

ETA LINNEMANN FRIEND OR FOE OF SCHOLARSHIP?

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Eta Linnemann falls within the broad frame work of "conservative evangelicalism" according to a recent classification of scholarly students of Scripture. A brief biographical sketch reviews her preconversion scholarly achievements and then her postconversion literary achievements. German scholars have largely ignored her postconversion work on historical criticism, but in North America and Britain, reviews of it have been mixed in their evaluations of the volume. Some reviews of her work on the Synoptic Problem have been positive in North America and Britain, but some have been very negative. A weighing of the weaknesses and merits of Linnemann's scholarship as reflected in those reviews yields the conclusion that she is a friend of scholarship in terms of her industry, tenacity, and intensity to shed light on a crucial area, in her zeal for the truth, in her creativity, originality, fearlessness, and sharpness in analysis; and in her willingness to change her mind after discovering her earlier weaknesses.

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Historical criticism in its classic Troeltschian formulation has come under increasing fire in recent decades. This is so much the case that Gerald Bray argues plausibly for recognizing a new hermeneutical paradigm as characteristic of current academic study of the Christian Scriptures. No longer should one speak of "critical" study, meaning academically rigorous and in some sense "scientific" research, as over against "uncritical" or "conservative" study, meaning academically flabby, methodologically outdated, and hermeneutically naive. Rather, in existence today are broadly speaking three approaches to formal, scholarly study of Scripture, each having its own distinct heritage, characteristics, legitimacy, and leading lights.

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The first of these is what Bray calls "academic scholarship, which carries on the historical-critical tradition inherited from the last century, and seeks to integrate new approaches into its established norms."² From its own point of view, this approach often regards itself as the only game in town, but in point of fact it no longer possesses the monopoly status it once did, and a rival outlook has arisen. This rival, a second position, Bray characterizes by the rubric "social trends"; in this world of academic discourse, current social and political issues set the agenda. Here scholars typically accept fully the critical conclusions of the first group—but view them as irrelevant. Along the lines made famous by liberation theology, they press toward a responsible and transformative orthopraxy rather than an academic critical orthodoxy that is removed from the world and its pressing social needs.

Bray's third group is that of "conservative evangelicalism." To quote Bray at some length:

This is a movement within the Protestant churches whose adherents have rejected the critical assumptions of Enlightenment thought to a greater or lesser degree. They seek to maintain the theology of the Reformation, though in practice this has frequently been modified. . . . Conservative evangelicals tend to regard the first world of discourse ["academic scholarship" above] as their mission field, and are ambivalent toward the second one ["social trends" above]. They frequently sympathize with the cause of fighting injustice, but doubt whether the way it is defined, or the methods adopted to combat it, are really consonant with scholarly standards or traditional theological positions.³

Bray's taxonomy is useful for purposes of the present discussion because it helps situate the subject of this essay, Professor Dr. Eta Linnemann. Bray himself alludes to her, albeit in just one sentence. Under the subheading "Alternatives to historical criticism: The conservative attack," he states,

Mention might also be made of the remarkable case of Eta Linnemann, who after being trained in the standard liberalism of the German universities was converted to a conservative evangelical faith, and has subsequently devoted her life to a root-and-branch critique of her earlier views.⁴

²Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present* (Downers Grove, Ill./Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1996) 467.

³*Ibid.*, 539.

⁴*Ibid.*, 481.

For some reason Bray does not list any of her post-conversion writings in his otherwise full bibliographies. Is this possibly not an oversight but an understandable move to avoid seeming too familiar with, and possibly sympathetic to, Linnemann's controversial outlook and sometimes flamboyant turns of phrase?⁵ Bray's recognition that her views are important enough to cite, but sufficiently problematic to pass over lightly, alerts readers to a problem, or set of problems, crying out for clarification. To provide that clarification is the aim in what follows.

To that end subsequent discussion will first flesh out biographical information, only sketchily furnished in Dr. Linnemann's published works to date. Sources for this will be personal autobiographical statements she has made available and oral interviews granted to this writer in late 1994 and early 1995. Next, the article will analyze reaction to her by surveying (1) the flurry of German-language discussion that arose after her formal published renunciation of "the historical critical method" in 1985 and (2) published reviews of her two major books written since that renunciation. Finally, this investigation will seek to answer the question posed by the essay's title. For reasons to be expressed below, the conclusion will cautiously contend that, overall, Linnemann is a friend of the scholarly enterprise in its highest sense rather than an adversary.

BIOGRAPHY

Linnemann was born October 19, 1926, in Osnabrück, Germany, in the northwestern corner of present unified Germany, well inland from the coast and as far south in Lower Saxony as one can travel without entering the North Rhine-Westphalia area. Primary and secondary schooling stretched from April 1933 until March 1948, being prolonged by World War II. From October 1948 till July 1953 she studied Protestant theology, which included a full range of biblical, philosophical, theological, and church-historical subjects, in Marburg, Tübingen, and Göttingen. Notable professors at Marburg were Bultmann and Dinkler in NT, Balla and Fohrer in OT, and Benz, Maurer, and Zscharneck in church history and dogmatics. At Tübingen her professors included Fuchs and Michel in NT, Würthwein and Elliger in OT, Rückert and Ebeling in church history and dogmatics, and Weischedel and Krüger in philosophy. At Göttingen she heard, among others, Gogarten, Wolf, Käsemann, and Trillhaus.

⁵E.g., "One can no more be a little historical-critical than a little pregnant" (Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990] 123).

Ironically, she had entered university in the hopes of becoming a schoolteacher, but all university openings for this major were full when she sought enrollment. Advice given her was to declare theology as her subject and then later move laterally into education. She never made the switch, becoming a theologian instead, yet continuing in her direct involvement with public school religious curriculum, as remarks below will show. By her third semester at Marburg, she says, her thought turned "in the historical-critical direction." Important books in this early period were Rudolf Bultmann's on Jesus and on the history of the synoptic tradition,⁶ as well as Walter Bauer's on early Christian belief and heresy.⁷ She regards Ernst Fuchs as her theological father in those days, Bultmann as her grandfather. From Bultmann she acquired her exegetical method, from Fuchs her theology and hermeneutic.

She took and passed her first state examinations on August 12-15, 1953. Then came a practicum during which she produced a scholarly, as yet unpublished treatise on the theology of Johann Adam Möhlers. Her second set of required exams took place August 17-18, 1957. She passed them as well. At this point the *Landeskirche* (state church) in Hannover assigned her to write interpretations of biblical texts for religion teachers in the German public school system. Out of this labor arose her critically acclaimed book on Jesus' parables, which was accepted as a doctoral dissertation by the *Kirkliche Hochschule* (Ecclesiastical College) of Berlin. Overseeing this work were Karl Kupisch, Ernst Fuchs, and Martin Fischer. She received her doctoral degree *summa cum laude* on July 13, 1961.

From April 16, 1961 till March 31, 1966 she taught in a seminary in Berlin,⁸ lecturing in New Testament, church history, and religious education. On April 1, 1966 she received appointment to occupy the chair of Protestant theology and religious pedagogical methodology at the Teachers' College of Braunschweig. There she became associate professor on February 14, 1967. In the midst of these labors she requested permission to *habilitieren* (submit a second doctoral dissertation, required in the German theological system for the *venia legendi*, the right to full privileges as university professor), a request she made to the Protestant faculty at the Philipps University in Marburg. Her dissertation there was entitled *Studien zur*

⁶Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980 [1935]); *idem*, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968 [1931]). [titles and dates of English translations with dates of the original German works in brackets]

⁷Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971 [1934]).

⁸In her own words she was "Dozentin am Seminar für kirklichen Dienst in Berlin."

Passionsgeschichte (Studies of the Passion Story). She received the *venia legendi* for NT on February 11, 1970 and was named honorary professor at Marburg on August 10, 1971. She became full professor at Braunschweig in 1972.

