The State of the New Testament Canon in the Second Century
Putting Tatian's Diatessaron in Perspective

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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.[1] 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

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1. W. L. Peterson, "Tatian's Diatessaron," in *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (ed. H. Koester; London: SCM / Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 403.

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*,[2] 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 does the composition and circulation of the *Diatessaron* help us understand the state of the NT canon in the second century?" From that viewpoint my purpose best fits under the second and third points in Peterson's list above.

It is a well-known peculiarity that we possess no direct copy of the *Diatessaron*. The text, therefore, must be reconstructed from a number of witnesses.[3] In reality, then, we have only one direct copy of Tatian's works extant, his *Oratio ad Graecos*. That Tatian did write other works is not disputed;[4] unfortunately, these works have not survived. The main focus of this study on the *Diatessaron*, rather than on the *Oratio*, is necessitated by the fact that the *Oratio* is valuable only in a limited sense in regard to Tatian's use and attitude toward Christian writings.

I. *ORATIO AD GRAECOS*

Of course, Tatian's *Oratio* is valuable for putting together a brief account of his own conversion to Christianity. He sought to discover truth, and while he was devoting himself to that endeavor, through Greek philosophy, he happened upon certain "barbaric writings"[5] which were too old and too divine to be compared with Greek

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2. The *Dura Fragment* was discovered at Dura-Europos in Syria in 1933. It measures about four inches square and contains fourteen lines of legible Greek from the passion narrative. Its date is around 254-57 AD. The text is harmonized and establishes an extremely early date for the circulation of the *Diatessaron*. See F. C. Burkitt, "The Dura Fragment of Tatian," *JTS* 36 (1935) 255-59.

3. For a discussion of the various witness to the text of the *Diatessaron*, see B. M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 10-25; Peterson, "Tatian's Diatessaron," 408-19.

4. Eusebius (*Hist. eccl*. 4.29) states that Tatian left a great many writings but does not name them save the *Orat*. In *Hist. eccl*. 5.13 Eusebius explains that Rhodos credits Tatian with writing *A Book on Problems* in which he promised to explain the obscure and hidden parts of scripture. Tatian himself (*Orat*. 15) states that he wrote "a treatise concerning animals."

5. *Orat*. 29.1, γραφαῖς τισιν ἐντυχεῖν βαρβαρικαῖς. Quotations from *Oratio*. are from E. J. Goodspeed, *Die ältesten Apologeten: Texte mit kurzen Einleitungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1915). English translations are my own.

philosophy. These barbaric writings were the prophetic word of God.[6] Not only was Tatian drawn to these writings because of their old age and divinity, but especially because their divinity was expressed in the foreknowledge of future events.[7] But unlike his teacher Justin Martyr, Tatian does not employ the argument from prophecy using Christian writings as historical proof for the occurrence of the prophecies.[8] Tatian explains that he does not use "witnesses from ourselves,"[9] that is, Christian writings, because the Greeks do not accept them. What writings Tatian would have used we do not know. We may conjecture that Tatian perhaps thought of the Christian writings in a different sense than Justin, but this would, indeed, only be conjecture. The best conclusion is to consider Tatian's audience in his lack of reference to Christian writings to prove the prophetic predictions. Because the audience was Greek, Tatian felt that the use of Christian writings to prove his points would be counterproductive,[10] even though he calls the Greek writings mythical accounts when compared with "our narrations."[11]

The *Diatessaron*, on the other hand, is relatively valuable in pointing out, not only Tatian's probable attitude toward written Gospels, but also the attitude of the church at large during that time, especially the Syrian church, which accepted the *Diatessaron* as its authoritative Gospel into the fifth and sixth centuries.

The existence of the *Diatessaron* is attested by a number of early Christian writers. The way these attestations are understood is seen to contribute to our understanding of the attitude toward the *Diatessaron* from the time it was compiled and into the fifth and sixth centuries. Specifically, attention has been paid to the heresy of Tatian, and perhaps more importantly, to the sources Tatian used in the *Diatessaron's* composition.

6. *Orat*. 20.2-3; 29; 30.1; 40.

7. *Orat*. 20.2-3; 29.1.

8. On Justin Martyr's use of the argument from prophecy see, e.g., D. E. Aune, "Justin Martyr's Use of the Old Testament," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1966) 179-97; L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); idem, "The Old Testament and Judaism in the Writings of Justin Martyr," *VT* 14 (1964) 395– 406; T. W. Manson, "The Proof from Prophecy," JTS 46 (1945) 129-30; H. P. Schneider, "Some Reflections on the Dialogue of Justin Martyr with Trypho," *SJT* 15 (1962) 164-75; M. Wiles, "The Old Testament in Controversy with the Jews," *SJT* 8 (1955) 113-26.

9. *Orat*. 31.1, μάρτυρας δὲ οὐ τοὺς οἴκοι παραλήψομαι.

10. Tatian does include several allusions to Christian teaching which may be in a written form and may even be NT documents. But none of these allusions contains an introductory formula or statement about whether it is the words of Jesus or was found in some memoirs or something else. See *Orat*. 4.1; 13.1; 19.4; 30.1.

