

Monday, March 27, 2006

### Michael Bird on Faith Based Scholarship

Fellow biblioblogger and rising NT scholar, [Michael Bird](#), has agreed to contribute to this series of interviews. He was born in Germany, teaches in Scotland, and was raised in Australia, despite the potential for some serious confusion; he really does have some good things to say.



**How would you describe the role of personal faith as it relates to biblical scholarship? What are some presuppositions that you might have when it comes to the interpretative task? What are some advantages and pitfalls of evangelical views concerning scripture?**

My faith it is what feeds and drives my research in biblical studies. I am not a disinterested observer in the origins of the early Christian movement, but I approach it along the lines of personal faith, a faith quickened, challenged and stimulated by my studies. For me the key questions are why did Christianity begin, why did it take on the shape and character that it did, and what does that mean for us today? When I enter the class room and begin to instruct my students it is kind of like, "Well guys and gals, this is what were' studying today and this is what I've come up with in the course of my studies." I have two basic presuppositions in approaching biblical studies: (1) God exists and has revealed himself in Jesus Christ; and (2) Australians are by far the best exegetes in biblical studies! (If you don't believe me think of these names: Bruce Winter, Graham Twelftree, Rikki Watts, William Loader, Doug Green, Brendan Byrne, Frank Maloney, Colin Kruse, Philip Esler, Peter O'Brien, Paul Barnett and the list goes on). The advantage of an evangelical approach to Scripture is that it takes seriously the view that God speaks in these texts, therefore, they are religious in nature. You can't explain away the New Testament simply by appeal to sociological models - that's reductionistic. The problem I have with some evangelical approaches to Scripture is that they construct their doctrine of Scripture independent of the phenomenon of Scripture. You must wrestle with the Synoptic problem, look at the way "history" was written in the ancient world, be cognizant of the issues pertaining to genre, get a grip on textual criticism, and appreciate the that the concept of "authorship" in antiquity was a bit broader that we might think. But if you start with 1 Tim 3.16 and then extrapolate how we must therefore have gotten our Bibles in their current form, then guys like Ehrman and company are going to have it over you every time. Get the history right and hopefully the theology will look after itself.

**What are the advantages and pitfalls associated with a more "secular" brand of biblical**

**scholarship? What does the church have to do with the academy and vice versa? What are the some possible avenues of fruitful dialogue between "faith-based" and "secular" approaches in biblical scholarship?**

The advantage of the secular approach is that it does not come with the preconceived ideas and agendas of some faith based approaches. I do not think for a moment that secular scholarship is more objective than faith-based scholarship, but the presuppositions that secularist bring to the biblical studies party are of a different ilk. In terms of secular scholars I have to give credit to James Crossley as a guy who does not let secular anti-Christian agendas overpower his reasoning and argumentation (for an aggressive secular soliloquy on the Bible go read the tripe written by Gerd Lüdemann). James has the courage and conviction to give credit where credit is due, even if that means that he's going to say, "Well darn it, the evangelicals are right on this one!" (e.g. James' view on the authenticity of the temple incident in Mk 11.15-17). The poor guy even gets mistaken for an evangelical at times (although if you look at how he dresses you would be more likely to mistake him for someone going to a funeral, a Marilyn Manson concert, or starting a career as a Ninja warrior \* he likes wearing black a lot). I don't necessarily agree with everything James says (esp. on the Resurrection), but James and those like him represent a voice that can make its own contribution to the field of biblical studies and one that deserves a place at the seminar table. In fact, James and I are about to engage in a collaborative project called Two Views of Christian Origins: A Secular and Evangelical Conversation (SPCK, 2008) where we will debate the historical Jesus, the resurrection, Paul, the Gospels and the early Church. You could pray for me that I would be given the grace to listen and learn from what James has to say, but also that I would be given the ability to give him the thrashing of his life! It is also our hope that this project will represent a fruitful engagement between faith-based and secular approaches to the study of early Christianity.

**Who would you considered to be stellar examples of evangelical scholarship? Who are some of the best examples of mainstream critical scholars?**

Well, one or two Australians come to mind! Otherwise, N.T. Wright is one of my favourite authors. I can read his books all day long and feel like I've been chatting with an old friend the whole time. It was reading Jesus and the Victory of God that ingrained in me a desire to be a New Testament scholar \*a desire that I thank God that I've been able to realize. I like Stan Porter and Ben Witherington, if only for the breadth of their study and the magnitude of their output. Ben and Stan are prime examples of generalists NT scholars who try to embrace the whole NT and not just segments of it. Craig Evans, Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock and Scot McKnight are a quartet of evangelical Jesus scholars that I'm always willing to listen too. Some older guys like E Earle Ellis and Richard Longenecker would be the ultimate supervisonal dream team for a Ph.D. candidate. I'd love to spend an hour or two picking their brains. It is worth buying books by anyone who teaches at Aberdeen University (Howard Marshall, Francis Watson, Simon Gathercole, etc). I think Mark Seifrid is probably the best evangelical Pauline scholar going around at the moment (contra the opinion of James White!). David DeSilva is a rising star in evangelical circles and one to keep an eye on. Craig Keener deserves a medal for the largest number of primary and secondary sources used in a commentary. Richard Hays is someone you could be stuck on a desert island with and never get bored by the conversation. But Richard Bauckham has got to be the guy I respect the most \* every time he puts pen to paper you know it

is going to be rigorous, insightful, provocative, and announce the end of some poorly argued assumption in biblical scholarship (e.g. the existence of Gospel “communities”). On the mainstream side E.P. Sanders is the FC Baur of the 20th century and all scholarship on Jesus or Paul must be done in dialogue with him. Thanks to Sanders we can now give Bultmann much less airtime than he has had in the past. I’ve read several helpful volumes by Leander Keck and Peter Achtemeier. A somewhat unknown chap called Jonathan L. Reed has impressed me in both his studies on Jesus and Paul. Craig Koester strikes me as a chappy that I’d like to get to know more, his commentary on Hebrews is bodacious. I confess to being a closet admirer of Dale Allison \* although I seem to spend most of my time critiquing stuff he says \* I still find him immensely stimulating. Markus Bockmuehl is also someone I’d always be willing to read whenever possible.

**Any additional thoughts on this subject?**

Did I mention anything about the quality of Australian biblical scholars? Finally I have enjoyed all of the interviews you have done so far and I am very grateful for the invitation and consider it an honor to be thought of along the lines guys like Bock, Evans, McKnight and Blomberg. Alan, I hope the Ph.D. finishes up well for you. Pity you’re not Australian. Blessings.