CHAPTER FOUR

A HISTORY OF DIATESSARONIC STUDIES
AND A DESCRIPTION OF DIATESSARONIC WITNESSES:
FROM 1900 TO THE 1930s

The appearance of Th. Zahn’s opus magnum, the publication of a Latin translation of the Armenian version of Ephrem’s Commentary, and the discovery the Sinaitic manuscript of the Vetus Syra—all chronicled in the preceding chapter—provided Diatessaronic studies with the tools necessary for advancing the discipline. The groundwork laid by the pioneers in the nineteenth century bore fruit in the twentieth. Developments—which included the discovery of new witnesses and the confirmation of new theories—came with breathtaking speed. The “Golden Age” of Diatessaronic studies was dawning.

ARTHUR HJELT

In 1903 the Finnish scholar Arthur Hjelt published Die altsyrische Evangelienübersetzung und Tatians Diatessaron besonders in ihrem gegenseitigen Verhältnis, the principal aim of which was to challenge the position Th. Zahn and Baethgen had accorded the Diatessaron as the oldest gospel in Syriac. Hjelt argued that while the Diatessaron circulated in Syriac before the creation of the text found in Syr, the same could not be said of the newly-published Sinaitic Syriac (Syr'). Its text was, said Hjelt, older than the Diatessaron. As he saw it, the Diatessaron lay chronologically between Syr, which antedated the Diatessaron, and Syr, which was more recent than the Diatessaron. Hjelt’s evidence need not detain us here, for it has been examined, and found wanting. Virtually all scholars since the turn of the century have found in favour of the Diatessaron as the oldest known gospel in Syriac; both manuscripts of the Vetus Syra show evidence of influence from the Diatessaron and, consequently, are more recent than the Diatessaron.

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1 FGNT 7.1 (Leipzig 1903).
2 Hjelt’s evidence has been examined—and rejected—by Burkitt, Vogels, Plooij, Voobus, and Black (see supra, 148).
While Hjelt's attempt to revise the accepted sequence of early Syriac gospels did not succeed, his monograph is valuable for presenting an extensive list of testimonia concerning the Diatessaron, ranging from Eusebius's first report to the colophons in the manuscripts of the Arabic Harmony. In chronicling these reports, he made trenchant observations on the Diatessaronic tradition in the various witnesses. He remarked, for example, that between 850 and 1000 there must have been a revision of the Diatessaron's text, for many of the Diatessaronic variants found in the Commentary of Isho'dad of Merv (written in the 800s) were absent from the manuscripts of the Arabic Harmony (the earliest of which dates from the twelfth or thirteenth cent). In another instance, he noted the considerable number of instances in which the gospel quotations in Ephrem's Commentary (Armenian version) agreed with the Peshitta. This led him to wonder

... ob diese Citate [in Ephrem] wirklich die ursprüngliche Textgestalt des Diatessaron aufbewahrt haben. Wäre es nicht möglich, dass der armenische Übersetzer bei seiner Übersetzung den Text nach der armenischen Vulgata, welche mit Sp [= the Peshitta] nächst verwandt ist, geändert habe, oder dass das von Ephraim benutzte Diatessaron-Exemplar durch eine nachträgliche Revision mit Sp konformiert worden sei?

Without answering this pregnant question, Hjelt became one more in a growing list of scholars to wonder whether a witness had been Vulgatized, or, as Th. Zahn had done in the case of Codex Fuldensis, to demonstrate it.

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3 Hjelt, Die altsyrischen Evangelienübersetzung, 16–70.
4 Ibid., 67.
5 Hjelt's skepticism was well-founded, as it turned out. Cp. our comments supra, p. 117, n. 126, and infra, 253–254.
6 Ibid., 156.