Her move into evangelical Christian confession has an early stage and then a later, better known one. In 1946 she had been given a copy of the Pietist *Losungen*, Bible verses for each day of the year meant for personal devotions and life direction. In subsequent years she bought them for herself, expressing her spiritual interest. Then on a holiday retreat in April 1948, following graduation from secondary school, she underwent a memorable religious experience when she responded to an evangelistic message and invitation. But apparently this rebirth barely took root, if at all; at any rate it did not issue immediately in sweeping life change. That took place on November 5, 1977, when at the age of fifty-one she says she gave her life to Christ. It was a month later that she "repented of my perverse theological teaching" and declared her earlier work and writing rubbish. She has elaborated on this part of her life in her first post-conversion book, *Historical Criticism of the Bible*.⁹

At her own request she took early retirement from the university, sensing a need to rebuild her biblical and theological outlook from the ground up. She received aid here by American missionaries in Wolfenbüttel holding Bible classes which she attended. In 1983 she sensed a call to teach in a missionary capacity in Batu, Indonesia, where she has returned to teach a number of times over the years since.¹⁰ Her other Christian service, besides local church involvement in an independent congregation near her north German residence of Leer-Loga, has been research and writing. Her initial book on historical criticism appeared in German in 1986 and has since been published in Dutch (1987), English (1990), Indonesian (1991), and Norwegian (1994) editions.¹¹ Sales of the English edition alone have far exceeded 10,000 copies. A second monograph dealing with the synoptic problem appeared in both German and English editions in 1992¹² and has likewise sold

⁹See note 5.

¹⁰For an assessment (now slightly outdated) of the work there, see Klaus Wetzel, "Die Studenten des Bibelinstituts Batu—ihre kirkliche u. geographische Herkunft," *Evangelische Missiologie* 1 (1988):7-10.

¹¹Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible*.

¹²Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?*, trans. by Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids:

several thousand copies. A third book is well along and will cover various topics, centering on questions of NT introduction. Just one of its chapters alone runs to forty single-spaced pages (ca. 17,500 words), in which she subjects to close scrutiny Udo Schnelle's negative decisions regarding the authorship of most NT documents.¹³

Baker, 1992).

¹³Udo Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Göttingen, 1994).

Since 1991 she has conducted two extended speaking tours in the United States, speaking at several dozen colleges and seminaries and before numerous church groups. She has also produced a number of essays, among them one called "Pauline Authorship and Vocabulary Statistics,"¹⁴ a second entitled "Historical Critical and Evangelical Theology,"¹⁵ a third entitled "The Lost Gospel of Q—Fact or Fantasy?" which recently appeared in *Trinity Journal*,¹⁶ and fourth "Is There a Gospel of Q?" which appeared in *Bible Review*.¹⁷ Still unpublished, to this writer's knowledge, is a close analysis of a portion of Robert H. Stein's *The Synoptic Problem*. An example of her German language article production is "Echtheitsfragen und Vokabelstatistik" ("Questions of Authenticity and Vocabulary Statistics"),¹⁸ in which she investigates the use made of statistics to call in question the traditional authorship of most NT books.

If being a friend of scholarship were simply a matter of authoring academically serious publications, the overarching question of this essay would virtually answer itself: of course, Linnemann is a friend of scholarship—she is producing it! But a look at reviews of her works shows that such an unqualified answer would meet with considerable disagreement.

REACTION TO LINNEMANN'S PUBLICATIONS

This section will canvass the response, first in Germany and then in North America and Britain, to Linnemann's book *Historical Criticism of the Bible*, her initial post-conversion blast against Historical Criticism and call to faith in Christ and the Bible. It will then do likewise in North America and Britain with her second book, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* It will deal with some minor criticisms along the way, leaving major criticisms for the next section where attention will focus on the weaknesses and merits of her second book.

Germany: Responses to Linnemann's Conversion and Charges Against Historical Criticism of the Bible

In December 1985, Linnemann went public with news of her conversion and renunciation of Historical Criticism as she had previously practiced it. A newspaper article in the *Kasseler Sonntagsblatt* entitled "Radikale Wendung einer Theologin" ("A Theologian's Radical Turn") contained the same news of her disillusionment with university biblical criticism as later appeared in the foreword

¹⁴Journal publication under negotiation.

¹⁵*Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 5/2 (1994):19-36.

¹⁶*Trinity Journal* 17NS (1996):3-18.

¹⁷*Bible Review* (August 1995):18-23, 42-43.

¹⁸*Jahrbuch für evangelikale Theologie* 10 (1996).

of her book *Historical Criticism*.¹⁹ This report caused no small stir, and it was all negative as far as Protestant theological officialdom was concerned.

Bultmann supporter and retired bishop Erich Vellmer drew first blood in the counterattack by chiding Linnemann condescendingly in the same paper for harboring the personal misconception that faith requires the support of theology and of historical-critical work. Vellmer, sounding notes familiar to anyone conversant with Bultmann's writings, insisted that a "faith" intermixed with "facts" was not Christian faith at all. The outward form of the Bible's statements ("Aussageweise") must be separated from the meaning, the content, of the Bible's statements ("Aussageinhalt"). Biblical writers wrote with particular intentions and using time-bound conceptions whose meaning must be liberated from their antiquated forms.

This is the service that Historical Criticism provides, says Vellmer, who implies that Linnemann is an imbalanced extremist ("Schwärmer") for raising a red flag regarding the negative relation between "history" and "faith" that prevails among historical critics in Germany. For Vellmer, what "faith" asserts is completely independent of what "history" turns out to be when analyzing Scripture with the historical-critical method. To relate faith directly to facts would be to make salvation dependent on works—the work of human cognition. Linnemann is thus unfaithful to the genius of the Reformation, Vellmer concludes, as well as of the NT itself. Supportive media departments of the state church in several central locales picked up and publicized Vellmer's letter in coming weeks.

It received additional support from a second Protestant clergyman, Walther Roth, who linked Linnemann's conversion with psychological fickleness or character weakness, thus disqualifying her testimony as a witness to anything of consequence whatsoever. The editorial staff of the paper airing the whole dispute likewise opposed Linnemann, siding with the Protestant clergy who were critical of her new outlook.

Initial mainline response to Linnemann, then, was negative if not scathing. It is worth noting that the primary means of official attack was to twist Linnemann's position: whereas she confessed that she had quit assuming that the Bible was historically untrue, having realized that her grounds for that critical assumption were unfounded, but then went on to speak of new-found personal faith in Christ, her opponents ignored the personalistic side of her statement and represented her as saying that faith is mere affirmation of facts: "Glauben ist nicht bloßes Fürwahrhalten" ("Believing is not merely affirming facts to be true") blared the title of a state

¹⁹The article and responses to it referred to above are from *Dokumentation: Kasseler Sonntagsblatt. Moderne Theologie und Gemeinde. Der Streit um Eta Linnemann* (Kassel, 1986). I owe Hans Bayer thanks for making this available to me.

church press release. Besides, at the dogmatic level Linnemann could expect little sympathy for her reported conversion in a church that teaches salvation is inherent in baptism and thus requires no conviction and decision of the sort Linnemann reported.

In the midst of all this, laity rose immediately to mount a spirited if populist defense: the newspaper in which Linnemann's initial profession of faith appeared received over a dozen formal letters of protest against Vellmer and support for Linnemann. The paper printed few of these but did print Vellmer's and Roth's rebuttals in full. To the extent that German Protestant church leadership stated their verdict, it was clearly negative against Linnemann.

One can measure scholarly response to her life change by observing that shortly after her conversion, Linnemann sent personal letters explaining her shift in outlook to all her fellow German university theologians. Few even replied, and fewer still, Linnemann reports, were in any way supportive. As for her first post-conversion book,²⁰ since it was not written for an academic audience per se or published by an academic press, it is no wonder that German scholars ignored it in academic journals.

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²⁰*Wissenschaft oder Meinung? Anfragen und Alternativen* (Neuhausen: Hänssler, 1986), later translated as *Historical Criticism of the Bible* (n. 5 above).

An awareness of Linnemann in English-speaking circles began at the 1988 national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Wheaton, Illinois.²¹ Several American publishers expressed interest in the word about Linnemann's conversion and new book.²² This resulted in the 1990 release of *Historical Criticism of the Bible*, of which some fifteen published reviews appeared by the spring of 1997.²³ At one end of the spectrum of response is David Watson, who has no word of negative criticism, calling Linnemann's book simply "a magnificent testimony!"²⁴ David P. Kuske's remarks are equally free of disagreement.²⁵ Slightly more reserved is David E. Lanier, who raises rhetorical questions about the extreme tone and substance of some of her statements, yet declines to censure her. In his words, "the present writer will refuse to chide her for writing out of the deepest passion of her repentance any more than he would have chided Paul for writing off the teachings of Gamaliel as so much *skubala* ('garbage')." ²⁶ Joe Blair, echoing Lanier's benign assessment, raises a couple of questions but points to no fundamental flaws.²⁷ William F. Warren, Jr., likewise raises no criticisms, noting only that Linnemann "at times overstates her position."²⁸ Hardly any more critical is the three-sentence

²¹Robert Yarbrough presented a paper entitled "From Bultmannian to Biblicist: Eta Linnemann's Indictment of Contemporary New Testament Scholarship."

