

FROM TATIAN TO SWANSON,
FROM CALVIN TO BENDAVID:
THE HARMONIZATION OF BIBLICAL HISTORY

Ronald Youngblood*

The canon of Holy Scripture contains a rather large percentage of material (especially—though not exclusively—historical narrative) that is repeated (often—though by no means always—verbatim), sometimes more than once. It is understandable, then, that students of the Bible would attempt to construct harmonies and synopses of the parallel passages in order to simplify comparison of them.

I. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN "HARMONY" AND "SYNOPSIS"

Although the words "harmony" and "synopsis" are often used interchangeably, we will distinguish between them for the purposes of this paper. "Harmony" will refer to any literary work that has interwoven two or more sections of Scripture into a continuous narrative. In the broadest sense of the term, "harmony" can be applied to such volumes as *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, in which chap. 1 of book 1 exhibits the following Biblical phrases and paraphrases, culled from both Old and New Testaments: "He who follows me does not walk in darkness," "hidden manna," "they have not the spirit of Christ," "vanity of vanities," "the lust of the flesh," "to attend only to the present life, and not look forward to the things to come," "that which passes . . . away," "the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing," "to separate your heart from the love of things which are seen, and to turn it to the things which are not seen," "defile their conscience."¹ One of Thomas' editors refers to the *Imitation* as the "little Bible."² Other examples of such harmonies in devotional literature are legion (cf., e.g., Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*). In the more traditional sense, however, "harmony" is used of works like that of Arthur T. Pierson,³ in which the compiler weaves together the first four books of the NT into one continuous story.

"Synopsis," on the other hand, will refer to those works that set forth similar Biblical texts or accounts in parallel formats of various kinds, usually in some sort of columnar arrangement. An excellent recent example would be *A Harmony*

*Ronald Youngblood is professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Bethel Theological Seminary West in San Diego, California.

¹T. à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (tr. E. M. Blaiklock; Nashville: Nelson, 1981) 23-24.

²*The Consolation of Philosophy* (Modern Library; New York: Random House, 1943) xviii.

³A. T. Pierson, *The One Gospel* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1889).

of the Gospels, edited by Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry.⁴ As its title indicates, the word "harmony" has unfortunately been canonized through long usage into a term that encompasses synopses as well as harmonies. Complicating the matter further is the fact that a few works combine the two forms, and these also are commonly called "harmonies." Needless to say, in one sense a harmony is the result of a synopsis (whether explicitly prepared or implicitly assumed).⁵

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF HARMONIES AND SYNOPSES⁶

Since the term "harmony" is most commonly used with reference to the NT gospels, and since the earliest of all harmonies (as far as we know) was a gospel harmony, we will treat the NT first.

Most (though not all) NT harmonies are restricted to the gospels. Our story begins with the harmony of a Syrian Christian named Tatian, who compiled his famous *Euangelion . . . dia tōn tessarōn* (familiarily known as the *Diatessaron*, a harmony "by means of four") c. A.D. 170. The work itself, originally written in Greek, is lost, but it was translated into Syriac at an early period. There are also Latin, Arabic and early German (A.D. 820-830) translations, but not always going back to the Greek. Tatian tried to retain all the words of the four evangelists as far as possible. It is not certain which of the four served as his basis for arrangement, but it was probably either Matthew or John.

Ammonius of Alexandria compiled his *Harmonia* c. 230 and was thus apparently the first to use the word "harmony." In a very real sense, however, his harmony was the forerunner of the synopsis format. Ammonius copied down the full text of Matthew, and then in the margin of his work he noted the parallel passages of the other three gospels. His laudable example was rarely followed by his successors, however, the *Canons* of Eusebius forming a rare exception. For nearly the next 1500 years, scholars regularly reverted to Tatian's harmony approach.

