

## THE FIRST HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS: TATIAN'S *DIATESSARON* AND ITS THEOLOGY

EDWARD A. JOHNSON, B.D.\*

During the latter years of the second Christian century a traveler returned from Rome to his native Syria. His name was Tatianus, or Tatian. A onetime protege of Justin Martyr, he had written various apologetical and polemical works and also compiled one of the world's first harmonies of the four Gospels. His work was one of the earliest translations of the New Testament text from the original Greek. Yet Tatian is remembered, not as a stalwart defender of the faith, but as a heretic.

Scholars have concentrated upon the textual reconstruction of Tatian's harmony, or *Diatessaron*, to the virtual exclusion of the theology which undergirds and permeates his work. The early church fathers, zealous to stamp out whatever did not bear the marks of orthodox truth, destroyed most of Tatian's writings. Yet, curiously, much of our knowledge of his work and theology is derived from quotations from his writings in the works of his orthodox opponents. This paper will explore both the history and content of the *Diatessaron* and the theology of Tatian as derived from it and from surviving fragments of his other writings.

### I.

Of Tatian's early life little is known. He was born about 120 A.D. to wealthy pagan parents in the ancient land of the Assyrians, somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the province of Adiabene. As a young man he traveled widely, studying the various religions of his day and flirting particularly with the Greek mystery cults and the philosophy of the Sophists. Eventually, he came to Rome, where he was attracted to the Holy Scriptures because of their pure morality and their promise of deliverance from sin. Between 150 and 160 he was converted to Christianity and wrote his fiery *Address to the Greeks*. In Rome he also came under the influence of Marcion and of Justin Martyr. At first loyal to the orthodox faith, he fell into heresy after Justin's death in 165 and was excommunicated by the Roman bishop Soter (166-175). About 172, during the twelfth year of the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Tatian returned to the East to live successively at Antioch and in Cilicia and in the Adiabene. He gained considerable influence in Christian

\*B.A., Carthage College; B.D., Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary; graduate studies at Divinity School, University of Chicago; presently pastor of St. John's and Grace Lutheran Churches, Ohio, Nebraska.

circles. One of his pupils was Clement of Alexandria, who refers vaguely to Tatian in his later works but denounces his teacher's extreme asceticism.<sup>1</sup> Of Tatian's last years, we know nothing, although it is believed that he founded the Encratite sect, of which more will be said later.<sup>2</sup>

Sometime between 170 and 180 Tatian compiled the *Diatessaron*. Scholars still disagree as to where he wrote it. The obvious answer would seem to be Syria; but the Dutch scholar Daniel Plooij, noting that the Syriac *Diatessaron* was translated into Latin even before any of the four separate canonical Gospels existed in that tongue, concluded that Tatian must have compiled the work while still in Rome for the numerous Easterners living there and in such other western communities as Lyons and Carthage. These people, knowing little Greek, had largely been ignored by the Greek-speaking church authorities.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Arthur Voobus similarly suggests Roman origin, concluding that since the *Diatessaron* easily made its way into western ecclesiastical circles it "could only have been possible that Tatian was still in the Catholic Church." Likely, the work was completed "before he was declared a heretic and excommunicated."<sup>4</sup> The original language was probably Syriac, although the name is Greek.

The *Diatessaron* (Greek: *dia tessaron*, "through four") combines the three Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel of John into one single version or harmony (*to euaggelion*).<sup>5</sup> From Syriac the work was translated into such other eastern tongues as Arabic and Armenian. Only in the Fifth Century was it permanently superseded in the East by the canonical Gospels as recorded in the Peshitta and the Old Syriac (*Vetus Syra*) text. In the West the book had been condemned almost from the beginning, although even after the Fifth Century it was not forgotten: "Especially among the Nestorians it long remained in high esteem," Zahn writes, "and it is not improbable that there it maintained itself through usage in worship to some extent,"<sup>6</sup> although it never was actually included in the Nestorian Bible. The Syrian bishop Theodoretus of Kyros (420-457), by his own admission, destroyed over 200 copies of the *Diatessaron* to make way for the canonical Gospels,<sup>7</sup> and his contemporary Rabbula of Edessa (411-435) was not far behind.

1. *Stromata*, I, 1; quoted by J. Rendel Harris in his introduction to Daniel Plooij, *A Primitive Text of the Diatessaron* (Leyden, 1923), p. 3.

2. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Westminster, 1950), I, 221.

