
From critical to evangelical scholars, and everyone in between, the synoptic gospels pose an interesting “problem.” For critical scholars, they see various presentations of events in the different gospels as evidence of their inconsistency and unreliability. Consequently, they view it as a problem for an evangelical acceptance of their inerrancy. For evangelical scholars and others who seek to defend the accuracy of these gospels, they certainly have to deal with this proposed “problem” by the critics. Moreover, a second problem arises, namely how one can account for the existence of numerous identical passages within the synoptic gospels, yet still account for their marked differences in some places. If a gospel writer had access to one or both of the other gospels, why would seeming discrepancies exist at all. One could perhaps enumerate several other “problems” that need solving, but these two are at the forefront of the discussion that has become known as the “synoptic problem.” However, in his book *The Synoptic Problem*, Robert Stein, Professor of New Testament at Bethel Theological Seminary, attempts to provide “an introduction that would help students work their way, step by step, through the Gospel’s disciplines” (11).

**Summary**

Stein organizes his work into three sections: literary relationship, which focuses on literary criticism; preliterary history of the Gospel traditions, which focuses on form criticism; and inscripturation of the Gospel traditions, which focuses on redaction criticism. These three sections are concerned more with historical concerns than exegetical ones, and Stein adds that he has organized the work in this fashion because this order is consistent with the “way that gospel studies have developed historically” (11).
In chapter one, Stein explores the various arguments for a literary interdependence of the synoptic gospels. He argues that agreement in wording, order, and parenthetical material, as well as Luke’s own admission that he used sources, all point to the conclusion that sources were used. He also explains problems with other positions, noting how identical Greek translations of Aramaic sayings are highly unlikely (33) and an argument that it is the result of inspiration by the Holy Spirit cannot account for the few similarities found in John (33).

The priority of Mark is the subject of chapter two. He proposes that Markan priority is the best explanation for the nature of the relationships espoused in chapter one. He concludes Markan priority on the basis of its shortness, its poorer writing style, its harder readings, the lack of Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark, literary agreements, an argument from redaction, and Mark’s more primitive theology. It is difficult to explain why Mark, if he used Matthew, would be shorter, have worse grammar, would contain harder readings, among other problems. Stein argues that it is far more likely that Matthew and Luke would have expanded on Mark’s work, thus making them longer, and yet Mark more often than the others has the longest pericope. This suggests to Stein that Mark could not have written last and simply omitted such large portions of Matthew and Luke. If he was concerned with brevity, why would he have consistently longer periscopes (49)? He also suggests that it is more likely to conclude that Matthew and Luke would have improved Mark’s grammar (53) and would have clarified Mark’s harder readings (62).

these options, Stein suggests that while the simplest explanation is Luke’s use of Matthew, there are numerous reasons why it is unlikely (91). One argument Stein uses is the lack of Matthean additions in Luke. There are numerous passages that Matthew includes that are not in Mark or Luke. If Luke used Matthew, it is difficult to explain why there is no trace of these in his gospel (91-95). He also notes the different and more primitive context of non-Markan material between Luke and Matthew (95-96). After presenting other brief arguments against Luke’s use of Matthew, Stein proposes the existence of Q, presenting evidence that it was a written source used by both Matthew and Luke.

In chapter four, Stein considers the arguments by opponents that agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark are evidence against the two-source hypothesis (Mark and Q). Stein concludes that the agreements are minor and most of them have simple explanations. He concludes the chapter by reminding the reader of the strength of the Markan priority position. Compared to the minimal problems posed by the Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark, Stein argues that, when viewed in totality, Markan priority is more convincing (127-128). In chapter five, Stein then summarizes the possible solutions for the synoptic problem. He admits that Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark “will always be the single greatest weakness of the two-source hypothesis” (132). Nevertheless, Stein recounts arguments against the Griesbach Hypothesis, concluding with a simple final thought: “it [the Griesbach Hypothesis] simply cannot provide a credible explanation as to why Mark was ever written” (133). The final chapter of Part One is “The Value of Literary Criticism” (chapter six), offers “some suggestions as to various ways in which the literary solution of the Synoptic Problem assists in the study of these Gospels” (139).
Part Two, “The Preliterary History of the Gospel Traditions,” consists of three chapters. The first of these chapters (chapter seven) deals with rise of form criticism. Stein suggests that since form criticism’s claims and goals are much debated, and yet the results are used to make judgments on the subject matter of the Gospels, it is necessary to ‘investigate the various presuppositions upon which this discipline is built” (162). He concludes that many of these presuppositions are questionable and often err by turning particulars into universals (185). Chapter eight then defends the reliability of the oral transmission of the Gospel traditions on the basis of his demonstration “that the Sitz im Leben in which the gospel materials were transmitted was far less free and anonymous and far more controlled than first suggested” (187). The final chapter of Part Two discusses the value of form criticism. Stein notes that while form criticism has been used poorly at times, it is itself neutral and can be used for good (217). Among the positive conclusions drawn from form criticism is a recognition that the Gospels are not meant to be strictly chronological, much of the Gospel material was originally independent units, and Gospel materials were preserved on account of religious concerns.

Part Three concludes with three chapters on the role of redaction criticism on Gospel studies. Chapter ten presents the rise of redaction criticism from Günther Bornkamm and Hans Conzelmann through Willi Marxsen. Though the goals of redaction criticism are few, Stein highlights three. The first two concern the theological emphases and purpose of the Evangelist in writing, while the third concern is on the Sitz im Leben out of which the Evangelist wrote (235). Chapter eleven uses examples from Luke 5, Matthew 13, Matthew 18, Matthean fulfillment quotations, and Mark 8-10 to demonstrate the method and practice of redaction criticism. Finally, chapter twelve highlights the value of redaction criticism, noting among other positive contributions the use of redaction criticism to improve scholars’ understanding of the evangelists
as interpreters of tradition, the Gospels as wholes, and the specific emphases of the Evangelists in their Gospels.

