David Trobisch, "The Gospel According to John in the Light of Marcion's Gospelbook," Das Neue Testament und sein Text im 2.Jahrhundert, Editor(s): Jan Heilmann, Matthias Klinghardt, TANZ 61 (Tübingen: Francke, 2018) 171-181.

The Gospel According to John in the Light of Marcion's Gospelbook

David Trobisch

At the end of the second century, Tertullian promoted the opinion that Marcion redacted the Canonical Edition of the New Testament by taking out whole writings and removing sections of text.[1] This view has often been challenged, however, and several recent studies firmly insist that Marcion's publication preceded the canonical Gospel According to Luke.[2]

The central observation that discredits Tertullian's assessment is that Marcion's book includes passages that contradict the theology that Marcion was supposedly trying to promote. Why would Marcion not have deleted them?

> And I believe that Marcion on purpose did not want to delete some material from his Gospel which contradicted him. He left it in the text although he could have deleted it, either so that one could not say that he deleted anything, or that one could say that he deleted material for good reason. (Adv. Marc. 4.43.7)
>
> Et Marcion quaedam contraria sibi illa, credo industria, eradere de evangelio suo noluit, ut ex his quae eradere potuit nec erasit, illa quae erasit aut negetur erasisse aut merito erasisse dicatur.[3]

Tertullian also reports that Marcion denied redacting the canonical version and accused his opponents of adding to his gospel as they created the Gospel According to Luke.[4]

---

1 For the term "Canonical Edition" see Trobisch, First Edition, 8–9.

2 Scholars in support of the priority of Marcion are Campenhausen, Knox, Hoffmann, Tyson, Klinghardt (see Bibliography; cf. also Klinghardt, Evangelium, 117–141). The position of Marcion editing the Canonical Edition has recently been re-stated by Moll (Moll, The Arch-Heretic). Harnack's position is not always consistent; see Klinghardt, Evangelium, 119–132.

3 The Latin Text is from Evans, Tertullian. The English is quoted from Roberts/Donaldson/Coxe, Ante-Nicene Fathers: Tertullian, 349.

4 Cf. Adv. Marc 4.4.4: "For if the Gospel, said to be Luke's which is current amongst us … is the very one which, as Marcion argues in his Antitheses, was interpolated by the defenders of Judaism…"

> I affirm that Marcion's Gospel is adulterated; Marcion, that mine is. (Adv. Marc. 4.4.1)
>
> Ego meum dico verum, Marcion suum; ego Marcionis affirmo adulteratum, Marcion suum.

So the pertinent question is, who edited whom? Tertullian proposes to settle the question by insisting that the version that was written first is the original one.

> Now what could possibly settle the question between us better than the argument of time? Authenticity should lie with that which is found to be earlier and that which is found to be later should be considered flawed. (Adv. Marc. 4.4.1, author's translation)
>
> Quis inter nos determinabit, nisi temporis ratio, ei praescribens auctoritatem, quot antiquius reperietur; et ei praejudicans vitiationem, quod posterius revincetur?

Tertullian assumes that if editors assign a writing to an author from the first century that the writing must have been written in the first century. The editorial narrative of the Canonical Edition suggests that Luke who finished the book of Acts while Paul was still alive (Acts 28:30–31) is the author of the third gospel.[5] Creative writers, however, may choose to tell a story through the voice of a character, and therefore the narrative details of when and where a story was written down may or may not be historical.

In the following, I will assume that Marcion's book is older than the Gospel According to Luke, and that the editors of the Canonical Edition of the New Testament were familiar with it and used it. They also knew that their readers would encounter the Gospel According to John as the fourth gospel in their Four-Gospel-Book.

It is therefore reasonable to try to understand John (a) on a literary level as an integral part of the Four-Gospel-Book, and (b) from a historical perspective in the context of Marcion's publication.

1 Literary-Critical Assessment: The Gospel According to John as an Edited Version of the Manuscript of the Beloved Disciple

Readers who appreciate the final form of the Gospel According to John and read it at face value will pick up reading instructions from the editors. Immediately before the concluding sentence of the Gospel the editors address the readers of the book (Jn 21:24).

> This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.

