

CHAPTER 3

AN OUTLINE OF JESUS' LIFE:

HARMONIZING THE GOSPELS

Assumptions of Harmonization

- Assume that each gospel is true, including statements of time, sequence, circumstances, etc.
- Recognize that when such statements are absent, the writer may have rearranged his material for a theological or literary purpose.
- Distinguish which parallel accounts describe the same events from those which describe similar but separate events.
 - Similar events probably occurred often, as Jesus moved from place to place. Likewise, he probably gave the same parables, discourses, teachings, and sayings on numerous occasions.
 - On the other hand, the gospel writers often quote Jesus loosely or indirectly. They maintain the thoughts Jesus intended to convey, but from their perspective. Therefore, the same event or speech may be reported differently in different gospels.

Examples of Harmonization

Tatian's Diatessaron

Ca. A.D. 160

Tatian was a Syrian from Mesopotamia, a rhetorician. He was converted in Rome by Justin Martyr, ca. A.D. 150, and became his pupil and disciple. Near the end of his life Tatian became an ascetic, and taught that Christians should abstain from meat, wine (and grape juice),

and marriage. His followers were called Encratites, and continued up to the 5th century. Finally Tatian became something close to a Gnostic. He died ca. A.D. 170.

Tatian wrote a good apology for Christianity, called *To the Greeks*. He also wrote his combined version of the four gospels, called the *Diatessaron* (*dia* + *tessaron* = “through the four”).

The *Diatessaron* uses all four gospels (except the genealogies), thus proving their existence and ecclesiastical use by A.D. 150. It follows the chronological framework of John, based on the feasts in Jerusalem, with a two-year public ministry for Jesus. For the style of the *Diatessaron*, see the example in Metzger, *Text of the NT*, p. 90.

Because of Tatian’s unorthodox views, Bishop Theodoret of upper Syria in ca. A.D. 425 ordered a purge of the *Diatessaron*. Over 200 copies were destroyed, and from then on the church approved only the separate Gospels. Thus the *Diatessaron* was almost lost to the church.

In the 4th century Ephraem wrote a commentary on the *Diatessaron* in the Armenian language; it was subsequently lost and not discovered until the 19th century. There are a few literary references and some quotations of the *Diatessaron* in the church fathers.

The recent rediscovery of most of the text of the *Diatessaron* is an interesting study in itself. Here are the major events:

- 1836 Armenian commentary of Ephraem on the *Diatessaron* published (note anecdote about J. B. Lightfoot in Metzger, *Chapters in the History of NT Textual Criticism*, p. 119, n. 3)
- 1876 Ephraem’s Armenian commentary translated into Latin and published
- 1881 text of the *Diatessaron* restored from Ephraem’s commentary by Zahn
- 1888 Arabic *Diatessaron* found and published
- 1933 small fragment of a Greek parchment *Diatessaron* found in Dura-Europos on the lower Euphrates (town destroyed A.D. 256-57; this is the part quoted in Metzger, *Text of the NT*, p. 90)
- 1957 Syriac manuscript of 3/5 of Ephraem’s commentary discovered; MS dated ca. A.D. 500

Other harmonies of the Gospels from that region show the influence of Tatian’s work; e.g., Arabic, Persian. For more information, see Metzger, *Chapters in the History of NT Textual Criticism*, ch. 4, “Tatian’s *Diatessaron* and a Persian Harmony of the Gospels,” pp. 97-120.

Eusebian Canons

Ca. A.D. 325

These “canons” are a numbering system for Gospel passages worked out by Eusebius of Caesarea to aid in finding parallel passages. In his day, of course, chapter and verse divisions were not used (ch. divisions, 13th century; verse divisions, 1551).

Eusebius developed a system with three parts:

1. Each Gospel was divided into short paragraphs, which were numbered.

Matthew	355 parts
Mark	233 parts (when long ending added later, 241 parts)
Luke	342 parts
John	232 parts

2. In the margins, small numbers referred to the section number in that gospel, and a table or “canon” number in the back in which it could be found. This table would have the parallel numbers, if any.