3. Daniel Plooij, *A Further Study of the Liege Diatessaron* (Leyden, 1925), p. 73.

4. Arthur Voobus, *Studies in the History of the Gospel Text in Syriac* (Louvain, 1951), pp. 11, 13. Even Roman tradition says that about 154-165, when Tatian was in Rome, the leading bishop was not Soter, who excommunicated him, but Anicet, a Syrian from Emesa. Voobus follows Plooij and Baumstark; the latter even asserts that Tatian had not left Rome when his work was translated into Latin.

5. The western name; in the East the Syriac title was *Evangelion da-Mehallete*, "the Gospel of the Mixed."

6. Theodor Zahn, *Grundriss der Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (Leipzig, 1904), pp. 47 f.

7. *Haer. fab. Comp.*, I, 20.

Later translations were made into Old Latin, medieval Dutch, ancient French, Old English, High and Low German, two ancient Italian dialects, and Persian. Surviving translations suggest that the Romans, the Germans, and the Arabs (among others) learned their Christianity from Tatian's work. Of the original Syrian manuscript we have nothing save fragmentary quotations in the *Commentary* of Ephraem or the *Homilies* of Aphraates. A Greek fragment found at Dura on the Euphrates in the early 1930s has attracted considerable attention. Victor of Capua (d. 554) found an anonymous *Harmony* in Latin and declared it to be Tatian's. Victor's edition of the *Diatessaron* (546) was brought to Fulda in Germany during the Eighth Century by St. Boniface and is still known as the *Codex Fuldensis*. Its excellent Latin appears to have been copied from the Vulgate, although Victor altered Tatian's wording and inserted such portions as Luke 1:1-4 and the genealogies which Tatian had omitted. Victor's work in turn was translated into an East Frankish dialect about the Ninth Century. The son of Charlemagne, Louis the Pious, caused an epic version of this to be drawn up in Old Saxon, the *Heliand*.<sup>8</sup>

## II.

In Tatian's time Syrian theology was intensely nationalistic. His attacks upon Greeks and Romans alike for their immorality and their unchristian worship represent the view of a fiery, ardent Syrian patriot even more than that of a theologian. In both Roman and Persian territory, Syrian Christianity early became a melting pot for various ascetic and rigoristic Christian elements. Some Syrian Christian groups joined with Tatian in demanding continency and celibacy. Some even declared that sexual intercourse thwarted the coming of the kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup> As late as the Third Century some orthodox Syrian groups were maintaining that only the chaste and the pure were entitled to baptism.

Partly against this background Tatian (so Eusebius tells us) created his own original system of thought which showed the world to be composed of many invisible aeons which essentially were emanations from a Supreme Deity.<sup>10</sup> Tatian and his contemporary Marcion thought the Old Testament God, or Demiurge, to be inferior to the God of love and mercy revealed in the New Testament. Chief among these aeons is the Logos.

Having misused his God-given freedom of the will, man became subject to the demons and was their slave, Tatian declares. But now Christianity has set men free from their cruelty, hatred, and immorality.<sup>11</sup> The frustrated, angry demons are plotting (through astrology, for ex-

8. See Hill's edition, *The Earliest Life of Christ* (Edinburgh, 1910), xi f.

9. See: A. Voobus, *Celibacy, A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm, 1951), pp. 32 f.

10. *Historia ecclesiae*, IV, 29 (Stroth ed., p. 134). Here he follows the Gnostic poet-philosopher Valentinus.

11. *Address to the Greeks*, 7-9, 16-17, 32-33, and esp. 8-20.

ample) to win men back to their former servitude; but the total and unconditional renunciation of all worldly things will frustrate their aims. To gain strength for such a renunciation, the soul must be reunited with the *pneuma* or divine spirit which was expelled from Adam by his first sin (brought about, incidentally, by these same demons). The demons, images of matter and of iniquity, cannot even do penance. But man, as God's image bearer, may attain to immortality through self-mortification. To gain such immortality, he must reject all things material.

In the beginning the Lord of this universe, who was the necessary ground (*hypostasis*) of all being, "inasmuch as no creature was yet in existence, was alone."<sup>12</sup> The Logos sprang forth from His will to become the first-begotten work of the Father, and we must recognize this same Logos as the beginning of the world.

