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37 John the Baptist According to Marcion's Gospel and Early Syriac Texts

Speaking about Marcion's view of John the Baptist could be seen as an act of audacity on the part of a historian whose interests in the New Testament and Marcionism are very recent.¹ However, looking at this same topic in a diachronic perspective and in a geographical area, namely in its implications within the context of the Syriac Christian culture of the first centuries CE, may seem more appropriate to an already established project of mine about the early religious debates and heresiological discourses within the Christianity of Syria and Mesopotamia between the second and the fourth centuries.² It is for this reason that, after a short discussion of John's role in what can be reconstructed as fragments

1 The main reference for studies on Marcion still remains Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom Fremden Gott*, TU 45 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1924). The second corrected edition is printed as "Neue Studien zu Marcion." For updated information on subsequent research see Michel Tardieu, "Marcion depuis Harnack," in *Adolf von Harnack. Marcion. L'évangile du Dieu étranger. Une monographie sur l'histoire de la fondation de l'Église catholique*, ed. Bernard Lauret, Patrimoines christianisme (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2003), 419–561, and the contributions in *Marcion und seine Kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung/Marcion and His Impact on Church History: Vorträge der Internationalen Fachkonferenz zu Marcion gehalten vom 15–18. August 2001 in Mainz*, eds. Gerhard May, Katharina Greschat, and Martin Meiser, TU 150 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002). A systematic presentation of Marcion's thought, with attention to the differences among the heresiological traditions (including the Syriac one), has been recently provided by Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Of great importance are the more detailed researches by Enrico Norelli: "Note sulla soteriologia di Marcione," *Aug* 35 (1993): 281–305; "Que pouvons-nous reconstituer du Syntagma contre les hérésies de Justin ? Un exemple," *RTP* 139 (2007): 167–81; "Marcione e la costruzione dell'eresia come fenomeno universale in Giustino Martire," *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo* 6 (2009): 363–88.

2 This project has already produced some results, as is demonstrated by the following publications: Alberto Camplani, "Bardesane et les bardesanites," *École pratique des hautes études. Section des sciences religieuses Annuaire. Résumé des conférences et travaux* 112 (2003–2004) : 29–50 ; "Traditions of Christian Foundation in Edessa : Between Myth and History," *SMSR* 75 (2009): 251–78; "Bardaisan's Psychology: Known and Unknown Testimonies and Current Scholarly Perspectives," in *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium, Duke University, 26–29 June 2011*, eds. Maria Doerfler, Emanuel Fiano, and Kyle Smith, *Eastern Christian Studies* 20 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 259–76 ; "Traces de controverse religieuse dans la littérature syriaque des origines: peut-on parler d'une hérésiologie des « hérétiques »?" in *Les controverses religieuses en syriaque*, ed. Flavia Ruani, *Études syriaques* 13 (Paris : Geuthner 2016), 9–66.

of Marcion's Gospel, I will search for reactions to this representation in texts composed in the context of the formation of Syriac Christianity.

Research on Marcion in the last three centuries not only touched on the reconstruction of his thought but also on his editorial activity in both the written memories about Jesus and Paul's letters. We know the motivations for Marcion's philological work on these texts: according to him, Paul's letters, which are the main reference for his religious discourse, show a sharp criticism against the believers in Jesus who have mingled the proclamation of the Gospel with the observance of the Law. These same believers are responsible for the alteration of the evangelical traditions and the letters of Paul, in which they have introduced their Judaizing mentality.³ Consequently, it becomes necessary for Marcion to recover the "authentic" Gospel of which Paul speaks, eliminating, through a philological process, the interpolations occurring in the traditions about Jesus. We can summarize in the following questions the lively debate among scholars of the last three centuries about what was the starting point of Marcion's editorial work⁴: was it, as asserted by Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius, the Gospel of Luke, which would have undergone under his hands a process of mutilation?⁵ Or was it an older Gospel—older than the Synoptic Gospels according to a few scholars—depended upon by both the *Euangelion* of Marcion and the Gospel of Luke, however the issue of priority and influence between the two authors may be adjudicated? Or was it a new literary creation, to which the canonical Gospels provided different responses? The recent research by Tyson,⁶ Tsutui,⁷ BeDuhn,⁸

3 On Paul's letters in Marcion, see Ulrich B. Schmid, *Marcion und seine Apostolos: Rekonstruktion und historische Einordnung der marcionitischen Paulusbriefausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), in particular 26–31 and 33–34.

4 A good introduction to this problem is Judith M. Lieu, "Marcion and the New Testament," in *Method and Meaning. Essays on New Testament Interpretation in Honor of Harold W. Attridge*, eds. Andrew B. McGowan and Kent Harold Richards, SBL Resources for Biblical Study 67 (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 399–416; "Marcion and the Synoptic Problem," in *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, eds. Paul Foster, Andrew Gregory, John S. Kloppenborg, and Jos Verheyden, BETL 239 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 731–51; *Marcion*, 183–233.

5 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.27.2; Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.2.4; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42.9.1 and 11.3–5.

6 Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).

7 Kenji Tsutui, "Das Evangelium Marcions: Ein neuer Versuch der Textrekonstruktion," *AJBI* 18 (1992): 67–132; *Die Auseinandersetzung mit den Markioniten im Adamantios-Dialog: Ein Kommentar zu den Büchern I–II*, PTS 55 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004).

8 Jason BeDuhn, *The First New Testament: Marcion's Scriptural Canon* (Salem: Polebridge, 2013).

Roth,⁹ Vinzent,¹⁰ Klinghardt,¹¹ Gramaglia,¹² and Oliver,¹³ among others, have highlighted several possible answers to this controversial issue. However, despite the variety of opinions, it is still possible, while avoiding taking position in this complex discussion, to evaluate the role of John the Baptist in the narrative of the reconstructed *Euangelion*.

The fact that John the Baptist is conspicuously absent from Paul's letters¹⁴ is likely one of the main reasons for his peculiar treatment within Marcion's *Euangelion*: we must admit that John is certainly present there, but in a very limited way. Two motivations could be invoked to explain Marcion's ambivalent attitude toward this character: on the one hand, Marcion is sensible to Paul's silence on John the Baptist and to its supposed motivations, on the other hand, the strength of the Jewish-Christian tradition and of the written gospel he was likely familiar with, according to which John, whatever the judgment on his role,

9 Dieter T. Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel*, NTTSD 49 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

10 Markus Vinzent, *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels*, *Studia patristica. Supplement 2* (Leuven: Brepols, 2014). Vinzent has taken the most extreme position in this debate, in favor of the priority of Marcion's *Evangelion* with respect to the synoptic Gospels and John.