Augustine's incomplete *De consensu evangelistarum libri quattuor* was written for apologetic and harmonistic purposes.⁷ The *Monotessaron* (Opera IV [Antwerp, 1706] 83-202) of Jean Gerson (1377-1429) declared that it was not the intention of the evangelists to write in chronological order. Andreas Osiander (*Harmoniae evangelicae libri quattuor* [Basel, 1537]), however, insisted that chronological sequence and verbal accuracy were the highest forms of truth and therefore claimed that each evangelist wrote in chronological order and with inerrant precision. Apparently identical events, then, were not always identical, and the

⁴R. L. Thomas and S. N. Gundry, eds., *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Chicago: Moody, 1978).

⁵It should be noted that in some circles "harmony" implies chronological paralleling while "synopsis" implies paralleling that allows each gospel to tell its own story apart from chronological considerations. For the distinction made in this paper cf., e.g., P. Feine, "Harmony of the Gospels," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (ed. S. M. Jackson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977 reprint), 5. 151.

⁶Because the number of synopses and harmonies is so large (e.g., J. A. Fabricus, *Bibliotheca Graeca* [Hamburg: 1790/1809], 4. 882-889, enumerates nearly 150 harmonies and concordances that had appeared up to his time), we must content ourselves with a representative selection.

⁷So B. M. Metzger, "Evangelienharmonie," *RGK* 3/2 (1957) 770.

same occurrence took place (or the same speech was made) over and over in precisely the same circumstances. Only two incidents (the rubbing of the heads of wheat and the healing of the man's withered hand) are exceptions—but two of Osiander's successors (Molinaeus and Codomanus) affirmed that these are repetitions also.

John Calvin's *Commentarii in harmoniam ex Matthaeo, Marco et Luca* (1555) formed a powerful antidote to the doctrinaire position of Osiander. His comment on Matt 8:5 is especially pertinent: Only by an inductive study of the gospels themselves, Calvin implies, can we determine to what extent the evangelists intended to record events in chronological order. Calvin was able to show that the gospels use certain formulae indicative of sequence, but that for the most part they apply to large sections of Jesus' life rather than to individual or isolated occasions. His separate treatment of the gospel of John shows that he understood something of the synoptic quality of the first three gospels. He set forth the three synoptics in parallel columns and then treated their contents in running commentary style, generally using Matthew as the basis when two or three gospels are paralleled. His debt to Martin Bucer's earlier work in this respect evokes this quaint observation by Calvin: "Where I use the liberty of differing from him, . . . Bucer himself, if he were still an inhabitant of the earth, would not be displeased."⁸

Like Calvin, Martin Chemnitz (*Harmonia quattuor evangelistarum* [1593]) returned to Gerson's earlier conclusion that the events of the gospels are not necessarily recorded in them in chronological order. He noted that succession of events does not necessarily imply chronological sequence. Only where temporal sequence is clearly and unambiguously noted should chronology be given due attention. If, however, accounts are similar but the time of their occurrence is obviously different, such accounts are not to be assumed as identical. Also, accounts are not identical if there are irreconcilable differences in detail between them.

The *Harmonia evangelica* (Amsterdam, 1699) of John Clericus is the first fourfold gospel synopsis in the modern sense in terms of stressing parallel arrangement of all four gospels (in both Greek and Latin) for the purpose of comparing them. Clericus included a Latin harmony at the bottom of the pages of his work.

Bengel's harmony (1736) made the unwarranted assumption that whenever certain series of events or pericopae occur in the same order in all three synoptists (although other events may intervene) the series are chronologically sequential. Bengel apparently did not realize that simply because scattered elements are found in the same relative position in various documents, that does not necessarily imply intentional arrangement.

The *Synopsis evangeliorum* of J. J. Griesbach (Halle, 1776) provides the first genuinely parallel arrangement of the details of the gospel materials, although John is not included. Although Griesbach did not invent the term "synopsis," he was apparently the first to use it for Matthew, Mark and Luke.

