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# THE SYRIAC ORIGINAL OF THE COMMENTARY OF EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN UPON THE CONCORDANT GOSPEL

by J. NEVILLE BIRDSALL

**T**ATIANS'S second-century Harmony of the Gospels—the "Diatessaron" or, as it is called in the title of this paper, the "Concordant Gospel"—is a document of immense importance for the history of the Gospel text and canon, and every additional piece of information that comes to light about it is eagerly welcomed. Great interest was accordingly aroused in 1957 when it was announced that a considerable portion of the original Syriac text of the commentary by the Syriac Father Ephraim (4th century A.D.) on the Diatessaron had been identified in a manuscript in the Chester Beatty collection (the commentary had previously been known from an Armenian translation). In this review article Dr. Birdsall, Lecturer in Theology in the University of Birmingham, and one of the leading authorities in this country on New Testament textual criticism, discusses the recently published edition of the Syriac text by Dom Louis Leloir, together with some other matters of relevant interest.

**T**HE study of the Diatessaron occupies an important place in the field of gospel study. The demonstration that such a work existed and that its existence was not a fabrication of the pious imagination of later Christian generations was an important step in answering the more radical strains of nineteenth-century criticism: but the study of the work itself has only been made possible by great philological discipline and investigation, most of which has been undertaken in the present century. It has extended to many different fields, for instance, into the study of Western European gospel harmonies of the Middle Ages, in Latin and in the vernaculars, into the evidence of Coptic and Parthian remains of the Manichaeans, and into the harmonistic features of such Biblical witnesses as Codex Bezae, the Old Syriac and the Old Latin versions. This is not to mention the two primary sources of our knowledge of the Diatessaron, namely the Arabic Gospel Harmony and the Armenian version of the commentary of Ephraim the Syrian upon the Concordant (or Harmonizing) Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Neither

<sup>1</sup> See the essential survey by Curt Peters, *Das Diatessaron Tatians* (Rome, 1939).

presents us with the Diatessaron in its original language, but a fairly clear idea of its order and in many cases of its wording may be obtained from a study of these two, always provided that account is taken of the many secondary and tertiary sources.

The original language of the Diatessaron is still a matter of debate: Greek or Syriac? The discovery of a Greek fragment of the Diatessaron at Dura Europos<sup>2</sup> seemed at one time to have settled the issue but Anton Baumstark<sup>3</sup> sought to demonstrate that it was in fact a re-translation into Greek from Syriac—and to many scholars and to the present writer his proof appears convincing. Nevertheless not all are convinced: and there still remain other Greek traces<sup>4</sup> of the work of Tatian, which have not yet been fully investigated—an important future task is to be seen here.

The Arabic Harmony was most recently edited by the Dominican Marmardji,<sup>5</sup> an edition of great learning and no little wit, but not perhaps the definitive edition, which would take account of the work of the late Paul Kahle, amongst others. This article is not, however, primarily concerned with this source of our knowledge.

The commentary of Ephraim (A.D. 306-373) is separated by two centuries from the activity of Tatian, but is our most direct testimony to the wording of his Harmony. The Armenian version of the commentary has been in edited form since 1836 and a Latin translation since 1876: but neither of these works has been readily available in recent years, and it was a great boon to students of these questions when Dom Louis Leloir, Benedictine of the Abbey of Clervaux, published an edition and translation in the series *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* in 1953 and 1954. He proceeded with Ephraim studies in a collection of his gospel quotations, *L'Évangile d'Ephrem d'après les sources éditées* (1958), but while this was in preparation there came to light in 1957, in the library of Sir A. Chester Beatty, a fragmentary manuscript of the original Syriac. Once identified by the late Cyril Moss of the British Museum, it was committed to Dom Louis for publication,

<sup>2</sup> Edited by C. H. Kraeling, *A Greek Fragment of Tatian's Diatessaron from Dura* (Studies and Documents III, London, 1935).