²²I.e., *Historical Criticism of the Bible*.

²³One review by David C. C. Watson appeared twice: *Churchman* 105/4 (1991):373 f.; *English Churchman* (July 12 & 19, 1991):7.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵David P. Kuske, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 88/3 (1991):239.

²⁶David E. Lanier, *Faith and Mission* 11/2 (1994).

²⁷Joe Blair, *Grace Theological Journal* 11 (Fall 1990):246-48.

²⁸William F. Warren, Jr., *Theological Educator* 45 (1992):149-52.

assessment of E. Earle Ellis, who writes,

While she sometimes paints with too broad a brush and tends to underrate the positive contributions of historical biblical study, she offers important insights and a challenge to all who, within the academic enterprise, seek to be faithful interpreters of the Scriptures as the Word of God.²⁹

More strongly worded is the caveat in David Crump's otherwise generally positive review, "Prof. Linnemann draws too many black or white dichotomies for her proposals . . . to be anything more than the enthusiastic trailblazer's rallying cry."³⁰

²⁹E. Earle Ellis, *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 34 (Fall 1991):82.

³⁰David Crump, *Criswell Theological Review* 6 (Fall 1992):153-55.

Markedly more reserved is Robert M. Johnston, who points out that Linnemann may sound as intellectually arrogant to some as the critics she denounces. She seems to be unaware of "positive uses of historical-critical *methods* (as distinguished from *ideology*)" by scholars like F. F. Bruce, George Ladd, and Robert Stein.³¹ Johnston appears to beg the question that Linnemann raises: does not the historical-critical *method* in fact necessarily imply an *ideology* hostile to a Christian historiography? Still, his negative remarks are measured and brief, hardly more than ten percent of his total review.

A positive yet discerning analysis is offered by Robert Shirock, who notes that in some ways Linnemann's horizon is too limited to the German scene. He points out, for example, that

a growing number of young evangelicals have worked their way through the problems which Linnemann raises and have found ways in which they can maintain their conservative beliefs while at the same time pursuing advanced research in Scripture within certain existing university systems,³²

referring no doubt to the British universities. Yet he urges that everyone engaged in biblical research and exposition read the book, noting,

Young evangelicals tend to allow the past forty years of German higher criticism to establish the agenda for their research. We believe that there is much truth in Linnemann's contention that we ought to be on the offensive rather than maintaining a defensive posture.

Equally positive are the remarks of Daniel Clendenin, who notes points of disagreement, including "the annoying form of the book with all its zeal and preachiness and its sometimes simplistic, grim content," yet concludes that it "masters so much prophetic insight, intellectual candor, self-examination and gospel passion that guild Christians everywhere might benefit from it."³³

³¹Robert M. Johnston, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 30 (Summer 1992):171-74.

³²Robert Shirock, *Evangelical Quarterly* 64 (July 1992):275-77.

³³Daniel Clendenin, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35/1 (1992):101 f.

Less unabashedly affirming is the essay by Andreas Köstenberger, who raises numerous perceptive questions. Linnemann demonizes Historical Criticism, he notes, but "the alternative remains unclear." (This is precisely the misgiving voiced by another reviewer, Howard Rhys, who in other respects says of Linnemann's book, "Her challenge is well expressed."³⁴) More sharply, Köstenberger suggests that Linnemann seems to be headed in the direction of a "devotional" study of Scripture rather than an academically serious one. "Thus Linnemann unfortunately remains largely captive to the very dichotomy between believing and critical inquiry that much of the historical-critical theology itself has helped create."³⁵ In light of the work Linnemann has published in recent years, one doubts that Köstenberger would accuse Linnemann of a "devotional" method today. Yet even allowing for such criticisms, Köstenberger accords Linnemann grudging praise.

A final positive review comes from Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) quarters. Horace D. Hummel writes, "One could easily close his eyes and, with only a few modifications, imagine this book as a product of the intense LCMS conflict about historical-critical exegesis a good two decades ago."³⁶ "Linnemann deserves better" than Earle Ellis' lukewarm commendation, Hummel thinks, and her "main thrust is surely beyond cavil." He concludes by hinting that the warning which Linnemann's book constitutes for North American evangelicals, whose acceptance of historical-critical thought is at times considerable, also comprises a warning to the LCMS. Is infighting among the LCMS's right wing hampering its attention to the real and far more dangerous challenges from the left? Did the LCMS "win" a pitched theological controversy in the 1960s and 70s only to be lulled into ultimate loss at the hands of historical-critical impulses now?

Purely negative reactions to Linnemann come from two sources. Casimir Bernas, writing in *Religious Studies Review*, finds her conversion touching but her thinking absolutely wrong.³⁷ "Things are not really as grim as depicted by

³⁴Howard Rhys, *Sewanee Theological Review* 35 (1992):212. Rhys is also critical of Linnemann for holding to a view of verbal inspiration of the Bible and for accepting "such historic ascriptions of authorship as that of Paul for the Pastoral Epistles."

³⁵Andreas Köstenberger, *Trinity Journal* 13NS (1992):95-98.

³⁶Horace D. Hummel, *Concordia Journal* 19 (July 1993):284-87.

³⁷Casimir Bernas, *Religious Studies Review* 18/2 (April 1992):140.

Linnemann." Following the same Kantian and Bultmannian definition of faith as Vellmer and Roth who opposed Linnemann in Germany (above), Bernas writes, "For those . . . who consider theology to be faith seeking understanding, it is simply erroneous to maintain that critical scholarship is an impediment or danger to either faith, understanding, or gospel proclamation." Behind this assertion appear to lie the convictions (1) that "faith" and "knowledge" are utterly disparate spheres, and (2) that historical study has destroyed whatever factual basis Linnemann might have for her claims.³⁸

³⁸Bernas says that the issue is "the reconciliation of historical research with religious faith" and advises Linnemann, "*Non arguitur contra factum.*"

The second purely negative reaction comes from Gregory A. Boyd.³⁹ It is interesting to contrast the cautiously appreciative reviews of figures like Ellis and Köstenberger (above), who are trained experts in exegesis and methodology, with the spirited review of Boyd, who is not. As an apologetics professor, he writes about his bitter disappointment with Linnemann's book. It is not the kind of book he thinks she ought to have written. He faults her for demonizing philosophy and science, which Boyd wants to view as having Christian roots; for ignoring the church's errors and shortcomings in biblical interpretation; for wanting to transport society back into antiquity, doing away with all scientific and medical advances of modern times; for unqualified fideism in her understanding of the gospel; and for failing to see the positive conclusions of Literary and Historical Criticism because of her fixation with alleged errors in criticism's assumptions. And so he concludes:

This is . . . just the kind of over-simplified, non-objective, and certainly unappreciative approach to biblical criticism which contemporary evangelicals do not need. What is needed is a critical dialogue with the biblical critical enterprise which is as appreciative as it is critical, as respectful as it is faithful, and objective as it is committed to scriptural authority. . . . Sadly, despite its sometimes profound insights into the subjective nature of supposedly objective scientific endeavors, Linnemann's book does not contribute to this needed critical dialogue. Unless you are looking for a passionate sermon on the evils of biblical criticism, therefore, I cannot recommend this book to you.⁴⁰

North America and Britain: Reaction to Is There a Synoptic Problem?⁴¹

Linnemann's second post-conversion book, an examination of the so-called synoptic problem,⁴² has received about eleven reviews of varying length and rigor by the spring of 1997. Among the most positive is that of John Wenham.⁴³ Wenham points out that "where Mark and Luke are undoubtedly parallel, Luke (if he is redacting) has made about 5,000 changes in Mark and Matthew about 8,000 changes."⁴⁴ He agrees that Linnemann's statistics show "in detail the unlikelihood of literary dependence" on the scale accepted by many.⁴⁵ He calls Linnemann's third section, dealing with how the synoptics arose apart from literary interdependence,

³⁹Gregory A. Boyd, *Christian Scholar's Review* 22/1 (Fall 1992):106-9.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 109.

⁴¹See note 12 above.

⁴²Usually defined as the set of knotty questions posed by both the similarities among and the differences between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, assuming some kind of literary dependence among the three.