11 Matthias Klinghardt, *Das älteste Evangelium und die Entstehung der kanonischen Evangelien*, Band I: *Untersuchung*; Band II: *Rekonstruktion, Übersetzung, Varianten*, TANZ 60/1–2 (Tübingen: Francke, 2015).

12 A volume devoted to questioning Klinghardt's hypothesis about the pre-Synoptic character of Marcion's *Euangelion* has been written by Pier Angelo Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca). Un confronto con Matthias Klinghardt*, *Collana di studi del Centro interdipartimentale di scienze religiose 7* (Torino: Accademia University Press, 2017): the author shows, through a lexical analysis, how much Luke's style and language occur in the fragments attributed to Marcion's *Euangelion*, whose pre-Synoptic character cannot be supported with sound arguments. On the other hand, he admits that, after Klinghardt's analysis, a distinction becomes necessary, as proposed in the past, between a first and a second redaction of the Gospel of Luke.

13 See Isaac W. Oliver's contribution in this book, in which, differently from Gramaglia, he shows the pre-Marcionite character of the Gospel attributed to Luke on the basis of a historical argument, that is, the kind of issues discussed, in particular those related to the observance of the Law and the status of the Jews in Christian congregations, can make perfect sense before or without Marcion. According to Oliver, a late first-century or early second-century dating of Luke and Acts corresponds to the questions discussed in both these writings and other Jewish texts of the period. See also Isaac W. Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts*. WUNT 2. Reihe 355. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) and "The 'Historical Paul' and the Paul of Acts: Which Is More Jewish?" in *Paul the Jew: A Conversation between Pauline and Second Temple Scholars*, eds. Gabriele Boccaccini and Carlos A. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 51–71.

14 Although in Acts 19:4 Paul speaks of John the Baptist's baptism: but, of course, it is the specific Paul of the author of Acts who is speaking there.

was ineradicable from the early history of Jesus, may have stimulated the Christian teacher to give him some space in his edition of the *Euangelion*.

John the Baptist in Marcion's *Euangelion*: A Brief Description and Historical Evaluation

A look at some passages of the *Euangelion* (= M_{cn}) as reconstructed by contemporary scholarship¹⁵ will give us the means to understand John's role in the text and, in a second moment, the meaning of the character within Marcion's religious perspective and in the debates that followed his activity.

A List of the Main Occurrences

"Consensus is firmest that Marcion's Gospel lacked the birth narratives and other opening events of canonical Luke, and that it begins the story of Jesus with his descent to Capernaum."¹⁶ This lack of memories about Jesus's first years has a deep significance also for John the Baptist's portrait as outlined by Marcion: the logical consequence is that neither his birth nor early career are connected with Jesus's infancy, nor is Jesus's baptism, a foundational event in the canonical Gospels, attributed to him, or even mentioned.

There is some evidence that the name of John the Baptist appears for the first time in a passage of M_{cn} corresponding to Luke 5:33–35, whose purpose is to contrast the fast and the prayers of his disciples (33: οἱ μαθηταὶ Ἰωάννου νηστεύουσιν πυκνὰ καὶ δεήσεις ποιοῦνται) with the free behavior of those of Jesus.¹⁷

The second occurrence is within the complex episode centered on the question posed by John the Baptist, while in prison, to his disciples about Jesus's identity as the expected Messiah (a text parallel to Luke 7:17–28), which is subsequently

¹⁵ Besides Klinghardt, *Das älteste Evangelium*, we will take into consideration also BeDuhn, *The First New Testament*; Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel*; Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca)*.

¹⁶ Lieu, *Marcion*, 197.

¹⁷ BeDuhn, *The First New Testament*, 100; Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel*, 413; Klinghardt, *Das älteste Evangelium*, 2:502; Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca)*, 134–35.

addressed by them to Jesus himself (Σὺ εἶ ὃς ἔρχει ἢ ἕτερον προσδοκῶμεν;). The passage deserves a quotation according to Klinghardt's text¹⁸:

17 καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ὁ λόγος οὗτος ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ περὶ αὐτοῦ [καὶ πάσῃ τῇ περιχώρῳ] ἐν οἷς καὶ] μέχρι Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ 18 ὃς <ἀκούσας τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ ἔσκανδαλισθῆς?> 19 καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος δύο τινὰς τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ 19 {λέγει, πορευθέντες εἴπατε αὐτῷ,}, **Σὺ εἶ ὃς ἔρχει ἢ ἕτερον προσδοκῶμεν;** 20 παραγενόμενοι δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν οἱ ἄνδρες εἶπαν, Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστής ἀπέστειλεν ἡμᾶς πρὸς σέ λέγων, **Σὺ εἶ ὃς ἔρχει ἢ ἕτερον προσδοκῶμεν;** 21 [ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ὥρᾳ ἐθεράπευσεν πολλοὺς ἀπὸ νόσων καὶ μαστίγων καὶ πνευμάτων πονηρῶν, καὶ τυφλοῖς πολλοῖς ἐχαρίσατο βλέπειν]. 22 καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Πορευθέντες εἴπατε Ἰωάννῃ ἃ εἶδον ὑμῶν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ἃ ἤκουσαν ὑμῶν τὰ ὕα- τυφλοὶ ἀναβλέπουσιν, χωλοὶ περιπατοῦσιν, λεπροὶ καθαρίζονται καὶ κωφοὶ ἀκούουσιν, νεκροὶ ἐγείρονται, πτωχοὶ εὐαγγελίζονται· **καὶ μακάριός <εἶ?> <εἶ?> μὴ σκανδαλισθῆς ἐν ἐμοί.** 24 Ἀπελθόντων δὲ τῶν ἀγγέλων Ἰωάννου ἤρξατο λέγειν πρὸς τοὺς ὄχλους περὶ Ἰωάννου, **Τί ἐξήλθατε θεάσασθαι εἰς τὴν ἔρημον;** κἀλαμον ὑπὸ ἀνέμου σαλευόμενος; 25 ἀλλὰ τί ἐξήλθατε ἰδεῖν; ἄνθρωπον ἐν μαλακοῖς ἱματίοις ἡμφιεσμένον; ἰδοὺ οἱ ἐν ἱματισμῷ ἐνδόξῳ καὶ τρυφῇ διάγοντες ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις εἰσίν. 26 ἀλλὰ τί ἐξήλθατε ἰδεῖν; **προφήτην;** ναί, λέγω ὑμῖν, καὶ περισσότερον **προφήτου,** ἄτι οὐδεὶς μείζων ἐν γεννητοῖς γυναικῶν προφήτης Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ. ↓ 27 **αὐτός ἐστιν περὶ οὗ γέγραπται, Ἰδοὺ ἡ ἐγὼ**† ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἀγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου, ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδόν σου †[ἐμπροσθέν σου]†. 28 Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, †[ἡ μείζων πάντων τῶν γεννητῶν γυναικῶν Ἰωάννου οὐδεὶς ἐστι·]†· **ὁ δὲ μικρότερος ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ μείζων αὐτοῦ ἐστιν.** (Mcn 7:17–28)

