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A Critical Analysis of Studying the Synoptic Gospels Origin and Interpretation

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The reference “Synoptic Gospels” was titled to the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke due to their similarities in wording, structure, and content. In some instances, the gospels share word-for-word phrases in the pericopes contained within them. While these stories are similar, the “Synoptic Problem” enters with the question of why these three gospels share so many similarities yet have so many differences between them as well. It begs the question of who copied who? And who wrote the first gospel? And what was the context of writing each account? These questions may forever go unanswered, but Robert H. Stein’s *Studying the Synoptic Gospels Origin and Interpretation: Second Edition* provides a guide through the synoptic problem through each gospel’s disciplines.

Summary

Stein breaks the novel into three main sections in order to provide a clear and cohesive argument. Firstly, he addresses the literary emphasis of the gospels, which focuses on literary or source criticism. Then preliterary history, which focuses on form criticism. And finally, inscripturation of each gospel, which focuses on redaction criticism. In his first section, Stein establishes the argument that the gospel writers were interdependent by using similar sources to create similar gospels. By stating this, he then makes his case for a Markan priority by saying that Mark wrote the first gospel, and Matthew and Luke must have used his gospel to write theirs. Stein’s bases his theory on six pieces of evidence: Mark has the shortest gospel, so Matthew and Luke must have used his to develop and expand on their own. Second, Matthew and Luke edited the poor writing style of Mark. Third, the more challenging teachings of Mark were softened to appease the audience of Matthew and Luke. Fourth, the lack of Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark shows that they were more likely to copy him rather than disagree. Fifth, there is a Matthean redactional emphases compared to Mark and Luke. Sixth, Mark has a more primitive theology compared to Matthew and Luke. To round off the theory of Markan priority, the introduction of the Q material is explained as a source that could be written, oral, or both, presenting the argument for the material found in Matthew and Luke, not Mark. Stein admits that the single greatest weakness to his two-source hypothesis is the evidence of Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark but still gives valuable evidence that Markan priority is a more viable option compared to the Griesbach hypothesis.

In the second section of the book, Stein investigates form criticism and its goals. He addresses form criticism by saying it is "important to investigate the various presuppositions upon which this discipline is built" (174), in which he analyzes the purpose and motivations of the tool. He moves on to say that form criticism requires "that we reassess the earliest portrayal of the process of oral transmission in the early church" (195). He defends the oral transmission of the

gospel by using evidence to prove that the "gospel materials were transmitted was far less free and anonymous and far more controlled than first suggested" (187). In doing so, a conclusion is drawn to show that form criticism at its core is neutral and a valuable tool to demonstrate that the gospels were not written in chronological order, but rather independent units and accounts assembled by the Evangelist.

In the third section of the novel, Stein highlights the three goals of redaction criticism: the theological emphasis the Evangelists used with the materials they had, the Evangelists' theological purpose, what the *Sitz im Leben* they were writing in. In general, the chapters end by showing the ways in which redaction criticism has helped scholars understand each Evangelist's emphasis on their gospel account.

Critical Analysis

Stein's argument for the theoretical solution of the synoptic problem includes an impressive amount of evidence to prove Markan priority and the likely possibility of Q material to establish this two-source hypothesis. The argument for Markan priority is broken down into six pieces of evidence: the shortness of Mark's gospel, Mark's poorer writing style, Mark's more challenging teachings, the lack of Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark, a redactional emphasis of Matthew and Luke on Mark, and Mark's primitive theology. Of these six points, Stein's most substantial piece of evidence is the explanation regarding the shortness of Mark's gospel. Previously, Mark was thought to be a shorter version of the gospel because it contained a smaller number of pericopes and primarily focused on the passion of Jesus. Stein proves this theory false by comparing the lengths of different pericopes within the three gospels to determine that Mark's pericopes were the most extensive. He then asks questions such as why Mark would omit so much material that seems crucial to the story of Jesus and how Mark chose to write more of a pericope than Matthew and Luke if they were in fact his sources. What was once thought to be an argument against Markan priority, Stein uses as an argument for and states: "[A] shorter gospel account for some reason or other simply runs counter to the fact that Mark is not an abridgment of the triple tradition. It is, on the contrary, an expansion" (53). At this point, Stein creates his strongest argument for Markan priority by not just defending against a counter argument but also using it to justify his point. The rationality and simplicity of his argument makes it easy for anyone to agree with Stein since he deduces the argument into terms of simple math.

To defend the other side of the argument that Mark is an abridged version of Matthew and Luke, Stein uses multiple instances of Mark's emphasis on "Jesus as teacher" (55). The basis of his defense is if Mark is emphasizing "Jesus as

teacher," why would he omit events such as the Sermon on the Mount and other teaching pericopes found in Matthew and Luke? While this argument is not as strong as the initial reasoning, it does provide a reasonable explanation for Markan priority. This piece of evidence used to establish Markan priority uses simple rationality for the omission of accounts in Mark, logical use of statistics of pericopes regarding Jesus as a teaching figure, and insightful questions for the reader to ponder that leads to the conclusion that Mark has to be the first gospel written.

