
T. Baarda, Essays on the Diatessaron (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 320 pp. 79.90 Dfl (= Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 11)


Professor Petersen of Pennsylvania State University is a former pupil of Gilles Quispel, was awarded his doctorate from Utrecht and is an honorary Dutchman. He is well placed to write a survey of that widespread and influential second century harmony of the gospels which is known as the Diatessaron. As is clear from his history of scholarship, much recent work has emanated from the Netherlands and from Utrecht in particular. Petersen tells his story with interest and commitment. He betrays a commendably clear grasp of the overall scene as well as minute details of the search for the Diatessaron. The book is richly furnished with meticulous footnotes and a bibliography of over 700 titles. As a reference work, the book is enhanced with the inclusion of the first catalogue of manuscripts of Diatessaronic witnesses and related works ever published. This catalogue is a comprehensive list of sources claimed by scholars as Diatessaronic.

The bulk of Petersen’s work is the four chapters surveying and assessing the history of scholarship. He divides the material into four periods: a) 546 (the year when Victor of Capua wrote his preface to the recently completed Latin Diatessaron) to 1900—the main discussions centre on 19th century studies; b) 1900-1930s; c) 1930s-1951; d) 1951-1993. Each section contains a roll-call of scholars and their work, a description of newly published witnesses to the Diatessaron, and a discussion of the contemporary preoccupations of scholarship in this field. Giants like Th. Zahn, von Harnack, Burkitt, von Soden, Vogels, Plooij, Lyonnet, Baustark, Peters, Quispel, Rathofer, Baarda and Leloir dominate the picture. Petersen, a worthy addition to that list of luminaries, judiciously sets out their contributions and offers his own wise criticisms. (In the context of Baustark’s borrowing the Utrecht Middle Dutch gospel harmony, Petersen, as a Utrecht alumnus, cannot resist taking up the cudgels on behalf of its librarian in the search for the overdue book—we have some 8 pages on this!). The historical survey shows how Diatessaronic studies keep growing. The fourth period of history, covering 40+ years is 90 pages in the telling. It was in this time of course that the Gospel of Thomas came into the equation, and Quispel’s often controversial articles on that text.

In some ways Petersen’s book is a history, a stock-taking of work achieved, but it is more than that. It is a clarion call for further work. As a practitioner in the field, Petersen is all too aware of the amount of sheer hard work and scholarly cooperation that is required if these multifaceted studies are to advance. His chapter 8 on the present and the future in one sense makes for depressing reading, so daunting are the tasks ahead and the many uncertainties that bedevil the whole of the search. In 1890 J. Rendel Harris’ (70 page!) introduction to the Diatessaron made the over-optimistic remark in its Preface that “... we are on the border of a new era in the criticism of the origin of the Gospels, and that before long the obscurity that hangs over the primitive texts will in great measure disappear”. The “Unsolved Problems” at the end of his book amounts to less than two pages. So many more problems than Harris was alert to are spotlighted a century later.
by Petersen—problems about the interrelationship of the Eastern and Western harmonies; the status of the secondary witnesses; the original sources—four or five, and if five what that fifth source was; the part played by early apocryphal sources, not just Thomas but a Jewish-Christian Gospel, possibly the Gospel according to the Hebrews; the history of Ephrem’s Commentary and so on and so on. These are likely to frighten off all but the most dedicated multilingual polymath, and yet there is here in chapter 8 an exciting range of topics that present themselves as potential subjects worthy of many a thesis. Some smaller and easily manageable projects are suggested, not only in this chapter but elsewhere in the book, for example the need to investigate the Biblical citations in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas.

To some extent Diatessaronic research is concerned to illuminate the 2nd century, a dark age in Christian studies, but its ultimate aim is to recover and then to reconstruct Tatian’s gospel from all the relevant secondary witnesses to it. For the NT textual critic many an alleged harmonizing reading in the Diatessaron may well be a “canonical” reading earlier than any surviving witness to it in NT MSS. For that reason editors of the NT text need to include the Diatessaron among the evidence in an *apparatus*, but extreme caution is needed before “Diat” can be added to an *apparatus* because many existing references to the Diatessaron in critical editions and printed *apparatus* ought to be treated carefully.

Petersen himself in chapter 7, “Using the Diatessaron”, shows just how cautious one must be before accepting an apparent harmonizing reading as a witness to the Diatessaron. Here he sets out some criteria to apply (such as the need for a reading to be represented in Eastern and Western witnesses, but not be represented in any non-Diatessaronic texts from which the Diatessaronic witnesses might have acquired it). He also includes 8 examples which he labels “Exhibits”, in which he sets out the various witnesses to the alleged Diatessaronic reading, tests these against his criteria and then pronounces which readings do, which do not, and which may have, come from the Diatessaron.

In some ways it would have been splendid to have had a commentary on all the verses that have been put forward over the years as Diatessaronic—perhaps Petersen could be persuaded to write a companion volume giving us such a guide!

To some extent Baarda’s volume, *Essays on the Diatessaron*, allows us to see a large range of other Diatessaronic texts. In the 15 essays assembled here (all but one re-publications) we have the opportunity to examine how one multi-lingual scholar expert is able to move around the various Diatessaronic witnesses with an enviable ease to examine in a painstaking and cautious way contenders for that long-lost harmony. Among the verses that are put beneath Baarda’s powerful microscope are Luke 4:17; Luke 4:29-30 “The Flying Jesus”; John 20:16ff.; Matt. 10:9f.; Matt. 13:47-50 (in three essays); John 1:5. These are models of precise and judicious scholarship and set the standards for other comparable studies. The first essay, “The Diatessaron of Tatian and its Influence on the Vernacular Versions” (originally delivered in French at a Montpellier seminar and published here for the first time) is a more general study even though it focuses on one verse in John (19:30). This gives a helpful introduction to the volume as a whole. The second essay on factors in the harmonization of the gospels also serves as a good general introduction. It is valuable to have these essays on this theme collected together in this form. (Baarda’s chapter on the parable of the fisherman in the Old Saxon Version was originally published in 1992 and not as stated in the Table of Contents in 1922!)

Among the sources discussed or frequently referred to by Petersen and by Baarda are Leloir’s edition of the Armenian Version of Ephrem’s Commentary in 1953 and his translation of the Armenian into Latin in 1954, and into French