IN SEARCH OF TATIAN’S DIATESSARON IN THE WEST

BY

ULRICH B. SCHMID

Tatian’s Diatessaron belongs to the most important texts of early Christian literature. As a Gospel Harmony from the second half of the second century it is a crucial witness to the history of the (fourfold) Gospel canon. As a compilation of early gospel texts it may well offer deep insights into the early transmission of the gospels. And as the product of a somewhat unorthodox Christian thinker, it might reveal the fingerprints of his theological mindset. However, high-reaching expectations are unwarranted, because the Diatessaron is lost. No copy of the original composition has been handed down to us. We do not even know the original language of the Diatessaron. On the other hand, some more-or-less distant echoes of this document have been preserved, especially in Syriac and Arabic. The most notable of these is a commentary on the Diatessaron by the Syrian church father Ephraem (d. 373 CE), as well as an Arabic version of the Diatessaron, perhaps as old as the eleventh century. This is not surprising given the well-known importance of the Diatessaron in the Syrian Churches and the dependence of large parts of Arabic-speaking Christianity on Syrian Christianity. As late as the fifth century Tatian’s work was still in reverential use in Syriac-speaking parishes, as can be gathered from Theodoret of Cyrhus’ famous report that he himself ordered more than two hundred copies of the Diatessaron found in churches in his diocese.

1 The present writer thanks William L. Petersen for supporting this contribution which even resulted, as it happened, in correcting its English prose. Remaining shortcomings—either factual or idiomatic—are the responsibility of the author, of course.

2 See W.L. Petersen, Tatian’s Diatessaron. It’s Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and History in Scholarship, VigChr. S. 25, Leiden 1994. We shall point the reader to this vividly written recent monograph on the subject. It also contains a rich collection of information and resources regarding the study of Tatian’s Diatessaron, which we thankfully explored.

3 See most recently N.P.G. Joosse, “An Introduction to the Arabic Diatessaron,” OrChr 83 (1999), 72-129.
to be replaced with the separate gospels. In marked contrast to the vital life of Tatian’s Diatessaron within the Syriac-speaking churches we have no reports that this Gospel harmony once flourished within Greek-speaking areas of the early church. The same holds true for the Latin-speaking regions of North Africa, Italy, Gaul, Germany, Spain and Britain. Thus, at first sight, there seems to be little promise in searching for Tatian’s Diatessaron in the West.

It is all the more surprising, then to realize that the oldest physical representation of a complete gospel harmony extant today stems from Northern Italy, and is written in Latin: Codex Fuldensis (Latin Vulgate siglum “F”). On April 12, 547, Victor, bishop of Capua, finally approved a manuscript he has commissioned and heavily corrected. This manuscript includes the entire New Testament, save for a gospel harmony replacing the four canonical Gospels. Victor deals with this unusual feature at some length in a seven-page preface. Here he explains that, by chance, he happened to come across an “unum ex quattuor . . . evangelium” lacking any title or author’s name. Based on subsequent research into this issue, Victor identified two names from the past that had been associated with compiling some sort of a Gospel harmony, namely Ammonius of Alexandria and Tatian, the pupil of Justin Martyr. Victor finally decided in favour of the latter as the author of the harmony in his hands. Today this judgement is unchallenged in the sense that the harmony extant in Victor’s manuscript is understood to derive, ultimately, from Tatian’s Diatessaron. At the same time, however, scholarship realizes that the present shape of the Latin harmony could hardly be more than a remote echo of the original Diatessaron, because the gospel harmony in Victor’s manuscript is a fine example of an early Vulgate text. Thus, at some point in its transmission-history, the text of the harmony found in Codex Fuldensis must have been adapted to a Vulgate model, effectively weeding out most, if not all, of the marks left from Tatian’s times.

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6 B. Fischer, Bibelausgaben des frühen Mittelalters, La Bibbia nell’alto Medioevo, SSAM 10, 1963, 519-600, p. 546. The edition of the manuscript is found in Codex Fuldensis—Novum Testamentum Latine Interpreté Hieronymo ex manuscripto Victoris Capuani edidit . . ., ed. Ernst Ranke, Marburg und Leipzig 1848.