹ and that his protection extends to the hairs of our head. ⁵⁰ The *M* gospel's »Father« would seem to be above such trivia. Also absent from the *M* gospel are passages that speak of divine violence and cruelty. The Jesus of the *L* gospel makes his contemporaries accountable for all innocent blood, from the very beginning of the world. ⁵¹ He threatens his hearers with the fate of contemporary victims of Pilate's savagery and a collapsing building. ⁵² The threatened divine violence finds its echo within the circle of Jesus' own disciples. Indeed, Jesus even advises them to go out and buy swords. Two have already been provided, and one will be used to gruesome effect, slicing off an ear in the Garden of Gethsemane. Once again, all this is lacking in *M*. ⁵³ In *M*, the true God is pure

⁴⁵ Luke 24:25; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 77. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 343–345; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 195. Tertullian reads ἐλάλησεν here (*Marc.* 4.43.4), but ἐλάλησα is confirmed by Adamantius, *De Recta* (n. 19), 5.12.

⁴⁶ Luke 10:21; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 22. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 305 f.; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 155 f. The omission of καὶ τῆς γῆς in Ψ^{45} may be coincidental, or it may be an echo of the Marcionite gospel. Tertullian here reads, »Gratias ago et confiteor, domine caeli« (*Marc.* 4.25.1).

⁴⁷ A key Marcionite proof-text. Thus in the Adamantius dialogues, the Marcionite Megethius states: »I will prove to you from the scriptures that there is one God who is the Father of Christ, and another who is the Demiurge. The Demiurge was known to Adam and his contemporaries – this is made clear in the scriptures. But the Father of Christ is unknown, just as Christ himself declared when he said of him, »No-one knew the Father except the Son, neither does anyone know the Son except the Father« (Adamantius, *De Recta* [n. 19], 1.23). Cf. Tertullian, *Marc.* 4.25.10, who notes that this is a favourite passage among other heretics too. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 373 f.

⁴⁸ Luke 12:6; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 29. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 312 f.; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 163.

⁴⁹ Luke 12:28; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 31. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 314; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 165. Tertullian alludes to this passage (*Marc.* 4.29.1–3), but, as Roth argues, his »allusions to the elements that Epiphanius attests as absent are likely due to Tertullian himself, and not to Marcion's Gospel« (ibid.).

⁵⁰ Luke 21:18; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 58. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 530; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 183, noting that this verse is also absent in syr^c.

⁵¹ Luke 11:49–51; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 28. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 312; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 162.

⁵² Luke 13:1–9; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 38. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 317 f.; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 168.

⁵³ Luke 22:35–38, 49–51; *Pan.* 42.11.6, nos. 64, 67. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 334–336; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 187 f.

goodness: »One is good, *the Father*.«⁵⁴ For the *M* community, the violence that has crept into the text of *L* is that of another deity. Underlying all this is the fatal mixing of the law with the gospel, precisely that perversion of gospel truth that the apostle Paul so vehemently denounced.

The *M* and *L* gospels are related in such a way that each can plausibly be presented as a secondary version of the other, whether through additions or abridgement. The question of historical priority is subsumed into a struggle for dominance between two competing accounts of Christian identity and its textual bases. Later Christian identities are all informed by the eventual victory of the catholic community over the Marcionite one, however and whenever this came about. For that reason, we are predisposed to side with Tertullian and Epiphanius as they insist that the Marcionite gospel is the work of Marcion himself and that it is a late abridgement of a first century Gospel of Luke. Yet conventional gospel datings are simply informed guesses and could be wrong; Luke might be later than we imagine, and Marcion might have inherited »his« gospel from some predecessor. An *L* gospel that postdates the *M* one is conceivable.⁵⁵

Conceivable, but (in my opinion) unlikely. Several of the *M* deviations from *L* seem clearly secondary. In Luke 11:42, the Pharisees are condemned for neglecting τὴν κρίσιν καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην θεοῦ, the justice or judgment and the love of God. In the *M* gospel the love of God is associated not with the divine judgment (κρίσιν) but with the divine calling (κλήσιν).⁵⁶ This is most likely to be an emendation reflecting the Marcionite dichotomy between the Jewish God of justice or judgment and the Christian God of love. In Luke 18:20, Jesus responds to the question, »What shall I do to inherit eternal life?« with the words, »You know the commandments ...« In *M* this has become »I know the commandments.«⁵⁷ This wording avoids any suggestion that Jesus recommends the law as the way to eternal life, but it fits awkwardly into its present context. In these cases at least, the variants are most plausibly explained as *M* redactions of *L*.

More compelling perhaps is the parallel case of the Pauline texts. In Tertullian's detailed treatment of the Letter to the Romans, he moves directly from Romans 8:11 to 10:2 with the remark that »here too I must leap over a great gulf of excised scripture.«⁵⁸ While it is unlikely that the *M* text of Romans could have moved directly from the one passage to the other, there may be good Marcionite reasons for rejecting the passages on the redemption of the created order (Rom 8:8–25)

⁵⁴ Luke 18:19; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 50 (cf. Adamantius, *De Recta* [n. 19], 1.1). Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 324–326, 384–387; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 177.

⁵⁵ See the nuanced remarks on this in Lieu, *Marcion* (n. 19), 200–203.

⁵⁶ Luke 11:42; *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 26. Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 310f.; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 162.

⁵⁷ *Pan.* 42.11.6, no. 50; cf. Tertullian, *Marc.* 4.27.4 (»Sic et holuscula decimantes, vocationem autem et dilectionem dei praetereuntes obiurgat«). Roth, *Text* (n. 12), 310f.; BeDuhn, *First New Testament* (n. 12), 162.

⁵⁸ Tertullian, *Marc.* 5.14.6: »Salio et hic amplissimum abruptum intercisae scripturae.«

and the scriptural view of election (9:6–33). If Tertullian is right to claim that Marcion has abridged and emended the Pauline texts, then the same may also be true of the Luke text. As the Pauline parallel shows, Marcion has an impressive track record as an abridger of earlier Christian literature.

This does not mean that orthodox anti-Marcionite polemic is straightforwardly correct and that Marcion is the »mutilator« of a revered canonical text. That would be to project a post-canonical perspective back into a pre-canonical situation. As editor and emender of an existing gospel text, Marcion is in direct continuity with earlier evangelists, who considered themselves at liberty to excise or elaborate as appropriate.⁵⁹ The tendency of the Lukan evangelist was to expand his primary source, Mark. If Marcion's primary source is Luke, and if his own tendency is to contract, that does not make him any less of a synoptic evangelist.

⁵⁹ As Lieu argues, »redaction and ›correction‹ were widespread textual strategies in the second century, and there is no good reason for excluding Marcion from their exercise« (*Marcion* [n. 19], 203).