In the articulation of Jesus's answer some structuring elements are to be detected, which will prove useful for our further argument: (a) a statement concerning the miracles occurring in connection with Jesus' activity, the mark of a new history; (b) a beatitude that, if addressed to John himself as Klinghardt supposes (καὶ μακάριός <εἶ?> <εἶ?> μὴ σκανδαλισθῆς ἐν ἐμοί),²⁰ would imply his previous perplexity and doubts in front of the reports about Jesus and his identity; (c) Jesus's preaching on John's identity as a prophet, and (d) finally Jesus's assessment on John's inferiority in comparison to the smallest one who is "in the kingdom of God."

18 Klinghardt, *Das älteste Evangelium*, 2:573–84. Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel*, 364–66 and 416, thinks that a good part of this passage belonged to Marcion's *Euangelion*, but it is impossible to reconstruct it in its original wording. The same opinion is shared by Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca)*, 155–56.

19 Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca)*, 155, note 157 considers Klinghardt's addition as unlikely, because it is based on an ideological comment by Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.18.4 and on the Matthean redaction (Matt 11:2). According to Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca)*, 155, note 159, also the expression ὃς ἔρχει, which occurs in Klinghardt's edition instead of ὁ ἐρχόμενος, is unfounded in both the manuscript tradition and the heresiological accounts.

20 For this reading see Epiphanius, *Panarion* 42.11.6.8. Klinghardt's proposal is considered unfounded by Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca)*, 156 n. 164.

Leaving apart Mcn // Luke 9:7, 9, 19, where John the Baptist is mentioned as the person with whom popular rumors try to identify Jesus, John appears again in Mcn // Luke 11:1 as one who has taught his disciples how to pray: Κύριε, δίδαξον ἡμᾶς προσεύχεσθαι, καθὼς καὶ Ἰωάννης ἐδίδαξεν τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ (Luke 11:1).²¹ It is on this occasion that Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's prayer.

Later on (Mcn / Luke 16:16–17), Jesus himself quotes John in one of the most influential statements about the latter's position in the history of salvation. It is interesting to notice the difference between Mcn, as edited by Klinghardt, and Luke concerning the passing away of a single sign in the Lord's words (Mcn) or in the Law (Luke):

Luke 16	Mcn
16 Ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφῆται μέχρι Ἰωάννου· ἀπὸ τότε ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ εὐαγγελίζεται καὶ πᾶς εἰς αὐτὴν βιάζεται.	16 Ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφῆται μέχρι Ἰωάννου {ἐπροφήτευσαν}· ἐξ οὗ ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ἀπαγγέλλεται / εὐαγγελίζεται †[καὶ πᾶς εἰς αὐτὴν βιάζεται]†. ¹
17 Εὐκοπώτερον δὲ ἐστὶν τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν παρελθεῖν ἢ τοῦ νόμου μίαν κεραίαν πεσεῖν. ²	17 Παρέλθει οὖν ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ ταχύτερον ἢ μία κεραία τῶν λόγων τοῦ κυρίου.

Note:

¹ Klinghardt, *Das älteste Evangelium*, 2:868. For the alternative reading εὐαγγελίζεται see Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel*, 163–64 and 426; Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca)*, 254–56, who considers Klinghardt's expression ἀπαγγέλλεται not justified in Tertullian's works.

² NA 28.

Gramaglia is right in pointing out that Klinghardt's texts is too dependent on Tertullian's rhetorically elaborated *peroratio*. Taken literally, Tertullian could suggest that in Marcion's passage there was an “alteration” of *nomos* in “my (=Lord's) words,” but we have also to consider the possibility that his text presents a contamination of Luke 16:17 with Luke 21:33.²² In other terms, unfortunately we have no way to determine if Marcion replaced *nomos* with “my / Lord's words,” a substitution that, if supported by other evidence, could be decisive in outlining the ideology of the *Euangelion*.

²¹ Klinghardt, *Das älteste Evangelium*, 2:725; Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca)*, 173–77.
²² Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.33.9, in *Tertullian. Adversus Marcionem*, edited and translated by Ernest Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 447; edition in *Tertullien. Contre Marcion: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, eds. René Braun and Claudio Moreschini, SC 456 (Paris : Cerf, 2001), 406–11.

The last episode is Jesus's answer to the Pharisees concerning the origins of his authority: in both Luke and Mcn Jesus invokes the example of John and asks his opponents whether John's baptism was from God or from the men (Luke / Mcn 20:1–8).²³

Some Considerations on the Significance of John's Portrait in Mcn

If we take into consideration all the passages listed earlier, the portrait that emerges of John the Baptist is that of a prophet different from Jesus under the most important respects: John's religious attitude is far from Jesus's joyful ethics; the beatitude pronounced by Jesus presupposes John's scandal in front of Jesus's activity and his inability to recognize him as the Messiah; John is proclaimed as the most important prophet but inferior to the sons of the Kingdom; again John is seen as belonging to an old economy (law and prophets), while the Kingdom of God begins after him; his prayer is substituted by Jesus's prayer; popular rumors identify him as the prophet of the God of Israel.

Equally significant are the silences: nothing is said in Mcn on a previous relationship between Jesus and John, which means eliminating any possible connection between the careers of the two, as well as Jesus's relationship with the Judaic context, differently from what happens in Luke.

At this point of our argument a methodological choice becomes unavoidable: either leave our list of Marcion's mentions of John the Baptist without any further consideration, putting aside the different profiles of Marcion's thought outlined by the heresiological tradition, or compare the results of this short review of John's occurrences in Mcn with those religious and ethical ideas that modern scholarship, on the basis of a rigorous analysis of the writings of the heresiologists, has hypothesized as belonging to the historical Marcion. I will adopt the second alternative, being aware of the risks I will face, as emphasized by Schmidt and Roth.²⁴

If we admit that at the center of Marcion's system there is (a) a tension between grace and law, on which, in agreement with those Christians who distinguished between the Demiurge and a transcendent deity, a clear separation between the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and an "alien" God is founded; (b) the idea that the unknown God of love, goodness, and mercy has revealed himself in

²³ Klinghardt, *Das älteste Evangelium*, 2: 958; Gramaglia, *Marcione e il Vangelo (di Luca)*, 286.