<sup>3</sup> "Das griechische 'Diatessaron'—Fragment von Dura-Europos", *Oriens Christianus*, 3te Serie, X, pp. 244-252.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. a scholion to Matt. 27: 49 in cod. 72; a verse in cod. 713 (codex Algerinae Peckover) added to Matt. 17: 26; and, in the writer's opinion, some quotations in the *Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila*.

<sup>5</sup> Beirut, 1935.

and it now lies before us in a handsome impression, published in the series of Chester Beatty Monographs.<sup>6</sup>

The MS is numbered 709 in the Chester Beatty Library. It is composite: its first ten folia are later by several centuries than its remaining 65. These are they which contain the work of Ephraim, and by palaeographical experts are dated as probably early in the fifth century. The place of origin of the MS is uncertain, for the numeration of the folia by means of Georgian letters, which was formerly thought to be a sure sign of Sinaite origin, is now known to point with equal likelihood to a monastery in the Nitrian desert in Egypt.

The older part of the MS unfortunately has many lacunae, and presents little more than half of the text known in Armenian. It confirms the order of pericopae known from the Armenian and other Oriental witnesses. It reveals that in major matters the Armenian is a reliable version of Ephraim's work. A striking instance of this is to be found in connection with the five references to "the Greek" made by Ephraim. J. Schaefer<sup>7</sup> had argued in 1917, with apparent cogency, that these were interpolated notes due to the Armenian translator, not references by Ephraim to the "Separated" Gospels (in Syriac, but based on the Greek pattern). In his edition of the Armenian Leloir had maintained Schaefer's position against Vööbus who had argued for the contrary view: but two of the five passages occur in parts of the commentary now found in the Syriac, and Leloir handsomely recants his previous opinion in the edition of the Syriac.<sup>8</sup>

Leloir has presented to scholars his conclusions concerning the text of the Diatessaron which lay before Ephraim in two further volumes published as *Subsidia* of CSCO, namely *Doctrines et Méthodes d'Ephrem d'après son commentaire sur l'Évangile Concordant* (1961) and, *Le Témoignage d'Ephrem sur le Diatessaron* (1962). One cannot hope to add very much to his wellnigh exhaustive investigations: but a few lines of further enquiry have suggested themselves to the present writer and some exploratory researches are here outlined.

Principal Matthew Black in an appendix to his *Aramaic*

<sup>6</sup> Chester Beatty Monographs, No. 8. *Saint Ephrem, Commentaire de l'Évangile Concordant, Texte Syriaque* (Manuscrit Chester Beatty 709). Édité et Traduit par Dom Louis Leloir, O.S.B., de l'Abbaye de Clervaux (Luxembourg) (Dublin, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> *Evangelienzitate in Ephräms des Syrers Kommentar zu den paulinischen Schriften* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1917), p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 49, footnote 2 to section 14.

*Approach to the Gospels and Acts* discusses a number of West Aramaic forms found in the Old Syriac gospels.<sup>9</sup> These lead him to the conclusion that a West Aramaic source or tradition has directly influenced the language of the Old Syriac. While he does not deny the influence of the Diatessaron upon the Separated Gospels, he concludes that such a West Aramaic source must be deemed a distinct factor in their formation. The Syriac text of Ephraim, however, now reveals that some part of these peculiarities was in his text of the Diatessaron. Very few of the passages adduced by Black are found in literal quotation: but in those which are found, a number of the lexical features are still to be seen, e.g., in the pericope dependent upon Matt. 22: 28 the expression *hayath miythe* is found<sup>10</sup>; in that derived from Matt. 26: 36 the word *'oraïta*,<sup>11</sup> while in Matt. 15: 13 *'abba* is read, not *'abi*<sup>12</sup> (although here it should be observed that the *Clementine Homilies* omit the possessive in their Greek text). Lk. 2: 35 presents a complicated textual state of affairs. The quotation is found twice: in the first instance,<sup>13</sup> which is not extant in Syriac, the Armenian renders "you will drive a sword through your own soul"; in the second case, the Syriac<sup>14</sup> reads in this same way, thus agreeing with the Separated Gospels, but the Armenian Ephraim reads with the Greek text "a sword will pass through your own soul". To complicate the issue, the Syriac reading stands in the MS *in rasura*.