For just as from one torch many fires are lighted, but the light of the first torch is not lessened by the kindling of many torches, so the Logos, coming forth from the Logos-power of the Father, has not divested of the Logos-power Him who begat Him. . . . And as the Logos, begotten in the beginning, begat in turn our world, having first created for Himself the necessary matter, so also I, in imitation of the Logos, being begotten again, and having become possessed of the truth, am trying to reduce to order the confused matter which is kindred with myself.<sup>13</sup>

All of this quite naturally leads Tatian into a discussion of the resurrection:

For just as, not existing before I was born, I knew not who I was, and only existed in the potentiality (*hypostasis*) of fleshly matter, but being born, after a former state of nothingness, I have obtained through my birth a certainty of my existence; in the same way, having been born, and through death existing no longer, and seen no longer, I shall exist again, just as before I was not, but was afterwards born. . . . God the Sovereign, when He pleases, will restore the substance that is visible to Him alone to its pristine condition.<sup>14</sup>

Man thus shares in a part of God and possesses a spark of immortality within his being. Prior to the creation of mankind the Logos was "the Framer of Angels"; both He and the angels were created with free will. The nature of good is brought to perfection in man through his freedom of choice. What is false becomes so through man's own fault; a true and good man exercises his free choice on the side of the right and thereby remains free from the sin of transgressing against God's will. Tatian uses Genesis 3:1 to point out that "one who was more subtle than

12. *Ibid.*, 5.

13. *Ibid.* The last reference is likely to Tatian's own conversion. *Confused* might well be rendered *kindred*. See: *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Fathers of the Second Century* (Buffalo, 1885), II, 67 (f.n.).

14. *Ibid.*, 6.

the rest," a being apparently referred to in a somewhat obscure passage as "the first born" or the *aggelos protegonos*, resisted the divine law and was therefore excluded, along with his adherents who had "declared him to be God," by the power of the Logos from all fellowship with the latter. He then became a demon. We mortals who imitate his illusions "are become a host of demons, and through [our] freedom of choice have been given up to [our] own infatuation." But man himself forms the material, i.e., the *hypothesis* of his apostasy.<sup>15</sup>

Because of later scribal and editorial alterations of Tatian's original text, his theology of the Word is obscure. Thanks to the influence of Justin Martyr, he seems to have retained some vital features of orthodox Christian belief. He maintains that the Son was born of the Father's true substance, but that the Word becomes the Son of God not through His incarnation, but because that Word was divinely generated. Then Tatian abandons the more stable concepts of Justin to speak to an ambiguous two-fold state of the Word as first "latent" and then "uttered."<sup>16</sup>

As for the soul of man, Tatian tends to confuse eternity with immortality, teaching that the soul is mortal by nature but that if it ever has known God, it will be dissolved only for a time and then return to life imperishable. The soul is darkness; it cannot comprehend the Light (John 1:5). But the light comprehends the darkness, and the soul is preserved by the divine spirit. While in the beginning the soul was accompanied constantly by the spirit, after a time the latter became unwilling to follow. Now the soul, unable to discern what is perfect, still retains a vestige of its former power and fashions unto itself many demonic gods, all the while wandering to and fro in its natural darkness. Yet, for all who have fallen victim to the demons, there are others who reject the condition which leads to death, thereby reconquering the forces of evil.<sup>17</sup>

The wing of the soul is the perfect spirit, which she loses by sin; after which she keeps close to the ground like a young chicken, and having fallen from her conversation with heaven, she desires to participate in lower things.<sup>18</sup>

Influenced alike by Platonist and Gnostic thought, Tatian visualizes an inferior spirit, the *psyche* or soul, which animates and differentiates the stars, angels, animals, and man, and a superior divine spirit identified with light and the Word. This latter spirit is "greater than the soul, an image or likeness of God; both existed in the first men, that in one sense they might be material (*hylikoi*), and in another superior to matter."<sup>19</sup>

15. *Ibid.*, 7-8.

16. Justin had spoken of the inward thought as *endiathetos*, "standing within" God at first, later becoming *prophorikos* when God spoke out this same Word which existed within Him. Thus the Logos became the very thought of God Himself.

17. *Address to the Greeks*, 13, 15.

18. *Ibid.*, 20; as quoted by Jules Lebreton and Jacques Zeiller, *The History of the Primitive Church* (Macmillan, 1942), I, 573 f.

19. *Ibid.*, (ANF), 12.

It is the will of God that the soul unite itself with this divine spirit.