²⁴ Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel*, 26 and 81.

Jesus only at the end of times, after the creation of Adam and the entire history of the Old Testament; (c) on the one hand, a negative attitude toward the creation of the human flesh (*sarx* in the Pauline sense of the word), the Creator (God of Israel) who is responsible for it, and the Law with which he has imprisoned humanity, and on the other hand the recognition of the alien God as the true God, the unique source of salvation, who seems to escape any ontological characterization; (d) the belief that two completely different economies are coexisting, the one witnessed to by the Hebrew Scriptures, which is awaiting its own Messiah, and the other that suddenly appears with Jesus, the son of the alien God, very different from the Messiah expected by Judaism:²⁵ we should admit that John the Baptist's portrait in Mcn fits very well in all these elements, which are likely part of Marcion's theological agenda. He appears as the last representative of the old economy: he is a prophet, the greatest; like the prophets of Israel, he is under the authority of God the Creator; and he is awaiting for a Messiah whose supposed aspect and actions are very different from those of Jesus. It is for this reason that John does not recognize Jesus as messiah, and is not aware of the fact that Jesus is the savior, a Jesus who, according to Mcn, neither received baptism from nor ever met John.

Negative Christian representations of John the Baptist are not rare in early Christian movements, as the extensive research by Edmondo Lupieri has demonstrated in the last decades.²⁶ Among the texts that can be classified as Gnostic,²⁷ in particular the *Testimony of Truth*²⁸ and the *Paraphrase of Sem*,²⁹ provide an ambiguous portrait of John the Baptist, with demonic characteristics. It is useful

²⁵ Lieu, *Marcion*, 323–86.

²⁶ For John the Baptist, see in particular Edmondo Lupieri, "John the Baptist in New Testament Traditions and History," *ANRW* 2.26.1 (1993): 430–61; "L'arconte dell'utero. Contributo per una storia dell'esegesi della figura di Giovanni Battista, con particolare attenzione alla problematiche emergenti nel secondo secolo," *ASE* 1 (1984): 165–99; *Giovanni Battista tra storia e leggenda*, BCR 53 (Brescia: Paideia, 1984), updated with the title *Giovanni e Gesù. Storia di un antagonismo* (Roma: Carocci, 2013).

²⁷ Lupieri, *Giovanni e Gesù*, 108–16. Concerning Herakleon, see Manlio Simonetti, "Preacursor ad inferos. Una nota sull'interpretazione patristica di Matteo 11,3," *Aug* 20 (1980): 367–82; *Testi gnostici in lingua greca e latina*, ed. Manlio Simonetti (Milano: Mondadori, 1993), 226–33 and notes 460–62. On Origen, see Carla Noce, "La morte del Battista e la fine della profezia," in *Il Commento a Matteo di Origene. Atti del X Convegno di Studi del Gruppo Italiano di Ricerca su Origene e la Tradizione Alessandrina*, ed. Teresa Piscitelli. Supplementi Adamantius 2 (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2011), 318–32.

²⁸ NHC IX, 30:20–31:5; 45:6–21.

²⁹ NHC VII, 30:21–31:4; 32:5–18; 40:4–23. On these passages, see *La Paraphrase de Sem (NH VII, 1)*, ed. Michel Roberge, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, Section "Textes" 25 (Québec: Les presses de l'Université Laval, 2000), 85–86.

to emphasize that the key scene in both texts is Jesus's baptism in the Jordan, whose waters have a negative symbolic value, namely the matter, the archons, the old economy, and the Law: John is connected to a demonic power that is trying to hold captive the spiritual element in the material creation through baptism. These powers, however, will be annihilated at the end of times, as they result from an accident that occurred originally in the divine world. Jesus's presence, with his own material body, is one of the stratagems used by the salvific plan of God in order to confound the archontic powers and begin their defeat.

Marcion's and the Gnostic portrait of John could easily be assimilated one into the other, but I would prefer to stress one point in which the two differ: as we have already remarked, it is highly probable that Mcn lacked Jesus's baptism, which is fundamental in the aforementioned Gnostic witnesses. How can we explain this fact? My opinion is that in Gnostic texts John and Jesus at the Jordan are the characters of two different histories having two long interconnected pre-histories and an original common root, the accident that occurred *in principio*. The dialectic between the two histories is already existent and will continue after the incarnation of the Savior that, however conceptualized, marks the end of the demiurgic powers and the beginning of the Kingdom. In Mcn the two economies are completely separated: that of Jesus and his unknown father is an absolute novelty in the history of humanity, having no prehistory, and is meant to save humanity from the bondage of the law and the Creator; the Creator's economy, on the other side, though inferior, has its own limited legitimacy and its own Messiah, the one reserved for the Jews. The two histories have nothing in common; the two Gods are unconnected. The only common interest being humankind, either as an object of dominion and exercise of a retributive justice (God the creator), or as an object of unconditional love (the unknown or "alien" Father).

The Debate in the Syriac Cultural Context

In the second part of this study I will surmise the concrete significance of the impact of Marcionism in early Syriac culture. In a recent contribution of mine I have tried, on the basis of Drijvers' studies, to see how a number of works could be connected, in certain aspects, to the debate about Marcion's *Euangelion* and his theology. There I have offered some hypotheses on the textual connections that link a series of works of the first centuries of Christianity in Syria and Mesopotamia, with each other and with texts produced during the debates in other regions of the Mediterranean world. I have illustrated how the works and activities of

Justin, Tatian, and Bardaisan represent crucial moments of transition and play a decisive role in the historical relations between Mesopotamian Christian groups and the Christian schools of Rome, where Marcionism has a noteworthy role.³⁰

My intention is here to go deeper in the analysis of sources based on a single example, John the Baptist's portrait in early texts of the Syrian area, used as a test to qualify the different reactions to Marcionism within Syriac Christianity. Two different attitudes will emerge in our analysis, of which only the orthodoxy of the fourth century CE (Ephrem and his school) seems to be deeply marked by a reaction to Marcion's portrait.