11. *Orat*. 21.1.

II. THE HERESY OF TATIAN

Most of the attention that was exerted toward Tatian in the first few centuries after the composition of the *Diatessaron* was not because of his harmony. That Tatian lapsed into heresy[12] is generally the focus of the second-century heresiologists who mention the harmonist. Irenaeus never mentions Tatian's *Diatessaron* but is sure to discuss his heresy.[13] From the outset Tatian is not cast in a very good light. The Encratites (self-controlled), who are led by Tatian, are said to spring from Saturninus and Marcion. They preach against marriage, thus setting aside the original creation of God and blaming God for creating humankind as male and female for procreation. Irenaeus also criticizes the Encratites for abstaining from meat because this proves them ungrateful to God who created the animals for our benefit. At the top of Irenaeus's list, however, appears to be the belief that Tatian denies the salvation of Adam. In book 3 of his work *Against Heresies*,[14] Irenaeus expands on this particular criticism. He finds fault in the doctrine because in disallowing Adam's salvation Tatian and the Encratites do not believe that the sheep which had perished had been found, an obvious allusion to Luke 15:4. Irenaeus reasons that if this sheep (Adam) has not been found, then the whole human race is lost in a state of eternal damnation. Irenaeus's verdict on Tatian is clear, "Thus also do those who disallow Adam's salvation gain nothing, except this, that they render themselves heretics and apostates from the truth, and show themselves patrons of the serpent and of death."[15]

Briefly mentioned by Irenaeus is the system of AEons invented by Tatian which was similar to Valentinus. This is confirmed in Hippolytus who expands the explanation by stating Tatian's teaching that the world had been created by these AEons.[16] Hippolytus also points out that he moved away from the beliefs of his teacher Justin in the area of marriage and the salvation of Adam.[17] Clement of Alexandria mentions only the teaching of Tatian concerning marriage. In disagreeing with his beliefs Clement sets out to prove the sanctity of marriage in God's eyes.[18] Finally, Eusebius mentions one writer,

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12. Whether this lapse was before or after the death of his teacher Justin Martyr is irrelevant for our purposes. On this question see, e.g., L. W. Barnard, "The Heresy of Tatian—Once Again," *JEH* 19 (1968) 1-10; R. M. Grant, "The Heresy of Tatian," *JTS* n.s. 5 (1954) 62-68.

13. Irenaeus *Haer*. 1.28.1.

14. Irenaeus *Haer*. 3.23.8.

15. Ibid.

16. Hippolytus *Haer*. 10.14.

17. Hippolytus *Haer*. 8.9.

18. Clement of Alexandria *Str*. 13.

Musanus, who wrote a discourse (extant to Eusebius but since lost) against the Encratites, a group "which was at that time just beginning to sprout and to introduce into life its strange and corrupting false doctrine. The story goes that Tatian was the author of this error."[19] In explaining this false doctrine Eusebius simply quotes Irenaeus from the passages outlined above.[20]

The beliefs of the Encratites include: the rejection of marriage as adultery; abstaining from eating meat; denial of the salvation of Adam. Also among the beliefs of the Encratites is the rejection of the drinking of wine. In fact, the Encratites even went so far as to substitute water for wine in the Eucharist service.[21]

If one were to examine the two extant works of Tatian for a complete, or even partial, outline of his heresy one would be hard pressed. The fact is that neither his *Oratio* nor his *Diatessaron* betrays any blatant heretical ideas. Rather than having heretical leanings, Tatian's *Oratio* is similar in argument and style to his teacher's *Apologies* and, indeed, with other second-century apologies. On the other hand, Tatian does offer some minor "improvements" in his harmony of the Gospels which betray a certain leaning in accordance with his more ascetic views.[22] Some examples include the following:

    a. The generally accepted Greek text of Matt 1:19 referring to Joseph as Mary's husband is changed by omitting the definite article and possessive pronoun and by taking ἀνήρ in a general and not a marital sense meaning, "Joseph, because he was a just man."[23]

    b. Some witnesses to the *Diatessaron* reduce the length of time of the marriage of the prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36) from seven years to seven days.[24]

    c. The declaration in Matt 19:5, "For this reason a man shall leave his Father and Mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall

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19. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.28-4.29.1, ἄρτι τότε φύειν ἀρχομένην ξένην τε καὶ φθοριμαίαν ψευδοδοξίαν εἰσάγουσαν τῷ βίῳ· ἧς παρεκτροπῆς ἀρχηγὸν καταστῆναι Τατιανὸν λόγος ἔχει. Quotations from Eusebius *Hist eccl.* are from the Loeb Classic Library edition. Volume 1 (Books 1-5): K. Lake (ed.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press / London: Heinemann, 1975). Volume 2 (Books 6-10): J. E. L. Oulton and H. J. Lawlor (eds.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press / London: Heinemann, 1973).

20. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.29.1-6.

21. B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 116.

22. J. F. Kelly, *Why Is There a New Testament?* (London: Chapman, 1986) 146; Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 34-36.

