Zeba A. Crook

Parallel Gospels: A Synopsis of Early Christian Writing


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Zeba Crook’s Parallel Gospels combines a lot of hard work with several interesting innovations to produce a new kind of English-language synopsis of the Gospels. The book is clearly intended as a rival to Throckmorton’s Gospel Parallels, the title of which is clearly echoed. Crook deploys a “source language translation” (i.e., literal, nonidiomatic rendition) that helps the reader to see as many of the actual agreements in the Greek as possible, agreements that are sometimes obscured in “target language translation” synopses such as Throckmorton’s.

There is undoubtedly a market for this kind of book. Theology and Religion courses that incorporate the teaching of Greek for undergraduates are a dying phenomenon, and the major Greek Synopses of the Gospels, such as Huck-Greeven and Aland, are now seen as tools for the specialists. American liberal arts students taking courses on the New Testament are highly unlikely to have studied Greek. A good English-language synopsis is just what they need, ideal for the weeks in New Testament introduction that explore the Gospels and especially the Synoptic Problem.

The essential ethos of Crook’s synopsis is right. There are drawbacks to using synopses that match up parallels in English that are not actually present in Greek, and there is always the potential for the same Greek in different Gospels to be translated differently. There are false positives, false negatives, and a false sense of security for the student relying on this translated text.

Moreover, the strongest feature of Crook’s Parallel Gospels is the addition of seventeen “Synoptic Study Guides,” which are distributed evenly across the work, pausing at appropriate moments to consider key data sets (Triple Tradition, Double Tradition, etc.) as well as key theories (Two-Source, Griesbach, and Farrer). It is particularly encouraging to see alternative theories being explained clearly and treated fairly. Given the nesting of these essays in the midst of the presentation of the data, the student is encouraged to take the primary evidence seriously while thinking about explanations for it. This is an innovation—Crook is here reversing the normal order, where synopsis excerpts are used to illustrate particular arguments in the secondary literature. Now, instead, the synopsis is primary and the theories secondary.

In spite of its significant advances and advantages, however, there are several difficulties with Crook’s Parallel Gospels that are sufficiently great to cause concern about its use in the classroom. The first and immediate difficulty with the synopsis is that the parallels are not aligned at the word level. Given the wooden, word-for-word translation, it is surprising that there is no attempt to line up the parallels on the word-level in the Synopsis. This is a fundamental element of good Synopsis construction, and it obtains not only in the major Greek Synopses currently in use (Huck-Greeven, Aland) but also in Throckmorton’s English synopsis. Parallel words and phrases frequently fall on different lines in Crook’s synopsis, detracting from the essential symmetry that is at the heart of sound synopsis construction. To take one among many examples, Pericope 184 (Matt 18:1–5 // Mark 9:33–37 // Luke 9:46–48) has “young-child” on one line in Matthew, the line above it in Mark, and straddling both lines in Luke; “receives me” occurs on one line in Matthew, the line below it in Luke, and straddling the two in Mark.

The difficulty in part is with the typesetting of the synopsis, which is always left-aligned. There are never any spaces entered in the middle of a line to show where a word is present in one Gospel but absent in another. The student herself is left to work out what goes where, and this detracts from one of the joys of a good synopsis, which should aim to present synoptic agreements and disagreements visually. It is true that on the block level Crook’s arrangement allows the student to see where the substantive parallels lie, but if we are to encourage students to fall in love with the intricacies of synoptic agreements
and disagreements, word alignment is essential. The student who has been asked to color the synopsis will have a much harder time with Crook than with Throckmorton.\(^3\)

The curious decision to avoid word alignment in the synopsis is in some tension with one of its chief goals: to provide a word-for-word Greek to English “source translation” that facilitates ease of comparison. This element of the synopsis is in some senses its major contribution, its key difference from other English synopses that rely on already-existing translations. Crook’s reasoning is sound—it is a laudable goal to try to map one English word to one Greek word so that the reader who lacks Greek can see how the texts are related. In practice, though, the strategy leads to serious problems with clarity and readability, the very issues that are essential in presenting a synopsis to new students.

Crook’s key decision is bold but flawed. He attempts to translate the same Greek word, every time it occurs, with the same English equivalent, regardless of case or context. This is “rendition” rather than translation, a word-for-word mapping rather than a clear, contextually coherent translation. It leads to literal translations that are so unreadable that the synopsis has to employ clarificatory words and phrases in square brackets.

The point is easiest to explain by illustrating it. In Pericope 66 (Matt 9:1–8 // Mark 2:1–12 // Luke 5:17–26), Crook’s version of Mark 2:7 reads as follows:

“What this talks [=Why does this man speak] thus? He blasphemes; what [=who] is-able-to-excuse sins if no [=except] the one god?”

The τίς interrogative here means “Why,” not “What,” so there is no benefit in having the confusing “What” in the main translation. The same is true of “what [=who].” Further, εἰ μὴ clearly means “except” here, and the translation “if no” makes no sense at all. The whole verse could therefore be translated in line with Crook’s square bracket clarifications, and without the clunky translations, as: “Why does this man speak thus? He blasphemes; who is able to forgive sins except one, God?” The issue is one of clarity. The target audience for the book is the student beginning to familiarize herself with the synopsis and with elements in Synoptic scholarship. Navigating through these clunky renditions only makes the job more difficult, more off-putting.