Pseudo-Clementine Literature

A recent insightful contribution by Stanley Jones³¹ focuses on John the Baptist in the pseudo-Clementine literature, a group of interrelated texts of Syrian origin but written originally in Greek that are generally considered as characterized by a strong anti-Marcionite tendency. This scholar, on the one hand, gives importance to the Syriac translation as a basis for the reconstruction of the Greek *Recognitions* (preserved only in Latin and Syriac versions) and, on the other hand, he accepts with new arguments the hypothesis of the existence of a common source used independently by the Greek *Recognitions* and the Greek *Homilies*, the so-called *Basic Writing*, probably written around 220 CE. Three passages in particular are useful to determine John the Baptist's portrait according to Jones: (a) the catalog of syzygies (*Rec.* 3.61.2 // *Hom.* 2.17.2), that is, the opposing pairs (female/male, negative/positive) in which the history of humankind is articulated; (b) the descriptions of Simon Magus' background (*Rec.* 2.8.1 // *Hom.* 2.23.1–24.1); (c) the debate between the apostles and the Jewish sects (*Rec.* 1.54, 60, 63).

In the catalog of opposing pairs (a), “the Basic Writing seems to have understood John as the first (evil) member of the pair in which Jesus formed the second (good) member,”³² an opposition that could have dualistic resonances and reminds us of Marcion's way of understanding the relations between the “old” and “new” economies. Jones' conclusion on this particular point seems to be too radical in my view: “it thus seems most unlikely, for example, that B[asic Writing]

³⁰ Camplani, “Traces de controverse religieuse dans la littérature syriaque des origines,” 15–42.

³¹ F. Stanley Jones, “John the Baptist and His Disciples in the Pseudo-Clementines: A Historical Appraisal,” in *Rediscovering the Apocryphal Continent: New Perspectives on Early Christian and Late Antique Apocryphal Texts and Traditions*, eds. Pierluigi Piovanelli, Tony Burke, and Timothy Pettipiece, WUNT 349 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 317–35.

³² Jones, “John the Baptist and His Disciples,” 323.

accepted the notion that Jesus was baptized by John.”³³ In fact, as we have already remarked, on one side, Jesus’s baptism by John occurs in Gnostic texts that have a very negative evaluation of the latter as a symbol of the demiurgic tyranny, on the other side, we must remember that this same episode is lacking in Mcn, an element that fits perfectly with Marcion’s theological perspective. I think that before offering new hypotheses about Jesus’s baptism in the pseudo-Clementine literature, we need more research on this specific topic as it occurs in works contemporaneous with the *Basic Writing*: this work could turn out to be closer to the Gnostics and to other Jewish-Christian writings³⁴ than to Marcion.

A negative vision of John emerges also in the other two passages studied by Jones: (b) concerning Simon’s background, John is presented as the teacher of the heretic Dositheus, who is in turn a guide for Simon; (c) division and sects took place at the time of John and are in some way connected with him.³⁵ This last point deserves a marginal note. The context is *Rec.* 1.27–44, 53–71, which seems to derive from a special source reworked by the author of the *Basic Writing*. In *Rec.* 1.54 there are really interesting materials for the history of the disciples of John the Baptist; however, I would like to stress here the significance of a passage due likely to the author’s redaction of that source concerning a fictional debate between one of John’s disciples and Simeon the Canaanite, where the reference to Matt 11:11 // Luke 7:26 is clear:

One of the disciples of John approached and boasted regarding John, “He is the Christ, and not Jesus, just as Jesus himself spoke concerning him, namely, that he is greater than any prophet who had ever been. If he is thus greater than Moses, it is clear that he is also greater than Jesus for Jesus arose just as did Moses. Therefore, it is right that John, who is greater than these, is the Christ.” Simon the Canaanite testifies against this one, “John was greater than the prophets who were begotten of women, but not greater than the Son of man. Hence, Jesus, in addition, is the Christ, while he was only a prophet. The matters of Jesus are as far removed when compared with the matters of John as is the one who is sent out and proceeds ahead from the one who sends him to run out before him and as is the one who performs the service of the law from the one who institutes the law.” (1.60.1–4)³⁶

³³ *Ibid.*, 325.

³⁴ For example, the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, quoted by Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.13.7–8.

³⁵ I follow here the Syriac translation of *Rec.* 1.53.5–54.8: “For the people were divided into many beliefs that began in the days of John the Baptist. For as the Messiah was ready to be revealed for the abolition of sacrifices and in order to reveal and show forth baptism, the slanderer who was opposed recognized from predestination the point in time and created sects and divisions, so that if the former sin receive renunciation and correction, a second vice might be able to obstruct redemption (...) 8 Now the pure disciples of John separated greatly from the people and spoke to their teacher as if he was concealed (*ayk da-b-kasyūtā*).” Translation taken from Jones, “John the Baptist and His Disciples,” 328.

³⁶ Jones, “John the Baptist and His Disciples,” 328–29.

John's disciple, eager to exalt the excellence of his teacher, uses Jesus' claim as expressed by Matt 11:11 / Mcn 7:26 in a sense totally opposite to Marcion's interpretation. It is Simeon's task to find the middle way between John's disciples and Marcionism.

The Syriac Gospel Harmony

The historian of Syriac culture should consider the early Syriac versions of the Gospels not only as fundamental witnesses to the text of the New Testament but also as literary works marked by diverse ideological tendencies, although the task of giving the variants a religious significance may result in the risk of a purely subjective and speculative appreciation. One of these translations, the *Gospel Harmony* (= GH, also known as *Diatessaron*³⁷), although lost in its Syriac form, was used by Aphrahat and Ephrem with the title "Euangelion," and was subsequently commented on by Ephrem's school.³⁸ In a sense, some of the characteristics of the GH could have influenced the Syriac orthodox tradition of the fourth century.

³⁷ The GH is normally identified with the *Diatessaron* attributed to Tatian by Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.29.6–7, an attribution which early Syriac writers ignore.

³⁸ For an introduction to the *Diatessaron* or *Gospel Harmony*, see William L. Petersen, *Tatian's Diatessaron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and History in Scholarship*, VCSup. 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), and Ulrich B. Schmid, "The Diatessaron of Tatian," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, eds. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, NTTSD 42 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 115–42. For the fragments of the Syriac text see *Saint Éphrem, Commentaire de l'Évangile Concordant. Texte syriaque (Manuscript Chester Beatty 709)*, ed. Louis Leloir, expanded and revised ed. (Leuven: Peeters, 1990). For the Arabic text, see *Diatessaron de Tatien: texte arabe établi, traduit en français, collationné avec les anciennes versions syriaques, suivi d'un évangélaire diatessarique syriaque et accompagné de quatre planches hors texte*, ed. A. Sebastianus Marmardji (Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1935); N. Peter Joosse, "An Introduction to the Arabic Diatessaron," *OrChr* 83 (1999): 72–129; "From Antioch to Bagdād, From Bagdād to Cairo: Towards an Archetype of the Arabic Diatessaron," *ParOr* 37 (2012): 67–84.