R. Anger, in his *Synopsis evangeliorum Matthaei, Marci, Lucae* (Leipzig, 1852), was among the first to relate the gospels to extra-Biblical materials. In his

⁸J. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 reprint), 1. xl.

work he included parallels from patristic literature and apocryphal gospels.

One of the finest of the modern synopses of the Greek gospels is that of W. G. Rushbrooke, *Synopticon: An Exposition of the Common Matter of the Synoptic Gospels* (1880-82), completed exactly a century ago. Rushbrooke used Mark as the basic gospel, including John's gospel and Paul's epistles wherever they exhibit parallels to the triple tradition. As for the synoptic materials themselves he used different colors and different fonts of type to distinguish the material common to all three evangelists, the parts that one of them has in common with another, and the text peculiar to each individually.⁹

After World War I, Burton and Goodspeed, *A Harmony of the Synoptic Gospels in Greek*,¹⁰ for a long time held sway. For the past twenty years, however, Kurt Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*,¹¹ has supplanted their work and has become a *sine qua non* for all who labor in the field of gospel studies. Such features as the reproduction of the text of each of the four gospels in its continuity, the printing of materials from the Apocrypha, new collations of the principal MSS, increased references to the older versions, patristic evidence, differentiation between primary and secondary parallels, inclusion of the Gospel of Thomas, the Oxyrhynchos Logia and the Bodmer papyri, and (in the most recent editions) the use of the UBSGNT text—all have combined to make Aland's *Synopsis* indispensable.

A formidable challenge, however, has recently been mounted by Reuben J. Swanson in his *Horizontal Line Synopsis of the Gospels*. The English-text edition, which reproduces in its four separate sections each of the four gospels with their parallels from the other three (plus Acts and 1 Corinthians), demonstrates in a striking way that John stands outside the synoptics: Matthew requires 186 pages, Mark 134, and Luke 179—but John needs only 81.¹² The horizontal-line format is not original with Swanson (that honor goes to K. Veit, *Die synoptischen Parallelen* [Gutersloh, 1897]), but he uses it with singular effectiveness. One can see at a glance, for example, that Paul's account of the Lord's supper in 1 Corinthians 11 is closest to that of Luke. For those who have the necessary time and patience, Swanson's impressive four-volume Greek synopsis (only Matthew has appeared so far¹³) is an extremely valuable tool. It includes variant readings from the major Greek manuscripts, all in horizontal-line parallel format and with pertinent context. Printed also are the variant gospel readings cited by Clement of Alexandria in his works, including the tantalizing *hamartōlos* (instead of *hamartōlōn*) in Matt 11:19.¹⁴

⁹A fascinating preview of Rushbrooke's work before publication appeared in E. A. Abbott, "Gospels," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (9th ed.; New York: Scribner's, 1879), 10. 789-790.

¹⁰E. D. Burton and E. J. Goodspeed, *A Harmony of the Synoptic Gospels in Greek* (Chicago: University Press, 1920).

¹¹K. Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1976); cf. also his Greek-English edition, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (3d corrected ed.; UBS, 1979).

¹²R. J. Swanson, *The Horizontal Line Synopsis of the Gospels* (Dillsboro, NC: Western North Carolina Press, 1975).

¹³R. J. Swanson, *The Horizontal Line Synopsis of the Gospels, Greek Edition: Volume I. The Gospel of Matthew* (Dillsboro, NC: Western North Carolina Press, 1982).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 110. Cf. Swanson's comment on p. XIV.

Leaving the gospels, we turn briefly to harmonies of other NT materials and use Paul's life and writings as our main example. In Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*,¹⁵ Acts is the framework, sometimes directly quoted but more often paraphrased and greatly expanded by reference to various primary and secondary sources. All the epistles are printed out in full in their appropriate places. Townsend, *The New Testament Arranged in Chronological and Historical Order*, used chronology as the determining criterion for arranging the words of the entire NT in a single harmony (he did the same for the OT in a separate volume). The title of *The Chronological Bible*,¹⁶ a recently published volume, speaks for itself.