5 Trobisch, First Edition, 49–52.

As readers we are told that the editors used a manuscript written by "this disciple" as the basis of their publication. They explicitly endorse the manuscript by insisting that the "testimony is true". But they also refer to themselves in the first person plural "we" and expect the readers to make a distinction between the authorial voice of the manuscript and the voice of its editors.[6]

Clearly, the editors would have had other possibilities. They could have used the authorial voice and write: "I, the disciple whom Jesus loved wrote these things down and I testify that everything I wrote is true". This is, for example, the perspective chosen in the Gospel According to Luke. It is introduced to the readers of the Four-Gospel-Book, "Dear Theophilus, I publish this story so you know that the teachings you received are reliable" (Lk 1:1.3.4).[7]

But the fourth gospel lives up to what the title suggests, this is not the "Gospel of John" it is the Gospel "According to John". The editors do not hide their voice, they invite the readers to distinguish between their editorial work and the manuscript of the "beloved disciple".

How should the readers distinguish between editor and author? The editors give two clues. Firstly, they differentiate between their own voice ("we") and the voice of the author ("disciple"), secondly they provide signals between the exact reference point in the manuscript of the beloved disciple and their comments, very much like footnotes in modern scholarly publications. A graphic representation of Jn 21:20–24 that uses notes in the margin, a common feature found in ancient manuscripts, could look like this:

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved* following them. When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!"**

** He was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?"*

***So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.*

6 For Jn 21:24 cf. Thyen, Joh, 1–5, 793–796. Traditional view advocating Jn 21 as an appendix see Wengst, Joh, Bd. 1, 30f., Bd. 2: 327f. For summary text observations indicating the beloved disciple as an implied author, narrator, authentic witness, and "exegete of Jesus" (Jn 1:18; 13:23; 15:27; 19:25–27) cf. Thyen, Joh, 596.

7 Cf. Thyen, Joh, 2.

In the first instance (*), the editors reference a passage in the manuscript and for lack of other indicators, like our modern chapters and verses, they provide a quote that allows readers to identify the passage as Jn 13:23–25.

> One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

The editors' objective is to identify the "disciple whom Jesus loved" as one of the characters mentioned earlier in the manuscript they are editing.

The second editorial remark (**) also references the exact passage by providing a direct quote, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" If one assumes the scenario that the author of the manuscript had already died at the time the editors are preparing it for publication, this comment feels helpful. A paraphrase could be: "Dear reader, read the passage carefully! Jesus did not say that John would still be alive!" Adding a note instead of simply changing the wording demonstrates to the readers the respect the editors have for the manuscript of the beloved disciple.

Other editorial remarks in the Gospel According to John also cross-reference characters of the story, reminding readers that they are mentioned in other places of the book, for example Jn 11:1–3.

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.* So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."	** Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.*

Here the editors reference a story that the readers have not yet read. It will be told in the following chapter (Jn 12:1–2).

> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Or when Caiaphas makes an appearance in Jn 18:13, readers are reminded that he was mentioned a few chapters earlier.

First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year.*	** Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people.*

The cross-reference is to Jn 11:49–50.

> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."

Judas is another person who is cross-referenced (Jn 6:68–71).

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil."*

* *He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray* him.

The reference is to Jn 18:2–3.

> Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

In the examples above, the cross-referencing of passages concentrates on characters in the story: the beloved disciple, Mary, Caiaphas, and Judas. And once readers recognize the pattern, they should appreciate that the editors did not interfere with the wording of their source but preferred to amend it through distinct commentary.[8]

Clearly the editors expect their audience to be a reading audience. The idea of an old manuscript written by an eyewitness, long lost and now brought to public attention, caters to book lovers. Familiarity with competing books is implied in the first lines of the Gospel According to Luke which inform readers that many others have already published accounts of what Jesus did (Lk 1:1).

The opening sentences of the Gospel According to John assume a familiarity with the beginning of the Greek Pentateuch, another publication editors assume readers will know.

1 *In the beginning* was the Word, and *the Word was with God*, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The *light shines in the darkness*, and the darkness did not overcome it.

1 *In the beginning* when God created the heavens and the earth, … 3 Then *God said*, »Let there be light«; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God *separated the light from the darkness*.

8 The editorial remarks are not limited to cross-referencing characters. Cf. Hedrick, Authorial Presence, 74–93.

The Gospel According to John is the fourth gospel of the canonical Four-Gospel-Book. Readers encounter it in the context of three other gospels. And as they engage in reading the fourth gospel, it becomes apparent that the editors expect them to be familiar with the storyline and characters of the first three gospels (Jn 1:6–8).

> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

The only John mentioned to the readers of the Gospel According to John at this point was the John referred to in the title. But this man is a different one, and from his description as "not being the light but testifying to the light" readers familiar with the three preceding gospels are expected to recognize the reference to John the Baptist.

As the text continues, readers familiar with the story will try to find parallels (Jn 1:9–11).

> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

"Coming into the world" may refer to the story of Jesus' birth. And for readers of the preceding three gospels the phrase "his own people did not accept him" references Jesus' rejection in Nazareth (Mt 13:53–58; Mk 6:1–6, Lk 4:16–30). However, only the Gospels According to Luke and According to Matthew have a birth narrative, and only Luke mentions the rejection in Nazareth at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. The suspicion, therefore, arises that the editors may specifically point to the Gospel According to Luke, which immediately precedes the Gospel According to John. This suspicion is corroborated by a number of references to stories contained exclusively in the Gospel According to Luke.

When Lazarus is introduced to the readers, he is introduced with language that assumes familiarity with his sisters Mary and Martha (Jn 11:1).[9]

> Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

However, Mary and Martha are not mentioned before in the Gospel According to John, nor are they mentioned in Matthew or Mark. The Gospel According to Luke is the only one that mentions the sisters (Lk 10:38–39).

9 Thyen, Erzählung.

> Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

The Gospel According to John assumes that the readers are familiar with the Gospel According to Luke. The readers are supposed to remember the sisters.

The story of the woman anointing Jesus' feet and the story of the miraculous catch of fish are both stories that are found in the Gospel According to Luke but not in Matthew and Mark, and they are referenced in the Fourth Gospel. As readers compare the versions they may recognize that the Gospel According to John does not simply repeat these stories, but uses the authority of the manuscript of the Beloved Disciple to correct important details.

Luke 7:36–38

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the *Pharisee's house** and took his place at the table. And *a woman in the city, who was a sinner***, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

John 12:1–3

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, *the home of Lazarus**, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. *Mary*** took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Whereas the story happens according to Luke during the Galilean period of Jesus' ministry, according to the Beloved Disciple it happened six days before Jesus' death. And his "testimonial" also declares that the place was not the home of a Pharisee in Galilee but the home of Lazarus in Bethany, a village just outside of Jerusalem. Most strikingly, the woman who anointed Jesus was not "a woman in the city who was a sinner" but it was Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. These corrections strike at the trustworthiness of Luke's sources.

According to the manuscript of the Beloved Disciple, Luke's report of the miraculous catch of fish also misrepresents important details.

Luke 5:1–3.9–10

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got

John 21:1–2.14

After these things Jesus *showed himself again* to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were *Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two*

into one of the boats, the one belonging to *Simon**, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore.
… For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were *James and John, sons of Zebedee**, who were partners with Simon.

*others of his disciples**. … This was now the third time that *Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

First of all, the timing is wrong. The event did not take place early in Jesus' ministry in Galilee but it happened when Jesus "showed himself again" after his resurrection, or as the narrative states at the end of the story, "this was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead" (Jn 21:14).

Present at the scene were not only Simon, James and John (the sons of Zebedee), but in addition to these, four more eyewitnesses are cited, "Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and two others of his disciples".

Again, Luke's account is harshly corrected. In the Gospel According to Luke Jesus does not return to Galilee but shows himself on Easter Sunday in Jerusalem and ascends to heaven the same evening (Lk 24). The editors of the Gospel According to John disagree; Jesus appeared in Galilee as well.

To sum up the new reading instruction of the editors of John: Read Luke first, look for points of reference, we are not going to repeat where we agree, Luke provides the structure of the narrative, but we will point out where we have additional information and we will prove our point to you by quoting the manuscript of the Beloved Disciple.

2 Redactional-Critical Assessment: Gospel According to John in the light of Marcion's Gospel

But why would the editors of the Gospel According to John assume that their readers are familiar with Luke's narrative and at the same time question its historical accuracy? An answer might lie in the observation that all three stories mentioned above are attested for Marcion.[10] It appears that the editors of the third and the fourth gospels were sharing the intent to discredit Marcion.

From a historical point of view, the editors of the Canonical Edition, and some of their implied readers, would have been familiar with the book on Jesus and with the collection of Paul's letters that Marcion had published.[11] In the context of

10 Based on Matthias Klinghardt's critical edition of Marcion's gospel: Luke 7:36–38 (588–600); Lk 10:38–39 (722–724); 5:1–3.9–10 (480–486).

11 For Marcion's collection of Paul's letters cf. Schmid, Marcion und sein Apostolos.

this essay, the interest is on better understanding the editorial concept expressed in the Gospel According to John than to understand Marcion's work.

In Marcion's book the disciple John is one of the twelve (Lk 6:14), and yet little more than a side character. He is in the background when Peter is called (Lk 5:10), he silently witnesses the resurrection of the little girl (Lk 8:51),[12] he is present at the transfiguration scene (Lk 9:28), and he is sent with Peter to prepare the last Passover meal (Lk 22:7). His character only has two lines of speech, the first saying, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us" (9:49). The other line John gets, he speaks in unison with his brother James, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them [= the Samaritans]?" (Lk 9:54).