The relation between Diatessaron and Justin the Martyr's lost *Gospel Harmony* has been studied by Maria-Émile Boismard, *Le Diatessaron: de Tatien à Justin*, Études bibliques 17 (Paris: 1992). See a summary of his very complex proposal (155–57): "Vers 150, l'apologiste Justin citait les évangiles selon une harmonie évangélique composée en grec, qu'il nommait "Mémoire des apôtres." Cette harmonie, qui devait donc déjà exister vers 140, avait incorporé les évangiles de Mt, de Lc, de Mc et de Jn, mais sous une forme plus archaïque que celle qui nous est parvenue dans la tradition manuscrite.... Cette harmonie/Justin fut reprise, quelque peu remaniée et complétée, pour former ce que nous avons appelé l'harmonie syro-latine. Écrite en grec, elle fut très tôt traduite en latin pour se diffuser en occident.... Traduite en syriaque, elle fut utilisée en orient par Aphraate et par Ephrem (?) qui la commenta. C'est d'elle que dépend aussi l'ancienne version

Since the title “Euangelion” reminds us of the title of Mcn,³⁹ one wonders whether in the composition of GH a competitive intention against Marcion’s work may be detected.⁴⁰ It has been argued that GH is connected to Mcn on the basis of the identification of cases where the former would appear to be indebted to the latter.⁴¹ However, even if we admit the plausibility of these parallels, this does not mean immediately that GH and Mcn are ideologically similar for the simple reason that the former could have used the latter within a very different theological horizon.

Indeed, the GH, which we can reconstruct in part on the basis of the commentary to the GH attributed to Ephrem, as well as other witnesses,⁴² differs fundamentally from Mcn. It is impossible not to assume a polemical intention, according to which

syriaque, surtout Syr^S qui en a conservé quelques fragments. L’harmonie/Justin fut également reprise, remaniée, complétée et traduite en syriaque par Tatien, vers 175.... Ce *Diatessaron* fut commenté par Ephrem au iv^e siècle.” The debate is still open.

39 Ulrich Schmid, “How Can We Access Second Century Gospel Texts? The Cases of Marcion and Tatian,” in *The New Testament Text in Early Christianity: Proceedings of the Lille Colloquium, July 2000*, eds. Christian-H. Amphoux and James Keith Elliott, *Histoire du Texte Biblique* 6 (Lausanne: Éditions du Zèbre, 2003), 139–50.

40 See Matthew R. Crawford, “Diatessaron, a Misnomer? The Evidence From Ephrem’s Commentary,” *Early Christianity* 4 (2013): 362–85; “Reading the Diatessaron with Ephrem: The Word and the Light, the Voice and the Star,” *VC* 69 (2015): 70–95. In particular see the following observations (71–2): “In fact, there is good reason to think that Tatian never gave the name ‘Diatessaron’ to his composition, but instead called it simply the ‘Gospel,’ in a manner akin to the product of Marcion’s earlier radical editing of the Jesus tradition. This title suggests that Tatian envisioned his project as the creation of a new, authoritative, and singular written instantiation of the Jesus tradition to replace the diversity of written sources existing at the time. In other words, the result of Tatian’s editorial work was a new textual object, indeed a new version of the gospel, in which the various portions of his source materials now stood in a new relation to one another.... These observations suggest that there were times and places in which Syriac speakers encountered the Jesus tradition primarily in the form provided by Tatian. For such readers, Tatian’s text was not merely a secondary gospel harmony, but simply the ‘Gospel.’ (...) The textual evidence from this earliest stage is largely lost, with the possible exception of Aphrahat, who may or may not have known gospel versions beyond Tatian’s. However, even once the ‘Gospel of the Separated’ came into use alongside the ‘Gospel of the Mixed,’ the latter continued to exert a dominant influence for some time. Ephrem is case in point. Although his corpus provides unambiguous evidence that he knew of the existence of the separated gospel, there is little clear indication that it had any significant impact on his thought. Notably, for at least a handful of passages Ephrem consistently refers to the Tatianic form of the tradition rather than to that found in the fourfold gospel.”

41 See Petersen, *Tatian’s Diatessaron*, 192–3, with reference to Daniel Plooi.

42 I follow the new perspective pointed out by Schmid, “The Diatessaron of Tatian,” 137–8 about the older form of the GH: “This can be done with considerably less baggage, because the old perspective’s requirements of comparing the Eastern sources with late medieval Western materials can be suspended.”

the relation between the two testaments, even if qualitatively different, is not placed in a perspective of absolute alterity, but of continuity and diversity at the same time.

It is not by chance that there are no evident contacts between the Gospel of Marcion and the Gospel of John (whatever their chronological relationship), while the latter has a structuring function in GH. Jesus life, which is represented by Marcion as an unprecedented, unexpected, “alien” event in the history of mankind, is inserted by GH, from the birth and infancy, into the context of the Prologue of the Gospel of John, which provides the chronological and religious context. According to Matthew Crawford and other scholars, the three most important surviving witnesses to GH—Ephrem's commentary, *Codex Fuldensis*, and the later Arabic harmony—largely agree on the opening section of GH, which was built on the following passages from the Gospels:⁴³

- Jn 1:1–5, opening the *Evangelium*, a hypothesis which finds confirmation in Aphraat *Dem.* 1.10, where John 1:1 is said to be the beginning of the “Gospel”;
- Luke 1:5–79, recounting the annunciations to Zacharias and Mary and the birth of John the Baptist;
- Matt 1:18–25, describing Joseph's perplexity at Mary's pregnancy, his dream and subsequent decision;
- Luke 2:2–35, recounting Jesus's birth in Bethlehem, the visit of the shepherds, and the presentation of Jesus in the Temple;
- synoptic traditions of the nativity (Matt 2:3–23), recounting the visit of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, the massacre of the innocent, and the return to Nazareth;
- the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41–52);
- a short section presenting John's ministry from Luke 3:1–5 and Matt 3:2–15;
- John 1:7–18, which has the function of enveloping Jesus' birth and infancy and to continue the narrative of the ministry of John.
- John 1:19–35 and synoptics: John's self-identification and baptismal activity.⁴⁴

Crawford observes that the Johannine material “is used strategically to frame the entire opening of Tatian's gospel, with John 1:1–5 and 1:7–18 functioning as an *inclusio* around an interweaving of the Synoptic material from Matthew and Luke.”⁴⁵ According to him, GH is basically following the order of John 1, in whose framework Matthean and Lukan material is inserted.

