CHAPTER FIVE

THE DIATESSARON OF TATIAN

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When Professor Petersen set out in 1994 “to survey the last fifty years of Diatessaronic research,” he “back[ed] up to 1923, when a new era in Diatessaronic studies was inaugurated.”1 Very sadly, his untimely death in 2006 prevented him from surveying the last fifteen years as well. Had he been able to do so, he would have had the opportunity to comment on what is perceived by some as yet another new era in Diatessaronic studies. Since the end of the twentieth century, considerable research on individual parts of the “[m]ore than 170 specific MSS or works … known to contain Diatessaronic readings and sequences of harmonization”2 has arrived at new insights that call into question the then-current paradigm. For the sake of brevity, the present position is called the new perspective on the Diatessaron3 below. Before discussing this research, a few words to situate the present account are in order.

When Tatian composed his harmony of the canonical Gospels4 in Greek,5 probably in the 60s or 70s of the second century, he used, of course, the

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2 Petersen, “Diatessaron,” 77.
3 This phrasing deliberately echoes the “new perspective on Paul” designation in Pauline studies and is employed for the simple reason that it appears to express in a nutshell the change of perspective in Diatessaron research.
4 Whether he also used one or more sources beyond the canonical Gospels is hard to discern, since we have no comprehensive picture of the versions in which the canonical Gospels were available to him.
5 According to Petersen, “The Diatessaron was almost certainly composed in Syriac” (ibid., 90). I find this hard to believe, if we stick to a literal understanding of “composed.” In the first place, the bare mechanics of composing a gospel harmony appear to require sources and end product to be in one and the same language. It seems hardly conceivable to perform a close word-by-word harmonization from Greek gospel texts and a Syriac translation simultaneously, without at least one intermediate Greek harmony stage during the compositional process. In the second place, if we assume that Syriac versions of the canonical Gospels already existed—for which there is no direct evidence—a possible Syriac origin
Gospels in the form they had at that time. Reconstruction of the Diatessaron’s text therefore provides the researcher with a “snapshot” of the Gospels as Tatian knew them in the mid-second century. In raw chronological terms, the Diatessaron antedates virtually all the MSS of the NT. Consequently the Diatessaron is of fundamental importance for the study of the text of the Gospels and for the study of the evolution of the gospel tradition.

Because “the original text of the Diatessaron is lost,” researchers traditionally have sought to reconstruct (parts of) it by working through a great number of sources that are considered to have come under the influence of the Diatessaron. These sources are conveniently grouped into Eastern and Western branches. In 1996 Professors Tjitze Baarda (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and William L. Petersen (Penn State University) assembled a research unit in order to perform that task by concentrating on Johannine passages from these sources in order to achieve a partial reconstruction of Tatian’s Diatessaron. A team of six gathered in the autumn of 1997 at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (Wassenaar) and worked for ten months on more than a hundred manuscripts and sources in Arabic, Armenian, Persian, Syriac, Latin, and medieval Dutch, English, German, and Italian. I was part of that team, with particular responsibility for the Latin sources. As a result of the work then, it became increasingly clear that a project designed to combine all the mentioned sources under one research question is generally too ambitious in scope and less appropriate to address the complex textual history of the individual parts of that large and diverse body of material. Therefore, members of that original research unit started to pursue more modest projects on their own, concentrating on smaller subsets, such as the Arabic or the Latin harmonies, one goal being eventually to bring together larger subsets such as, for example, the Life of Jesus tradition of medieval western Europe. A unifying feature of such projects of the Diatessaron is more likely. But then one has to address questions like, What evidence is there that Tatian composed any of his works in a language other than Greek? Given that his contribution to apologetic discourse was performed in Greek and given that the existence of multiple gospel writings was an issue in attacks on Christianity (cf. Celsus in Origen, Contra Celsum 2,27), how likely is it that Tatian would have missed the opportunity to write up a Greek gospel harmony to counter such attacks in the first place? To be sure, Tatian could have translated and issued a version of the Diatessaron in Syriac, but likely after he had composed it in Greek.

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6 Petersen, “Diatessaron,” 77.
8 Tjitze Baarda, Hette Bakker, August den Hollander, Peter Joosse, Bill Petersen, and Ulrich Schmid.