

Tuesday, March 28, 2006

Philip Davies on Faith Based Scholarship

Emeritus research professor in OT at Sheffield University, Philip Davies, joins us today and offers some delightfully blunt answers to my questions. You may be interested to know that he is in the process of editing a book with Jacques Berlinerblau on this very topic. I am truly grateful that he has agreed to share his views.



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?

Like Michael Fox, I regard it as having no place in the overt practice, as having no methodological role in scholarship. But personal faiths of all kinds inhabit scholarly work and it is unwise to pretend they are not there as part of the psychology of the scholar or indeed of the cultural assumptions. One can't make a neat separation between an objective 'scholarship' and the subjective scholars who produce it. But one can always be aware of this inevitable influence and try to ensure that its effects are recognised and monitored. Since scholarship is in my view a communal enterprise this task is best performed communally: we correct each other's 'faiths' (which do not have to be religious ones). That is why it is so important that the community of biblical scholars is represented by as many different perspectives as possible.

My presuppositions are that every written communication conceals as much as it reveals and that in principle all literature is propaganda, i.e., designed to persuade. Resistance is necessary, though not necessarily hostile resistance. Resistance can even be sympathetic. But we must remember that criticism means independence from the claims and values of the text. If we can reach some kind of independence how can we be 'critical'? I have prejudices in favour of minorities and victims of any kind of bullying; I dislike the kind of respect that some religions and religious believers claim for their beliefs. I do not see why religious belief should be treated any differently from other beliefs. By 'belief' I do not include opinions based on any kind of evidence or rational argument, and resist the notion that belief in science is of the same kind as religious belief.

The pitfalls of evangelical belief are numerous. I liken them to astrologists among astronomers. The only advantage is that those who hold them are at least interested in the Bible and think that studying it is a good thing. They also think it is important to speak as if the Bible has a contemporary relevance. All biblical scholars need people like that! And I agree with all of these propositions myself.

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 advantages are that the bible comes out of the ghetto and can join the ranks of all great human intellectual and artistic achievements. Its power, in the wrong hands, to humiliate and destroy people, vividly documented over the last two millennia, can be broken without breaking its power to inspire (as well as to horrify!)

The church and academy seem to me to have two quite different uses for the Bible. Sermonizing, in any guise, is out of place in the academy while critical work is of little use in the church or synagogue. True, it can be used, to good effect, but its use seems always to me to be so partial and unbalanced that it amounts to abuse. Good scholarship is driven by doubt and usually ends in doubt. Churches also recognise doubt, but their role is surely to overcome it in some way, if only through ‘faith’ and not intellectual conviction. Can there be a fruitful dialogue? On the whole, I think not, except inside the heads of those scholars with a religious faith. The Christian perspective is, like the Jewish perspective, part of biblical studies, but only as part of the whole range of receptions. I do not see how a modern Jew or Christian can claim to have a better understanding of the Bible--honestly!

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

I like John Goldingay. He is the best I know. I also like Alan Millard. He is prepared to listen and argue and defend; he is certainly closer to me than to a clown like Ken Kitchen (I mean clown because he plays for laughs, though most of them are unintended). Of mainstream scholars my heroes are Gottwald, because of his honesty and self-awareness; Joseph Blenkinsopp whose knowledge and originality and range are unmatched; and the late Robert Carroll, who could destroy an opponent with ease yet without malice. Generally, I can get on with anyone who has a sense of humour and in the end accepts that we have no idea what life is for or about, if indeed it has any purpose other than the one we construct.

Any additional thoughts on this subject?

It’s a pity that biblical scholars are in a discipline that has top deal with a large constituency of practitioners who have a religious attachment to it and a huge

constituency outside with the same attachment. I would rather we carried on without work free from perennial questions about theology and what the bible means and whether it is historically true. Public misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of biblical scholarship is enormous and would not be tolerated in other academic disciplines. Ignorance, yes--that is often unavoidable. But ignorance and prejudice combined – ugh! If I didn't like the Bible so much I'd be doing something else. Except that if I am honest there is a great opportunity for mischief here, and I love that. Mischief turns up more creative ideas than most other practices.