A Didactic Review of Linnemann's, *Is There A Synoptic Problem?*

In the 2004 Haddington House Journal*, we have included a section called "A Didactic Review." The purpose of this kind of review is for broader instruction than simply discussing a particular book, hence the name – didactic review, or instructive review. This review acquaints the reader with several technical terms and issues in the field of biblical studies; it will help students taking advanced biblical courses; and it also surveys some of the key authors in German Higher Criticism. We believe that students and readers need to know that there have been significant works written challenging several of these false assumptions. These books by Eta Linnemann are catalogued in the Haddington House Library and may be consulted by readers coming for study and sabbatical.*

The Editor

Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels
Eta Linnemann. Trans. R.W. Yarbrough.
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Co., 1992, 219 pp.
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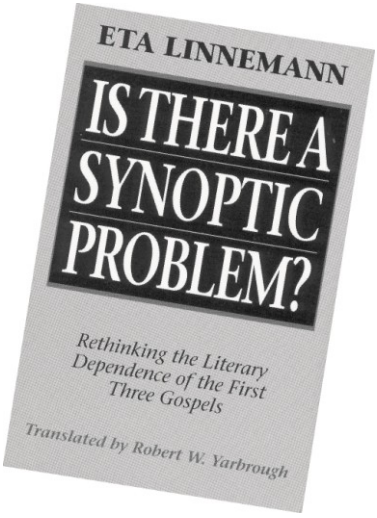


Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels has already received due attention a number of years ago in the book reviews of respected journals. However, the case for literary independence set forward by Linnemann still maintains a measure of relevance in the field of Source Theory. (We will define this in the following paragraph.) This is evidenced by the small but growing number of New Testament scholars who are drawing attention to the necessity for the re-evaluation of the long propagated Two-Source Hypothesis, the child of German Historical Criticism.

Historical Criticism of the Scriptures emerged as the Enlightenment and its understanding of history interacted with the Reformation's principles governing Scripture. The Enlightenment, in the words of Leonhard Goppelt,

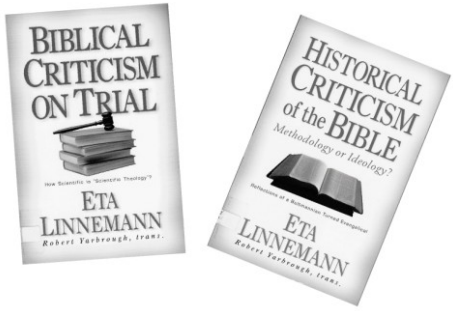
> …separated the present from the past in order to liberate the present from the domination of tradition. Out of this level of awareness and reflection arose the programmatic concerns of the historical-critical investigation of scripture. Such investigation maintained that even the biblical writings must first of all be seen as historical documents of the past and not as a word laying claim upon the present.[1]

Thus, the theological task of Historical Criticism was to analyse the Scriptures using historical science and interpret them using philosophy, which, "…should in the end communicate to persons in the modern world the content of the New Testament, which is of importance to them but is obscured by church tradition."[2] This historical examination of the Scriptures leads to developmental assumptions and further questions about the layers of sources behind the Scriptures as well as the identity and nature of these sources. This historical investigation focused also on the process of oral and written transmission, on the order of the writing, in this case, of the Gospels, and on the literary dependence between them.

[1] Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Jürgen Roloff, trans. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), 1:256.
[2] Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, I:256.

The phrase, "Literary dependence… means that a writer used the writing of another as a source" (p.47). Thus, within the realm of Historical Criticism the field of Source Criticism took shape. The Two-Source theory of literary dependence postulates that Matthew and Luke independently followed Mark and another hypothetical source named Q (from the German, 'quelle', which means, 'source').

Eta Linnemann wrote, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* initially in German, under the title *Gibt es ein Synoptisches Problem?* This was written as a "specific example" of the first book, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian Turned Evangelical*.[3] Both of these have been translated into English by Dr. Robert W. Yarbrough, of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, along with the latest, *Biblical Criticism on Trial: How Scientific is "Scientific Theology"?*[4]



Eta Linnemann's conversion deserves special mention. She was a student of well-known eminent German scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann. She advanced in her studies and became honorary professor of New Testament at Philipps University, Marburg, West Germany. Eventually, certain observations lead her into disillusionment until her dramatic conversion experience. After which she vehemently rejected her prior academic position

[3] Eta Linneman, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Butmannian Turned Evangelical*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 201), 169 pp.

