

# Sixteenth-century Gospel Harmonies: Chemnitz and Mercator

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In the seminar devoted to the study of the sixteenth-century harmonies of the Gospels, three papers were read and discussed.

## I.

The first paper was presented by Professor Bernt T. Oftestad of Oslo. It was entitled «The Gospel Harmony of Martin Chemnitz: Its Theological Aims and Methodological Presuppositions».

The first part (chs 1-51) of the *Harmonia evangelica* was composed by the Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586) and published after his death by Polykarp Leyser in 1593. Leyser carried on Chemnitz's work and published a considerable portion of it (chs 52-140) in the years 1603-1611. The project was completed by Johann Gerhard in 1626-1627 (chs 141-180). The whole of this monumental Gospel harmony was published in three fol. volumes at Frankfurt and Hamburg in 1652.

Professor Oftestad discussed in detail the theological views and assumptions that had led the founding father of the project, Chemnitz, to undertake the work. Information

about Chemnitz's ideas with regard to his harmonization work is contained in his *Prolegomena*.

1. Chemnitz wanted to reconstruct a single, chronologically trustworthy account of Jesus' public ministry, based on the four Gospels. True, God had entrusted the task of describing Jesus' ministry to four different authors. But in Chemnitz's view the fact that there were four authors, not one, posed no fundamental problem since the Gospels differed without contradicting each other. In reconstructing the chronological order underlying the Gospels, Chemnitz followed Augustine's principle according to which none of the evangelists could be deemed to have preserved the true, historically correct order of the events narrated. According to Augustine, all evangelists had been free to compose their story in an order deviating from the chronological one. In adopting this Augustinian principle, Chemnitz cut clean across the views of his contemporary Andreas Osiander, who had based his Gospel harmony (1537) on the principle that each evangelist had preserved the correct chronological order. This view had forced Osiander to treat parallel stories figuring at chronologically different points in two (or more) gospels as accounts of different events. Thus, parallel pericopes which Chemnitz regarded as renderings of one single event had been dealt with by Osiander as narrations of two or three different events. The Osiandrian method, which multiplied the number of events narrated, was explicitly rejected by Chemnitz.

2. According to Chemnitz, his harmony had a three-fold purpose:

- (a) Apologetic: the harmony had to defend the trustworthiness of the Gospels against those who rejected them on account of their contradictions.
- (b) Biographical, that is, edifying: a clear, historically plausible presentation of the life of Jesus could serve to edify the readers.

- (c) Historical: a harmonization of the Gospels would incite the reader to turn to the Gospels themselves in order to examine their chronological indications and other data.

It was especially the intended apologetic and edifying functions of the harmony which required a chronologically trustworthy rearrangement of the material contained in the Gospels. According to Professor Oftestad, this rearrangement can be regarded as a «critical» procedure. In fact, the narrative structure of each Gospel corresponds to the *scopus* of each evangelist. No evangelist intended to present Jesus' life in its chronological order. Consequently, the restoration of the historical chronology behind the Gospels would require a critical approach to each of them.

3. The methodological rules according to which Chemnitz wanted to reorganize the Gospel material into one historical account of Jesus' public ministry were derived from the practices which classical rhetoric had prescribed for the composition of the *narratio*, the second part of an oration. The most important requirements with which the classical *narratio* had to comply were *brevitas*, *perspicuitas* and *probabilitas*. In order to convince the audience, the *narratio* had to *docere*, *delectare* and *movere*. It is in these rhetorical terms that Chemnitz described the intentions he had in presenting the four Gospels in a synoptic format determined by chronology and in one harmonized text. Obviously, he conceived his harmonization as a rhetorical task.

4. Chemnitz wanted his harmony to show up the chronological structure of the events narrated in the Gospels. In a sense, his attempt at harmonizing was a critical search for historical truth. Ultimately, however, Chemnitz's intention was not to discover and reveal the historical truth, but to persuade his readers of the historical reliability of the Gospels. For Chemnitz, this reliability was not really open to question, but it had to be demonstrated. In fact, since each of the evangelists had had his own *scopus*, the chronological

structure of the narrative as a whole had become less apparent. By means of his harmony Chemnitz intended to make this chronological structure evident and to remove any possible doubt about the historical trustworthiness of the Gospels.