⁴³ Cook stresses Lukan and Johannine priority at the opening of the gospel: John Granger Cook, “A Note on Tatian's *Diatessaron*, Luke, and the Arabic Harmony,” *ZAC* 10 (2007): 462–71.

⁴⁴ Crawford, “Reading the *Diatessaron* with Ephrem,” 79–80.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

John the Baptist is more prominent in GH than in each of the sources used to compose it. He becomes the sum of the Markan, Matthean/Lukan, and Johannine perception of him, strictly connected not only with Jesus infancy, but also with the more general theological theme of the incarnation of the Logos in the history of Israel. The story of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, followed by the episodes of the childhood of the latter, reveals an intention to connect the historical Jesus to the religious life of Israel, while John 1:1–5 connects him to the creation of the world by God. Consequently, Jesus is not conceived of as the envoy of an unknown God, a character of a different economy of salvation, but as an integral part of the creation of the cosmos by God through his Logos.

Of course, the emphasis on the novelty of the “Jesus” event was likely very strong in GH, but it did not imply an absolute opposition between the history of salvation and the history of creation. It is important to observe, at this juncture, that this perception of John the Baptist has marked the development of the later Syriac theology.⁴⁶

Ephrem of Nisibis and the *Commentary on the Gospel Harmony*

A very characteristic feature of the three *Discourses against Marcion* contained in Ephrem’s *Prose Refutations*,⁴⁷ as well as the *Commentary to the Gospel Harmony*,⁴⁸ is the name that the (Syriac) disciples of Marcion used to give Jesus: not the common *yšwʿ* (*yešoʿ*), but the peculiar *ysw* (*yesu* ?), which could be a transcription of the Greek Ἰησοῦς. We wonder whether this name is the product of Ephrem’s argumentative strategy, which aims at transforming the Marcionite emphasis on the name of Jesus, the humble son of the alien God, into an orthographic oddity, or an orthography deliberately created by the Aramaic-speaking Marcionites,

⁴⁶ It should be added that in GH it is possible to detect some variations in relation to the Synoptic Gospels and John, for example, concerning John’s diet. See Sebastian P. Brock, “The Baptist’s Diet in Syriac Sources,” in *OrChr* 54 (1970): 113–24.

⁴⁷ S. Ephraim’s *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan. Volume II: The Discourse ‘Of Domnus’ and Six Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Charles W. Mitchell, completed by Anthony A. Bevan and Francis C. Burkitt (London: The Text and Translation Society, 1921), xxii–lxx.

⁴⁸ For the Syriac text see *Saint Éphrem, Commentaire de l’Évangile Concordant. Texte syriaque (Manuscript Chester Beatty 709)*, ed. Louis Leloir, expanded and revised ed. (Leuven: Peeters, 1990). Bibliography on the Armenian text is in *Éphrem de Nisibe. Commentaire de l’Évangile concordant, ou Diatessaron*, traduit du syriaque et de l’arménien, introduction, traduction et notes, trans. Louis Leloir, Sources chrétiennes 121 (Paris: Cerf, 1966). See also *Kommentar zum Diatessaron*, trans. Christian Lange, Fontes christiani 54 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).

having the function of an identity code. It is difficult to answer, partly because of the shortcomings of the text.

Ephrem focuses on two scenes, which are evidently the main points of debate between Marcion's eastern disciples and himself: the transfiguration of Yesu, with the appearance of Moses and Elijah (Mcn // Luke 9:28–36), and John the Baptist's message from prison (Mcn / Luke 7:18–35). Ephrem appeals at length to these episodes “as fundamental to his own sense of a single scriptural narrative.”⁴⁹ John the Baptist appears in his *Discourses* as the one who from the beginning recognized the messiahship of Jesus, opened the way to the king, never deviated from this historical vocation, contrary to a reed swinging in the wind:

“Hast thou then come, or look we for another ?” And he (i.e. John the Baptist) does not say, “they look,” but “we look,” in order to show that he and his contemporaries, in his own days and in those of his contemporaries, were looking for Him.⁵⁰

For Ephrem, the first person plural of the question provides explicit evidence of John's conviction that the Messiah is coming in his days, he is not someone projected in the distant future. This is for Ephrem an argument in favor of the identification of the Messiah expected by John with Jesus.

Ephrem's demonstration in his *Discourses against Marcion* is based on the fact that Jesus' humility, which was considered by Marcion his distinctive feature, to be seen in opposition to the traditional image of the Judaic powerful Messiah, is actually similar to John's humility, his herald. In other words, the two are not in opposition; their relationship is based on their being part of the same plan of salvation. The humble John is really preparing the way for the humble Jesus, while at the same time preaching a glorious Lord of justice. The biblical expressions exalting the power and the strength of the Messiah, his role as the last and supreme judge, occurring also in John's baptismal preaching, are to be interpreted in a very specific way: if, in Marcion's perspective, they would have been understood as unequivocal evidence of the peculiarity of the Jewish Messiah and his distinction from the humble savior called “Yesu,” according to Ephrem instead they must be related to a different dimension of the same person, the Son of God, who, while humble in his first *parousia*, will be powerful and victorious in his second glorious coming.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Lieu, *Marcion*, 179.

⁵⁰ *Against Marcion* 1, in *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, 2: xxix= 62 col. a l. 14.

⁵¹ *Against Marcion* 1, in *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, 2: xxix–xxxix = 63–67; and *Against Marcion* II, *ibid.* 2: xlvii–lii = 103–15.