3. An appendix in the back contained 10 tables or “canons”:

Canon 1	sections in all 4 Gospels
Canons 2-4	sections in 3 Gospels
Canons 5-9	sections in 2 Gospels
Canon 10	sections in only 1 Gospel (this canon had four parts)

This system of Eusebius is explained in his letter to Carpianus, quoted, along with the canons themselves, in the Nestle-Aland Greek NT (pp. 84*-89* in the 27th ed.). See Metzger, *Text of the NT*, pp. 24-25.

Harmony of Andreas Osiander

Published in 1537

Andreas Osiander was an early Protestant theologian in Nurnberg. He was the first to apply the name *harmony* to this type of edition. The full title of his harmony is printed in McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?*, pp. 1-2.

Note his evaluation by Philip Schaff: “A. Osiander, an able and learned, but opinionated and quarrelsome theologian, preached . . . against the Roman Antichrist (and) fought as violently against Zwinglianism. . . . He published a mechanical Gospel Harmony (1537), at the request of Archbishop Cranmer, who had married his niece. . . .

“[Later] he stirred up a bitter theological controversy with the Wittenberg divines by his mystical doctrine of an effective and progressive justification by the indwelling of Christ” (*History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, pp. 570, 595).

Osiander’s harmony was too mechanical, insisting that any variation in accounts, however small, indicated two separate events. He thus ignored one of the main principles of Gospel harmonization—allowing for differences of perspectives in authorship. His harmonistic method is lampooned by A. Schweitzer, *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, p. 13.

Calvin’s harmony

John Calvin preached a lengthy series of sermons on the Synoptic Gospels, and he refined those sermons in his *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (final Latin ed. 1563, one year before his death). His commentary is a masterful example of balanced, thoughtful exegesis, and is still regularly used and highly esteemed.

Modern harmonies

- Johann Jakob Griesbach, *Synopsis evangeliorum*, 1776

Uses the term “Synopsis”; used only the first three Gospels, the general tendency of critical scholarship up to this time

- Constantinus de Tischendorf, *Synopsis Evangelica*, 1st ed. 1851, 5th ed. 1898

Uses all four Gospels

- Huck and Lietzmann, *Synopse der drei ersten Evangelien*, 1st ed. by Huck 1892, rev. by Lietzmann 1935

Huck and Lietzmann was a harmony in Greek; Eng. translation using the RSV entitled *Gospel Parallels*; very commonly used until recently

- Ernest deWitt Burton and Edgar Johnson Goodspeed, *A Harmony of the Synoptic Gospels in Greek*, 1920, 2nd ed. 1947

Three Gospels in Greek

- A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ*, 1922

Four Gospels; uses ASV English; lists Mark first

- Kurt Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, 1963, rev. ed. 1967; and *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, 1970

Four Gospels; the standard for scholarly study; repeats material so that every gospel is in its own order; Eng. ed. uses RSV; Greek ed. includes numerous other sources

- Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels*, 1978 (in the same year they published a harmony using the NASB)

Four Gospels; excellent practical harmony; uses NIV

Outlines of Jesus' Life

General principles

In this section we will consider various outlines that have been suggested. We will consider only those which accept all four Gospels.

The early years of Jesus present few problems for harmonizing the Gospels. Most of the difficulties are found in the last year of Jesus' ministry, his passion, and his resurrection appearances.

The Gospel of John provides the most detailed chronological framework; so we persist in basing our outline on that framework. In this procedure we depart from many critics, who base chronology on the Synoptics alone, and who often maintain a public ministry of only one year.

The following outlines are selected to show the tremendously different ways the same biblical material may be handled. Of course, these outlines are only indicative of the many thousands that have been put forth. In spite of the variations, note the underlying unity established by the major events and periods of Jesus' life.

Outline of James Stalker

(The Life of Jesus Christ, 1880)

1. Birth, infancy and youth of Jesus
2. Final stages of his preparation (baptism & temptation)
3. His public ministry
 - a. Year of obscurity

First disciples, first miracle, cleansing temple, Nicodemus
 - b. Year of public favor

Miracles, preaching, apostolate
 - c. Year of opposition

Sifting, wanderings, psychology, transfiguration, journey to Jerusalem
4. The end

Jerusalem, Upper Room, trial, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension

Outline of Alfred Edersheim

(Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 1886)

1. From the manger in Bethlehem to the baptism in Jordan

Birth, childhood, youth, John the Baptist, baptism
2. The Ascent: from the river Jordan to the Mount of Transfiguration

