THE DURA PARCHMENT AND THE DIATESSARON

BY

JAN JOOSTEN

Introduction

In 1933 an archaeological team digging at Dura Europos on the Euphrates discovered a small fragment of parchment inscribed on one side with Greek gospel text. Classified as Dura Parchment 24, the find was published two years later by the palaeographer Carl Kraeling, with an extensive discussion.\(^1\)

The archaeology of the site made it practically certain that the parchment dated from before the year 256-257. Its text was found not to correspond to any one canonical gospel but to represent a harmony integrating elements of all four of the gospels. Kraeling, after patient discussion, concluded that the fragment was a witness of Tatian’s famous Diatessaron. This conclusion was unanimously embraced by Diatessaronic specialists and New Testament textual critics of the day. The main point of discussion was not whether the new witness attested Tatian, but whether it proved anything regarding the original language of the Diatessaron.

A few years ago, D. C. Parker, D. G. K. Taylor and M. S. Goodacre published a detailed study attempting to reopen the debate on the Dura parchment.\(^2\) New proposals are offered for the reading of the text and for its date (although the 256/7 date ante quem is recognised), and new solutions are sought for some problems of detail. More importantly, the authors come to a revolutionary conclusion: the Dura fragment is not part of Tatian’s Diatessaron. Instead, the text was originally composed in Greek and represents an independent attempt to harmonise the four gospels:

\(^1\) C. H. Kraeling, A Greek Fragment of Tatian’s Diatessaron from Dura, Studies and Documents 3 (London 1935).

We conclude that 0212 [= the Dura fragment in the Munster catalogue of NT manuscripts] was originally composed in Greek, probably in the latter part of the second century. It is not part of Tatian’s Diatessaron, and so it can shed no light on the origins of the Diatessaron.\(^3\)

While appreciative of the effort to renew the discussion on an important textual witness, the present author has not been persuaded by the arguments of Parker, Taylor, and Goodacre against the Tatianic affiliation of the Dura fragment. Moreover, arguments in favour of this affiliation appear not to have received due attention from these authors. For in spite of its fragmentary nature, the Dura fragment can indeed, with a high degree of certainty, be identified as a witness of Tatian’s Diatessaron. Admittedly, this identification creates a few problems of its own: the earliest witness of the Diatessaron turns out to be virtually the only one attesting a Greek version, and the sole Greek witness to the Diatessaron comes to light in the East. Such problems, however, should not deter one from recognizing textual facts.

\textit{History of research}

As was mentioned above, Kraeling’s interpretation of the Dura Fragment as representing Tatian’s Diatessaron was universally accepted by his contemporaries. Specialists of Syriac literature such as F. C. Burkitt and A. Baumstark, textual critics of the New Testament such as M.-J. Lagrange and A. Merk, and New Testament scholars such as H. Lietzmann and L. Cerfaux unanimously endorsed the Tatianic character of the fragment.\(^4\) This was also the position of the leading Diatessaron scholar of the day, D. Plooij.\(^5\) Plooij cautioned, however, that the existence of a Greek fragment of a Tatianic passion story did not prove the existence of an entire

\(^3\) \textit{Ibid.}, 228.
