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 geneologies), 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 was a harmony in Greek; Eng. translation using the RSV entitled *Gospel Parallels*; very commonly used until recently

  
  Three Gospels in Greek
  
  Four Gospels; uses ASV English; lists Mark first


  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


  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)*

3.5
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

3.6
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
3. 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


   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)
3. 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.

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<th>Matt</th>
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1. The 30 years in Nazareth
   a. John’s prologue
   b. The birth narratives
   c. Home life in Nazareth

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*