The prolific and indefatigable John Calvin heads our brief survey of OT harmonies and synopses. His *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* is an attempt to systematize the legal materials in Exodus through Deuteronomy, setting them in a chronological framework.¹⁷ After a lengthy historical preface that makes use of the Biblical texts themselves, Calvin arranges most of the pentateuchal laws under the headings of the ten commandments (this section constitutes the bulk of the harmony). Then follow treatments of the "sum of the law" (Deut 10:12-13; 6:5; Lev 19:18), the "use of the law" (only NT passages are quoted here), and "sanctions of the law" contained in promises and threats (passages from Leviticus and Deuteronomy). The harmony then resumes the pentateuchal history and concludes with the Song of Moses and an account of his death. The arrangement and methodology used in Calvin's two-volume work demonstrate his ability, all too rare in our time, to successfully combine the disciplines of Biblical exegesis, Biblical theology and systematic theology.

G. Campbell Morgan wrote a book that he wanted to call *The Harmony of the Scriptures*, but his publishers renamed it *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*.¹⁸ The theme of the OT, says Morgan, is man's need, while that of the NT is God's supply. Morgan's outlines of the Bible's two halves are similar to each other. Matthew through Acts, for example, he entitles "the Pentateuch of the New Testament."

A very helpful synopsis of several OT historical books is William Day Crockett, *Harmony of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles*. An appendix contains a table of

¹⁵W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Hartford, CN: Columbian, 1877). Cf. also F. J. Goodwin, *A Harmony of the Life of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1951).

¹⁶Issued in at least two formats: *The Chronological Bible* (ed. E. Reese; 2d ed.; Nashville: Gaddy, 1978); *The Reese Chronological Bible* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1980).

¹⁷J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 reprint). J. Lightfoote, *The Harmony, Chronicle and Order of the Old Testament* (London: John Clark, 1647), is only one among many so-called "pre-critical" scholars to make perceptive observations about the Bible's frequent lack of interest in chronological order: "It is a well-known, and a well-grounded *Maxime* among the Jews, . . . That *Non est Prius & Posterius in Scripturâ*; 'yn mwqdm um'whr bmqr'. Their meaning in it is this, that the order and place of a Text as it stands in the Bible, doth not always inferre or inforce the very time of the Story which the Text relateth: But that sometimes, (nay, it occurreth very oft) Stories are laid out of their natural and Chronical place, and things are very frequently related before, which in order of time occurred after; and so *è contra*" (p. A 2).

¹⁸G. C. Morgan, *The Unfolding Message of the Bible* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1961).

additional Biblical passages that are parallel with certain sections of Crockett's synopsis. Included are texts from Genesis (genealogies), Joshua, Ruth (genealogy), Ezra (the join at the end of 2 Chronicles), Nehemiah, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Matthew (genealogy) and Luke (genealogy). The arrangement of the texts in the main synopsis is chronological, about which Crockett has this to say: "In the matter of Biblical chronology, the basal law seems to be, 'Every man for himself, and the critic take the hindermost.'"¹⁹

A fitting conclusion to our historical survey of Biblical harmonies and synopses is an excellent little volume compiled by Abba Bendavid.²⁰ The complete text of Chronicles is the framework of the book, with parallels from the other OT books printed in adjoining columns. Next in order is Ezra-Nehemiah, then in sequence the books of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Variant passages in the parallels are printed in red to highlight differences in spelling, terminology, phraseology, word order and the like, enabling the reader to see such differences at a glance. For example, the description of God as "compassionate and gracious" (Exod 34:6; Pss 85:15; 103:8) changes to "gracious and compassionate" in Ps 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Neh 9:17. Whether the change is due to historical or theological causes is a matter for further study.