Tatian violently and repeatedly condemns the Greek philosophy and culture which he deems utterly sinful and vice-ridden. Christianity shines all the more brightly for him because it clearly contrasts the mystery of the Incarnation with the ambiguities of the Greek philosophers, and because it antedates all other religions (Moses having lived even before Homer). Tatian's polemics become exaggerated, however. In a lost book, *Concerning Perfection According to the Saviour*, Tatian argues that through fornication one weakens his supplication to God in prayer. "Fellowship in corruption weakens supplication," he writes, citing I Corinthians 7:5. Here, then, is the outline of the theology behind Tatian's *Diatessaron*.

### III.

Tatian appears to have altered both text and message of the Scriptures whenever a particular verse could not be fitted into his theological scheme. Without his original manuscript we shall never know how extensive his alterations were. Eusebius, however, states that by the early Fourth Century Tatian was known to have paraphrased and even rewritten various verses from the Pauline Epistles, ostensibly "to improve their expression" but also to change their meaning.<sup>20</sup> Some examples:

1. All mention of Christ's early Judean ministry is omitted. Instead, a later one is created, consisting largely of a non-canonical Passover week and a supposed winter sojourn in Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup>

2. John's account (Chapter 13) of Christ's washing of His disciples' feet is inserted into the Harmony immediately before the descriptions of preparations for the first Eucharist.<sup>22</sup>

3. The visit of the Magi is shown as taking place in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. This view reflects the views of several of the later Syrian church fathers that the Magi visited Christ when He was already two years old. (For that matter, did these churchmen derive this idea from the *Diatessaron*? For they might well have reinforced one another in their views.) An alternative theory has it that Jesus' parents, after returning to Nazareth following His birth (with no reference made to the sojourn in Egypt), went back a second time to Bethlehem and were visited by the Magi there. Whichever theory one chooses, Tatian mis-treats the Biblical text in a manner "not paralleled for crudity elsewhere" (Hobson). Elsewhere, Tatian rearranges materials and the sequence of

20. *Hist. eccl.*, IV, 29; Stroth ed., p. 135. Zahn, however, in his *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (Erlangen, 1888), I, 425 shows that for "paraphrase" Eusebius uses the term *metaphrasat*, which also can mean "translate" and thus may indicate merely a rendering of the text from one language into another.

21. A. A. Hobson, *The Diatessaron of Tatian and the Synoptic Problem* (Chicago, 1904), p. 45.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 46 ff.

events to suit himself, and takes frequent liberties with syntax. The account of Christ's baptism contains a strange element apparently imported from the lost Gospel According to the Hebrews: it is related that when the rite had been consummated the Jordan was suddenly illuminated by a mysterious light.<sup>23</sup>

4. There is not the remotest reference to any genealogies of Jesus. Theodoretus of Kyros, writing in 453, tells us that Tatian eliminated them from his work.<sup>24</sup> They portray Christ as born of David's line according to the flesh, an idea which the Gnostic (and particularly the Docetic) elements in Tatian's thinking would never permit him to accept.

In fairness to Tatian it should be stated that he tried to preserve all he could of the Gospel text "even though such preservation involved lack of harmonization, repetition, and incongruities."<sup>25</sup> He sometimes uses the same material again and again, or uses passages twice from the same source. (This may simply indicate that repetitive trait which is characteristic of the eastern mind.)

Still more revealing are the peculiarities of Tatian's text which reflect his extreme ascetic views on marriage:

5. Matthew 19:4-6 is rendered in the Dutch *Liege Diatessaron* as follows:

And Jesus answered them thus: 'Have you not read that in the beginning, when God had made male and female, he joined them together; and Adam said, "Because of this bond shall a man leave father and mother, and shall remain with his wife, and the two of them shall be joined in one flesh"?'<sup>26</sup>

The words *Adam said* are aimed at abasing the institution of marriage. They buttress the Syrian ascetic view that the husband-wife relationship is sinful and Adamic in origin rather than ordained by the Creator, and that only the spiritual link can be considered Christian. The *Diatessaron* waters down the relationship of Joseph and Mary to exclude all thought of marriage after the flesh.

6. The Greek text of Luke 2:36, *dzesasa meta andros ete hepta apo tes parthenias autes*, is made to read in the Persian *Diatessaron* (based upon the Syrian) as though Mary remained a virgin for seven years with her husband instead of Anna the prophetess.<sup>27</sup>

7. Luke 14:26 is rendered: "Every one who does not *abandon* his father and his mother and his brothers and his sisters and his wife and

23. Mentioned to the author by Dr. A. Voobus, his former teacher.

24. *Haer. fab. comp.*, I, 20.

