

A Simplified Harmony of the Gospels. By George W. Knight. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001, xxvi 267 pp., \$14.99 paper.

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The church recognizes four canonical Gospels. That fact, plus recent trends in Gospel research, has caused the concept of a single-line harmony to be much maligned in contemporary scholarship. Nonetheless, given that the Gospel authors themselves purport to represent history (a debated, but still defensible, position), one could conceive of the possibility of reconstructing the order of the reported historical events. This is an age-old endeavor in the history of the Church. Knight's Harmony continues in this tradition, though at times it fails to inform the reader of the pitfalls.

The Simplified Harmony, while aiming at a popular market, provides three distinctive features when compared to other available harmonies or synopses. (1) It is based on the Holman Christian Standard Bible. This translation seeks to be "as close to the words of the Hebrew and Greek texts as possible" (p. xxv). It affords a serviceable, if occasionally awkwardly phrased, foundation for this book. (2) This volume includes brief study Bible style notes and section introductions. Occasional sidebars in italics supply context or acknowledge choices made in producing the Harmony (cf. "Two Cleansings of the Temple?" on p. 37). These are quite helpful to the lay reader, but sometimes suffer from oversimplification (e.g. the Lucan genealogy is "traced through Mary" [pp. 13-14]; the Pharisees "hated everything about foreign culture" [p. 61]; Romans used crucifixion "only for slaves and the lowest types of criminals" [p. 236]). (3) This is a simplified harmony. Rather than render parallel accounts of similar events in parallel columns (as do most contemporary harmonies and synopses), Knight has chosen to provide a single unbroken narrative. Hence this Harmony is similar to the Gospels section in the Narrated Bible (1984); to the "harmonies" by Cadman (1885), Dietz (1951), or Boettner (1977); and to some older, conservative "Life of Christ" volumes. Knight has improved on many of these predecessors by including some useful devices such as a parallel synopsis listing and an index. Further, Knight employs superscripts to indicate which Gospel is being cited; and on some occasions (though certainly not all) variant words from another Gospel are indicated within brackets.

Like all such single narrative accounts, Knight must make some decisions. Principally he follows the order of Mark, supplementing with Luke or John. This causes multiple displacement of the material in Matthew 5-12. A major exception to the Marcan order comes in a curious re-organization of the crucifixion narratives. Occasionally, one finds perplexing results, such as locating John the Baptist's death (Mark 6:17-29) before the first half of the very same pericope (Mark 6:14-16), which makes nonsense out of the transitional word "for" at the beginning of Mark 6:17 (see pp. 100-101; also cf. p. 41).

There are certainly dangers to this kind of "harmony." The Gospels do not merely contain a listing of events; they also interpret those events by locating them in a particular context. By seeking to place these events in a re-created historical order, one invariably strips them of their canonical interpretive context. This is especially problematic with transition words (such as "for" mentioned above), but it can also effect how one understands the whole pericope (contrast

Knight's blended beatitudes on pp. 64-65 with the Matthean and Lucan accounts by themselves). Historical reconstruction has benefits; however, the reader (especially the lay reader) should be made aware of the cost. Yet, both the author in his introduction and the publisher on the cover have failed to clarify these important limitations. Many will find it interesting and edifying to engage with Knight in this activity of harmonizing the Gospels. I would indeed recommend this book to them, though I would also caution them concerning the inevitable weaknesses.

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