III. PRINCIPLES AND PURPOSES OF WRITING HARMONIES AND COMPILING SYNOPSSES

Various criteria have been employed for subdividing the gospels into manageable large segments when writing harmonies and compiling synopses of them. Passovers, geography, and subject matter—among other possibilities—have been utilized as overall rubrics. When all is said and done, however, the criterion of chronology is the overwhelming favorite, not only for the gospels but also for the rest of the Bible.

Criteria for harmonization segue effortlessly into purposes behind the writing of harmonies—and once again chronology occupies pride of place. Stevens' and Burton's *Harmony of the Gospels* is, for example, by their own admission "intended to promote and facilitate the historical study of the gospels" and, in so doing, to trace "the events they narrate in their chronological sequence and in their organic connection."²¹ Thomas and Gundry, *Pentecost*,²² Croscup²³ and many others have declared that chronological order is vital indeed if other purposes of harmonies and synopses are to be attained.

¹⁹W. D. Crockett, *Harmony of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles* (New York: Revell, 1897) vi.

²⁰A. Bendavid, arranger, *Maqbilôt Bammiqrâ' [Parallels in the (Hebrew) Bible]* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1972).

²¹W. A. Stevens and E. D. Burton, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Historical Study* (Boston: Silver, Burdett, 1899) iii.

²²J. D. Pentecost, *A Harmony of the Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) vii.

²³G. E. Croscup, *Historical Charts of the Life and Ministry of Christ. With an Outline Harmony of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1912).

Chronological sequence, however, is not easily determined, as the history of gospel studies amply demonstrates. Croscup, for example, opts for John as having been written in chronological order, while others have attempted to make a case for one or another of the synoptics. In any event, overemphasis on the importance of chronology can sometimes lead to bizarre results. Take the case of Philip Mauro, who, after deploring the "defective character of all existing chronologies," dates "the return from Babylon in the first year of Cyrus" to "B.C. 457."²⁴ His misguided and wrongheaded exegesis has caused him to misunderstand the referent of the starting point of Daniel's 483 years and forced him to date the restoration eighty years too late.

Although for practical reasons gospel harmonies will continue to be crafted along basically chronological lines, the modern approach is more and more coming to be to allow each gospel to tell its own story apart from chronological considerations. Swanson, for example, has four synopses in his English edition, one for each of the gospels. As Wieand puts it: "A 'Harmony' of the Gospels is essentially a pedagogical device . . . a parallel arrangement in order to facilitate all kinds of comparative study of them."²⁵ Such study may propose to determine which parallel portion is the earlier/earliest, to hypothesize concerning the existence and recoverability of sources, to demonstrate the validity of redaction criticism (for which discipline Barclay prefers the term "composition criticism"²⁶), and so on. In the minds of most of us, of course, the end result of all such activity should be the kind of insight described by Thomas and Gundry as "a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ, His life, death, and resurrection."²⁷

IV. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY

The affirmation section of Article XVII of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics drafted last month reads as follows: "We affirm the unity, harmony and consistency of Scripture and declare that it is its own best interpreter." Biblical harmonies and synopses can, in point of fact, illustrate both the unity and consistency of Scripture and thereby provide objective data in support of Biblical inspiration. Of Calvin's pentateuchal harmony one of his translators says, "Nothing can more satisfactorily prove the unity of these Books than that homogeneous body of Truth into which Calvin has here resolved them."²⁸ Of the NT gospels Berkeley Mickelsen says, "Had the Church later polished off and created the narratives in the way some imagine, the reader would find traces of a studied, intentional collusion. Instead, he finds basic agreement without arti-

²⁴P. Mauro, *The Seventy Weeks and the Great Tribulation* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1944) 24, 117.

²⁵A. C. Wieand, *A New Harmony of the Gospels* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 2.

²⁶W. Barclay, *Introduction to the First Three Gospels* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 277.

²⁷Thomas and Gundry, *Harmony* 5.

