

Eta Linnemann. *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? — Reflections of a Bultmannian turned Evangelical*. Trans. Robert W. Yarbrough. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990. 169 pp.*

In her "former life," as she now calls it, Eta Linnemann was a student of Bultmann, Ebeling and Fuchs, some of the most renowned historical-critical theologians of her day. Later she taught in Marburg, Germany, and contributed to scholarship on Jesus' parables and gospel studies from an historical-critical perspective (*Jesus of the Parables: Introduction and Exposition*, trans J. Sturdy [Scranton, PA: Harper & Row, 1967]). Then, through some of her students and a loving, gospel-preaching church family, Eta Linnemann turned from her "dead works," as she learned to consider them, to Christ. Linnemann's conversion led her to reevaluate radically her own work in the tradition of historical criticism. In her "Confessions," or as her American publisher calls them, "Reflections," Linnemann not only expresses deep repentance for her own historical-critical past, but also launches a vehement attack against historical criticism itself. She claims that, under the guise of scientific objectivity, historical criticism is an ideology rather than a mere methodology.

Linnemann's assessment strongly differs from such positive standard evaluations of historical criticism as the one by Edgar Krenz (*The Historical-Critical Method* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1975]). Krenz maintains that "It is a mistake to think that there is such a thing as a sacred method. A method does not have faith or unbelief; there are only believing or unbelieving interpreters" (p. 68). Is Eta Linnemann's case a modern-day incident of a former idolator's scruples to "eat meat sacrificed to idols?" Is historical criticism's "demon" in the eye of the beholder, Eta Linnemann? Is hers a reaction against the *use* of historical-critical methodology as a tool of destruction? Or is her label of historical criticism as an "ideology" at least partially applicable when one considers the circumstances of its development? These were some of the questions in the mind of at least this reader as he sought to grapple with Linnemann's very provocative book.

What makes this book so difficult to evaluate, is not only its cross-cultural flavor, but its mixture of polemic and educational policy proposals. After an emotional, autobiographical foreword, Linnemann takes up her attack with a chapter on the "anti-Christian roots of the university," i.e., humanism. She argues that Christ, not man, is the center of creation, quoting Col:15–18. Linnemann charges the university with promoting a spirit of competition (p. 51) and, at least by implication, with a "compulsive preoccupation with 'progress'" (p. 66). One wonders if universities have a monopoly on these vices. Linnemann maintains that "The altering of *structures of thought* can come about only by rejecting and departing from sites where harmful structures of thought reign" (p. 71). To support this assertion, she quotes 2 Cor 6:17, "come out from them." Apart from the question of the appropriateness of the Scripture quotation, the question remains if Linnemann's assertion is universally applicable. Later, Linnemann points to the pluralism inherent in modern scholarship (p. 87). She notes that "Questions are solved on one's knees, not through ransacking commentaries" (p. 112). One would hope that godliness and serious scholarship could coexist, as Linnemann herself believes; this quote seems to betray disjunctive thinking, even if one allows for the context and the emotion with which it is expressed.

On pp. 114–23, in one of the most gripping sections of the book, Werner Kümmel's *Theology of the New Testament* (pp. 14–16) becomes the target of Linnemann's rather blunt criticism. These pages contain a sample of the kind of treatment Linnemann gives proponents of "historical-critical theology" (her term). Linnemann does not seem to entertain the possibility that Kümmel's approach is one of "reception history," i.e., the analysis of what the people themselves thought about certain issues at the time period he considers. Thus Kümmel would primarily guide the reader through the history of biblical interpretation without necessarily endorsing the views he chronicles. If this were in fact Kümmel's procedure — and this reviewer thinks it is — it would seem to be a valid one (though if Kümmel is in fact the impartial guide he claims to be, is another question: see below).

However, Linnemann's criticisms seem to be justified in several respects. First she draws

attention to the cloak of scientific neutrality and objectivity protruding from a writer like Kümmel who seems to leave the impression that while "dogmatic theology" is based on often unspoken (and generally incorrect?) premises, historical-critical theology is free from such presuppositions. Second, Linnemann sharpens the reader's discernment of such confident language by exposing historical criticism's often one-sided emphasis on Scripture as "the work of human authors. . . documents of ancient religious history, written in a dead language. . . and a conceptual world no longer immediately comprehensible to us" (Kümmel). Third, she shows that historical criticism has driven a wedge between a believing hearing of the Bible and its critical investigation.

