

## The First Harmony Of The Gospels: Tatian's *Diatessaron* And Its Theology

Edward A. Johnson\*

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. **You must have a subscription and be logged in to read the entire article.**

[Click here to subscribe](#)visitor : : uid: ()