²⁸Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses* xii.

ficiality, unity without uniformity, and commonness of conviction without a monotonous pattern of details."²⁹

But what about the "alleged discrepancies" concerning which Haley speaks in his classic work on the subject³⁰—"discrepancies" that appear on virtually every page of the typical gospel synopsis? Arthur Custance puts the problem in a particularly trenchant way and then offers his own solution when he affirms that

there are clearly contradictions in reporting which the Holy Spirit has not merely allowed to appear in the text, but has, to my mind, deliberately introduced because by them something more has been revealed than would have been possible by slavishly repeating on every occasion the same precise wording. Every attempt to remove these inconsistencies by artificially combining them or by excusing as errors of transmission inevitably robs us of part of the total revelation which God intended. For this reason, I believe harmonies of the Gospels can be dangerous. In fact, experience shows fortuitously that they never have been successful in any case.

While we thus say that the *meaning* is the important factor, it is still true that meaning cannot be conveyed without words. Thus it needs to be underscored that to give the true meaning according to the mind of the Holy Spirit, inspiration of the wording was required. This is all the more essential where the record is *apparently* contradictory.³¹

Ebrard illustrates such apparent discrepancies by referring to an actual occurrence in which he was personally involved:

I notice some very interesting proofs of this in the oral communications which I received at one time in Zürich with reference to the well-known affair of September 1839, and that in cases where the eye-witnesses were intelligent and trustworthy men. I may be allowed to cite one of the instances. The report that troops had been sent for to Berne to overawe the people, and that they might arrive at any moment, had produced the greatest excitement. The people armed on every hand, and were ready at the shortest notice to march to Zürich to meet the Bernese forces. On the evening of the 5th September, information was received by the leaders of the popular movement that there was no foundation for the report. They immediately caused several hundred letters to be written and despatched in all directions, for the purpose of quieting the people. Now, one person informed me that late in the evening N. was sent with a letter to Pfäffikon; another told me that N. was sent in the evening to Pfäffikon, but, after going a short distance, returned with the report that the alarm-bell had already been rung in Pfäffikon; a third related, that two messengers had been sent on horseback to Pfäffikon; and a fourth, that N. had sent two men on horseback to Pfäffikon. If any four accounts ever seemed irreconcilable, these did. And if a harmonist had attempted to reconcile the whole on the supposition that N. was sent, but met two messengers from Pfäffikon, who reported the outbreak of the riot; that he turned back with them to Zürich, where he immediately procured horses, and sent them back in all speed to quiet the people,—it would be rejected as a most improbable and artificial conjecture. Yet this was the simple explanation which I received from N. himself, when I asked him what the facts of the case really

²⁹A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 94.

³⁰J. W. Haley, *An Examination of the Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 reprint).

³¹A. C. Custance, *Hidden Things of God's Revelation* (Doorway Papers VII; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 83 (italics his). By "contradictions" he does not mean "contradictions of fact" (see p. 80).

were. We see from this example that there is much greater fear of being too timid than too bold, in resorting to hypotheses for the solution of apparent discrepancies.³²

When all is said and done, however, we are not obliged to find a solution to every alleged contradiction in Scripture. It is better to leave some of them unresolved than to resort to forced harmonization. Great harm has been done to a proper understanding of what inerrancy is all about by well-meaning friends of Scripture. If it be true that the Bible is the Word of God because what the Bible says God says, then in the area of the harmonization of Biblical history Scripture's best supporters are often those who have refused to manipulate that Word and have discovered that now and then an honest admission of failure is preferable to a false appearance of success.³³

³²J. H. A. Ebrard, *The Gospel History: A Compendium of Critical Investigations in Support of the Historical Character of the Four Gospels* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1863) 59-60.

³³Cf. Crockett, *Harmony* vii. I wish to thank my colleagues Robert Stein and Marvin Anderson for helpful suggestions during the preparation of this paper.