

Faith Based Scholarship Interviews from Café Apocalypsis

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Craig Blomberg on Faith Based Scholarship

I am very pleased to introduce to you a series of posts related to the question concerning the value of faith based scholarship. I have interviewed some leading evangelical scholars on this topic. Craig Blomberg, a distinguished NT professor at Denver Seminary, adds his voice to the discussion.



(1) In what way does your faith enhance your scholarly investigation of the Bible?

I know from my experience and the experiences of hundreds of evangelical scholars, that critical questions need not destroy my faith. I have seen too many remarkable events in my life and in the lives of countless other Christians, the timing and meaning of which fit perfectly with what have typically been called "answers to prayer," including the scientifically inexplicable, that I cannot logically attribute these to chance or random selection. I have watched Christians die with a peace and confidence I have never seen, even in life, among any other kind of people. I have researched enough on all of the "hard questions" for Christian faith to know that credible answers to them exist, and in most cases have existed for centuries, even if we cannot tie down every loose end by any means. I do not panic or rush to the latest revisionist hypothesis each time some new discovery or theory claiming to undermine historic Christian faith captures the popular fascination.

How does your research differ from that of secular biblical scholars?

However esoteric it may be at first glance, I don't do anything that I don't think somehow, even if only indirectly, is relevant for Christian thought and living more generally. I find a significant percentage of my writing intentionally trying to bridge the gap between the highly technical and the completely popular.

What are some of your guiding presuppositions? What are some of the potential strengths and weaknesses of a committed evangelical view of the Scriptures?

I believe that Yahweh, God of Israel exists. I believe that the best explanation for the rise

of Christian faith is that a group of Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth had experiences with him, both during his life, and after his death (as they experienced what they believed were appearances of him in bodily resurrected form and then as they experienced empowering for ministry that they attributed to God's Spirit) that the only categories they could use to describe these experiences were categories of deity, even while never rejecting monotheism. They likewise came to believe that Jesus' death atoned for the sins of humankind and that salvation was available through no one else (though that still leaves open whether everyone saved through his cross-work had to have heard of it; clearly pre-Christian Jews didn't hear of it but were saved).

The strengths and weaknesses of this view are basically the same as the strengths and weaknesses of anyone's worldview--weaknesses: when the results of one's research seem "in sync" with one's presuppositions, one may wind up not testing them as rigorously as one should; when they seem to challenge one's presuppositions, one may tend too quickly to opt for resolutions that are not fully satisfactory. Conversely, the strengths are that presuppositions keep one from having to rethink every issue from first principles with every new research project; truly doing that would mean that little else would ever get done! But presuppositions must always in principle be challengeable, even if the most bedrock principles are what Thomas Kuhn has called functional non-negotiables, short, that is, of a Kuhnian revolution.

(2) What are some of the potential strengths and weakness of secular biblical scholarship?

Just invert everything I wrote above (sort of)! They will see blind spots in believing scholarship and not always notice weaknesses in their own; just as faith-based scholarship can "return the favor."

What does the academy have to do with the church and vice versa?

One probably has to ask, "which academy" and "which church"? Academicians who are members of one or more religious groups can obviously tailor their research to the needs, real or perceived, of their religious groups, just as those groups can help inform the scholars how they can best be of service. But if, as I believe, "all truth is God's truth," then truth discovered anywhere in the academy has potential relevance to religious life, so that, although it doesn't happen nearly as often as it should, scholars and lay persons of faith should interact with each other, genuinely listening to each other's perspectives to see what can be learned from them. Too often, the academy has communicated a sense of superiority to and over religious groups, as if the scholars alone knew the truth. Too often, religious groups have put too many constraints on their scholars, often pushing them out of the groups in which they were raised. Neither of these trends is healthy or desirable.

What is your advice to evangelical scholars regarding how one might interact with secular scholarship?

Never go it alone. Find faith communities, and plenty of them do exist, even if you have

to hunt awhile in any given location to find them, who are not anti-intellectual, who are willing to help you address the hardest questions you may confront, who will also provide nurturing, supportive, worshipping environments for your heart, and stick close to them. Build deep friendships within them. These may be local churches, they may be campus ministries, they may be home Bible fellowships, accountability groups, mentoring relationships, or more.