25. Hobson, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

26. As edited by Plooi and Phillips (Amsterdam, 1935); cited in Voobus, *Celibacy*, p. 18.

27. Voobus, *op. cit.*, pp. 19 f.

his children...is not worthy to become my disciple." Luke's original word is *misei*, "hates" or "regards lightly." Voobus believes this variant reading to have originated with Tatian's Harmony.<sup>28</sup> It appears in the Persian *Diatessaron*<sup>29</sup> but has not survived in extant manuscripts of the Syriac Gospels or in the long line of Greek manuscripts. "Together with the word of salvation a message was spread that marriage is an immoral institution, as an aptipode to the Christian form of existence. Christianity finds its realization only in rigid asceticism, headed by virginity."<sup>30</sup>

Mention was made earlier of the sect reportedly founded by Tatian, the Encratites. Their name means "the abstinents" or "the self-controlled." They were Christian Gnostics who rejected marriage as adulterous, condemned all use of meat and the slaughter of animals, and substituted water for wine in their eucharistic rite (thus acquiring another nickname, "the Aquarii"). Eusebius describes Tatian as the *archegos* of the Encratites, a term which could be rendered "chief" or "leader" or "prince" (as in Acts 5:31) or "prime author" (Acts 3:15; Heb. 2:10, 12:2).<sup>31</sup> Some scholars conjecture that Tatian was only the group's leading member, not its founder; but in all likelihood he did establish it.<sup>32</sup>

Eusebius, quoting Irenaeus, says that Tatian called marriage "whoredom and corruption" (*phthora kai porneia*),<sup>33</sup> as did Marcion, and that he was the first to question whether Adam could be saved. The Encratite doctrine may have been the forerunner of the later and more notorious Manichaeans.<sup>34</sup>

8. John 15:1, "I am the true Vine," is rendered "true vineyard." So also in the *Liege Diatessaron*: "*ic ben die gewarege wyngart*," a reading which Plooiij calls one of the most famous of the entire work. However, he reminds us that in medieval Dutch the term *wyngart* (cf. German *Weinberg*) was also extended in usage to mean "vine" or *wyinstoc* (German *Weinstock*).<sup>35</sup>

9. Matthew 25:1 adds to the canonical narrative that the ten virgins "went forth to meet the bridegroom *and the bride*." This reading occurs in the entire Latin tradition, in Arabic, in Armenian, the *Liege Diatessaron*, Codex Bezae, and much of the Syriac line.<sup>36</sup>

28. *Ibid.*

29. Edited by G. Messina (Rome, 1951).

30. Voobus, *loc. cit.* Against such a background, incidentally, we first encounter the heretic Mani.

31. C. Peters, *Das Diatessaron Tatians from the Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 123 (Rome, 1939), p. 213.

32. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, IV, 29 (Lake ed., p. 397) states that Severus later contributed to the heresy and it thereafter became known as "Severian."

33. *Loc. cit.* (see Lake ed., p. 394).

34. The Encratites at least recognized the type of spiritual marriage practiced by the so-called *suneisaktoi* (*virgines subintroductae*) where Marcion had sweepingly rejected even this procedure. Voobus, *Celibacy*, gives further details of this curious practice.

35. Plooiij, *A Primitive Text of the Diatessaron*, pp. 58 f.

36. *Ibid.*



10. John 19:30 has the addition: "It is *all* finished." So also in the *Liege Diatessaron*: "*nu est al voldæen*," and in Armenian, Arabic, and the old Latin *Diatessaron* reading, "*omnia consummata sunt*."<sup>37</sup>

11. Luke 15 is given some interesting new twists: (a) The woman finds a *gold* drachma; (b) the shepherd leaves his ninety-and-nine sheep on the mountain or in the desert place *where they were grazing* and already had food in abundance. This implication lacks canonical support; but, as though one addition to the story justified another, the shepherd puts the lost sheep on his shoulder and *takes it home*. (c) When the prodigal son returns home, his father kisses him *vor den mond*—on the mouth.<sup>38</sup> Tatian's expression shows the Semitic way of expressing the tenderest love possible among men. Here, at least, is a new and beautiful addition to the story which is unknown in the canonical text.