In admitting that each evangelist had followed his own *scopus* and that, as a result, the chronology of the narrative had been given only secondary importance, Chemnitz acknowledged, with Luther, a human factor in the composition of the Gospels. With Augustine, however, he believed that there was no real chronological contradiction between the accounts and that the points of obscurity in the chronology served a pedagogical purpose: they encouraged the reader to search for the hidden true chronological order of the entire narrative.

5. According to ancient rhetoric, a narration can only be convincing if it is perspicuous and plausible. Perspicuity and plausibility, however, can only be attained through the careful mention of such *circumstantiae* as matters and persons involved, time, place, causes and chronological order. In Chemnitz's view, these rhetorical principles also had to be applied to the composition of a Gospel harmony. He thus developed a series of practical rules by means of which the material could be rearranged to form one clear, convincing, continuous story. Axiomatic to Chemnitz was Augustine's view according to which each evangelist had recorded certain events at an earlier, other events at a later point than would have been required for chronological fidelity. The reorganization of the material, then, had to restore a «natural», smooth, historically plausible sequence of the events, a sequence based on a meticulous examination of the *circumstantiae* of the individual episodes as narrated in the Gospels. In sum, in composing his Gospel harmony Chemnitz used rhetorical criteria for hermeneutical, pedagogical and theological goals. In this he shows the influence of humanist hermeneutics.

6. In order to bring out clearly the theological relevance of each episode adopted in his harmony, Chemnitz accompanied it with a commentary. Since the object of the harmony was the presentation of a plausible account of Jesus' life and teaching, the commentary avoids an allegorical exegesis of the text: it tries to establish only its *sensus historicus*. But Chemnitz does utilize the *circumstantiae* of each story as starting-points for developing certain dogmatic-theological concepts and doctrines.

7. In Chemnitz's view the literary form of the Gospel harmony was theologically relevant. He regarded faith as man's assent to God's word. This assent, however, could more easily be given to a perspicuous plausible narration as presented in a Gospel harmony than to four diverging, seemingly contradictory accounts of Jesus' teaching. A harmony would convince people of the truth more effectively than the individual accounts. The theological relevance of the harmony thus lies in its power of persuasion.

## II.

Chemnitz's Gospel harmony was also the topic of the second paper, which was read by Professor Bengt Hägglund of Lund. Its title was «Some Observations on Martin Chemnitz's and Johann Gerhard's *Harmonia evangelica*».

Professor Hägglund began by drawing attention to the enormous size of the harmony composed by Chemnitz, Leyser and Gerhard. In a modern edition it would take up about sixteen volumes of 500 pages each. The work can be considered one of the most extensive commentaries on the Gospels. That it has passed into almost complete oblivion must be attributed to the fact that in New Testament exegesis the whole genre of the Gospel harmony has been abandoned. In the seventeenth-century, however, the harmony of Chemnitz and his successors went through many editions. Lutheran

ministers found material for their sermons especially in the commentary, which sought to put Christ's message over to the readers and not merely to give historical information. It had to lead the readers to Christ himself, arouse faith and piety, console and show the way to eternal life.

Chemnitz's harmony is in fact a complete synopsis of the Gospels. It gives the parallel passages one below the other, both in Greek and in Latin. Wherever parallel passages can be deemed to reflect the same event or the same teaching of Jesus, a harmonized text is added. The work as a whole is an attempt at reconstructing the chronology of Jesus' life. The harmony has to show that there is no contradiction between the Gospels. Ultimately, the work has to demonstrate that the testimony of the Gospels regarding Christ deserves the readers' full confidence.

Professor Hägglund discussed Chemnitz's criticism of Osiander's treatment of the Gospels in his harmony. Like Professor Oftestad, he pointed out that Chemnitz's rearrangement of the contents of the Gospels in accordance with chronological probability was a *critical* operation which required much philological scrutiny. Professor Hägglund went on to treat the eighteen methodological rules by means of which Chemnitz wanted to establish the historical sequence of the events mentioned in the Gospels. Chemnitz held that the evangelists had abandoned the historical sequence; they had all altered the order of the events. In reconstructing the historical sequence close attention had to be paid to chronological clues such as «after that», «next», etc., but «after that» must not always be taken to mean «*immediately* after that».

