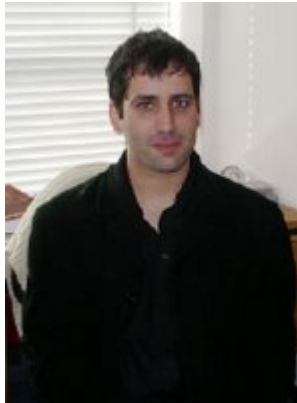


Friday, March 17, 2006

James Crossley on Faith Based Scholarship

Along with evangelical scholars, I have invited a few other voices to the table to discuss this issue. [James Crossley](#) is really the one who got me interested in this topic (although, Michael Fox wrote the initial essay on the SBL Forum). He has graciously agreed to respond to my questions.



(1) 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?

Personal faith has an important role to play in scholarship as does just about any perspective. Evangelicals obviously have a very high view of scripture and bring their own agendas (I don't mean this negatively) which forces certain questions to be asked and hopefully (but sadly not always) answered. In fact I think there is a serious problem when evangelical critiques are made then ignored. I've often used evangelical insights and will continue to do so wherever I find them useful. I often find that a desire to show the historicity of this or that gospel passage can prove particularly useful and an important counter to the more 'radical' views. Yet at the same time I also see as the main pitfall issues surrounding historical reconstruction among some evangelicals (not all), particularly if there is a reluctance to accept that some of the stories or miracles might be fictional. In comparison with other ancient literature surely some miracles/stories are fictional creations?

(2) 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?

I don't think a secular approach is inherently superior to any other approach but like evangelical perspectives it offers new ways of looking at the history and the texts. It too would offer new questions which would (hopefully) have to be answered. My own particular hope is that more and more secular types could provoke differing ways of looking at history such as a more causal based explanation for the emergence of Christianity rather than explanations grounded in

description or history of ideas.

My take on this is that there needs to be more and more secular minded scholars in the discipline to make this happen. It's all about numbers. Look at the ways in which more and more women changed questions in biblical studies. There may still be nowhere the numbers of women that might be hoped for but feminist criticism and related issues came about because of an increase in numbers. There is the potential for more secular types. Just look at the popularity of the Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient Egypt or, dare I say it, even the Da Vinci Code (I'm only talking about interest in the book before anyone sends an abusive email). I often encounter the view that biblical studies is just about worship and people are genuinely surprised when it is explained that there are all sorts of ways of approaching the discipline. There is also potential from radical groups. Roland Boer in his book on Marxist criticism of the Bible noted that the section on the Bible at a Marxist conference was very well attended. In fact there has been a long but little known tradition of Marxist interpretation of the Bible aside from Liberation theology which has explained (away in some cases) Christian origins in terms of economic 'forces' and so on. It is not that the Marxists are right but they do provide a potential source of secular scholars.

The church naturally has an interest in its sacred text and it seems quite logical that it should have an input in the ways in which it is being used. As I implied above, the church brings its own questions for us all to deal with.

As for the way forward, well one way would be collaborations between secularists and evangelicals. Not only interviews like this but co-written books like, ahem, the forthcoming dialogue between Crossley and Bird on Christian origins. More generally, interactions with works of opponents and answering their questions is one positive way forward. The ways in which evangelicals have engaged with E. P. Sanders might be one model (although I realize this hasn't always been all love and romance).

(3) Who would you considered to be stellar examples of evangelical scholarship?

For all my criticisms of NT Wright there's no doubting his impact and there's no way his work can be ignored. He would be an obvious example as would FF Bruce, Scot McKnight, and Paul Barnett. Those Aberdeen people seem very clever too. And then there is Michael Bird: always worth a good argument. But I always get a bit worried about listing people because I'm almost certain to miss a few people off the list. Also, I'm not always sure who is an evangelical scholar or not (which is possibly a good sign) so there are probably many more to add (Bauckham? Bockmuehl? C A Evans?).

Who are some of the best examples of mainstream critical scholars?

In the interests of balance I should mention other scholars who have made an impact through differing perspectives and how a perspective can be a positive thing. Vermes' Jewish background contributed towards changing historical Jesus studies for the better and is still one of the most plausible reconstructions of Jesus in my view. E. P. Sanders' perspective is still not entirely clear from his academic biography but it seems pretty clear that he wanted to approach the NT from the perspective of what I would regard as a secular historian of religion. Read any major detailed

work on Jesus and Paul and you cannot help but see what a profound impact he has had on the discipline, perhaps more than any other modern scholar. This is in no small part down to his 'agenda' and has influenced people of a wide range of perspectives. I'm biased but Maurice Casey is for me an outstanding example of a secular perspective providing what should be regarded significant as significant contributions to historical Jesus studies (esp. 'Jewishness' of Jesus and an alternative account of earliest Christology). Crossan gets a lot of criticisms and I don't buy a great deal of what he says but his use of social history could prove to be his most important legacy and I don't think he gets enough credit for that. There are a whole host of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament secular scholars who have made seriously challenging arguments. But, ultimately, I don't like hero worship so I'll shut up now.