The State of the New Testament Canon in the Second Century Putting Tatian’s Diatessaron in Perspective
Craig D. Allert
Trinity Western University
Langley, British Columbia

In contemporary discussions of the NT canon, focus has been on its polemical aspects, that is, when it was closed. By so doing the idea of a canonical process suffers. In attempting to understand Tatian’s Diatessaron in this process it is argued here that the very existence of the harmony testifies against a closed fourfold Gospel canon in the mid–second century. A proper distinction between canon and scripture is foundational in this understanding. Discussions about the closed NT canon belong to a day far removed from Tatian’s. By placing Tatian’s Diatessaron in the perspective of process we are less tempted to view his use of the four Gospels as proving their canonicity, a view which is anachronistic and inaccurate.

Key Words: Diatessaron, harmony, Gospels, sources, canon, scripture

W. L. Peterson begins his informative essay on the Diatessaron with four reasons why the Diatessaron is important. First, the Diatessaron is the most extensive, earliest collection of second-century Gospel texts extant. It is much more comprehensive than the other scattered references of the second century because it incorporated virtually the entire text of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as material from extracanonical Gospels. Second, it is the earliest example of a Gospel harmony yet recovered in extenso. Therefore it allows us to examine the techniques and concerns of a second-century harmonist. Third, the Diatessaron reflects the theology and praxis of its locale. Fourth, it is usually considered the most ancient of the versions, most likely being the form in which the Gospels first appeared in Syriac, Latin, Armenian, and Georgian. Because of this it occupies a unique position in the history of the dissemination of the Gospels, for it served as the foundation of four of the major NT versions, each of which bears the Diatessaron’s imprint.

Since the recovery of the Dura Fragment, study of the Diatessaron has blossomed and expanded into a field all its own. I do not propose in this essay to add anything new to the technical study of the Diatessaron—that is, the original language and provenance, examination of the witnesses, and so on. My purpose is simply to place Tatian’s harmony in the context of the second century’s understanding of Christian writings. In other words I ask, “How do...

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