

Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ

Robert H. Stein

Downers Grove, Leicester: IVP, 1996.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im Vergleich zu vielen Jesusbüchern der vergangenen Jahre bietet Stein ein nüchternes und dennoch faszinierendes 'Leben Jesu' auf der Grundlage der kanonischen Evangelien. Besonders hervorzuheben sind – sowohl in der einleitenden methodischen Reflexion wie auch in der Durchführung – sein durchweg überzeugendes Eintreten für die Historizität der Evangelienberichte (ohne dabei historische Schwierigkeiten zu übersehen oder herunterzuspielen) und seine Bereitschaft, Wunder nicht a priori auszuschließen. Evangelikale werden sowohl die durchweg verständliche und sich aufs Wesentliche konzentrierende Darstellung wie auch die gebotene Argumentationshilfe schätzen, andere sollten sich über die hier präsentierten Argumente nicht ohne gute Gründe hinwegsetzen. Übersetzung ins Deutsche wird empfohlen, da es z. Zt. auf Deutsch kaum Vergleichbares gibt.

The last decade has produced a great number of books, which – in the widest use of the term – could be called 'biographies' of Jesus. In addition to numerous popular accounts, scholarly studies abound on all aspects of the life of Jesus, his teaching, his background, etc. It is hardly possible to stay abreast of this ever-rising tide. Several helpful surveys are available, e.g. B. Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995); N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, *Christian Origins and the Question of God II*; (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 3–124; C.A. Evans, *Life of Jesus Research: An Annotated Bibliography*, rev. ed., NTTS 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1996); B. Chilton, C.A. Evans (ed.), *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, NTTS 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

Stein is well-known on account of several studies related to Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels, which many evangelicals have come to appreciate (e.g. *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*). Following his preface and introduction, Stein offers in Part One of the present

volume a fine discussion of some 'Key Issues in Studying the Life of Christ' (15–60). The chapter headings summarise well the issues succinctly covered by Stein: 'Where you start determines where you finish: The role of presuppositions in studying the life of Jesus'; 'Where can we go?: Sources for Studying the Life of Jesus' (including helpful discussion of the increasingly popular non-canonical gospels) and 'When did all this take place?: The problem of chronology'. Part Two deals with the life of Jesus from virgin birth to resurrection (61–277).

In several ways Stein's *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ* makes a unique contribution to the widening stream of books on Jesus. Firstly, while others deny the value or even the possibility of historical study of the life of Jesus or allow for very little of historical value, Stein offers an outstanding compilation of what can be said with reasonable certainty about the life and ministry of Jesus. While readily acknowledging historical difficulties (e.g. concerning the Lukan census, 68f), Stein demonstrates persuasively throughout the volume that in reconstructing the life of Jesus there are good historical reasons to believe the Gospel accounts. The evidence and arguments he presents need to be taken seriously by friend and foe. The second main strength and contribution of this volume follows from the first. In the programmatic chapter 'Where you start determines where you finish: The role of presuppositions in studying the life of Jesus' (17–25) Stein gives a brief history of the development of the non-supernatural approach to the miracles of the Gospels (Harnack, Bultmann, Hume, Troeltsch) and shows its weakness, subjective presuppositions and the terminology employed to avoid direct statements (historical, kerymatic, historic; 21f). He demands that an a priori exclusion of the supernatural, i.e. the miraculous, is a presupposition that should be clearly stated. Using Matthew's resurrection account as an example, Stein presents the approach and self-imposed limits of the classical 'historical critical' method (in the definition of Troeltsch, 20). Stein believes that due to the adherence to its basic tenets, the results of the so called third quest remain disappointing. Starting with the resurrection of Jesus Stein brings out the consequences of such an endeavour: 'To deny the miraculous is to deny historic Christianity' (18). Stein openly declares his openness to the possibility of the supernatural (13) and concludes: 'A study of the life of Jesus that excludes the miraculous is destined from the

start to produce a Jesus who is an aberration. He will be a stranger both to his opponents, who acknowledged his miracles ..., and to his followers, who will no longer be able to identify him as the object of their faith ... Attempts to strip the supernatural from Jesus' life can only produce a Jesus so radically different that he is unrecognizable and his impact on history is unexplainable' (24). This chapter is well worth reading for its tight argument and the challenge of much of older and current mainstream positions. What is observed and stated on methodological questions in the opening chapters is consistently applied in the second part. Stein's statement of his own methodological presuppositions is exemplary and, sadly, rarely to be found in similar publications. Perhaps one might add a few paragraphs indicating that the traditional non-supernatural approach is strongly indebted to the worldview of the last two centuries and that more recent views allow for more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in the older philosophy.

Both of Stein's emphasises are closely related. Is the historical scepticism about the life and ministry of Jesus not predominantly directed to his miracles, including his resurrection? Once students become sceptical of or reject the miracle accounts of the Gospels, is this attitude then not easily extended to other passages? After all, can authors, who account the miraculous as if it really happened, be trusted in other aspects? If, however, the possibility of miracles is granted, the accounts which contain such reports become more acceptable as historical testimony. Stein's book is an excellent case study of the impact of a priori assumptions on historical study and of evaluating the historicity of sources.

In addition to this welcome focus on history and the miracles and the sensitive treatment of both issues, Stein offers helpful summaries of the proclamation of Jesus (e.g. 'The message of Jesus: The kingdom of God has come to you', 123-40). Stein's attention to and actual treatment of the infancy narratives in 'Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary: How it all started' (64-80; critical views of the virginal conception, historical difficulties in the biblical accounts, the birth of Jesus, the theological importance of the virginal conception), otherwise often dismissed lightly, is to be welcomed. The same applies to the chapter on the 'silent years' of Jesus (81-89; their normality - aimed against apocryphal accounts, the brothers and sisters of Jesus, the family life of Jesus, the personal life, the languages of

Jesus). There are but a few points where the present reviewer would disagree in either part.

Stein is to be thanked for a well-argued, sober and yet fascinating and masterly presented account of the life of Jesus based on the canonical Gospels. He provides a 'no-nonsense' introduction and informed guidance for undergraduate students and others seriously interested in Jesus. It will be a stimulating challenge to those of different persuasion, due to their own convictions or simply due to ignorance of such an alternative. However, readers more acquainted with the facts and issues will also find stimulating fresh insights. Though the volume does not offer detailed interaction with current scholarship, the informed reader appreciates the authors' indirect interaction with major positions in the field. This is a volume that students and their teachers can hardly afford to miss.

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**Das Evangelium des Lukas.
Übersetzt und erklärt
Josef Ernst**

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SUMMARY

This is the latest and probably the most helpful recent one-volume German commentary on Luke's Gospel for a general readership. Scholarly and up to date with current research and literature, scholars and exegetes find in this beautifully produced volume what is, with Schürmann's magnum opus, among the finest modern Catholic interpretation of Luke's Gospel (the closest English equivalent is perhaps C.F. Evans' Saint Luke). Moderately (historical-) critical and redaction critical in general approach (Mark, Q, Lukan Sondergut, stress on oral tradition), the author also attempts - though somewhat hesitantly - to take some of the more recent reading 'strategies' on board. In addition, Ernst sketches with varying success the relevance of each passage for application in preaching and teaching in a separate subsection following those on analysis and exegesis.