Readers of the New Testament may find that the scenes from Marcion's book featuring John are greatly elaborated in the Gospel According to John and numerous details are corrected. Narrating the calling of Peter, the Gospel According to John shifts the location from Galilee to a place on the Jordan closer to Jerusalem, and Peter is not the first disciple to become a follower of Jesus but the third one (Jn 5:35–43). The scene in Samaria is reflected in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1–42). The information in Marcion's book that Peter and John prepared the last Passover in the light of the Gospel According to John is questionable because according to John Jesus dies in the afternoon before the Passover meal. It therefore seems unlikely that Jesus would send out disciples to prepare an event that Jesus knew he would not attend. All these corrections undermine Marcion's authority to report accurately.

In Marcion's edition of Paul's letters, John is marginal as well. John, the disciple, is only mentioned once by name (Gal 2:7–9).

> And when James and Cephas and *John*, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

When the editors of the Canonical Edition introduced readers to the seven Catholic Letters, however, John was represented with three writings.

Readers of the Canonical Edition know that Paul had seen Christ in a vision (2Cor 12:1–10). But John's credibility, in contrast to Paul's, is based on more than visionary experiences. The book of Revelation of John vividly documents John's

12 The story of the healing of Jairus' daughter is not directly attested for Marcion through Tertullian or other sources. However, this does not necessarily prove that it was missing in Marcion's edition, see Klinghardt, Evangelium, 624–630. Either way, John is silently present.

visions. But in addition, John presents himself to readers as Jesus' beloved disciple and a reliable witness to historical events in Jesus' life (1Jn 1:1).

> We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands.

It is with this authority that John in his letters counterbalances canonical Paul. Paul only knows Christ spiritually. John experienced both: the man Jesus and the resurrected Christ.

In Marcion's publication, John is a colorless side character both in Marcion's gospelbook and in his edition of Paul's writings. The editors of the Canonical Edition, however, lift John from obscurity and make him a prominent voice in the New Testament.[13] Next to Paul with fourteen writings, John is the author of five writings, followed by Peter and Luke with two writings each.[14] The remaining four authors, Matthew, Mark, and Jesus' brothers James and Jude each only have one writing to their name.

Taking a side character and making him or her an authoritative voice is a well-documented literary strategy in extra-canonical gospels.[15] It fits the genre.

Summary

The editors of the Gospel According to Luke clearly stated their intention in the introduction (Lk 1:1–4): They are presenting to the readers the critical work of the first century author Luke. Luke had had access to the earliest publications and to eyewitnesses. Luke's work is older than Marcion's.

The Gospel According to John may have been published with the same objective. By referencing and correcting passages that were first published by Marcion, it follows the lead of the Gospel According to Luke, which immediately precedes it in the Canonical Edition. The editors express at the end (Jn 21:24) that there are many other books that could be published about Jesus, but because they

13 Peter of Alexandria, who died in 311, writes that the autograph of the Gospel According to John was still on display in the church of Ephesus (Migne, PG 18, 517). With this assessment, he captures very well what readers of the Canonical Edition can glean from information provided by the editors: John is associated with Ephesus and the Gospel According to John is based on an autograph.

14 In the Greek manuscript tradition, Hebrews is transmitted as a letter of Paul, placed between 2Thessalonians and 1Timothy in almost all early witnesses. A literary approach assesses the implied narrator only, allowing for the possibility of fictional voices. For a full discussion of the manuscript evidence see Trobisch, Paulusbriefsammlung.

15 Gospel of James, Mary, Judas, and Thomas (brother of Jesus) come to mind. It is also the strategy for the most successful extra-canonical Christian letter collection, the 6th century corpus assigned to Dionysius Areopagita (cf. Heil/Ritter, Corpus Dionysiacum, 151–210).

discovered a manuscript written by an eyewitness, Jesus' beloved disciple John, they imply that their gospel is better than Marcion's book. They repeat the argument of canonical Luke and Tertullian: the older version is more trustworthy.

If the Gospel According to John reacts to Marcion, its historical value lies in its description of what editors, publishers, and, possibly, their audience believed concerning Christ a century after Jesus' death. This makes the Gospel According to John an excellent source to illustrate theological convictions of the developing catholic Christian movement as their leaders struggle to articulate their beliefs by narrating what Jesus did and taught in the context of Marcionite, Gnostic, Jewish, and other faith communities with ties to the Jesus tradition.