A particular difficulty is the attempt to translate prepositions uniformly throughout, regardless of case, so, for example, Jesus is baptized “under [=by] John” (Pericope 21, Mark 1:9 // Matt 3:13, but separated by two lines in the Synopsis). But ὑπό with genitive is always “by” and not “under,” and rendering it “under” is just confusing. Sometimes even

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the clarificatory, square-bracketed correct translation is absent, as when in Mark 1:14 (Pericope 24), the translation is “So with the to-be-delivered [=arrest] of John, Jesus went into the Galilee.” The preposition μετά with the accusative is always “after” and not “with,” and this passage is universally translated, “after the arrest of John” and not “with” it, whatever that would mean. This uniform translation of prepositions without paying attention to case is an unnecessary and complicating factor in a synopsis aimed at the introductory student.

The danger, moreover, is that these clunky renditions might be misread by the enthusiastic beginner as preserving “what the original Greek really says,” offering something of a hostage to fortune. It is, of course, important to consider how best to communicate with the reader who has no Greek, but there is also a case for encouraging that reader to appreciate the limitations of working with English translation and using that as an invitation to study Greek.

This issue may not be the most serious drawback with Crook’s Parallel Gospels. One of its most striking features is the introduction, for the first time in a Gospel synopsis, of the reconstructed text of Q.4 On one level, this could be seen as a useful and interesting way of introducing new students to the reconstruction of Q, illustrating how it is done, on the basis of analysis of comparisons between Matthew and Luke. The difficulty, however, is that the presence of Q limits the usefulness of the synopsis in a fundamental way by foreclosing one of the key issues in Synoptic Problem research, which is one of the reasons for consulting a synopsis in the first place. Instead of acting as a tool for students to investigate and test the Q hypothesis, the actual printing of the reconstructed text of Q inevitably gives Q a tangibility, a concrete presence that makes it harder to encourage students to examine the hypothesis. It is an issue of what one is trying to achieve in constructing a synopsis. The strong synopsis facilitates good comparison between the Synoptic Gospels, enabling the student to assess competing hypotheses. To integrate one of the solutions to the Synoptic Problem into the presentation of the data can only hinder that aim. It is clear that Crook sees the integration of Q into the synopsis as a feature, even a selling point, but it is difficult to see how the move can facilitate fair and balanced assessment of the synoptic evidence. The issue relates to how data is presented and the

4 James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, The Critical Edition of Q: Synopsis including the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark and Thomas with English, German, and French translations of Q and Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). Of course, the International Q Project themselves use a synopsis of Matthew and Luke (with additions sometimes from Mark and Thomas) in order to illustrate the derivation of their reconstruction of Q. However, this is natural in a work that is all about the reconstruction of the hypothetical document. In the synopsis proper, still more the introductory synopsis, Q is one possible result of the analysis and not an element in the presentation of the evidence itself.
importance of differentiating between getting to grips with the data and finding solutions to the problem.

There is a related practical and pedagogical issue. The introduction of Q turns intuitive two-column double tradition into a three-column presentation. It turns intuitive three-column triple tradition into a four-column presentation. Not only does this reduce the simplicity of the layout, thinning out the columns and crowding the page, which is a shame in a synopsis that is designed to appeal to undergraduate students, but also it makes it still more difficult to color the synopsis. It is greatly fortuitous that there are three Synoptic Gospels and three primary colors and that the combinations between them make coloring both intuitive and fun. Coloring a four-column synopsis introduces all sorts of problems. Would one leave Q white? Would one color in-line with the coloring of Matthew and Luke so that one could see how the wording of Q had been reconstructed? Either way, the addition of Q into the synopsis looks a gift horse in the mouth—three Synoptics, three primary colors.

There is a further related problem about using this synopsis in teaching. Pure triple tradition is here still in three columns, so one has the link there between triple and three columns. But pure double tradition is also in three columns, Matthew, Q, and Luke, so it is less straightforward to explain how “triple” and “double” work. This might sound like an overly simple point, but Crook’s own Synoptic Study Guides forefront the discussions of “triple tradition” and “double tradition” only to miss the opportunity to illustrate how these work in simple synopsis.

A new Gospel synopsis provides those with an interest in the study of the Synoptics a fresh opportunity to assess how to present the evidence, how to teach the Synoptic Problem, and how to assess the strengths and weaknesses in traditional approaches. While Crook’s Parallel Gospels offers a welcome stimulus to think about the presentation, the understanding, and the teaching of the issues, it falls short in several key ways. Its word-for-word renditions can be clunky and confusing, its lack of word alignment deprives us of an elegant means of visualizing agreements and disagreements, and its integration of a Synoptic theory into the presentation of the data confuses problem and solution. Lest this seem too harsh, it is worth remembering that Aland’s Synopsis is currently in its fifteenth edition, and Huck-Greeven is a world apart from Huck-Lietzmann and other iterations of the same. In time, Crook’s Parallel Gospels might still take its place alongside the great teaching tools, with its first edition regarded as a useful stepping stone to later, revised versions that ironed out these problems. For the present, though, trying out new ideas helps us to realize where some of the older ideas worked a little better.