⁴³John Wenham, *Evangelical Quarterly* 66/3 (1994):266-67.

⁴⁴Cf. John Wenham's own weighty contribution to the synoptic debate: *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1992).

⁴⁵Wenham argues for a limited literary interdependence and for Luke's use of Mark (*ibid.*).

"lightweight." Yet he places himself alongside Linnemann as one who believes "in the verbal independence of the Synoptics" and concludes, "It is heart-warming to welcome this courageous and scholarly addition to the present synoptic problem ferment."

Purely laudatory is Erich H. Kiehl's review.⁴⁶ He says her book's "charts and tables reflect the extensive and meticulous study Linnemann has done to demonstrate the accuracy and truthfulness of her study." Unfortunately, little in this review indicates that the reviewer was interested in pointing out flaws had he sensed any. Only slightly more critical are remarks by Edwin E. Reynolds.⁴⁷ He questions mainly formal aspects of the book, although he also wonders "how the statistics would vary if she were to test words for similarity in content rather than for identity." Overall, he writes, "Regardless of what one thinks of her conclusion, her statistical research is impressive, and certainly makes a very significant contribution to synoptic studies. Scholars should be grateful for the wealth of data she has contributed to the field." Robert L. Thomas, though he "does not concur with every minor point along the way," considers her book "probably the most significant volume on the Synoptic Problem to appear thus far in the twentieth century."⁴⁸

William R. Farmer praises Linnemann's debunking of the presumed bases for the classic two-source hypothesis as held by Strecker, Marxsen, and Koester based on Wilke, Weisse, and Holtzmann.⁴⁹ But he thinks her main argument, that "the Gospels are independent literary works based on eye-witness testimony," is "unconvincing." He does concede that Linnemann correctly exploits a gap in current criticism, which has "failed thus far in explaining Luke's use of Matthew."

David W. Jurgens, like Farmer, is skeptical of Linnemann's main thesis.⁵⁰ But he is less appreciative of her rejection of the two-source hypothesis and with it Marcan priority. He suggests that Hans-Herbert Stoldt's list of fifty-seven agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark may in fact be a sign that Matthew and Luke *did* use Mark. He contends, "If Matthew omits 6,593 words of Mark, and Luke omits 11,025 words of Mark, they would naturally have omitted many of the same words without ever having consulted each other." It can be asked whether this statement adequately answers Stoldt's objections to the two-source hypothesis.⁵¹ Jurgens' other criticism of Linnemann runs like this: Robert Stein in *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* states that he believes in Scripture's inspiration, and that

⁴⁶Erich H. Kiehl, *Concordia Journal* 19 (July 1993):280-81.

⁴⁷Edwin E. Reynolds, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 33 (Autumn 1995):309-10.

⁴⁸Robert L. Thomas, *The Master's Seminary Journal* 4 (1993):111-13.

⁴⁹William R. Farmer, *Religious Studies Review* 20/4 (October 1994):337.

⁵⁰David W. Jurgens, *Reformed Review* 47 (1993):63.

⁵¹Summarized in Hans-Herbert Stoldt, *History and Criticism of the Marcan Hypothesis*, trans. and ed. by Donald L. Niewyk (Macon, Ga./Edinburgh: Mercer University/T. & T. Clark, 1980) 18-23.

when gospel compilers edited traditions as determined through source, form, redaction, and literary criticism, those interpretations are still "divinely inspired, canonical, and authoritative." In other words, Jurgens, like Stein, is willing to extend divine inspiration to whatever means gospel transmitters, compilers, or redactors used over the decades of gospel formation. Linnemann's arguments for eyewitness testimony are, then, unnecessary, because Stein's extended doctrine of inspiration abolishes the need for assured and direct eyewitness accounts. This point will receive further attention in the next section of this article.

Five reviews remain, each more critical than the preceding. Peter Head finds "the major weakness" in Linnemann's statement that "given the assumption of literary dependence, one would expect similarities of nearly 100 percent."⁵² He calls this "a false premise," though he discusses none of Linnemann's observations supporting her statement and alleges that no evidence is available to prove it in light of certain literary parallels like "the Targums and the Masoretic Text; the Gospel of Peter and the canonical Gospels; or Josephus' use of the OT and Aristeas." In a much fuller treatment, Matt Williams makes nearly the same observation, though he seeks to ground it at greater length.⁵³ This article will review his arguments below. He adds the criticism that Linnemann fails to interact with non-German scholars—like Streeter, Sanday, and Farmer—who have argued for literary dependence. In fairness to Linnemann, however, she explicitly takes on the two-source hypothesis as it originated and exists in Germany and is taught in the university there, not all literary dependence theories elsewhere that have sprung up subsequently. It might surprise Williams to learn that German NT scholars feel no need to take Streeter, Sanday, and Farmer into account, so they clearly do not. This is, therefore, not a very telling criticism.

Rainer Riesner has some kind words to say of Linnemann.⁵⁴ But her book "contains too many onesided and imprecise statements." He shows that her handling of the history of the synoptic problem is flawed and that her use of patristic sources lacks cogency. His summary of her extensive use of statistics deserves quotation:

In general L.[innemann], like many of her historical-critical opponents, places too much faith in the view that statistics are decisive for the synoptic question. Although this reviewer has long maintained that the oral gospel tradition must be taken very seriously, he does not believe that it suffices to explain the synoptic phenomena in their entirety.

On cultural-historical grounds alone it seems virtually unthinkable that prior to the synoptic gospels, which L. places in the mid-60s, nothing had been written down. I share with L. the concern that broad segments of New Testament science underrate the

⁵²Peter Head, *Anvil* 10/3 (1993):260-61. Linnemann makes a statement to this effect in *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* 109, and again (with more nuance) on 132.

⁵³Matt Williams, *Trinity Journal* 14/1NS (Spring 1993):97-101.

⁵⁴Rainer Riesner, *Jahrbuch für evangelikale Theologie* 9 (1995):225-27.

reliability of the synoptic gospels. But in conservative evangelical exegesis the early written recording was actually seen as a factor supporting this reliability.

In a somewhat more critical vein Dan G. McCartney concedes that Linnemann "certainly deserves commendation" for "her criticism of the naturalistic assumptions lying behind literary dependence theories."⁵⁵ But he charges her with a "misunderstanding of the nature of the problem" she is dealing with. Even if it can be shown that only 46% of Mark shows verbal identity with Matthew, McCartney says that is significant. He compares the situation with two student examinations he might grade, noting that 46% agreement between the two would cause him to suspect literary dependence immediately.

But this analogy is surely defective. What if he were to test two students from an oral culture on what they had learned from a religious teacher in that culture, and what if they had lived with that teacher for three years and had received systematic instruction from him, often repeated verbatim? Would 46% agreement in their reminiscences, especially when remembering the words of their master, mean they had copied from each other? McCartney's comparison is hardly to the point.

McCartney goes on to allege two other examples of Linnemann's basic misunderstanding of her topic. He charges her with making sweeping conclusions at times and with condemning all criticism of the gospels because "most German criticism operates on unbelieving presuppositions." McCartney does not allow for Linnemann's self-restriction to the German scene, dominated as it is by the Two-Source Theory. Nor does he recognize that in academic gospels study in Germany there is no other game in town except for the one controlled by such presuppositions, apart from a relatively tiny enclave of scholars making up the NT segment of the *Arbeitskreis für evangelikale Theologie* (a Tyndale Fellowship-like group) numbering no more than a dozen professional NT scholars. McCartney concludes that "in spite of her overstatements, she has some good points to make," but that "it is sad she has couched her arguments . . . in such a way that her valid observations will be easy for people to ignore."

⁵⁵Dan G. McCartney, *Westminster Theological Journal* 55 (1993):348-50.

One critical review remains, that by John S. Kloppenborg.⁵⁶ Generally speaking, it is a withering blast, repaying in kind the absence of "critical, courteous, and fair-minded interchange" he finds in Linnemann's book. His charges are these: (1) Linnemann fails to set the views of figures like Lessing and Holtzmann "within a historical context"; (2) she limits her view to the German scene; (3) "her procedure involves both fragmentation of the data and curious statistical operations," an assertion for which Kloppenborg advances some arguments; and (4) she is wrong in assuming that literary dependence ought to result in nearly 100% reduplication of the original source, in this case Mark. He concludes, "If there is a case to be made for the independence of the Synoptics, let it be made. But let it be done with care, attention to the richly nuanced conversation that continues within the academy, and without baseless assertions of prejudice and bad faith." Clearly, in his view Linnemann is guilty of all these, as well as ignorance of bibliography and issues that would justify writing her off as at least emotionally imbalanced and perhaps just plain incompetent.⁵⁷

CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP?