23. This reading is found in Ephraem and in the Persian and Venetian harmonies.

24. This reading is present in the Commentary of Ephraem and the Sinaitic Syriac manuscripts. The Persian harmony does not reduce the length of time of the marriage but claims a state of celibacy for the couple.

become one flesh," (NASB) is put in the mouth of Adam rather
than God. In effect, this changes God's intention of marriage to
being only a spiritual union between man and wife, while the
physical union is more an invention by Adam.[25]

d. Instead of Jesus' claiming, "I am the true vine" (John 15:1), the
Persian *Diatessaron* has Jesus claiming, "I am the tree of the fruit
of Truth."

e. The allegation of Jesus' being a glutton and a drunkard (Matt
11:19) is absent, as is the statement "when men have drunk freely"
(John 2:10) from the account of the miracle at Cana.[26]

f. Instead of Jesus' being offered wine mixed with gall in the account
of the crucifixion (Matt 27:34) Jesus is said to have been given vin-
egar mixed with gall.[27]

g. Some witnesses change John the Baptist's diet (Mark 1:6 and par-
allels) from "locusts and wild honey" to "milk and honey."

These minor alterations and subtractions are by no means indic-
ative of any of the heresies that the above antiheretical writers ad-
dressed. Certainly no one would suggest that the *Diatessaron* is latent
with such heresy. I affirm, with Westcott that, "the heretical charac-
ter of the book was not evident upon the surface of it."[28] Important,
however, in light of these alterations and subtractions is the fact that
Tatian was not beyond changing things in the Gospels which he per-
haps found at odds with his particular understanding of Christianity.

III. THE SOURCES FOR THE *DIATESSARON*

The more important question for our purposes is the number of
sources which Tatian used in compiling his harmony. No one denies
that Tatian used the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The
question surrounding the sources is did he use any more than simply
these four? Of course there are other questions that flow from the
initial question (how many other sources? what were they? were they
written or oral?), but the main question is prominent here. The dis-
cussion of the sources centers on two issues: the attestation of the
Diatessaron, and the text. I will examine each in that order.

25. This reading is found in several of the Medieval harmonies (Liege, Stuttgart,
Gravenhage, and Theodiscum).
26. This reading is found in Ephraem.
27. This reading is found in Ephraem.
28. B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*
(5th ed.; Cambridge and London: MacMillan, 1881) 324.

1. *The Attestation*

The first mention[29] of the *Diatessaron* in the West is by Eusebius (ca. 260-340), "Tatian composed in some way a combination and collection of the Gospels, and gave this the name of *The Diatessaron*, and this is still extant in some places."[30] Rufinus's (ca. 345- 410) Latin translation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* further expanded on the title *Diatessaron* by stating *unum ex quattuor*.[31] Epiphanius (ca. 315- 403) states that the Gospel *Diatessaron* was created by Tatian and that some call it "according to the Hebrews."[32] Later, in the fifth century, Theodoret (ca. 393-ca. 466) states that,

> He [Tatian] composed the so-called *Diatessaron* by cutting out the genealogies and whatever goes to prove the Lord to have been born of the seed of David according to the flesh. And this work was in use not only among his own party but even among those who follow the tradition of the Apostles, who used it somewhat too innocently as a compendium of the Gospels, without recognizing the craftiness of its compositions. I myself found more than two hundred copies in reverential use in the churches of my diocese, all of which I removed, replacing them by the Gospels of the four Evangelists.[33]

In the sixth century Victor, bishop of Capua in Italy (541-54), discovered a manuscript of a Gospel harmony with no title or author's name. He had a copy made and in his preface to the new copy (which is the present Codex Fuldensis) explains how he concluded that the work must be the harmony of Tatian. Interestingly, however, Victor does not call the work *Diatessaron*, but a *Diapente* (= "through five [Gospels]").

There is much evidence to show the early circulation of the *Diatessaron* in the East. The Old Syriac Gospels (extant in the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus and the fifth-century Codex Curetonianus) show that they have been influenced by the textual variants and the harmonistic readings of the *Diatessaron*.[34] Many of the Gospel quotations of the Syrian writers Aphrahat (early fourth century) and Ephraem (ca. 306-73) are from the *Diatessaron*.[35] Ephraem even wrote a commentary on the *Diatessaron*.[36]

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29. What follows is dependent on Peterson, "Tatian's Diatessaron," 405-8.
30. Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.29.6, ὁ Τατιανὸς συνάφειάν τινα καὶ συναγωγὴν οὐκ οἶ δ᾽ ὅπως τῶν εὐαγγελίων συνθείς, Τὸ διὰ τεσσάρων τοῦτο προσωνόμασεν, ὃ καὶ παρά τισιν εἰς ἔτι νῦν φέρεται·
31. "One from four."
32. Epiphanius *Haer.* 46.1.8-9.
33. Theodoret *Haer. fab. comp.* 1.20.
34. Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 12-17.
35. F. C. Burkitt, *Ephraim's Quotations from the Gospel* (TextsS 7/2; Cambridge, 1901).
36. The harmony, however, was not known by the name *Diatessaron*. Rather it was known as the Gospel of the Mixed (*Euangelion da Mehallete*). Ephraem mentions neither Tatian nor the title *Diatessaron* in this commentary.