In Chemnitz's view the reconstruction of the chronological order of Jesus' biography could only be undertaken after the duration of Jesus' public ministry as a whole had been established. Since he believed that John alluded to four Passovers, Chemnitz fixed the period running from Jesus' baptism to his death at three years and some months.

That Jesus' public ministry had lasted well over three years was a conclusion which Chemnitz shared with Osiander. Both scholars rejected the traditional calculation according to which Jesus' public activity had lasted only two years and a half.

Before the Gospels were written, the church had propagated the principal points of its doctrine in oral tradition. This oral *forma doctrinae apostolicae* went back to the teaching of Jesus himself. It corresponded fully with the doctrine taught in the written Gospels. The essentials of this doctrine are: (1) all have sinned, are guilty in the sight of God and need his grace; (2) their justification has been made possible through the death of Jesus Christ; (3) justification has to result in «fruits», i.e., in sanctification. Chemnitz held that this doctrine of justification had to serve as the hermeneutic co-ordinating system of all biblical exegesis.

As an example of Chemnitz's harmonistic procedure, Professor Hägglund discussed his treatment of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6). Since the *circumstantiae* of the Sermon on the Mount are different from those of the Sermon on the Plain, these sermons had often been regarded as two different speeches, delivered on different occasions. Chemnitz, however, came to the conclusion that the two sermons are versions of one and the same speech. Chronologically, Luke's location of the sermon is preferable to that of Matthew, because Luke placed it immediately after the choosing of the Twelve. It fits best here because the sermon can be regarded as instruction addressed to the disciples. It is true that Luke and Matthew seem to contradict each other in that according to Matthew the sermon was delivered «on the mountain», whereas Luke says that Jesus addressed his disciples after he had come down from the mountain. But Luke's account leaves the possibility open that Jesus did not begin to speak until he had ascended the mountain again. Chemnitz is convinced, therefore, that Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6 refer to one and the same discourse. Yet he admits that Jesus may have said the same things on more

than one occasion. Consequently, it is no religious error to maintain that the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain were originally two different speeches. This example shows Chemnitz's critical sense in composing his harmony. It also shows that he was aware that not all conclusions he arrived at were absolutely certain and that probability was at times the most one could attain.

### III.

The third paper was given by Professor H.J. de Jonge of Leiden. It was entitled «Gerardus Mercator's *Evangelicae historiae quadripartita monas* (1592)».

Gerardus Mercator (1512-1594), the foremost geographer of the sixteenth century, was also one of the leading astronomers and chronological experts of his time. In 1552 he moved from Louvain to Duisburg, where he obtained the official position of cosmographer to the Duke of Cleves. His *Chronologia* (1569) was important for basing historical chronology on the authority of a canon of dated eclipses. The work also includes an early, rudimentary form of what was to become Mercator's *Evangelicae historiae quadripartita monas*, a complete synopsis of the Gospels in Latin (Duisburg, 1592).

In contradistinction to all other sixteenth-century harmonies and synopses, including that of Chemnitz, Mercator's synopsis had a purely scientific, chronological purpose. By means of this synoptic presentation of the Gospels Mercator wanted to demonstrate that Jesus' public ministry had lasted at least four full years. The reason why he wanted to prove this was that, according to his own calculations, the period running from the 15th year of Tiberius (28-29 A.D.) to the reign of Diocletian (284 A.D.) had been longer by one year than traditional chronology would have it. Starting from the supposition that the missing year might be hidden somewhere in the time of Jesus' public ministry, Mercator

decided to try to recover the lost year in the Gospels. Consequently, he had to find here the evidence for five successive Passovers instead of the three or four Passovers which were generally believed to be referred to. It comes as no surprise that Mercator found what he looked for. The five Passovers which he thought he could use to prove that Jesus' public activity had lasted at least four full years are those alluded to in the following passages:

1. John 2: 13 and 23;
2. John 4: 45 (in reality a cross-reference to 2: 13 and 23);
3. John 6: 4 (Mercator identified the Passover mentioned here with one preceding Matthew 15: 1 and Mark 7: 1);
4. Luke 9: 57. Mercator determined the interval between John 6: 4 (Passover n° 3) and John 7: 2 (Tabernacles) at 18 (not 6) months. In this interval a Passover must have occurred. Mercator sees an allusion to this Passover in Luke 9: 57: «Sequar te quocunque ieris, Domine» in so far as these words seem to presuppose a journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. The purpose of this hypothetical journey to Jerusalem can only have been the celebration of a Passover.
5. John 11: 55, 12: 1, etc. (the Passover at which Jesus was put to death).