Second, go in with an open mind. See how many things you can affirm or agree with before becoming either offensive or defensive. But then be alert for whatever flaws in the scholarship may emerge as well.

(3) Who would you consider to be stellar examples of faith based evangelical scholarship and why?

In New Testament circles, which are the ones I know best, my two mentors from seminary and Ph.D. work remain two of my heroes in life--D. A. Carson and I. H. Marshall. But many many more could be added and I'd risk offending countless friends by leaving them off any short list. But immediately off the top of my head I think of Darrell Bock, Ben Witherington, Grant Osborne, Eckhard Schnabel, Phil Towner, Bill Klein, Karen Jobes, Aida Spencer, Kazuhiko Uchida and Joseph Osei-Bonsu. Or in Old Testament: Bob Hubbard, Danny Carroll Rodas, Rick Hess, Cynthia Miller and Helene Dellaire. Or in Systematic Theology: Bruce Demarest and Sung Wook Chung. These and countless more are individuals who have never sacrificed the highest level of scholarship due to their faith nor a deep, abiding faith and local church involvement in the name of scholarship. They are also all wonderfully nice people.

Who are some secular scholars that you respect and why?

I'm not sure how you're using "secular" here. Presumably, that means people with no religious affiliation of any kind. Frankly, I don't know many such individuals in the New Testament arena, and many of those whom I do, understandably rejected an ugly side of fundamentalism that they encountered at some point in their lives and "threw the baby out with the bathwater" by rejecting Christianity altogether. While I can relate somewhat at an emotional level, I cannot respect such decisions at the intellectual level. I have great respect for many scholars who identify themselves with very liberal forms of Christianity or with Judaism. But off the top of my head I can't think of anyone I've heard of who grew up atheist, decided to go into New Testament studies, and remained an atheist, though there are probably are such people somewhere.

But for the sake of giving you at least one name in answer to your question, I might mention Bart Ehrman. More so than many, he has very candidly disclosed his religious pilgrimage, particularly in his most recent book, *Misquoting Jesus*. As I read his story (we are the same age, both came to Christ out of liberal mainline Protestant backgrounds through a Youth for Christ/Campus Life club in high school, both went on for academic Ph.D's in New Testament), I think, "there but for the grace of God go I." He went to Moody Bible Institute and encountered a brand of fundamentalism that harmed rather

than helping him in his intellectual and religious pursuits. He then went to Princeton and was encouraged to abandon his evangelicalism and, on his own it appears, he subsequently abandoned religious faith altogether. Yet he is a winsome writer, I love his sense of humor and I sense a kindred spirit in many ways. And he is candid enough about his experience that his writings don't come across as so many did when I was in school, as if dispassionate scientific study had led them to their conclusions.

I, on the other hand, went to Augustana College in Illinois, where a five-person religion dept. of ordained, white male Lutheran pastor-scholars all were seemingly trying to lead this once solidly Christian college down a path so that religion classes would be indistinguishable from what was taught in a public university. I saw through the narrowness of that approach just as much as Bart saw through the narrowness of Moody in his era, but was privileged to have the opportunity to do my M.A. in N.T. in what may have been the finest such program in American evangelicalism in the late 1970s, at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where no one avoided the hard questions but tackled them head on and encouraged us to continue studying them and improve on the positions of our professors. Whether or not I have succeeded is for others to determine. So while I deeply respect Bart's candor and his scholarship, I hope he will give the better side of evangelicalism the empathetic study that he may not yet have given it.

(4)Any additional thoughts on this subject?

I have always dreamed of finding a school that would teach the best of evangelical and liberal scholarship as even-handedly as possible but never found one. The two times I did a major job search, I couldn't even find a non-evangelical school, out of more than 200 to which I applied who would even give me an interview, though initially that was my dream in terms of a context in which I wanted to teach. I wonder if things would be different today in 2006.