⁵⁶John S. Kloppenborg, *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 6 (1993):262-64.

⁵⁷The dismissive, even contemptuous tone of the review is striking. Kloppenborg might reply that she pushed first.

In two books and a number of articles that are impossible to explore in detail here, Linnemann has challenged the monopolistic gospel studies enterprise of German university scholarship as epitomized in the standard textbooks used there. In this she is hardly alone, as Bray has pointed out: "Historical criticism came under attack [in the 1970s and since] from many different sources, including from within the discipline itself."⁵⁸ Is her voice as yet another important word of caution, or even dissent, against Historical Criticism in the strict sense? Should one even move in the direction of looking askance at synoptic study operating within literary dependence parameters on the basis of her findings? With thousands of copies of her books in print and sales still lively, those questions cry out for informed answers from everyone involved in formal gospels studies, whether for preaching or for scholarly purposes. To answer these questions, an additional weighing of criticisms catalogued in the previous section—besides the minor ones already dealt with—is in order. This should also give a basis for additional insights into the question of the viability of Linnemann's proposals, a question involving a few perspectives and considerations that reviewers so far have either not noticed or decided not to mention.

Weaknesses and Merits of Historical Criticism

(1) The contentions of Vellmer, Roth, and other mainline German Protestant leaders that true faith is untouched by Historical Criticism because faith does not deal with empirical truth anyway, just religious experience, will carry weight only with those whose notion of Christian faith excludes any admixture of cognitively apprehended facts. This has admittedly been the shape of Christian faith for many since Lessing and Kant. It is a popular conception of faith today among various groups. Examples would include those who identify with an existentialist gospel à la Bultmann, those who utterly reject the role of reason in saving faith à la Barth, and those whose postmodern world view denies the knowable existence of truth generally and in religion particularly ("If there is a mountain out there, there are any number of ways to get to the top."). Persons identifying with those views might be New Age-types desiring a Christian flavor in their religious mix, old-line liberals of mainline denominations, evangelicals zealous for Barth, or pietists of any persuasion who so stress Spirit and direct experience that Scripture and knowledge assume secondary importance.

⁵⁸Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present* 461.

But it is difficult to regard criticisms of Linnemann based on this outlook as fatal to her case, because so much in the Bible, in the history of the church, and even in recent hermeneutical discussion argues against it as a compelling position.⁵⁹

And in fact those criticisms came against Linnemann only from her German colleagues and from Casimir Bernas in North America. It seems fair to set them aside as insufficient grounds for calling in question the academic merit of Linnemann's arguments as a whole.

(2) Complaints that Linnemann tends to generalize and overstate, on the other hand, recur in reviews and must be taken seriously. To the extent that these tendencies detract from the substance of the arguments, or even replace argument with rhetoric, Linnemann's *modus operandi* has weakened her own case. It is likewise lamentable that she fails to concede positive contributions by critical scholarship. For example, do not NT exegetes everywhere make heavy use of the Greek lexicon that Walter Bauer, no theological conservative, compiled over a lifetime of diligent labor? Common courtesy calls for more fairness here.

On the other hand, the other side could argue that university scholarship in Germany during the last century would have produced a Hellenistic Greek lexicon anyway. After all, Bauer's predecessor, Cremer, a rock-ribbed confessionalist, proved that one need not share Bauer's critical views to produce quality lexical work. The post-Enlightenment, anti-orthodox conceptions of NT scholars *per se*, which "Historical Criticism" as Germans understand it enshrines, deserves little or no credit for Bauer's production. Possibly better lexical work, and more of it, could have come into being if there had been more appreciation for the truth and beauty of the Christian Scriptures and fewer million man-hours and monographs devoted to showing how true Christian faith, or early Christian history, is nothing like what the surface claims of the NT and the traditional teachings of the church imply.

Moreover, if one praises German criticism and demands reverence for its scholarly achievements, is it right to overlook its complicity in two World Wars, Germany's tragic anti-Semitism, and the West's widespread religious skepticism at the end of the twentieth century? Though it would be quite wrong to blame Historical Criticism for those disasters, it is equally dubious to call for respect for Historical Criticism's accomplishments while saying nothing of its liabilities. More than one German responding to Vellmer and Roth spoke of their country's empty churches and desolate soul as the result of the ravages of critical theology in the

⁵⁹On Kantian fact-faith dichotimization in currently ascendent pluralist theologies (Hick, Knitter, et al.), see Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Zur Lage von Glaube und Theologie heute," *Internationalen Katholischen Zeitschrift Communio* 25 (July/August 1996):359-72. I am indebted to Werner Neuer for this reference.

universities, and ultimately in the churches, over many generations. As the manifold failures of the twentieth century's Marxist experiments continue to come to light, it should never be forgotten that Karl Marx learned much about the NT at the feet of Bruno Bauer, a notable historical critic of the nineteenth century. Those are all sentiments that may sound churlish to voice but probably deserve a hearing.

(3) The investigation of reviews in the previous section revealed that the major set of arguments against Linnemann came from Boyd.⁶⁰ Some of his evident pique seems to be a classic case of a book not containing what the reviewer thinks it should. This irritation leads him to accuse Linnemann of fideism, a curious charge when one remembers that Germans like Vellmer thought she sounded rationalistic. His displeasure with Linnemann's statement that a Christian philosophy is a contradiction in terms makes sense in North America, where a Christian like Alvin Plantinga can be a leading philosopher, but fails to appreciate the German setting, which regards "philosophy" as a body of knowledge that rules out the viability of classic Christian belief and renders dialogue with it passé. North American academia has analogies at this point, as Alan Bloom and more recently Phillip Johnson have pointed out. It is naive to think that even Alvin Plantinga is causing historical critics in Germany (or, so far, in North America⁶¹) to rethink their hermeneutic.

Boyd's claim that Linnemann wishes to return humankind to classical antiquity is likewise hardly to be taken seriously. It constitutes an unfortunate overreaction to Linnemann's rhetorical critique of modernity's pretensions that it is leading the world into utopian splendor in all areas of life, whether medical or educational or technological. Here Linnemann is merely echoing similar critiques by many secular thinkers who call attention to the Trojan horse of "modern" approaches to medicine, technology, the environment, and even private life, and who point out that post-industrial "progress" is often more than offset by harmful side effects. For example, despite the mechanization of the American home by all kinds of time saving devices, why do we have so much less discretionary time than a generation ago? Further, what has a generation of post-60s educational philosophy and values clarification done for the SAT scores, morals, and character of American school children?⁶² "New" or "modern" is often not better at all. This is Linnemann's point, as most reviewers were able to recognize.

Boyd's charge that Linnemann fails to point out modern science's Christian

⁶⁰See above under the heading "North America and Britain: Reaction to *Historical Criticism of the Bible*."

⁶¹For a tantalizing harbinger, possibly, of better things to come, see Stephen Louthan, "On Religion—A Discussion with Richard Rorty, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26/2 (Winter 1996):177-83.

⁶²This is not to blame schools for children's declining performance; home life is an even greater problem. But schools are an obvious relevant factor in the decline.

roots are historically well founded. But they are irrelevant for science as it exists in the sphere Linnemann is dealing with. In that realm a stark naturalism has pretty much hijacked the scientific enterprise inaugurated centuries ago by thinkers who were, as Boyd correctly implies, Christian in their world view. Boyd, unlike other reviewers, seems to lack adequate grasp of the shape of "historical critical" thought as it actually exists in the German university system. He seems to see it as a benign set of ground rules amenable to at least two underlying metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) rationales: a Christian rationale and a post-Enlightenment, non-Christian one. But this is not how "historical critical" thought is the concept in the halls of learning of the European continent, especially in Germany. In the end Boyd's criticisms point more to failure to understand the German system, a system not without analogies in North America, than to a systemic failure on Linnemann's part.

Boyd's decision not to recommend the book to those not looking for a passionate sermon on "the evils of biblical criticism" is understandable. There are plenty of non-Christians or historical critics to whom this writer would not want to give a copy of *Historical Criticism* for fear the tone would do more harm than good. Yet Boyd's words appear to trivialize those "evils," when in fact Linnemann is on firm ground in seeing them for the dangers they are. Boyd also seems to assume that people do not *need* to hear sermons they do not *want* to hear. The opposite is not seldom the case.