**Critical Evaluation**

Stein’s work can boast numerous strengths. The most obvious strength is Stein’s use of examples to defend his conclusions. His book is filled with three column comparative passages, tables, and other helpful examples that supplement his points in the text. Not only does he provide such examples, but he also provides good suggestions for how to read them. For example, in chapter one he suggests that “the easiest way of observing the close similarity in the wording of the synoptic Gospels is to underline the agreements that exists between them in parallel passages” (29). He suggests that the reader use blue underlines for those places that agree in all three Gospels. He also suggests that the reader note agreements between Matthew and Mark only (yellow), between Matthew and Luke (red), and between Luke and Mark (green, 33). He then includes three examples that are side-by-side, three-column comparisons of parallel passages. Following the text, he returns to his color-coding suggestion to highlight the overabundance of blue underlines (agreement among the three) and a minimal amount of red (Matthew and Luke, but not Mark). This becomes significant later when he defends Q against Matthew-Luke agreement against Mark.

Another strength is Stein’s willingness to admit the weakest points of his argument. He states plainly that Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark “will always be the single greatest weakness of the two-source hypothesis” (132). This openness is a strength for two related reasons. First, quite simply, it is true. He not only refers readers to Farmer’s arguments against Streeter, but he suggests that “Farmer has raised some serious questions against his [Streeter’s] argumentation” (124). The fact that Stein has rightly noted the most significant argument against
his position (since he holds Streeter’s view) shows that he is willing to take on his opponent’s most convincing arguments. The second related reason that this is a strength is that Stein follows with a reasonable defense of his position. Though not claiming to prove his position definitively, he gives good reason why the Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark are not as strong as some might suppose, and when compared with the strength of his evidence for Markan priority, Stein makes his position not only plausible, but most likely probable for most of his readers (127-128).

Yet another strength is Stein’s detailed analysis of points. Two examples should demonstrate this fact. The first example is seen with respect to Stein’s discussion of the historical present in the synoptic Gospels. He notes that Mark uses the historical present 151 times, Matthew 78 times, and Luke only six (117). Though Stein gives some good evidence, it is perhaps not entirely convincing until he alerts the reader to an interesting anomaly. If it were the case that Matthew was first, then one would be forced to argue that Mark added the historical present to his Matthean source, whereas Luke sought to avoid it. The Griesbach Hypothesis thus “requires two totally opposite tendencies on the part of Mark and Luke” (120). It seems unlikely that two authors would be so drastically opposite in their approach to the material that one would add seventy-three uses, while another would remove seventy-two. It is this type of detailed analysis that Stein regularly utilizes to make convincing points supporting his conclusion or refuting other positions. A second example of this type of detail is in his appraisal of how literary criticism, specifically one’s solution to the synoptic problem, aids the study of the Gospels. He uses a parallel text that he has already referenced from Matthew 7:11/Luke 11:13 in order to demonstrate Luke’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit. In this example, Matthew’s text reads “give good things” while Luke’s reads “give the Holy Spirit” (145). He does an excellent job showing

Few weaknesses are apparent in Stein’s work, certainly the result of his attention to detail and clear argumentation. Nevertheless, a few points lack sufficient clarification. One representative example is Stein’s discussion of the use of “immediately” in the Gospels. While the discussion is for the most part convincing, he leaves some questions unanswered. He notes how euthys is used forty-one times in Mark, while Matthew uses euthys and the related eutheos five and thirteen times respectively. Stein shows how all five of Matthew’s uses of euthys have Markan parallels. With respect to eutheos, nine of thirteen instances occur in Matthew (81-82). The question arises as to the explanation for why four of these instances do not occur in Mark. Stein begins this discussion, pointing out that two of these instances have parallels in Mark that lack the word, another occurs in a Matthean addition to Mark, and one has no parallel in Mark (82). However, rather than explaining an apparent question that arises here, he moves on and argues that Matthew must have used Mark because he uses the word only once in non-Markan parallels (82). The question that Stein has overlooked, however, is what to make of the two uses in Markan parallels that omit the term. If Matthew uses eutheos only once in non-Markan parallels, showing his other uses as dependent on Mark as Stein suggests, why would he add eutheos to a Markan passage that did not already have it? It seems reasonable to assume that Matthew borrowed the other uses from Mark, which is Stein’s main contention, but unlike other places in the work, Stein does not pursue every angle to defend his conclusion. While not crippling his case, it is curious why Stein would not take the time to defend Matthew’s addition of eutheos in Markan parallels where it is absent.
One other minor criticism is with respect to Stein’s aims for the book in the preface. Stein is perhaps a little too broad in his aims to provide “an introduction that would help students work their way, step by step, through the Gospel’s disciplines” (11). Stein certainly provides students with an outstanding analysis of the synoptic problem, its various solutions, and his presentation for the two-source hypothesis as the best option. Parts Two and Three are also helpful in explaining to students helpful ways to apply form and redaction criticism to Gospel studies. However, there are too many facets and nuances to the discipline of Gospel studies to think that this work would suffice as an introduction to the “Gospel’s disciplines” in general (11). Altering his aim as stated in the preface would be a simple way to clarify his otherwise obvious intentions of the book—to introduce and provide solutions for the synoptic problem.

**Conclusion**

Stein’s work is both clear and convincing. He is honest about the strongest arguments against his position and yet defends his position with good evidence. His detailed analysis and use of examples repeatedly makes his case compelling and understandable. Consequently, this work is a worthwhile read for any who are interested in the synoptic problem, and should continue to remain a standard work on the synoptic problem.