The title *Diatessaron* first appears in Syriac in a fourth-century translation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*. The text (4.29.6) is translated, "Now this same Tatianus their former chief collected and mixed up and composed a gospel and called it *Diatessaron*; now this is (the Gospel) of the mixed, the same that is in the hands of many unto this day "[37] In comparing the Syriac translation with the Greek original it can be seen that the translator deleted Eusebius's "I know not how" and modified the last phrase to emphasize the *Diatessaron's* continuing use. Even though the title *Diatessaron* was a transliteration, the translator also felt obliged to include the explanation that the *Diatessaron* is known to the readers as the "Gospel of the Mixed."

The *Diatessaron* is also named in the fifth-century Syrian work *Doctrine of Addai*, but the inclusion of the title is most likely an interpolation.[38] It is not until the ninth century that the title is used in Syriac literature again. In order to influence the writings of Aphrahat, Ephraem, and the *Doctrine of Addai*, the *Diatessaron* must have been in circulation in Syria from the beginning of Syrian Christianity, where it was known as the "Gospel of the Mixed." It was only later that the title *Diatessaron* became the common designation in Syria. This explains why the first use of the title in Syriac, in the fourth-century Syriac translation of Eusebius's *Hist. eccl.*, is a transliteration which causes the translator to add the standard Syriac name "Gospel of the Mixed."

The above attestations of Tatian's harmony are often used as proof that the name *Diatessaron* was given to the work by Tatian himself. For example, B. F. Westcott states, "There can be no reasonable doubt that the name was given to the work by Tatian himself; and if the Diatessaron was not a compilation of four Gospels, what is the explanation of that number? If again these four Gospels were not those which we receive, what other four Gospels ever formed a collection which needed no further description than *the four*?"[39] The assertion that Tatian himself called the work *Diatessaron* further leads Westcott to state that Tatian used only the four canonical Gospels in his harmony. Both of these assertions need to be addressed.

Questions have been raised concerning the above attestations which claim the name *Diatessaron* for Tatian's work. R. P. C. Hanson believes that there is no reason to think that this was Tatian's own title

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37. W. Wright and N. McLean (eds.), *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius in Syriac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898) 243.

38. F. C. Burkitt (ed.), *Euangelion da-Mepharreshe: The Curetonian Version of the Four Gospels* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904) 2.175. Peterson, "Tatian's Diatessaron," believes that it is an anachronism simply because it is so anachronistic in Syrian literature of the time.

39. Westcott, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 322.

for the work.[40] This belief is intimately linked with the number of sources that Tatian used. Certainly the title *Diatessaron* (διὰ τεσσάρων= "through four") suggests the use of only four Gospels. But if this title was only a later appellation and not used by the compiler himself we cannot necessarily argue, as Westcott, that the title is entirely descriptive of the work.

In examining the various attestations of the *Diatessaron*, G. M. Hahneman[41] believes that Eusebius's suggestion that Tatian harmonized only the four canonical Gospels is not based on firsthand knowledge of the work—Eusebius had probably never seen the document. Further, Hahneman points out that Rufinus's Latin translation of the same passage (4.29.6) further accentuated the possible error. Also thrown into the mix is the fact that Victor of Capua called the harmony a *Diapente*, thus suggesting Tatian's dependence on five sources rather than four.

J. H. Charlesworth[42] asserts that there is no consensus regarding the number of sources used. Against the use of only four sources is the possibility that Eusebius erred when he wrote that Tatian's harmony was compiled using the four Gospels. Further, the Syriac translation of the Eusebian passage does call it the *Diatessaron*, but this is probably a transliteration of the Greek name. Why would Tatian place a Greek name on a Syriac work? Against the use of five Gospels and the appellation of Victor of Capua (*Diapente*) is the fact that *Diapente* may simply be a musical term. In fact, Metzger points out[43] that *both* terms are musical and can apply to Tatian's harmony.

> Bolgiani shows that δαὶ τεσσάρων and διὰ πέντε are technical terms used in ancient musicology, one referring to three intervals of four notes, the other to four intervals of five notes. He therefore interprets Victor's comment to mean that Tatian's "harmony" of the four Evangelists involves not merely four individual notes but four fundamental elements of symphonic harmony, the *diapente*. Thus both terms, *diatessaron* and Victor's metaphorical use of *diapente*, are appropriate descriptions of Tatian's Harmony of the Gospels.[44]

Metzger's belief that only four Gospels were used is irrelevant to the fact that both terms can be applied to describe something in the harmony other than the number of sources. For Charlesworth, this

40. R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM, 1962) 230.
41. G. M. Hahnernan, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 98.
42. J. H. Charlesworth, "Tatian's Dependence upon Apocryphal Traditions," *HeyJ.* 15 (1974) 5-6.
43. Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament,* 28-29.
44. Ibid., 29.

translates to his belief that neither Eusebius's nor Victor's statement should dictate the answer to the question of Tatian's sources.[45]