Of the six pieces of evidence Stein uses to establish Markan priority, the argument of difficulty from certain teachings is his least convincing. While it does not detract from the overall argument, the explanations given do not fully support Markan priority and raise questions regarding the effectiveness of such proof. One example that Stein uses that seem to be at fault are Mark's use of "many" instead of Matthew and Luke's use of "all" (68), in one of Jesus's healing stories. Another example is when Mark and Luke write "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" while Matthew writes "Why do you ask me about what is good" (73) in reference to a man seeking eternal life. In the first example, Stein suggests that Mark's use of "many" is not absolute and therefore raises questions about the authority of Jesus to heal. Stein then follows with the point, "Upon closer examination, such a conclusion is not necessary, for many is clearly a synonym in Mark 1:34 for the 'all' in 1:32" (68). Why would Stein include this as evidence for more challenging teachings if this is just simply a synonym? There are many different explanations for this use of language, such as an author's preference or translation mishaps. Still, it doesn't seem to be conclusive evidence for Markan priority. Another question is, if the two words are synonyms, why would the use of either word retract from the overall meaning of the pericope? What if Mark intentionally uses "many" to hint at something much deeper? Does that mean he exposes a more authentic Jesus than Matthew and Luke portray? And if that is the case, wouldn't that infer a Matthean or Lukan priority? While these are wildly out-of-line theories based on one tiny piece of evidence, it questions why Stein would include this and support his argument. The other faulty example that Stein uses in his more challenging readings evidence is the story of the man seeking eternal life. This evidence does not retract from Stein's overall argument but does once again raise questions of its effectiveness. Stein argues that Matthew's version of the pericope is an easier reading than Mark and Luke's version. Stein's entire argument in the evidence of the more challenging reading demonstrates that Matthew and Luke both created an easier read than Mark's more primitive and questionable pericopes. But, in this case, Luke agrees with Mark. The initial reaction to this example is, if Luke is supposed to be an easier read, then why is he not following suit with Matthew, in which Stein says "have been difficult passages to interpret and have raised numerous

problems” (73)? While Stein still uses this example to prove Markan priority, it again does not carry the same weight as other pieces of evidence since Luke agrees with Mark and not Matthew in a notoriously tricky passage for churches to interpret. Except for the few weaknesses that raise room for questions, Stein does an excellent job establishing and defending Markan priority while also pointing out critical flaws in other hypotheses that say otherwise.

Stein’s extensive explanation to prove the priority of Mark is then followed by his attempt to prove the existence of “Q material” as an explanation for the pericopes found in Matthew and Luke that are not present in Mark. When setting up Markan priority, Stein used six different points to prove his two-source hypothesis, but when he argues for the existence of Q, he starts by refuting any other idea to make Q the most reasonable explanation in the end. The methodology of proving Q be the best explanation for non-Markan material found in Matthew and Luke rather than trying to prove its existence strengthens Stein’s argument by exposing the flaws in any other possibility. The four different views that Stein deliberates are: Luke may have known Matthew, Matthew may have known Luke, Matthew and Luke may have used common oral material, and Matthew and Luke may have used a common written source or sources (99). Stein starts by discussing at length numerous points that work to prove that Luke could not have known Matthew. He uses evidence from the different contexts of Q material, Luke’s lack of Matthean additions to the triple tradition, the more primitive context of Q material in Luke, Matthew, and Luke’s lack of agreement in order, and Luke’s lack of M material in his gospel. The strongest piece of evidence is Luke’s lack of Matthean additions to the triple tradition of these points. The basis of Stein’s argument is that if Luke knew Matthew, he would have created similar additions that Matthew had. Instead, we continue to find independent Matthean additions and Lukan additions found in different places. The simple rationality of this point makes it the strongest since what we see are unique spin-offs of Mark’s gospel by Matthew and Luke instead of Luke writing similar additions that Matthew had. In the second option, Stein does not argue that Matthew may have known Luke since it is mostly accepted that it is impossible that Luke came before Matthew.

Stein now must argue that Q was a written source rather than a collection of oral sources. While this argument is not as convincing as the two previous ones, his use of methodology has already created a strong establishment that some form of Q material is a high possibility. He breaks his argument for Q to be a written source into three different pieces of evidence: the exactness of wording, the order of the material, and doublets found in Matthew and Luke. According to Stein, the evidence regarding doublets found in Matthew and Luke are “decisive proof” (117) that Q was a written source, but his explanation is much less convincing. Stein states, “Yet these doublets do not necessarily prove the

existence of a written Q” (118). It is confusing to a reader why Stein would start his explanation with a definite saying of some scholars and end with almost no argument made at all. Even though his argument for a written Q material is weaker, his strategic use of methodology to prove its existence in some form is ingenious because as readers, we are already convinced that some form of Q exists. Before even discussing whether Q was written or not, he has already successfully proved his two-source hypothesis that he mentions later in his book.

Conclusion

Throughout his work, Stein uses an exhaustive number of sources, charts, statistics, and reasoning to establish strong and almost irrefutable points that make the two-source hypothesis of Markan priority alongside Q material the most likely influence for the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The well-rounded evidence used to support Markan priority is seemingly impossible to argue against, and the methodology used to prove the existence of Q allows the reader to see that it is the most reasonable explanation for the gaps in Matthew and Luke that cannot be filled in Mark. Stein provides an exceptional theoretical solution to the synoptic problem, and without new evidence to show otherwise, seems to be the best answer to this unsolvable mystery.

Works Cited

Stein, Robert H. *Studying the Synoptic Gospels Origin and Interpretation*. 2nd ed., Baker Publishing Group, 2001.