CHAPTER 17

On the Marcionite Prologues to the Letters of Paul

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1 Introduction

Many manuscripts of the New Testament text contain, alongside the main text, also introductions, lists of section headings, and various numbering systems. Among these para-textual elements are the so-called “prologues,” short introductions prefixed to each separate book. Various sets of prologues are known, and in the Latin tradition we find prologues which are ascribed to authors such as Pelagius, Jerome, and Hilary. One of these sets of prologues to the Pauline epistles has attracted attention because of their apparent age and their identification as being prologues that originally belong to the edition of Paul’s letters made by Marcion, which, of course, consisted only of the letters to the seven churches. This identification was first made in 1907 by Donatien de Bruyne, independently confirmed by Peter Corssen in an article published two years later, and almost immediately and enthusiastically accepted by Adolf Harnack and J. Rendell Harris. For a moment it seemed that textual scholarship had yielded yet another of its assured results.

However, the identification of the Prologues as originating from Marcion received its first criticism in the 1920s and the discussion continued up to the 1970s. In 1978, Nils Dahl published an article that pointed to an alternative

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1 Since Mike Holmes has worked in second-century church history, textual criticism, and all its related fields, I have tried to combine these elements in this essay as a token of my appreciation for his scholarship and encouragement.
solution to the problem.\(^6\) Dahl goes carefully through all the arguments for and against the Marcionite character of the Prologues and suggests a way forward. If one assumes that the Prologues belong to an edition of Paul's letters similar in shape to that of Marcion, which circulated outside Marcionite circles, the result is "a more plausible explanation of the data than any current theory."\(^7\) For Dahl, neither the argument of the order of the Prologues nor their content compels one to accept Marcionite origins. Once the Prologues are freed from their dubious past, their inclusion into the Latin tradition becomes easier to explain.

Dahl's thesis has been received favourably. In Metzger's *Canon of the New Testament*, it gets the final say\(^8\) and, perhaps more importantly, it is accepted and refined by Ulrich Schmid in his monograph on Marcion's *Apostolikon*.\(^9\) Schmid's thesis is that the first Pauline collection was in existence already before Marcion, and that it is this non-Marcionite collection that should be identified with the collection as suggested by Dahl.\(^10\) Schmid's argument regarding this "earliest attested collection of Paul"\(^11\) does not depend on the non-Marcionite character of the Prologues alone. For him, an important textual argument is that Marcion uses the 14-chapter version of Romans (without chapters 15 and 16), a version which, according to Schmid, is more likely received than created by Marcion.\(^12\) As is often the case in the development of scholarship, a suggestion quickly turns into a fact. Beduhn boldly asserts that

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10 Schmid (Marcion, 294f52) even holds that the Prologues were already part of this pre-Marcionite collection.


12 So also Sebastian Moll, "Schmid has conclusively demonstrated the existence of a pre-Marcionite collection of Pauline letters which was in many ways very similar to the one of