12. Matthew 26:27 and Mark 14:23 are harmonized to show that at the institution of the Lord's Supper Christ took the cup and *eucharistesas edoken autois* (Vulgate: *gratias egit*). The Greek text bears this identical wording, but in both the *Liege Diatessaron* and the Arabic the reading is *dankde Gode ende benedydene*, "thanked God and blessed" (and gave to them). Plooiij regards this as a genuine Tatianic ending, being an apparent doctrinal rendition. This peculiar wording is also found in several eastern and western liturgies, notably the Ethiopic: "And likewise also the cup giving thanks, he blessed it and hallowed it."<sup>39</sup>

13. John 21:12 is rendered: "... They knew it was the Lord. *But He did not appear to them in His own form*." Harris believes this reading may originate from Mark 16:12, "in another form" (*en hetera morphe*); but this reading still has no parallel in the New Testament text.<sup>40</sup>

14. John 4:7 is so rendered as to make Jesus ask the Samaritan woman, "Give me *water* to drink," to avoid giving the impression that our Lord indulged in the forbidden practice of wine drinking.<sup>41</sup> (One wonders what Tatian thought of His first miracle at Cana!)

#### IV.

The early fathers vigorously condemned Tatian's Harmony. His one-time pupil Clement of Alexandria declared that Tatian had taken Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount—"Lay not up treasure on earth,

37. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

39. Plooiij, *A Further Study of the Liege Diatessaron*, pp. 41 f. Our variant apparently comes down from the earliest days of both the Syrian and the Latin churches; there are even suggestions that the Egyptian church of the latter Second Century fell under the influence of the Tatianic Harmony.

40. Harris, *The Diatessaron of Tatian* (London, 1890), p. 37.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 38 f. Harris believes that this reading is attributable not so much to Tatian's Encratite censorship as to editorial expansion. But Harris also debunks the whole idea that Tatian altered the Biblical text for doctrinal ends, feeling this to be an unproved, hypothetical assumption. Harris's conclusion is curious indeed!

where moth and rust corrupt"—and added them to his strictures against procreation: "And he is not ashamed," Clement further states, "to add to these the words of the prophet: 'You shall all grow old as a garment, and the moth shall devour you.'"<sup>42</sup> Clement further declares that Tatian misread the command, "Let there be light," from the creation narrative in Genesis as a prayer, thereby implying that He who uttered these words knew a God superior to Himself. Such a concept would reflect the Gnostic idea (cf. Marcion) that the Old Testament Jehovah, the Demiurge, was not the true Creator at all. Origen scores Tatian on theological grounds and for grammatical clumsiness in not recognizing the imperative of the original Hebrew expression *v'hi aor*, "Let there be light," "as if, as he impiously thought, God was in darkness."<sup>43</sup> Jerome, commenting on Galatians 6:8—"For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption"—accuses Tatian of teaching that a man joined to a woman thereby sows to the flesh and shall reap only his own destruction.<sup>44</sup> Jerome thinks it possible that Tatian has constructed his heresy upon the basis of Amos 2:12: "But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, 'You shall not prophesy.'" Thus Tatian would be "asserting that wine is not to be drunk, since it was commanded in the law that the Nazirites were not to drink wine, and now those who give the Nazirites wine are accused by the prophet."<sup>45</sup> Finally, Archelaus, a countryman of Tatian and bishop of Carrha in Mesopotamia (fl. 280), ranks his compatriot with "Marcion, Sabellius, and others who have made up for themselves a peculiar science."<sup>46</sup>

Yet some, at least in the Orient, were reluctant to divide the one true and supposedly indivisible Gospel into four separate accounts, each with its alleged textual inconsistencies, repetitions, and incompatibilities.<sup>47</sup> Tatian actually was not the first to *attempt* a harmonization—Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, had tried it earlier—but of his work we have nothing save a passing reference in Jerome.<sup>47</sup>

Once completed, Tatian's Harmony reinforced and spread his peculiar brand of asceticism and apparently helped popularize the Encratite movement. Sect and book likely reinforced and abetted one another in their peculiar interpretations. Running throughout the *Diatessaron* is the conviction that Christ's Gospel demands "radical renunciation of the whole human life"; indeed, as Voobus has expressed it, "the price of eternal life is virginity."<sup>48</sup>

Tatian's gifted personality and his reputation as an apologist gave

42. *Stromata*, iii, 12. For this and the accompanying quotations see ANF, II, 82 f. The Scripture passage cited is Isaiah 50:9 (cf. 51:6, 8).