It is a subtle question to decide whether these instances bear upon the question of the relative priority of the Diatessaron and the Separated Gospels. It would seem, however, to be the more viable option to suggest that these forms at least came into the Separated Gospels, like so many of their harmonistic features, from the Diatessaron. And perhaps the West Aramaic forms provide us with a trace of that non-canonical source which clearly was known and used by Tatian.

Thus we now have in Syriac much of the Diatessaron known to us, both in Ephraim and in other sources such as the works of Aphrahat. In the material to be derived from Ephraim we have the three "hallmarks" of the work, the Davidic descent of both Joseph and Mary, the light shining at Jesus' baptism, and "he

<sup>9</sup> Second edition (1954), pp. 216 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Leloir, *op. cit.* p. 180 (*Commentaire*, XVI, 22).

<sup>11</sup> Leloir, *op. cit.*, *ibid.* (*Commentaire*, XVI, 23).

<sup>12</sup> Leloir, *op. cit.* p. 87 (*Commentaire*, XV, 12).

<sup>13</sup> *C.S.C.O.*, vol. 137, p. 32; vol. 145 (Latin translation), p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 228 (*Commentaire*, XXI, 27); *C.S.C.O.*, vol. 137, p. 330; vol. 145, p. 235.

looked on him with love" as the rendering of Jesus' reaction to the "rich young ruler". We have also a Syriac form of the addition to the story of Peter's stater in Matt. 17: 26, previously known in the Armenian Ephraim and in MS 713 of the Greek New Testament. While comparing the attestation for this and Leloir's comments, the writer's attention was drawn to the article of Rendel Harris in *The Expositor*<sup>15</sup> in which he discussed the reading of MS 713 (the Codex Algerinae Peckover, now in the Library of the Selly Oak Colleges). He makes much, in his discussion, of a comment of Ephraim which he quotes thus: "had it not been foretold that the obedience of the sea should be turned towards that Just Alien?" From the collocation of Just and Alien, he envisages Ephraim tilting against the Marcionites, whom we must therefore envisage utilizing a Diatessaron or at least knowing of this addition. But reference to Leloir's editions of Syriac and Armenian Ephraim reveals no adjective "just" in this passage. Nor, so far as a rather quick perusal shows, do Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Marcion contain the phrase, though the words "severe stranger" do appear on one occasion,<sup>16</sup> but in an ironical passage. How did this phrase come into Harris's text?

This edition will also furnish data for reconstructing in more detail Ephraim's text of Paul, one of our sources for the pre-Peshitta Syriac version. Father Kerschensteiner is working on such a reconstruction and will doubtless utilize this material. Meanwhile the painstaking work of Molitor<sup>17</sup> gives a sound basis of collation and shows that certain readings already known to be characteristic are reflected for instance in the citations of Romans 1: 3; 10: 18 (against the N.T. Peshitta but with the O.T. Peshitta) and 15: 12.

In sum, there are here great resources for the further study of Ephraim and the early Syriac knowledge of and use of the scriptures. An Index of Syriac words would have expedited comparison with other extant works of Ephraim and other authors. But much has been given and we are indebted to Sir Chester Beatty and to Dom Louis Leloir.

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<sup>15</sup> 8th series, Vol. 23, pp. 120-129.

<sup>16</sup> *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan* (editor, C. W. Mitchell), vol. II (1921), p. xxvi (Eng. tr.) and p. 56, col. 1, line 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Der Paulustext des hl. Ephräms* (Monumenta Biblica et Ecclesiastica, 4, Rome, 1938).