The value of Boyd's remarks is that they alert readers to the limitations of Linnemann's style of response. This writer has finally concluded, in the course of preparing this essay and cataloguing reviewers' responses, that a defense is possible for what she has written from the standpoint of who the writer was, when she wrote (shortly after conversion), and just which set of ills she sought to address (those prevailing in the German system, of which she had long been an insider). But Boyd is correct to warn that her approach is not to be universalized, at least not *in toto*, even by others who share many of her basic convictions. Her words could fan the flames of an anti-intellectual, militia mentality already too common in conservative American religion. They might cause college or seminary students to be haughty and dismissive of ideas they have not yet taken the time to understand. They might encourage young preachers to adopt a Rush Limbaugh tone that would be disastrous for any gracious presentation of gospel claims. The need exists for an even-handed, restrained, and highly trained interaction with historical-critical ideas long typified by scholars in, say, the Tyndale Fellowship tradition, a tradition of learned and dispassionate inquiry, yet still palpably Christian in orientation, with precedents as varied as the work of J. B. Lightfoot, Adolf Schlatter, and J. Gresham Machen.

Yet there is room from time to time for a prophetic voice calling attention to imminent dangers and warning against complacency, unwitting complicity, and misplaced hopes. With many reviewers, this writer concurs that limitations of Linnemann's popular-level diatribe against Historical Criticism should not obscure

its important, valid insights. Despite its flaws and intentional popular appeal, Linnemann's *Historical Criticism* furthers scholarship by sharpening one's vision of what it is and ought to be.

Weaknesses and Merits of Is There a Synoptic Problem?

(1) Reviewers of *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* have repeatedly pointed out the weakness of Linnemann's positive proposals regarding how the gospels found their way into writing in the mid-A.D. 60s. Though her appeal to external, patristic evidence is refreshing when compared to common critical fixation with internal evidence alone,⁶³ it is not as sophisticated as it might be. Wenham, Riesner, and others appear to have valid criticisms here.

Linnemann is also more dependent on Zahn's history of synoptic studies than is desirable. Here, too, Riesner has shown the weakness of Linnemann's reliance on secondary literature, expertly citing relevant original sources to show the derivative nature of her knowledge of certain points. But this does not mean that Kloppenborg is justified in claiming that Linnemann fails to set figures "within a historical context." Linnemann is broadly correct that an anti-Christian animus worked in figures like Lessing, and that biblical scholars taking their cues not from data but from the *Zeitgeist* transformed NT scholarship into a discipline serving philosophical idealism rather than the empirical ideals normally associated with historical science. F. C. Baur and the Tübingen school illustrate that point. Still, if Linnemann wishes to place weight on her reading of the history of the discipline, she needs to do more careful primary-source investigation.

Of course, Linnemann could respond that her reading of history is no more sketchy and tendential than Bultmann's reading of the history of NT theology, which is at least as skewed as Linnemann's in the direction he wanted it to go.⁶⁴ This is not to advocate letting Linnemann off the hook because Bultmann does the same thing. It is only to point out that a weak ancillary section does not necessarily detract from a book's central arguments. Clearly Linnemann's account of the remote history of gospel studies is not the main point of her book, any more than is her reconstruction of gospel composition on the basis of patristic sources—especially Irenaeus.

(2) Jurgens' appeal to Robert Stein⁶⁵ in an effort to minimize the importance of eyewitnesses calls for careful reflection. Linnemann is obviously concerned

⁶³The fixation goes back to D. F. Strauss (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. George Eliot [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972 (1835)]): "To investigate the internal grounds of credibility in relation to each detail given in the Gospels, (for it is with them alone that we are here concerned) and to test the probability or improbability of their being the production of eyewitnesses, or of competently informed writers, is the sole object of the present work" (70). Strauss justified the limitation to internal matters by discrediting patristic testimony, i.e., early church tradition. His procedure is somewhat similar to that of Reimarus.

⁶⁴Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1980⁸) 585-89.

⁶⁵Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

to uphold apostolic authorship of the synoptics, whether direct (Matthew) or indirect (Mark, Luke), along the lines envisioned by ancient tradition, the titles of the earliest manuscripts themselves, and Luke's prologue. Jurgens seems to think that the process of gospel composition is of less importance than the final form, which is at the end of the day what God inspired. But the issue is not so simple. At the inaugural level of "historical-critical" study of the gospels as it exists today is D. F. Strauss (1808-1874). And foundational to his demolition of the aura of reliability that had surrounded the gospels for centuries was his conviction that the gospels are not, and must not have been, produced by direct eyewitnesses:

It would most unquestionably be an argument of decisive weight in favour of the credibility of the biblical history, could it indeed be shown that it was written by eyewitnesses, or even by persons nearly contemporaneous with the events narrated. For though errors and false representations may glide into the narrations even of an eyewitness, there is far less probability of unintentional mistake (intentional deception may easily be detected) than where the narrator is separated by a long interval from the facts he records, and is obliged to derive his materials through the medium of transmitted communications.⁶⁶

Linnemann's sensitivity to the eyewitness question is probably an intuitive response to the German setting where the ongoing task of upholding Strauss' denial of eyewitness status to the gospels is an underlying, if tacit, function of source, form, and redaction criticism. It is worth noting that Bultmann wished to dedicate the first edition of his *History of the Synoptic Tradition* to Strauss but was advised against it by his teacher Wilhelm Heitmüller for political reasons.⁶⁷ His desire confirms his commitment to the ideal Strauss established.

It is ironic, then, to see defense of the authentic (i.e., true-to-historical-fact) *result* of gospel formation—such as Stein argues for—when most historical critics understand that material to contain either no direct eyewitness material, or only such as has been handed along, processed perhaps several times, and eventually set in final form generations after the events described. To illustrate, contemporary study of Abraham Lincoln gives the authenticity of sayings attributed to him an A rating in the case of a direct quote recorded soon after its utterance, B if an indirect quote recorded soon after its utterance, and C for quotes reported only after the passage of weeks, months, or years.⁶⁸ That seems to be a reasonable ranking system, with its

⁶⁶Strauss, *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* 69. See also n. 62 above.

⁶⁷Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 193 n. 76. Thus, though "Rudolf Bultmann hardly ever referred to Strauss," (Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988] 204), he may have worked more consciously in Strauss' train than his explicit autobiographical remarks indicate.

⁶⁸Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1996), cited in Lewis Lord, "Looking for Lincoln," *U.S. News & World Report* (February 17, 1997):62-63.

analogies in criteria established to rank the authenticity of what Jesus may have said. But if applied to Jesus' words with the understanding that all the synoptic material is the result of a complex tradition process that first crystallized two generations or more after Jesus' death, few of the synoptic words of Jesus are likely to be regarded as necessarily genuine. Divine inspiration becomes a *deus ex machina* to preserve what historical probability and common sense argue against.

Though Linnemann may try to prove too much with her theory of radical non-interdependence among synoptic writers, she is not being naive in her aversion to facile theories of synoptic composition that would retain a high degree of reliability for synoptic sayings while going with the flow of literary criticisms sprouting out of the ashes of the once-reliable gospel edifice that Strauss torched to the ground. If eyewitnesses are primarily responsible for gospel documents, the complicated tradition process *as posited by large segments of synoptic criticism*⁶⁹ is both unlikely and unnecessary. On the other hand, if traditional two-source synoptic criticism is largely correct and the whole gospel tradition is mostly hearsay, then claims of eyewitness reliability for the results of the tradition process sound like special pleading, especially when those claims call in the Holy Spirit to guarantee the historical veracity that empirical observation is assumed to have demolished.

(3) Another point touched on repeatedly by reviewers (Head, McCartney, Williams, Kloppenborg) was Linnemann's claim that literary dependence should result in something approaching 100% agreement between, say, Matthew and Mark, if Matthew copied Mark. Reviewers claimed that literary dependence could be at work with a much lower percentage of agreement. Discussion above has already suggested that McCartney's comparison of 46% agreement between two student test papers, on the one hand, and the gospels, on the other, is an apples-and-oranges comparison carrying minimal weight. The same is true of Williams' observation based on local newspaper reports of a super-sectional high school basketball game. It is not easy to see what is proved by observing that two reporters gave two quite different accounts.