43. *De Orat.*

44. *Com. in Ep. ad Gal.*

45. *Com. in Amos.*

46. Routh, *Reliquiae*, tom. V, 137; ANF, II, 83.

47. *Epist.*, 121, vi, 15; quoted in Lietzmann, *The Founding of the Church Universal*, p. 128.

48. *Celibacy*, p. 17.

his Harmony a place in eastern church life for over two centuries. Yet the influence of his work was largely confined to the Orient. There is no indication that it ever gained official acceptance in ecclesiastical circles in the West. Western asceticism, too, was nowhere as extreme as that of the East. Plooij believes that the *Diatessaron* was meant only for missionary purposes and private use, and was used officially in worship only as long as no rival editions of the Gospels were available.<sup>49</sup>

The intense nationalism of Tatian's document, its literary polish, and its meeting of the demands for one single Gospel in place of four separate writings, all contributed to its popularity. Its pure classical Syriac replaced the Palestinian barbarisms of earlier Syriac Gospel versions and made the work ideal for simple and learned alike.<sup>50</sup>

Tatian's apologetic contributions may be regarded with some skepticism. True, he dealt less with mythology and more with the truly harmful forces of astrology, magic, and the Mysteries than had earlier apologists.<sup>51</sup> Yet his questionable chronology seems meant solely to demonstrate that since Moses antedated the Greek philosophers, the latter were mere plagiarists. "This argument was not original, it will often be repeated and it will not enrich Christian apologetic."<sup>52</sup>

Gradually, through its many struggles with heresy, the western church came to see the value of a tradition founded upon a reputable historical basis, i.e., a Word not truncated by heretical harmonizers. As Lietzmann states, it is true that even though the four Gospels were preserved as four, copyists often erred in transmitting the text. "Only in Syria were the codices of the official translation of the Bible copied out with an obviously religious care which went far beyond the usual, and which therefore protected the text from distortions."<sup>53</sup> Yet Syria still became the melting pot of heresy. Where more orthodox scribes erred unintentionally and carelessly, men like Tatian deliberately tailored the text to fit their own theological notions.

Irenaeus advanced possibly the most decisive arguments for the eventual repudiation of the *Diatessaron*. Since the Logos had given men a fourfold Gospel (*edoken hymin tetramorphon to euaggelion*), he argued, it would be sinning against revelation and the Spirit to change this order in any manner.<sup>54</sup> The world has four chief winds; Heaven has four corners: thus the church must have its four pillars. Naive though it sounds now, Irenaeus' argument helped carry the day for the orthodox cause. There was also the silent and even more telling fact that Tatian

49. *A Primitive Text of the Diatessaron*, p. 73.

50. Voobus, *Researches on the Circulation of the Peshitta in the Middle of the Fifth Century* (Pinneberg, 1948), pp. 56 f. Voobus does not believe as do some scholars that the *Diatessaron* was the original Gospel version of Syrian Christianity.

51. Lebreton and Zeiller, *op. cit.*, I, 572.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 573.

53. Lietzmann, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

54. *Adv. Haer.*, III, 2, 8; see also Zahn, *Grundriss*, p. 16.

and his *Diatessaron*, for all their western (and specifically Roman) background and their later circulation in western Europe, came from the Syrian church of the East, "a neglected part...and a more or less heretic section for which the official leaders had scarcely more than silent contempt."<sup>55</sup>

J. Rendel Harris supplies a note of humor by way of conclusion. In the British Museum, he says, are certain Vulgate Latin and Old English harmonies attributed to John Wycliffe who, like Tatian, used John 1:1 as a starting point. One manuscript states that its text came from a *Unum ex quatuor* made by the British scholar Clement of Llanthony. "If, then, we can show that Clement's text is not his own composition, but a direct descendant of the Latin Tatian, shall we not be justified in calling Tatian the Father of the Reformation?"<sup>56</sup>

Tatian assuredly did not beget the Reformation. Nor was the Christian church really in need of his services. His name remains in a significant place in the history of the various New Testament versions. He worked with skill and care amid his free-wheeling redactions of the text. Yet his aims were private and propagandistic, and his version of the four Gospels was distorted and unreliable. All things considered, he has earned his niche in church history as a false apostle.

55. Plooi, *A Further Study of the Liege Diatessaron*, p. 74.

56. Harris, *The Diatessaron of Tatian*, pp. 3 f.