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Tatian

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Tatian “left a great many books” (Eusebius HE iv.29), of which only one, *Oration to the Greeks*, is extant.

1. *Oration to the Greeks* [λόγος πρὸς Ἕλληνας]

The date and place of this Greek composition are disputed: (a) in Rome between 150–172, or (b) outside of Rome following Justin’s martyrdom (172–180). The text is preserved in three Greek manuscripts dating from the eleventh to twelfth centuries; critical Greek editions have been produced by Whittaker (1982) and Marcovich (1995), and numerous English translations are available (Whittaker, 1982).

Tatian’s writing has been termed sprightly, intemperate, vigorous, satirical, and “a showpiece of Asianic rhetoric” (Edwards, “Tatian,” *ABD* 6.335). The use of the Greek optative mood, rare in his day, along with rhetorical questions, antitheses, and chiasms, gives the work a literary flavor. The *Oration* consists of forty-two chapters (under twenty pages in Ryland’s *ANF* translation) and is a sharp attack on Greek culture, especially its art, philosophy, and literature, even arguing that the Greeks had borrowed from Moses.

You Greeks are the sort of people whose words are fluent, but whose ideas are bizarre. (14.1)

So it is clear . . . that Moses is older than heroes, cities, demons. We should believe one who has priority in time in preference to Greeks who learned his doctrines at second hand. (40.1)

Whereas many patristic writers sought some reconciliation between Hellenistic and Christian philosophy, Tatian sees here a battle line. The *Oration* is also important for revealing many details of ancient culture, such as sculpture.

2. *Diatessaron* [Gk. τὸ διὰ τεσσάρων εὐαγγέλιον (“the gospel through four”)]

Although Tatian is best known for this harmony of the four gospels, no manuscript of the entire text in its original language (Greek or Syriac) has survived. Only one small Greek fragment of fourteen lines from the mid-second century has been uncovered. The *Diatessaron* was the preferred form of the gospels in the Syrian church until Bishop Rabbula of Edessa (411–435) ordered its replacement by the four gospels of the Syriac Peshitta. Our lack of manuscript evidence is due largely to Bishop Theodoret of Cyrus (423–457), whose visit to Syria in the fifth century resulted in the destruction of all two hundred known manuscripts of the *Diatessaron*. Nevertheless, it continued to be disseminated as far as China to the east and England (or Iceland) to the west. John Hus apparently utilized it shortly prior to the time of the Reformation. No new instances of this genre (*harmonia evangelica*) occurred until the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, when many

TATIAN (120–180/190). Best known for his harmony of the four gospels (*Diatessaron*), Tatian is usually remembered in the Western Church (but not in all portions of the Eastern Church) as a Christian apologist turned heretic. He was born in Assyria (or Syria) ca. 120 CE and came to Rome, where he adopted the Christian way through reading “barbarian writings” (Jewish Scripture, *Or* 29:1). There he became a student of Justin Martyr, after whose death (ca. 163–167) he returned to his birthplace in 172 CE. Almost nothing is known of his later life in Syria (d. ca. 180–190).

were produced. In modern times the gospel synopsis has largely replaced the harmony.

Modern reconstructions and translations of the *Diatessaron* are based on translations in other languages (Arabic, Latin, Armenian, Dutch), translations of these translations (Old German, Latin), a commentary on the *Diatessaron* by Ephraem the Syrian (d. 373), and scattered comments by other authors.

The *Diatessaron* is important for reconstructing the original New Testament text and versions, as well as for understanding the development of the New Testament canon. It also gives insight into the character of early Christianity, particularly ascetic tendencies in Syria as illustrated by the following.

- Rather than “*the women* who had followed” Jesus from Galilee (Matt 27:55), the *Diatessaron* speaks of “*the wives of those* who had followed” him, perhaps to avoid slander over Jesus traveling with unmarried women.
- Joseph is not called “Mary’s husband” (Matt 1:16) but simply “a just man.”
- Anna, the prophetess, was married not seven years (Luke 2:36), but seven days.
- The allegation that Jesus was a “glutton and winebibber” (Matt 11:19) is omitted.

Although some evidence may suggest Tatian’s use of a fifth source (e.g., Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of the Hebrews), the *Diatessaron* presents a highly skillful interweaving of the four canonical gospels, eliminating duplications and contradictions and harmonizing parallels. The *Diatessaron* quotes approximately 75 percent of the total verses in the gospels and omits the remaining 25 percent. Or, put another way, it retains

- 96 percent of John
- 76 percent of Matthew
- 66 percent of Luke
- 50 percent of Mark

An excerpt illustrates this skillful interweaving.

and in that hour one of them hastened, and took a sponge, and filled it with that vinegar, and fastened it on a reed (Matt 27:48), and brought it near his mouth (John 19:29) to give him a drink (Matt 27:48, Mark 15:36). And when Jesus had taken that vinegar, he said, Everything is finished (John 19:30). But the rest said, Let be, that we may see whether Elijah cometh to save him (Matt 27:49). And Jesus said, My Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34). And Jesus cried again with a loud voice, and said, My Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit (Luke 23:46). He said that, and bowed his head, and gave up his spirit (John 19:30).

The following writings of Tatian are mentioned in ancient sources, but no manuscripts have been discovered.

3. *On Animals*: Mentioned in *Oration* 15.2, it apparently seeks to show that fallen humanity is not superior to the animals.

4. *On Demons*: Mentioned in *Oration* 16; contents unknown.

5. *On Perfection According to the Savior*: Mentioned with fragmentary citation by Clem. Alex. *Miscellanies* iii.81, it interprets the antiascetic 1 Cor 7:3–6 in an Encratite direction.

6. *Problems*: Mentioned by Tatian’s former pupil, Rhodo, according to Eusebius (*HE* iv.13), apparently to explain problematic passages in scripture.

7. *Against Those Who Have Discussed Divine Things* (?): Mentioned in *Oration* 40 as a future work (completed?).

8. *Chronicon* (?): Mentioned by Rufinus (*Church History* vi.11), but may have been confused with the chronological chapters of the *Oration*.

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