[4] Eta Linneman, *Biblical Criticism on trial: how Scientific is "Scientific Theology"?*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 217 pp.

and successful writings. Linnemann now writes from the position of an Evangelical Conservative repudiating the historical-critical theology she once zealously embraced. The extraordinary nature of her conversion is only heightened upon reflection on Bultmann's teaching. Rudolf Bultmann, who began to exercise influence from 1920, sought to demythologize the Scriptures, that is to say, to interpret them using existential philosophy, to reach beyond the obsolete and mythical view of the world presented in the Scriptures and grasp the intrinsic New Testament message as distilled in the kerygma, the primitive proclamation. It is with a knowledge of this that Eta Linnemann's conversion is justifiably termed, "dramatic".

Is There a Synoptic Problem? is divided into four parts. Part one, containing two chapters, is a critical review of the history of the presuppositions and method of theological science as well as that of academic pedagogy. Part two, consisting of six chapters, sets out to answer the question, "Is there literary dependence among the Synoptic Gospels?", by the quantitative comparison and vocabulary investigation of the Synoptics. Part three, containing two chapters, discusses "The possibility of understanding the Synoptic Gospels without literary dependence", and the implications of this to our understanding of the origin of the Gospels. Part four, in concluding fashion, deals with the purpose of and treatment of the four Gospels.

The introduction to the content of *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* provides the reader with a useful orientation to the general nature of the contention in Source Theory *via* answers to questions frequently asked Linnemann. Almost immediately, her austere but evocative manner of presenting the material becomes vividly apparent. However, owing to the book's specialized material, it is only moderately readable. From the start Linnemann plainly asserts, regarding the literary relationship among the Gospels, that "The alleged literary dependence is not proven." (p.10) The reader is continually reminded of this initial statement at all significant junctures throughout the book. Among five reasons stating why the issue of literary dependence has unfavourable implications for Christians, she maintains that, "…the authority of God's Word is undermined by the systematic exercise of critical predisposition to reduce the Word of God to literary-

theological construction instead of seeing it as the revelation of our creator and redeemer." (p.15)

Linnemann begins chapter one by writing, "Scientific theology was born, not because people were committed to the Bible, but because they sought reasons to avoid obligation to its teachings." (p.19) She points out that the majority of leaders were not theologians but philosophers. Linnemann identifies Gotthold Ephraim Lessing as the one whose "dubious reinterpretation of Eusebius" (p.27) laid the ideological foundation upon which the Synoptic literary dependence hypotheses was built. She points out that Historical Critical New Testament scholars established the views of literary dependence following the same path tread by Old Testament scholars who established the Graf-Wellhausen source theories (a particularly influential, yet an increasingly questionable theory of the historical development of the Old Testament). Both are a product of intuition/ conjecture, beginning with a "…striking absence of proof." (p.22) Only later were biased assertions and judgements brought to bear on the theses. Linnemann writes, "…students were never told that the two-source theory resulted from no thorough investigation of the biblical data, but rather is a transitional phase in the course of a discussion." (p.25) She then recounts the varied explanations of literary dependence as it developed from its questionable source, namely, Lessing.

In chapter two, Linnemann critically reviews the history of the presuppositions and method of academic pedagogy. She draws attention to widely used Georg Strecker and Udo Schnelle's introduction to New Testament exegesis. Strecker and Schnelle ignore the possibility that the Gospels arose independently; instead they presuppose literary dependence and Marcan priority, and support their view by "distorting" the observations of philologist Karl Lachmann, who wrote that Matthew and Luke did not imitate Mark, but that they arose out of evangelical tradition. She then identifies other scholars in Strecker and Schnelle's text who further perpetuated the Two-Source Hypothesis based on presuppositions, circular arguments and "outright distortions" (p.53).