The notion of humility as a distinctive character of Jesus and the new economy is criticized by Ephrem through the examples of Jeremiah and Elijah, who are similar to John, who in turn is similar to Jesus:

Humility (*makkikūtā*) existed before Isu. And if humility existed before him, what is that one new thing which he brought with him (and) which was not in those three (i.e. John, Elijah, and Jeremiah) and in their other associates who were like them?⁵²

At the same time, Jesus and John, though strictly connected to the Old Testament, are also original in relation to it, as John's baptismal practice shows:

Now the Baptism at the hands of John was so alien that not even the angels and righteous men and prophets were aware of it; let that Strangeness, therefore, of which no one was aware, appear in the days of this Strangeness of Isu, of whom no one had been informed; but it was right that the Strangeness of our Lord should be bound together with the Strangeness of John by the conduct of our Lord, as John also was with the Law: Old Testament and New Testament (meet) in the new Baptism of John.⁵³

In the later *Commentary to the Gospel Harmony* Marcionism appears again as one of the main polemical targets. This emerges already in the first episode concerning John's birth, namely Zacharias' meeting with an angel of God during his service in the temple. According to *Commentary* 1.11, the presence of Gabriel in the temple is a sign against those who believe in the "alien" God, in the sense that the place, a temple, shows the continuity between the new economy inaugurated by Jesus and the Scriptures.⁵⁴ Obviously, one of the most extensive passages about John is the one concerning his question about Jesus's identity:

1. *Are you he that is to come, or should we await another?* (Matt 11:3). It was not that [John] had been in doubt concerning him. For he had prepared the way in the wilderness, and did not hesitate to exult with joy in the womb, and, at the moment of [Jesus'] baptism, did not grasp glory for himself: *It is fitting for me that you should baptize me* (Matt 3:14), and, *Behold the Lamb of God* (John 1:19), and *He takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29), and, *I am not worthy to untie the straps of his sandals* (John 1:27, Mark 1:7). Let us say, rather, that

⁵² Ibid., 2: xxxi = 67.

⁵³ *Against Marcion* 2, in S. Ephraim's *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, 2: liii = 116.

⁵⁴ *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709*, *Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement* 2 (Oxford: Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of Manchester, 1993), 45: "Zechariah went to the angel, that it might be seen that this child was inferior to the angel. The angel came to Mary, that it might be known that her child was the angel's Lord. The angel came to the Temple, lest it be a pretext for those who wanted to find a pretext for an alien [God]."

what was spoken by the prophets was [spoken] by them for the sake of those who needed to hear [it]. For our Lord had also said, *It is for the sake of the crowd that I am saying these things, so that they may believe* (John 11:42). So likewise, in the case of John, when he saw that it was drawing close to when he was to leave the world, and that he would precede the Saviour among the dead, just as by his birth he had preceded him among the living, he took care not to allow his disciples go astray and be scattered, *like a flock without a shepherd* (Matthew 9:36).

2. [John] sent them to him, not to interrogate him, but rather that [the Lord] might confirm those former things that [John] had proclaimed to them. John was directing the mind of his disciples towards [the Lord]. When other disciples of his *had heard him speaking* (John 11:37) about our Lord, and had seen him, they left John without sadness and followed [Jesus].⁵⁵

The Syriac interpreter assumes that John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus because, as he was about to die, the latter could console and comfort them. Jesus's answer, therefore, is addressed to them and, consequently, no contradiction exists between what John said about Christ at the beginning of the Gospels and the doubt expressed in his question to Jesus. The author of the *Commentary* is aware of the fact that a number of John's and Jesus's words could foster the Marcionite opposition between the old economy, of which John was a part, and the new economy, inaugurated by the incarnation, and in what follows he reports a possible objection:

Along with these, you should learn this: "Blessed is he who is not scandalized on account of me." Through these [words] he gave a sure pledge to the disciples of John lest they be scandalized on his account. Others have said that it was concerning John that [the Lord] had said, "Blessed is he if he is not scandalized on account of me."

In the background, it is easy to see the Marcionite interpretation of this beatitude, according to which John the Baptist has been scandalized by Jesus's activity.⁵⁶ But the author's own interpretation is different⁵⁷:

⁵⁵ *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 154.

⁵⁶ This interpretation is recorded in Adamantius's *Dialogue* 1.26.

⁵⁷ Differently, for example, from Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.19.2–4: "'But John is scandalized when he learns the miracles of Christ because he is from another.' But I will begin by explaining the reason for his scandal, in order to expel more easily the scandal of the heretic" (Tertullien, *Contre Marcion*, éd et trad. Braun and Moreschini t. 4: 230–31). He then explains that with the incarnation and preaching of Jesus, the spirit has withdrawn from John: "That is why John, being no more than an ordinary man and an individual of the crowd, was scandalized, indeed, as a man, but not because he expected or conceived another Christ." (Tertullien, *Contre Marcion*, IV, 19, 5, éd. et trad. Braun and Moreschini 4:232–33).

We would maintain however that, because these former things were said with reference to the person of John, then, of necessity, in this case likewise, when [the Lord] pronounced the beatitude, it was spoken about the person of John too. It was not that he was in doubt over John that he had said this, but it was in order to warn the disciples of John.⁵⁸

Conclusions

John the Baptist's portrait in the *Euangelion* edited by Marcion fits very well with the outline of his thought that modern scholarship has been able to recover from the elements transmitted by the heresiological sources. John appears to be part of an "economy" different from Jesus's, he is not connected to his biography, to the point that the episode of Jesus's baptism by John was in all probability lacking in the *Euangelion*. John appears as the last representative of the old economy: he is the greatest of the prophets; he is under the authority of God the Creator, like the prophets of Israel; as all the Jews, he is awaiting for a Messiah whose supposed aspect and actions are very different from those of Jesus, and for that reason John does not recognize him as messiah.

On the other hand, John the Baptist's function in the history of salvation as can be traced in the Syriac orthodox texts, Ephrem and his school, owes much to, and is a deep reworking of, the significant role he played in the Syriac *Euangelion* or *Gospel Harmony* in the second part of the second century CE. In turn, the author of this text, by composing the new Gospel, took a position in the debate about the written form of Jesus' memories, and of course about John the Baptist's role in Jesus' career, a debate that involved Marcionites, Gnostic authors, and the complex world of Jewish Christianity.

We know of a number of controversies surrounding Marcionism, thanks to some witnesses, such as the *Odes of Solomon*, the writings of Bardaisan (or those attributed to him), some passages of the *Acts of Judas Thomas*, the pseudo-Clementine literature, the writings of or concerning Mani—figures and movements that were later labeled as heretic. The Marcionite Prepon polemicized against Bardaisan's critiques, Mani refuted Bardaisan's psychological doctrines, the pseudo-Clementine literature used Bardaisan's arguments against Marcion, and Ephrem's *Commentary to the Gospel Harmony* attests to cosmological and exegetical differences between Marcion and Bardaisan. To those texts are to be added the *Gospel Harmony* and the *Vetus Syra*, whose authors also had in their theological agenda, among others questions, the debate against Marcionism.

It comes as no surprise that in such a context the space was open for a debate involving John the Baptist and his role in the economy of salvation.

58 *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 154.