In all other sixteenth-century harmonies, such as those of Osiander, Jansen, Codmann and Chemnitz, one can detect an unmistakably apologetic note: they want to defend the Gospels against the possible charge of mutual contradiction. In the synopsis of Mercator this apologetic tendency is entirely absent. His interest is technical and chronological.

The leading principle underlying the composition of Mercator's synopsis is that in each of the four vertical columns, headed Matthew, Mark, Luke and John respectively, the text of the Gospel concerned had to be presented in its own order without any exception. As far as this procedure allowed Mer-

cator to place parallel passages side by side, he did so. Wherever one Gospel has no parallel to a passage given in the column of any other version, the column for that Gospel contains a blank space.

Now maintaining the sequence of each of the Gospels and placing side by side certain parallel passages necessarily results in separating other parallel pericopes. In the system adopted by Mercator it is impossible to put all parallel passages alongside each other. Carolus Molinaeus, the author of a synopsis published in 1565 and quoted by Mercator, had concluded that parallel passages which could not be put side by side had to be regarded as relating to different events. Mercator, however, preferred to draw another conclusion. In his view parallel passages that could not be placed side by side could still relate to the same historical event. Their being torn apart in the synopsis just meant that in one or more Gospels the event at issue was narrated at the wrong place, that is, contrary to the chronological order. In this way Mercator removed the necessity of «multiplying» the number of times Jesus had done or said the same things.

Mercator held that the incompatibility of the chronological order of any Gospel with that of any other Gospel was only a literary problem, not a historical or chronological one. With Augustine he believed that the evangelists had been free to deviate from the historical chronology of the events they narrated. Mercator states that with regard to chronology the evangelists had had the same freedom as pagan historians. He depicts the evangelists as authors who were free to arrange their narrative material in accordance with their own literary purposes.

In an appendix Mercator lists again all the pericopes which he thought to be out of sequence. According to Mercator about 14 per cent of the material contained in the Gospels is not in chronological order. This is rather a lot, considering that Osiander and Molinaeus had claimed that the order of each Gospel was chronologically correct. Yet it should be observed that Mercator did not go so far as

twentieth-century critics might wish. Many parallel passages in the Gospels that are now regarded as going back to one and the same episode are treated by Mercator as accounts of different events. To quote some examples: Mercator has *two* cleansings of the temple, *two* anointments of Jesus by a woman; the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain are two different speeches delivered on two different occasions.

Mercator's synopsis reflects his criticism of the way in which the Gospels were confused and distorted in harmonies such as that of Osiander. It testifies to his respect for the integrity of the text of the Gospels as literary documents and as the only safe basis for historical research. Mercator's merit lies in the great extent to which he treated parallel pericopes as accounts of identical events. This approach enabled him to purge Jesus' biography of a number of absurd repetitions of episodes. No less important is his view of the evangelists as authors who were as free to organize their material as any pagan historian.

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Each paper was followed by a discussion. The points discussed included the following. (1) Most sixteenth-century harmonies claim to have an apologetic goal. Was this assertion only a traditional *topos* or was it seriously meant and inspired by a real threat? It was felt that the latter was the case. (2) Both Mercator and Chemnitz studied the order of the pericopes in the Gospels. Whenever they found that some pericopes occurred in the same order in more than one Gospel, they regarded this order as the chronological order of the narrated events. Why did Augustine's *Benutzungshypothese* not prevent them from drawing this conclusion? (3) In order to bring about a historically plausible account of Jesus' public ministry, both Mercator and Chemnitz made use of the rules to which *narratio* had to conform according to classical rhetoric. Can Chemnitz have been

influenced in this by Mercator? Since Chemnitz quotes Mercator, the question has probably to be answered in the affirmative, but further research is required.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The best study of sixteenth-century Gospel harmonies and synopses is Dietrich Wünsch, *Evangelienharmonien im Reformationszeitalter. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Darstellungen* (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 52), Berlin-New York, 1983. For Mercator, see pp. 251-256; for Chemnitz, pp. 257-258.