2. *The Text*

If neither Eusebius nor Victor should dictate the number of sources used in Tatian, the question remains, what should? There certainly is no consensus on how many sources were used in the compilation of the harmony. Some admit only the four canonical Gospels,[46] while others admit at least one other written or oral source.[47]

The former view is based entirely on the assertion that Tatian himself gave the harmony the name *Diatessaron*. Westcott[48] does just this when he claims that the only reason for the name *Diatessaron* is that Tatian used only the four canonical Gospels. And Metzger[49] further conjectures, based on the same assertion, that Tatian compiled his harmony because it was his private judgment that the fourfold harmony was the most convenient way to present the whole gospel story at once instead of confusing people by offering them four parallel and more or less divergent narratives.[50] As we have seen, however, the belief that Tatian himself gave the title to his harmony can easily be called into question.

45. Charlesworth, "Tatian's Dependence upon Apocryphal Traditions," 6.

46. See, e.g., E. J. Goodspeed, *The Formation of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926) 58; Kelly, *Why Is There a New Testament?* 86; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 115-16; idem, *Early Versions of the New Testament,* 28-30; A. Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (rev. ed.; C. S. C. Williams; London: Duckworth, 1960) 155; Westcott, *On the Canon of the New Testament*, 322.

47. See, e.g., Barnard, "The Heresy of Tatian—Once Again," 5; F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity, 1988) 128; H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Eng. trans. J. A. Baker; London: Black, 1972) 175; Charlesworth., "Tatian's Dependence upon Apocryphal Traditions," passim; R. M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1965) 138; Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon,* 98-99; Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church,* 191, 230; W. L. Peterson, "Textual Evidence of Tatian's Dependence upon Justin's 'ΑΠΟΜΝΗΜΟΝΕΥΜΑΤΑ," *NTS* 36 (1990) 512-34; G. Quispel, "Tatian and the Gospel of Thomas," *VC* 11 (1957) 189-207; idem, "Some Remarks on the Gospel of Thomas," *NTS* 5 (1958) 282-90; idem, "The Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of the Hebrews," *NTS* 12 (1966) 371-82.

48. Westcott, *On the Canon of the New Testament*, 322.

49. Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament,* 116.

50. Related to this conjecture by Metzger is the interesting article by T. Baarda, "ΔΙΑΦΩΝΙΑ−−ΣΥΜΦΩΝΙΑ: Factors in the Harmonization of the Gospels, Especially in the Diatessaron of Tatian," in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Rescensions, Text, and Transmission* (ed. W. L. Peterson; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 133- 49. Baarda contends that Tatian's motivation in harmonizing the Gospel accounts was found in his conception of the unity of Christianity and the disunity of the Greeks. He believed unity and harmony were the hallmark of Christianity, but the apparent discrepancies in the Gospel accounts could not escape his notice. The outworking of this belief is his *Diatessaron*.

Not very much more evidence can be offered for the latter view that Tatian used five or more sources in compiling his harmony. This assertion has been made simply through an examination of the re-constructed text[51] of the *Diatessaron.*[52] Certainly no one would deny that the majority sources for the *Diatessaron* are the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The point at issue here is the possible use of sources other than these four. The following are the few ex-amples that can be presented as possible evidence of Tatian's use of extracanonical sources.

  a. The synoptic accounts of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist are similar in that they do not mention a great light shining after the baptism. Many witnesses to the *Diatessaron,*[53] however, in-clude the account of a great light shining. We do know that this same tradition is found in Justin Martyr[54] and Epiphanius.[55] Epi-phanius even states that it was found in the now lost *Gospel of the Ebionites.* Therefore, Justin's reading may come from the *Gospel of the Ebionites,* which was then used by Tatian—either directly or indirectly—when he compiled his *Diatessaron,* or Tatian and the *Gospel of the Ebionites* were both dependent on Justin's harmony.[56]

  b. The difference between the canonical Matt 8:4[57] and the *Diatessa-ron*[58] has lead some to assert that the reading must be evidence of an earlier Judaic-Christian text.[59]

  c. One scholar[60] has shown the possibility of the Persian *Diatessaron's* including nativity readings that are present in the *Protevangelium of James.*

These are really the only concrete examples that are presented as evi-dence that Tatian relied on an extracanonical source. This evidence,

51. On the rules on the reconstruction of the text of the *Diatessaron*, see Peterson, "Tatian's Diatessaron," 419-22; idem, "Romanos and the Diatessaron: Reading and Method," *NTS* 29 (1983) 484-507.

52. What exactly these sources were is not relevant for this essay. A good over-view of this discussion can be gleaned from the sources listed in n. 46 above.

53. This reading is included in Erphraem's Commentary, Isho^cdad of Merv, the Pepysian Harmony, the Latin Poem *Vita Rhythmica*, and two Vetus Latine manuscripts, a (fourth century), and g[1] (eighth century).

54. Justin Martyr *Dial*. 88.3.

55. Epiphanius *Haer*. 30.13.

56. Peterson, "Tatian's Diatessaron," 422-23.

57. "Go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses com-manded, for a testimony to them."