Temptation, John's testimony, first disciples, first miracle, temple cleansing, Nicodemus, Samaria, Nazareth, Galilee ministry, disciples, preaching, healing, death of John, feeding and nature miracles, travels, controversies, Peter's confession
3. The Descent: from the mount of transfiguration to the valley of humiliation and death

Transfiguration, journey to Jerusalem, Jerusalem ministry, Peraean ministry, teaching and parables, Lazarus, Jerusalem

4. The cross and the crown

Triumphal entry, temple cleansing, disputes, parables, Olivet discourse, Lord's Supper and discourses, trial, death, resurrection, ascension

Outline of G. Campbell Morgan

(The Crises of the Christ, 1903)

Morgan organized his book around seven crises which, he claimed, contain all the significance of the divine work.

1. The birth
2. The baptism
3. The temptation
4. The transfiguration
5. The crucifixion
6. The resurrection
7. The ascension

Outline of Kurt Aland

(Synopsis Quatuor Evangeliorum, 1963)

Note that Aland's outline must be based on John, because of the nature of the synopsis, not necessarily because of his belief concerning Jesus' life. Since the synopsis gives each Gospel in its own order, that of John provides the primary divisions of the outline.

1. Introduction

Birth, childhood

2. Preparation

John's ministry and arrest, baptism, temptation

3. The beginning of Jesus' public ministry (acc. to John)

First disciples, first miracle, temple cleansing, Nicodemus, John's testimony

4. Jesus' ministry in Galilee

Samaria, Nazareth, disciples, healings, preaching

5. The Sermon on the Mount (acc. to Matthew)

6. The Sermon on the Plain (acc. to Luke)

7. Jesus' ministry in Galilee continued

Healings, miracles, twelve disciples, disputes, parables, death of John

8. The way of the cross

Peter's confession, transfiguration, preaching

9. Last journey to Jerusalem (acc. to Luke)

Mission of the seventy, preaching, parables

10. Jesus at the feast of tabernacles in Jerusalem (acc. to John)

(John 7-10)

11. The ministry in Judea

Teaching, Lazarus, Jericho

12. The final ministry in Jerusalem

Triumphal entry, temple cleansing, controversies

13. The eschatological discourse

(Matt 24, Mark 13, Luke 21)

14. Conclusion of the account of the time before the Passion

a. Parables about coming which supplement the eschatological discourse (acc. to Matthew)

(Matt 24-25)

b. General concluding observation (acc. to Luke)

(Luke 21)

- c. Concluding statements (acc. to John)

(John 12)

15. The Passion narrative

- a. Until going to Gethsemane

Bethany anointing, betrayal, Passover, Last Supper

- b. The farewell discourse (acc. to John)

(John 14-17)

- c. The arrest, crucifixion, and burial

16. The resurrection

17. Epilogue: the endings of the gospels

Outline of Donald Guthrie

Donald Guthrie, "Jesus Christ," *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (1975). This is a summary of this very extensive outline.

	<u>Matt</u>	<u>Mark</u>	<u>Luke</u>	<u>John</u>
1. The 30 years in Nazareth				
a. John's prologue				1
b. The birth narratives	1-2		1-2	
c. Home life in Nazareth			2	
2. The period of preparation				

a. John the Baptist	3	1	3	
b. The baptism of Jesus	3	1	3	
c. The temptation of Jesus	4		4	
3. The Judean ministry of Jesus				1-4
4. The Galilean ministry				
a. Period up to choosing of the twelve	4-11	1-3	5-6	
b. Period up to the withdrawal of Jesus from northern Galilee	12-15	2-7	4, 6-9, 11	5-6
c. Period up to departure of Jesus for Jerusalem on last journey	15-18	7-9	9	
5. The closing period of the ministry				
a. Moving toward Jerusalem			9-18	7-11
b. Journey into Jerusalem	19-20	10	18-19	12
c. The ministry in Jerusalem	21-25	11-13	19-21	12
6. The passion and resurrection of Jesus				
a. From the plot to the arrest	26	14	22	13-18
b. The Passion	26-27	15	23	18-19
c. The resurrection	28	16	24	20-21
d. The ascension			24	
			Acts 1	

*See also the time charts in Thomas & Gundry, pp. 339-41