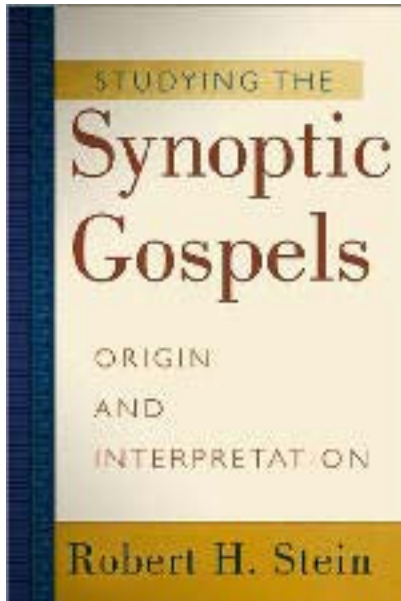


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Stein, Robert H.

Studying the Synoptic Gospels: Origin and Interpretation

2d edition

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001. Pp. 302. Paper. \$26.99.
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This book is a revision of a long-standing benchmark in studies of the Synoptic problem, previously published in 1989 as *The Synoptic Problem*. On the whole, the new revision follows the original work very closely; there is little new or groundbreaking in this edition. That being said, however, it still remains a very accessible approach to studying the Synoptic problem, especially for the beginning student. Both the first edition and current edition are aimed at the student just beginning serious examination of the Synoptic problem. As such, the book is well positioned for its intended audience. As with the first edition, however, Stein does not present exhaustive arguments on any of the issues for scholars.

The primary focus of the book is found in part 1, where Stein makes a case for the dominant two-source hypothesis for understanding the relationship between the Gospels. He begins by demonstrating the literary independence of the Synoptic Gospels (ch. 1), then argues for the priority of Mark (ch. 2) and the existence of Q (ch. 3). Finally, Stein attempts to rebut challenges to the two-source hypothesis by dealing with Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark (ch. 4) and contrasting the two-source hypothesis against the Griesbach hypothesis (ch. 5), concluding with a short chapter arguing for the value of source criticism (ch. 7).

Following the argument for literary connections, Stein also devotes a substantial section (part 2) to the preliterate backgrounds of the Gospels. Here he examines form criticism, primarily to raise questions about the way in which form critics have cast doubt on the reliability of oral traditions. The critique of form criticism is followed by an argument for the general reliability of the traditions that are behind the written Gospels. Finally, Stein concludes his work with a short section (part 3) that addresses the way redaction criticism can be helpfully used in interpreting the Gospels. In this last section, Stein has expanded his examples of how redaction criticism can help develop the Evangelists' major theological perspectives.

A major strength of the book is the presentation in tabular form of material that shows patterns of relationships between the Gospels. Especially helpful are tables showing the order of pericopes in the three Gospels (table 4, p. 53) and the arrangement of certain Q sayings (tables 5 and 6, pp. 105, 114). In the new edition, the tables have been made even more reader-friendly through the addition of shading and the use of a clearer font. Stein also displays numerous parallel pericopes, in English, which are presented to suggest a literary relationship. The book presumes that students will use a synopsis and do their own analysis with colored pens (he gives instructions on pp. 20–30). Perhaps this will work if the book is used as a textbook, with a teacher guiding students in this task, but it would have been helpful to have actually annotated some of the presentations of parallel pericopes in color (or with underlining) to guide students in what to look for and how to proceed on their own analysis. As it stands, many of the tables are simply parallel texts with no explicit indication of where the similarities and differences are to be found.

In a number of instances in the new volume, Stein has expanded his interaction with criticisms that have arisen since the first edition, usually in footnote references. He has, for instance, reacted to David Black's criticism of some of his conclusions about Markan grammar (see footnotes on pp. 57, 58). Footnotes referring to other scholarly works are also updated with newer references, although Stein's interaction with contemporary scholarship is by no means exhaustive or accurate (e.g., he labels Goulder's approach as Augustinian). His examination of whether Q is a document is expanded to include questions about the validity of attempts to identify strata in Q or communities that developed the source. Despite these updates, however, the essential form and argument of the book are little changed from the first edition.

Perhaps the biggest weakness of the book is still its narrow focus in support of the two-source hypothesis. In its willingness to entertain the difficulties with the two-source hypothesis and to explore alternative and complex theories, a rival introduction to the Synoptic problem, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* by E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies is clearly superior. Stein's book is easier to read, however, though that is in part because of its avoidance of some of the evidence that turns against the two-source hypothesis.

Moreover, although there are footnote references to Austin Farrer and M. D. Goulder, Stein never seriously considers their hypothesis, which is a major rival to the two-source hypothesis: the “Markan Priority without Q” hypothesis (often called the Farrer theory). Since this theory is growing in interest, especially in Great Britain, it is unfortunate that Stein’s revision did not acknowledge this approach more clearly. Instead, the Griesbach hypothesis is only presented, functioning as the only legitimate alternative to the two-source hypothesis. Arguments about Q are often confused with arguments about Markan priority, although these are really distinct issues. It is interesting that Stein repeats a major argument for Q, that Matthew and Luke “never” agree in added material in the triple tradition, but always puts “never” in inverted commas and acknowledges only in a footnote that a number of such instances do exist (see 99 n. 4). Similarly, while he admits that this presents serious problems for the independent use of Q by Matthew and Luke, he does not develop the problem but brushes it aside as minor.

Despite its shortcoming as primarily an apologia for the two-source hypothesis, Stein’s new version of what is clearly a classic textbook is a welcome update. Stein’s presentation of the major arguments for Markan priority are cogent and clear, and he presents the essential arguments for Q in a way that is clear to the reader. This is still a leading textbook primer on the Synoptic problem, especially for beginning students, and the new edition is clearly a welcome improvement.