With Linnemann, it is appropriate to affirm that "presuppositionless exegesis" is impossible — her own mentor R. Bultmann affirmed that fact. It also must be recognized that the pendulum has swung too far to the extreme of a human(istic) view of Scripture in biblical scholarship; evangelicals need to uphold the revelatory aspect of the Bible to counterbalance the scholarly concern with human (cultural, social, historical and other) factors. Furthermore, the evangelical scholar needs to resist the tendency to dichotomize between a "devotional" or "churchly" reading of Scripture on one hand and "critical," "scholarly" research on the other. For example, recent studies have shown that those seminary students who reflected in their personal reading of Scripture on the insights gained in their scholarly research, left seminary with significantly greater maturity than those who neglected their "faith involvement" with Scripture at the expense of their academic pursuits (cf. P. Meier, "Spiritual and Mental Health in the Balance," in *Renewing Your Mind in a Secular World* [ed. J. D. Woodbridge; Chicago: Moody, 1985]).

Finally, one aspect of Kümmel's treatment to which Linnemann does not refer seems to be worthy of mention. Kümmel presents M. Luther in his keen awareness of the tensions between Paul's and James's message as the pioneer of anti-dogmatic theology and the precursor of historical-critical theology. While Kümmel is right in one sense (Luther indeed affirmed Scripture as faith's sole authority over against Roman Catholic dogmatic theology), Kümmel neglects to point out that Luther's "independent-mindedness" in matters of NT theology did not leave him without "dogmatic" presuppositions (like the revelatory nature and integrity of Scripture which he deemed worthy of absolute authority in a believer's life). But this is to veer off into a subject that has recently stirred extensive discussion among American evangelicals (e.g., as occasioned by the Rogers/McKim proposal; cf. also standard Barthian analysis).

There are, however, also some cautions against Linnemann's approach. While she reveals the instinct of a (former) historical-critical "insider," she frequently strikes a reactionary note by "demonizing" historical-critical methodology as a whole. Consider the following quotes: Kümmel "misleads" (p. 114); the reader "gets caught in a web of deception"; historical criticism is based on a "decision to suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (p. 115). Kümmel's description of historical-critical inquiry around 1800 which gave separate consideration to the theologies of the OT and the NT, and of Jesus and the respective NT writers, Linnemann considers to be under a "spell" of "demonic forces" (p. 118). Where Kümmel sees a "tension" between historical-critical research and "dogmatic theology," Linnemann only finds "the two coordinates *truth* and *lie*" (italics hers; p. 119). These examples illustrate a certain extremism in Linnemann's perspective that leaves no room for an integration of historical criticism and faith — one has to choose: "One can no more be a *little* historical-critical than a *little* pregnant" (p. 123). But while historical criticism is demonized, the alternative remains unclear. Linnemann's proposals remain rather unspecific with regard to scholarly methodology (cf. her Excursus 1: *General Studies for Christian Students*, pp. 59–63). What she seems to advocate, is neither a pre- nor a post(trans?) critical study of Scripture, but rather an anti-critical, "devotional" 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.

Linnemann must be commended for her honesty and courage in challenging the historical-

critical "establishment." The question if Linnemann's charges are valid must ultimately be answered by the reader. Linnemann is not the first to point out the inadequacies of the historical-critical method. Gerhard Maier pronounced "the end of the historical-critical method" as early as 1974. Peter Stuhlmacher, Ernst Käsemann's successor in Tübingen, is more measured and qualified in his critique. While affirming the indispensability of the historical-critical method for theology, Stuhlmacher questions the method's adequacy in dealing with its object the Bible. He notes that historical criticism has neglected to consider God's acts in history as well as the church's tradition. J. Moltmann, F. Hahn, M. Hengel, and U. Wilckens, among others, also show an awareness of the limitations and shortcomings of the historical-critical method. Yet more recently, R. Rendtorff, at the occasion of the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature in Kansas City (November 1991), exposed the ideological element in the development of the four-source hypothesis for the Pentateuch. He called for continuity between historical and literary approaches in studying Scripture.

This mounting recognition of the limitations of the historical-critical method has led to a greater freedom of academic discourse and a healthy pursuit of alternative models. It seems difficult to conceive of a future paradigm for biblical studies totally devoid of historical-critical methodology. The evangelical interpreter should develop a method that concurrently considers the possibility of supernatural intervention in human history rather than limiting scholarly study to cultural or social factors. Much, of course, depends on one's definition of historical criticism. If all that is meant is a concern with the historicity of the biblical materials and a sensitivity to the historical context of Scripture, few would object to such an approach. The evangelical community owes Linnemann a debt of gratitude for exposing certain ideological components in historical criticism's formative stages. Indeed, historical-critical methodology may have become infested and infected with "godless" presuppositions — but does that render historical criticism incurably sick? The call for the modern evangelical interpreter is one for discerning use of whatever methods may be useful in his task of interpretation, recognizing that perfect methods are elusive, especially in a world where we still "see through a mirror dimly" (for an excellent example of such an approach see G. R. Osborne's, *The Hermeneutical Spiral — A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* [InterVarsity, 1991]). Stuhlmacher's observations may help here. Also, Linnemann is working on a book on the Synoptic issue. Perhaps on its publication we will find out more about how she conceives of alternative approaches to biblical study.

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