58. "Go, show yourself to the priest and fulfill the Law." This reading is found in Ephraem, Isho^cdad of Merv, Romanos, the Liège Harmony, the Venetian Harmony.

59. Peterson, "Tatian's Diatessaron," 424.

60. G. Messina, "Lezioni apocrife nel Diatessaron Persian," *Bib* 30 (1949) 10-27.

or lack thereof, causes Metzger to conclude, "the amount of extra-canonical material that seems to have been present in Tatian's Diatessaron hardly justifies the opinion of some scholars that Tatian used extensive use of a fifth, apocryphal Gospel when he compiled his harmony."[61]

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The field of *Diatessaron* studies is vast and often times confusing. The major issues of witnesses, titles, and sources are areas to which much significant study has been devoted. Many of the conclusions reached in theses studies, however, have only minimal bearing upon our topic. As important as many of these issues are for other matters, they come little into play in understanding the state of the NT canon of the second century.

Foremost in our minds in placing Tatian's *Diatessaron* into perspective is the issue of definition. In many discussions of canon there appears to be a lack of application of the true definitions of *scripture* and *canon*. Many, in fact apply the terms as synonyms. That is, many move from *scripture* to *canon* without recognizing the difference which lies therein. This has led to confusion for those who have sought to understand the state of the canon in the second century.[62]

Years ago A. C. Sundberg, Jr. called for a more precise definition of the terms *canon* and *scripture* in order to distinguish some very important features of the terms.[63] Sundberg stated, "it is necessary to distinguish between the terms 'scripture,' meaning writings which are held in some sense as authoritative for religion and 'canon,' meaning a defined collection that is held to be exclusively, i.e., with respect to all other books, authoritative."[64] Sundberg did not like the fact that many discussions concerning canonicity employed the terms *canon* and *canonical* in a rather loose sense. In other words, Sundberg objected to the fact that these terms were used to designate documents that were widely held in authority (scripture), without regard to a definitive and exclusive determination of a group of such documents (canon). He considered the application of *canonical* to these documents anachronistic because a *canon*, by definition, is closed and no such closed canon existed in the second and third centuries. Thus,

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61. Metzger, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, 36.
62. A. C. Sundberg, Jr., "Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon," *SE* (TU 102; 1968) 452-61.
63. A. C. Sundberg, Jr., "The Making of the New Testament Canon," in *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (ed. C. M. Laymon; London: Collins, 1972) 1216-24; idem, "Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon."
64. Sundberg, "The Making of the New Testament Canon," 1216.

canon and *scripture* must be applied and understood in the proper sense in order to avoid the above mistakes. More recently the importance of this distinction has been furthered by L. M. McDonald[65] and H. Y. Gamble,[66] albeit in differing, yet complimentary, terms.

McDonald begins his discussion of the proper distinction between *scripture* and *canon* with an appeal to the findings of G. T. Sheppard.[67] There are two ways of understanding the notion of *canon* in the ancient world.[68] Taking his cue from Sheppard, McDonald explains these two ways as "canon 1" and "canon 2." Canon 1 is essentially a rule, standard, or guide that functions in an authoritative manner in a community. It is a fluid or flexible authority that is not yet fixed. Canon 1 is therefore present wherever there is a respect for some authority within a community, either in written or oral form. Canon 2 occurs when these authorities (canon 1) become more fixed in a given community. Canon 2 authority becomes so well established in a community of faith that very little doubt arises about the authority of a text thereafter. Canon 2, therefore, is a more fixed authority for the community.

Gamble (with more reliance on Sundberg) employs the terms *functional* and *formal* in his understanding of scripture and canon. Gamble begins from his understanding that the NT canon "calls special attention to its form, i.e., a fixed collection of precisely twenty-seven early Christian documents, and to its function, i.e. literature that is normative for the faith and life of the Christian community."[69] Immediately Gamble points out the importance of understanding canon as a *fixed* collection. This is what he means by a formal canon. On the other hand, a functional canon is one that operated in the sense of a norm or a standard, whether written or oral. Gamble emphasizes that a scrupulousness about such terminology is necessary so that these real distinctions are not blurred. The history of the NT canon is not only concerned with the normative use of Christian writings as authoritative documents (as scripture), but with the delimitation of a

65. L. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (rev. ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995); idem, "The Integrity of the Biblical Canon in Light of Its Historical Development," *BBR* 6 (1996) 95-132.

66. H. Y. Gamble, "Canon—New Testament," *ABD* (ed. N. D. Freedman; 6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1.852-61; idem, "The Canon of the New Testament," in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. E. J. Epp and G. W. MacRae; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 201-43; idem, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

67. G. T. Sheppard, "Canon," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. M. Eliade; 10 vols.; New York: MacMillan, 1987) 3.62-69.

68. McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon,* 20; idem, "The Integrity of the Biblical Canon," 101.

69. Gamble, "Canon—New Testament," 852.

specific group of such writings and with its meaning and function as a *collection* (as a canon).[70]

Both McDonald and Gamble are really saying the same thing as Sundberg. *Canon* is *not* synonymous with *scripture*. As McDonald has pointed out,[71] there is considerable overlap. The overlap occurs in the authority of a document, that is, both scriptural documents and canonical documents are viewed as authoritative in the life of the community. The line of demarcation occurs where these documents are chosen to be placed between two distinct poles.[72] At one end of the pole is a rule, standard, ideal, norm, or authoritative office or literature, whether written or oral. Both Sheppard and McDonald call this pole "canon 1," while Gamble calls this a "functional canon." However, it seems that some confusion would be avoided if we maintained Sundberg's term "scripture." Whichever term one chooses to use, the emphasis of this pole is on the internal signs of an elevated status within the community of faith. At the other end of the pole is a fixation, standardization, enumeration, listing, chronology, register, or catalog of exemplary or normative persons, places, or things (although for our purposes here we are concerned only with writings). Sheppard and McDonald call this pole "canon 2," while Gamble prefers "formal canon." If we adopt Sundberg's terminology above for scripture, it would then be acceptable also to adopt simply the term *canon* for this pole. The emphasis here rests on the precise boundary, limits, or measure of what, from some preunderstood standard, belongs within or falls outside of a specific canon.

When taking this understanding of *scripture* and *canon* into the field of the history of the NT canon its significance can at once be seen. We must understand that the word *canon* did not begin to come into use as an appellation for a collection of Christian writings until the mid–fourth century with Athanasius.[73] In the second century, however, the word designated what the church acknowledged as having regulative authority for its faith and life.[74] It was only after Athanasius that the term *canon* came to denote a closed collection of authoritative writings to which nothing could be added or from which nothing could be taken away.

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70. Gamble, "The Canon of the New Testament," 205.

71. McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 13.

72. Sheppard, "Canon," 64.

73. Athanasius *Decr*. 5.18. Here Athanasius describes the *Shepherd of Hermas* as "not of the canon." See also Athanasius's famous *Festal Letter* (Ep. 39) of the year 367, wherein he describes certain Christian books as "canonical."

74. See, e.g., Irenaeus *Haer*. 1.9.4; 1.10.1; 5.20.1; *Dem* 3; Tertullian *Praescriptio* 13; 27; *De virginibus velandis* 1; Clement of Alexandria *Str*. 7.15.90; Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.13.3.

On the other hand, the term *scripture* designates writings which are religiously authoritative. They are thus used as such without regard to their systematic enumeration or limitation. This is, in fact, how Christian writings were used throughout the second century. The concept of *canon* presupposes *scripture*, but the concept of *scripture* does not necessarily entail the notion of a *canon*.

In canon studies one must be aware of not attributing canonical status to a document that has only attained scriptural status. This is particularly important in dealing with the second and third centuries. This is so because of the lack of evidence that the church consciously discussed or contemplated a closed or fixed collection of the NT Scriptures during this time.[75]

In the second and third centuries, the church fathers did not answer Marcion, Gnosticism, and Montanism with a closed canon of scriptures (canon 2 or formal canon). The answer to these challenges was with a canon of truth (canon 1 or functional canon) which was defended by an appeal to apostolic writings. This can be seen in Irenaeus[76] (ca. 130–ca. 200) and in Tertullian[77] (ca. 260–ca. 225) where both use the *canon* of *truth* to speak to these challenges. Even as late as the early third century Serapion shows the same thing.[78] In writing to his church, Serapion wished to settle the question of whether the *Gospel of Peter* could be read in that church. He had previously allowed it to be read in the church but later reversed this decision on the basis that it denied the humanity of Jesus. The point here is that Serapion did not revoke his permission to allow the *Gospel of Peter* to be read in the church on the basis of an appeal to a closed collection of scripture but on the basis of the canon of truth, on the basis that certain doctrines contained in that Gospel were at variance with what was handed down through the Apostles to the Bishops of the churches. The issue was dealt with on the basis of orthodoxy, not canonicity.

It is difficult to place the settling of the NT canon in the second century when doubt concerning certain documents was occurring in the fourth century. Eusebius's famous list of recognized, disputed, and rejected books is illustrative of this point.[79] One must asked why discussions of this type were occurring in the early fourth century if the issue was largely settled in the second. The fact is that there

75. The following two paragraphs acknowledge McDonald ("The Integrity of the Biblical Canon in Light of Its Historical Development," 118-19) for a succinct explanation of this issue.
76. Irenaeus *Haer*. 1.8.1; 1.9.1-4.
77. Tertullian *Praescriptio* 8-9.
78. Eusebius *Hist. eccl*. 6.12.3-6.
79. Eusebius *Hist. eccl*. 3.25.

were simply no discussions by the second-century fathers concerning canonicity.

The above has implications for placing Tatian's harmony into proper perspective. Because of its second-century date, the *Diatessaron* must be understood in light of the necessary distinction between scripture and canon. Unfortunately, in the past, this distinction has neither been maintained nor understood by many students of the scriptural canon.

For example, we must wonder how Souter can state that the harmony of the *Diatessaron* in ca. 170 proves the canonicity of the four Gospels.[80] What exactly does Souter mean here? If the concept of a canon, as we have come to understand it, implies no addition or subtraction from its contents, then the *Diatessaron* is in violation of that concept by its very existence simply because it added to and subtracted from the four canonical Gospels.