Part two quantitatively compares the Synoptics and investigates their vocabularies to determine if any literary dependence really exists. Linnemann clearly emphasizes that,

"Literary dependence can only be proven or disproven from the actual wording; one must restrict study to the linguistic data." (p.70) Agreement in the content of the Synoptics may not be sequestered as evidence for literary dependence. "Similarity in content is, however, no proof of literary dependence, for it could just as easily be due to historical rather than literary factors."(p.149) Linnemann summarizes her findings,

> …material shared by Matthew and Mark comprises 55.46 percent of Matthew; material shared by Luke and Mark comprises 42.91 percent of Luke… 50.43 percent of the three Synoptic Gospels follow a similar narrative sequence, 75.65 percent of the sequence in Matthew and Mark is similar, and 70.43 percent of the sequence in Mark and Luke is similar… extent of parallelism between Matthew and Mark at 46.5 percent, and between Mark and Luke at 36.17 percent… quantitative cross-sectional Synoptic investigation showed that only 22.17 percent of the words… are parallel in all three Synoptics are totally identical. In Matthew and Mark… 40.99 percent; in Luke and Mark…34.29 percent… similarities in vocabulary,… come to 0.22 percent of Mark… 2.3 percent for Mark and Matthew, and 0.97 percent for Mark and Luke. (p. 149-150)

She admits to some cases of literal agreement but discounts them as "rare" (p.150). She sharply concludes the summary of part two, "…not only the two-source theory but also the Griesbach hypothesis, with their underlying assertion of literary dependence among the three Synoptic Gospels, are both finished when the Synoptic data has been sifted. No room remains for free-floating hypotheses." (p.l52) The Griesbach hypothesis theorizes that Matthew wrote first and was in turn used by Luke, with Mark writing his Gospel last making use of both Matthew and Luke.

Linnemann bases her explanation of the independent origin of the Gospels on the analysis of the mechanics of "linguistic

fixation" (p.158-165) as it is governed by the effectual "forgotten factor", memory (p.182-191). She identifies that Wolfgang Schadewaldt already promulgated these thoughts. Linnemann states that the direct independent historical deposit of the Gospels by eyewitnesses has its significance in the multiple and not single shared testimony of the Evangelists to Christ Jesus (p.195-196).

Has Linnemann successfully dismantled the edifice of literary dependence? She has unarguably achieved a plausible case for literary independence, but she has not eliminated the real possibility of degrees of literary dependence working in tandem with oral tradition. Oral tradition, not in the Historical Critical sense, but meaning that the disciples and Evangelists did repeatedly verbalize standardized historical eyewitness accounts to the communities before actually depositing these accounts in an orderly manner directly in writing (*e.g.* Luke 24:19-24). John W. Wenham puts forth a view similar to this in his, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem*.[5] It is also highly likely the individual Gospel writers had access to whichever Gospel(s), if any, was written prior to the writing of their own. It is inconceivable to think that the communities of believers did not actively circulate material written for common edification. The apostle Paul, we read, requested that his epistle to the Colossians be read in the Laodicean church and the letter sent to Laodicea be read in Colossae (Colossians 4:16).

Linnemann did commendably well to point out, as others have done, the circular arguments and biased conjectures by which literary dependence hypotheses developed. Linnemann discerningly states, "The mode of thinking of twentieth-century theologians is imposed on the New Testament." (p.51) Linnemann's quantitative comparison of the Synoptics is impressive and useful. Though, her selection of shared material, parallels and pericopies is at times questionable. It is unfortunate that she did not scientifically define the accepted threshold of agreement percentage necessary to determine, without a doubt,

[5] John W. Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 319 pp.

dependence. By what methods and standards is this determined? She does not satisfactorily address this crucial point.

Linnemann correctly identified the importance of the "forgotten factor" of memory. This, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is indeed central to the formation of the Gospels. Linnemann correctly stated that, "Reliable historical tradition does exist" (p.187), in the testimony of the church fathers. This is an important reminder since their testimony has been prejudicially discounted as being "unscientific". It is unfortunate that Linnemann interacts almost exclusively with German scholarship. Part three lacked clarity in nomenclature, which in turn directly affected the strength of her argumentation for literary independence, though not its plausibility. It seems that Linnemann and the reader must continually keep in mind that her statement, "We are dealing here with a methodologically new starting point…" (p.71), is equally pertinent to all parts of her book.

Linnemann is adamant in her arguments and blunt in her reproofs. She is right to draw attention to the need for re-examination of, specifically, the Two-Source Hypothesis. Her arguments are, in the end, graciously seasoned with scripture and exhortation, which demonstrates her love for the Gospel, its divine inspiration, inerrancy and its historical veracity. There is, therefore, good reason Linnemann's writings should continue to occupy a guarded place in the realm of our knowledge of Source Theory. Pastors, divinity students and academics alike will find and continue to find this book usefully thought provoking in their studies and work.

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