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# The Synoptic Problem

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## The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction

Robert H. Stein

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987

272 pp. + glossary and indexes

There has always been a need for a good *introductory* work devoted specifically to the synoptic gospels. Too often texts and courses dealing with this area of biblical research assume a depth of knowledge that general New Testament introductions simply do not have the space to provide. For example, for the sake of brevity many New Testament introductions offer verbal parallels as the primary (or only!) evidence for the two-source theory, while more advanced courses and books may take the arguments from order or redaction for granted. Robert Stein's book, if put to use in the classroom, could serve to rectify this unfortunate situation.

Despite its title, *The Synoptic Problem* does not deal exclusively with source-criticism but functions as a general introduction to the scholarly study of the first three gospels. The first half of the text, however, does deal with source criticism in detail. The evidence for the two-source theory is explained, objections to it and alternate theories are dealt with, and the value of source-criticism is discussed. Stein comes down in favour of both Marcan priority and the existence (in a general sense) of Q. The remainder of the book is divided into discussions of form- and redaction-criticism. The history, method, theory, and value of each is discussed in detail. A positive attitude toward all three of these disciplines underlies the discussions of their respective value.

The only critiques that can be made of Stein's treatment involve specific assertions of the author with which some readers will not be able to agree. For example, Stein refuses to commit himself to a unified, written Q. Given the startling theological, linguistic, and stylistic coherence of the double-tradition material, however, this hesitancy seems rather too skeptical. Or again, in his discussion of form-criticism, Stein argues at length that the Jesus-tradition is more reliable than the form-critics have tended to assume. But given the absence of any evidence that early Christians were more concerned with the historical Jesus than with the risen Christ, and the fact that the evangelists were so demonstrably free with *written* sources, the mere possibility of accurate oral transmission in antiquity may fail to convince one that the form-critics were too skeptical. It must be said, however, that these questions are treated fairly and evenly. Stein cannot be accused of not presenting the "other side" of any issue he addresses. As well, these objections are obviously open to discussion. Many readers will doubtless find themselves in agreement with Stein on these points.

These minor and qualified reservations aside, *The Synoptic Problem* is an excellent introductory text. It is comprehensive and detailed. An entire chapter is devoted to the "minor agreements" of Matthew and Luke against Mark, with separate subsections dealing with the different types of agreements. At the same time, amidst all this detail the book manages to be

comprehensible and easily understood by someone with little or no background in this field. A glossary further enhances the discussion's clarity. Add to this fine work the sympathy and fairness of presentation mentioned above, as well as the need for such an introductory book, and the result is a text which ought to be used in the classroom extensively. There is always the possibility, of course, that it could fall between the cracks of general New Testament introductory and advanced work on the gospels. If this happens, it will be a tragedy, especially for the student, who stands to learn a great deal from this book.

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### **Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah**

Douglas Stuart

Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1987

xliv + 537 pp. \$36.20

"There are all sorts of biblical commentaries" (preface). In the long odyssey of biblical exegesis a variety of commentaries has been written ranging from highly technical works to more broadly oriented theological compositions. The *Word Biblical Commentary* represents another contribution in this discipline. When completed it will be comprised of 52 volumes covering the canonical books of the Old and New Testament. Twenty-four volumes are complete while two are being printed. The work under review, no. 31, is a comprehensive study of 5 prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah.

More than 8 pages of abbreviations for periodicals and reference works occur at the beginning of the volume after the Table of Contents, followed by a listing of biblical and apocryphal books consulted. A general bibliography and introduction bring us to the prophets each of which are headed by their own bibliographies and introductions. The latter includes such features as message, form, structure, style, historical setting, provenance, and date of composition. Of these form, structure, setting plus translation, appear for the respective pericopes analyzed. The exegesis, carefully done based on a keen study of the Hebrew, fills out the format for each prophetic book allowing for variations found in the writings themselves.

While theological content is interwoven in the commentary (as it appears to this reviewer) Stuart has a section entitled "Explanation" as a finale to a given lesson in which he develops the theological aspects further. The reviewer could have wished for more in the "Explanations" but as Stuart notes there is a limitation allowed for space and selectivity governed by