Goodspeed also misunderstands this distinction when he attempts to place the deliberate creation of the fourfold Gospel at AD 115-25.[81] Goodspeed chooses this date because he believes the *Preaching of Peter*, 2 Peter, the *Gospel of Peter*, Papias, the *Epistle of the Apostles*, and Justin Martyr all show acquaintance with or dependence on all four canonical Gospels. This attempt, however, confuses aquaintance with, and even dependence upon, the four with a conscious decision to arrange the four into a fixed collection. The former does not necessarily mean the latter.

We must also take issue with Goodspeed when he states that Tatian's use of the four Gospels in this bold rearrangement shows that, even though these four stood on a higher level than any others, they were still not considered scripture.[82] It is quite apparent that Goodspeed is using *canon* and *scripture* synonymously since he later claims that Tatian's harmony proves that he had no canonical reverence for the four Gospels.[83] I would agree with the statement concerning the lack of canonical reverence but not with Goodspeed's comment that Tatian did not consider them scripture. The very fact that Tatian used primarily these four Gospels shows, at the very least, that they were authoritative and thus considered scripture.

B. Lindars also misunderstands the concept of *canon* when he discusses the *Diatessaron*.[84] Lindars claims that the concept of *canon*

80. Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament,* 155.
81. Goodspeed, *The Formation of the New Testament*, 37-38.
82. Ibid., 58.
83. Ibid., 115.
84. J. Rogerson, C. Rowland, and B. Lindars, *The History of Christian Theology, Vol. 2: The Study and Use of the Bible* (Basingstoke: Pickering / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 243.

was not so rigid so as to prevent some freedom in handling the text. Apparently Lindars ignores the fact that the concept of *canon* was not associated with writings during the second century. As was pointed out above, it was associated with the rule of faith. In this light it is difficult to imagine Tatian having a concept of *canon* that was applicable to the sources used in his compilation.

I assert that the appearance of a harmony, regardless of the sources used, shows that a fourfold Gospel canon was not in existence, practically or even conceptually. Only a handful of scholars have come to recognize the significance of the above definitions with respect to the position of the *Diatessaron* in the second century.[85] With them I recognize the importance of the *Diatessaron* in establishing authority for the four Gospels. It is, in fact, the first document available to us that overtly recognizes the authority of the four Gospels. But it is a mistake to assume that the use of these four shows that they were already canonical in Tatian's day. Perhaps the lines have become blurred because the main sources used by Tatian are known *to us* as canonical. But, as the above scholars have pointed out, Tatian used the four Gospels in much the same way that the Gospel writers employed their sources. But no one has ever argued that, simply because Matthew and Luke used Mark, Mark was canonical.

Tatian used these four because they were scripture and probably the most influential Gospels, not because they were canonical. If they were canonical it seems as though Tatian's compilation would have met with some sort of opposition from the very start because of his handling (mishandling?) of the canonical text. But this was not the case. In fact, the *Diatessaron* enjoyed great popularity for centuries in Syria and was probably the first Gospel to reach Syria. The *Diatessaron* was only dislodged there as the authoritative Gospel under the influence of Rabulla, bishop of Edessa, in the fifth century. Apparently this dislodging was not a result of a disagreement with the handling of the texts but because of Tatian's reputation as a heretic.[86] The church in Syria most likely became embarrassed by the use of a Gospel text that was compiled by a heretic.

In placing Tatian's *Diatessaron* in perspective we must understand that the idea of Tatian's thinking of these four Gospels in a canonical sense is, in reality, anachronistic—it belongs to a time removed from his own. The documents were authoritative and they were scripture,

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85. Gamble, "The Canon of the New Testament," 210; idem, "Canon—New Testament," 854; Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Devlopment of the Canon*, 98-99; McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon,* 10, 152, 225; Sundberg, "Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon," 457-58; idem, "The Making of the New Testament Canon," 1219.

86. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament,* 218.

but they were not canonical. The perspective this opens for us is that the state of the NT canon during Tatian's day was still fluid. Tatian, in concert with Justin Martyr, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp, betrays neither a concept of nor a desire to form a NT canon. The possibility, therefore, of a written or oral "extracanonical" source in the *Diatessaron* is irrelevant because we are not dealing with a canon.

The discussions surrounding the significance of Tatian's harmony on the NT canon point to the need for a better understanding of the formation of the canon. By focusing on the polemical aspects of the canon—that is, when it was closed—the idea of a *canonical* process suffers.[87] We are better served by placing Tatian's *Diatessaron* in this perspective of *process*. By viewing this fluid era of Christian writings from this perspective, we are less tempted to view Christian writings of the second century from the anachronistic perspective of twentieth-century Christianity, which already possesses a fixed canon and assumes the same situation at the appearance of certain writings in early Christianity.

87. A. C. Outler, "The 'Logic' of Canon-Making and the Tasks of Canon-Criticism," in *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and the Early Church Fathers* (ed. W. E. March; S. D. Curries Festschrift; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1980) 263-76.