This yields no basis for the conclusion that to have the degree of verbal similarity they do,⁷⁰ the gospels must reflect some amount of direct literary

⁶⁹The italics are important. I think there was a tradition process, and it was complicated. But I do not find the methods and informing hermeneutic of some segments of guild synoptic studies to be convincing either in their methods or results. Rainer Riesner's *Jesus als Lehrer*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1988) is an example of an alternate approach which does not oversimplify, yet works in conscious contrast to many received ground rules of synoptic criticism. See also the viewpoints represented in William R. Farmer, ed., *Crisis in Christology* (Livonia, Mich.: Dove Booksellers, 1995). Biblical scholars represented in this volume include C. F. D. Moule, R. T. France, E. Earle Ellis, N. T. Wright, James Dunn, Martin Hengel, Peter Stuhlmacher, Ben F. Meyer, and Farmer himself. While all of these would take exception to much in Linnemann, their work shares with hers a theme of disagreement with the methods, aims, and results of synoptic criticism in many of its current forms.

⁷⁰For a summary of many of the statistical findings, see Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* 149.

borrowing. Other explanations are possible. Different on-the-spot reports of a post-season basketball melee bears little resemblance, formal or material, to the apostolic recollection of the deeds and words of the Son of God as He instilled His truths into His followers over the span of several years—and in a culture where faithful preservation of holy prophetic utterances had a venerable past.⁷¹

⁷¹Note, e.g., Kenneth E. Bailey, "Middle Eastern Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *The Expository Times* (September 1995):363-67.

More weighty here is Head's reference to the Targums and the Masoretic Text, the Gospel of Peter and the canonical Gospels, and Josephus' use of the OT and Aristaeus. In the same vein Kloppenborg refers to Josephus' replication of the Decalogue. Their point is to underscore what Kloppenborg calls "the extremely free way in which classical authors treated their source material."⁷² But this is not always the case. Counterexamples like Suetonius and Eusebius spring to mind immediately. From the NT writers to Clement of Rome and onward, it is apparent that direct borrowing from scriptural sources commonly results in nearly 100% reproduction of the text being cited, at least in the form known to the writer. When the likeness is much less than 100%, then one suspects a loose allusion, not direct copying. So the evidence here is not as clearly one-sided as suggested.

Furthermore, for each example cited by reviewers, one could point out factors that show the relatively free citation as observed in some sources to be doubtful analogies for synoptic composition. The express design of the Targums was to expand and interpret the Masoretic Text; the Gospel of Peter is clearly bent on augmenting some strands of canonical material with lore of quite different origin; Josephus is well within the bounds of literary license in how he shapes and adapts the material he uses from the Hebrew Scriptures and elsewhere. It is only if one assumes synoptic literary interdependence that these analogies seem immediately to explain synoptic phenomena. But closer scrutiny limits the analogy.

The Targums, for example, are hundreds if not more than a thousand years later than the traditions they gloss. The Gospel of Peter is a mid-second century document⁷³ making obvious free use of canonical sources for docetic purposes. Josephus' various apologetic motivations are well documented. In each of these cases, purely literary dependence, helped along by extra-literary considerations (for example, Josephus could not possibly have been a witness at Mount Sinai), is the only historical explanation possible. Things are different with the synoptics. The

⁷²Kloppenborg, *Critical Review* 263.

⁷³Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, rev. ed., trans. R. McL. Wilson, vol. 1 (Cambridge, England/Louisville, Ky.: James Clarke & Co./John Knox, 1991) 221; M. S. Enslin, "Peter, Gospel of," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, K-Q (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 766. The claims that it "circulated in the mid-1st century" and "probably served as one of the major sources for the canonical gospels" (Paul Allan Mirecki, "Peter, Gospel of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5 [New York et al.: Doubleday, 1992] 278), are based on the mutually supporting theories of J. D. Crossan and H. Koester and lack documentary backing.

time span between document and putative source is drastically reduced.

Admittedly, a literary dependence explanation on the analogy of Targums, New Testament Apocrypha, and Josephus is imaginable. But so is the scenario proposed by Linnemann: hand-picked and specially trained followers of Jesus heard His words and recorded them in juxtaposition with His equally striking and memorable deeds, all framed with varying degrees of chronological concern and exact verbal precision within a continuum stretching from birth and boyhood to Galilean days, forays to Judea and elsewhere, and eventually death in Jerusalem. Verbatim similarities among the synoptics, typically exceeding 80% in Jesus' words but more often running at around 50% or below even in parallel passages, are due to similarity of reminiscence and the lasting impressions His words left. The accounts resemble each other because the things they report happened and were remembered by those later responsible for recording them, not because various non-witnesses relied chiefly on one or two seminal documents (Mark, Q) having equally indirect ties with the original phenomena.

The synoptics differ for many reasons. To name some obvious ones: imprecision of memory, point of view of recollection, varied and repeated forms in which Jesus delivered His wisdom, translation from Semitic forms into Greek, and the inherent fact that identical truths or observations are communicable in quite different verbal combinations, linguistically speaking.

None of this discounts the challenge that reviewers pose at this point. It simply suggests that the reasons they give for discounting Linnemann are thin in substance. Most telling in Linnemann's favor, however, is the obvious conclusion that reviewers seem to use a heads-I-win, tails-you-lose argument. Synoptic agreement is seen as proof of inter-synoptic direct dependence. Yet synoptic divergence is still proof of inter-synoptic direct dependence, reasoning from parallels like those cited above.⁷⁴ In this scheme of things no dissent from current consensus is possible—literary dependence theories are, as M. Goulder says of the Q theory, a juggernaut.⁷⁵ While one may finally beg to differ with Linnemann's dissatisfaction with the critical tradition that makes use of that logic, it is only fair to grant that she has a point in calling it into question.

(4) A recurring criticism in reviews questioned Linnemann's use of statistics. Richard S. Cervin sent a lengthy and detailed personal letter to Linnemann outlining problems with her method. To summarize his criticism (page references are to Linnemann's *Is There a Synoptic Problem?*):

I have found a number of problems with some of your statistics. On page 110, you say "We can only assess the data objectively through quantitative means" and on page 59 you

⁷⁴See Linnemann's observations on this phenomenon in *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* 109 f. and elsewhere.

⁷⁵M. Goulder, "Is Q a Juggernaut?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115/4 (1996):667-81.

acknowledge the need for tests. I agree with you in principle; however, your analysis makes no use of statistical tests—you have simply counted words and figured percentages. How is anyone to know whether your word counts are statistically significant or are the result of mere chance? How is anyone to know whether your samples are large enough to be statistically significant? Merely counting words and providing percentages as you have done is not very meaningful without some statistical tests to demonstrate probability levels, correlations, margins of error, and various other relationships among the data.⁷⁶

⁷⁶This and other quotations from Cervin are from a copy of his letter to Linnemann kindly supplied by Cervin.

Kloppenborg refers to the same problem in complaining that Linnemann "draws conclusions from raw numbers."⁷⁷ This is probably the major weakness of Linnemann's book. Yet Cervin goes on to note that he has "yet to see any biblical scholar provide any formula for any probability statement made." He adds that in the course of researching his response to Linnemann, he "found that nearly all of the statistical studies done by biblical scholars that I examined were based on misunderstandings and/or ignorance of statistical procedures and reasoning." In other words, Linnemann is using a method of reasoning similar if not identical to scholars who argue contrasting conclusions. Though it is fair to point out her faulty method, if faulty it is, one must also go on to call in question the statistic-based arguments of the mainline textbooks that Linnemann seeks to refute. Among reviewers, only Riesner recognizes that Linnemann's problem here is one shared by everyone who places too much weight on statistics alone to prove or disprove synoptic theories. If statistical findings *supporting* literary dependence theories receive positive recognition despite their faulty nature (and no one familiar with synoptic literature will suggest they are not receiving that recognition), then it would be consistent to agree that Linnemann, using similar methods, has formulated an important counterbalance in response to those theories.

Norman E. Reed has pointed out the problem of statistical studies of the gospels along with the reasonable nature of Linnemann's results seen within that milieu.⁷⁸ He points out that B. H. Streeter finds a 51% agreement between Matthew and Mark in actual wording. Morgenthaler finds 77% agreement in overall substance, 38% if agreement be defined as identical wording. Carson, Moo, and Morris say that 97% of Mark is paralleled in Matthew,⁷⁹ citing Robert Stein's *The Synoptic Problem*, which says that "97.2% of the words in Mark have a parallel in

⁷⁷Kloppenborg, *Critical Review* 263.

⁷⁸"How Much of Mark's Gospel Can Be Found in Matthew?" Unpublished paper. Unfootnoted quotations in the next few paragraphs are from Reed. My thanks to Rev. Reed for sharing the results of his research with me.

⁷⁹Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 33.

Matthew."⁸⁰ For support Stein cites Joseph Tyson's and Thomas Longstaff's *Synoptic Abstracts*.⁸¹ Clearly the divergence of figures here—51%, 77%, 38%, 97%—suggests that something is awry. Taking the highest of these, Reed shows that Stein's figure is far too high and is based on a dubious interpretation of Tyson and Longstaff.

⁸⁰Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 48.

⁸¹Joseph Tyson and Thomas Longstaff, *Synoptic Abstracts*, *The Computer Bible* 15 (Wooster, Ohio: College of Wooster, 1978).

Tyson and Longstaff analyze the synoptics with computers for verbal agreement using three different criteria.⁸² The first is *continuity*. This means "strict verbal agreement of at least two consecutive words between parallel pericopes." Using this criterion, 3,512 of Mark's 11,025 words agree with Matthew.⁸³ Thus 32% of Mark agrees with Matthew. A second, more generous criterion is what Tyson and Longstaff call *identity*. This is defined as "strict agreement of words, but without the requirement that any of the words have to be consecutive." Using this method, 40% of Mark's words agree with Matthew. A third criterion is *equivalency*. This "calls for only the root or the meaning of two words to be in agreement within parallel pericopes."

Applied to all of Mark, adding the similarities found by computer search based on all three criteria, 5,357 of Mark's 11,025 words have verbal agreement with Matthew. This is a 49% parallel between Mark and Matthew.

Reed shows that when Stein cites Tyson and Longstaff, he appears to base his 97.2% figure on the observation that "[o]f the 11,025 words found in Mark, only 304 have no parallel in Matthew."⁸⁴ This means that 10,721 are parallel; Stein appears to be reasoning that 10,721 divided by 11,025 is 97.2%. The math here is correct, but he has gone beyond what Tyson and Longstaff themselves arrive at, which is 49%.⁸⁵ Reed comments, "The problem is further compounded when others . . . quote his interpretation of the data in their writings." And in a surprisingly positive assessment of Linnemann, given criticisms recounted elsewhere in this paper, Reed concludes,

. . . Linnemann claims that the parallelism found between Mark and Matthew is 55.25 percent. She also writes that 40.32 percent of the words of Mark have exact verbal agreement [with parallel passages in Matthew]. But she goes on to give a reasonably detailed explanation of the method she has used to arrive at these statistics. Her willingness to include a description of her method adds to the credibility of her claims. It is interesting to note how closely her results, produced by observation and tedious hand calculations, agree with the computer generated results of [Tyson and Longstaff's] *Synoptic Abstract*.

⁸²Ibid., 11.

⁸³Ibid., 170.

⁸⁴Stein, *Synoptic Problem* 48.

⁸⁵Tyson and Longstaff, *Synoptic Abstracts* 75, 170.

It seems fair to agree with reviewers that Linnemann's work is hampered by the same restrictions inherent in all purely statistical approaches. But it seems equally important to bear in mind that the suggestion that her statistics are wildly improbable or misleading appears to be one-sided.

(5) Two final criticisms of Linnemann need to be assessed. Previous discussion has already touched on one of them: her specific positive proposal, based on Irenaus's statements about Peter in the A.D. 60s, is unconvincing. It is important to note this. But it is equally important to point out that no single positive proposal explaining the data of gospel origins has yet found universal acceptance. Even Reimarus (who proposed greed for financial gain as the historical explanation for apostolic claims) and Strauss (who proposed naive mythological forms of perception and expression), rightly hailed as leaders in the historical-critical tradition, find few to no followers of their specific positive proposals today. What they contributed was the destruction of prior certainties, not the establishment of more lasting ones. With this in mind, one can say that Linnemann's central argument—that the synoptics can be explained on historical and not merely literary grounds—might still merit serious consideration in spite of the weaknesses of her last few chapters. Parts of her other sections may bring about a constructive destabilization of prior but dubious certainties. It is up to others to make constructive use of them if this is possible.

(6) And finally, Kloppenborg makes much of Linnemann's failure to factor in "the virtual avalanche of literature on the synoptic problem."⁸⁶ This is undoubtedly a weakness. Yet the German university textbooks that Linnemann worked with likewise fail to show familiarity with this avalanche. Helmut Koester, for example, in his section on literary criticism of the gospels, notes only studies by Holtzmann, Wellhausen, Streeter, Lehmann, Farmer, and Stoldt.⁸⁷ The work of Streeter, Farmer, and Stoldt he ignores, unless he includes them in his remark that strong objections continue to be raised against "the Two Source Hypothesis," which he presents as "the most widely accepted solution of the Synoptic Problem." In other words, Linnemann is far from alone in doing her work in isolation from other important strands of research.

Like Kloppenborg, this writer is uncomfortable with Linnemann's bibliographical myopia, and it is true that she invites suspicion by not presenting her views in close enough interaction with a broader spectrum of thinkers. But given the studies she has chosen to respond to, her work is hardly more restricted in focus than theirs.

One thinks here of Otto Betz's critique of the Jesus Seminar: "In view of [their] unfounded presuppositions and the homogeneity that these forced presuppositions impose on the Fellows, the number of scholars [voting] doesn't amount to

⁸⁶Kloppenborg, *Critical Review* 264.

⁸⁷Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, volume 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, Berlin and New York: Fortress/Walter de Gruyter, 1980) 43-45.

much in the end: even with 400 participants the Seminar's findings would hardly look any different."⁸⁸ Linnemann ignores a sizable bloc of synoptic discussion because in the end, it amounts to a single shout of acclaim for literary dependence, which is the very premise that she wants to isolate and call into question. If one should not ridicule Koester (or Bultmann, whose work typically showed the same tendency) for failing to do bibliographical justice to those segments of the community of scholarship that do not agree with his line of thinking, neither should she/he write off Linnemann for mirroring the limited scope of the textbook examples she analyzes.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

This article began by noting Bray's argument that Historical Criticism no longer enjoys its former monopoly status and is being supplanted by at least two other broad and rival forms of intellectually viable analysis. Linnemann's work is symptomatic of the current ferment. Of the criticisms lodged against her, some of them stick. Others lack cogency. She is not a foe of scholarship, it appears, unless that scholarship is unprepared to question its basic premises where this is warranted. But then in what sense is it scholarship?

Her work as exemplified in her first two post-conversion books is not a model of scholarly disquisition due to its (in places) sermonic form, abrasive tone, and failure to take account of other literature. On the other hand, sermons are sometimes needed where they are not desired. What she seeks to prove—that the synoptics are not literarily interdependent—may turn out to be unprovable using statistics alone, or indeed by any means whatsoever. Yet it is notoriously difficult, in many instances, to furnish positive proof for or against anything that is not and never was true. She may be regarded as a friend of scholarship in terms of the industry, tenacity, and intensity with which she has expended impressive labor in hope of shedding light on a crucial area of inquiry; in her zeal for truth; in her creativity, originality, fearlessness, and sharpness in analysis; and in her willingness to change her mind (humility) after finding herself fundamentally mistaken at the

⁸⁸Review of R. W. Funk and Roy Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 119/11 (1994):989.

⁸⁹In private conversation, Linnemann defends her practice here by noting that it amounts an *ad fontes* focus. The problem she wrestles with is that the synoptics are read through the lenses of secondary literature based on dubious assumptions. She attempts to analyze the primary literature, first of all, not to wade into the turbulent, and turbid, waters of secondary discussion.

very core of her outlook.

Article output subsequent to her two post-conversion books shows that her work continues to exhibit the strengths just mentioned—and fewer of the weaknesses. It is ironic, and perhaps symptomatic of the troubled state of criticisms of all stripes at the moment, that precisely in an age of tolerance and recognition of the legitimacy of women's voice in biblical scholarship, some have been so quick to stigmatize a female intelligence praised so highly⁹⁰ when it served the furtherance of historical-critical assumptions and results.⁹¹

⁹⁰Her two published doctoral dissertations were accorded critical acclaim. The first of these, *Jesus of the Parables* (New York/Evanston: Harper & Row, 1966), continues in widespread use.

⁹¹My thanks to Steve Kline and to the New Testament Colloquium of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for constructive comments on this paper.