

Monday, March 20, 2006

Craig Evans on Faith Based Scholarship

Distinguished NT professor at Acadia University, Craig A. Evans, has graciously agreed to add his thoughts on a couple questions related to faith based scholarship:



1) In what way does your faith enhance your scholarly investigation of the Bible? How does your research differ from that of secular biblical scholars? What are some of your guiding presuppositions? What are some of the potential strengths and weaknesses of a committed evangelical view of the Scriptures?

For me Christian faith makes investigation of Christian origins worth pursuing. This includes critical study of Christian Scripture, as well as related writings. It also means critical study of the early history and development of the Christian movement, from the historical Jesus, to the preaching, teaching, and activities of the first two or three generations that followed him. However, Christian faith, just as surely as agnosticism or atheism, can become a problem, if there are pre-conceived notions in place that prevent honest, critical study. For conservative Christians this usually means an idea about what Scripture must be. This leads to an unwillingness to consider options and conclusions that challenge the idea. Sometimes this shows up in an unwillingness to be guided by form critical considerations. For example, the Gospel of John is probably not straight-forward, reportorial history, but rather a highly theological, even dramatic presentation of what Jesus is and means for the Johannine community, a presentation that intersects with some of the events and teachings to Jesus, to be sure, but is not restrained by them. Form critically, the Johannine Jesus' "I am the light of the World" is really "Jesus is the light of the world." But conservative Christians usually don't want to hear this, thinking that failure to embrace the Gospel of John as fully historical is to deny its truthfulness and authority. I have actually heard conservative Christians say of parables: "If the story of the parable did not actually happen, how can the parable be true?"

Related to this is fear of redaction criticism, and in some cases textual criticism also (look how Bart Ehrman has exploited a gullible public in this field in his *Misquoting Jesus*). A rigid, conservative view of Scripture is suspicious of the data concerning scribal errors, corrections, glosses and the like, in the transmission of biblical manuscripts, and very suspicious of the data indicating the activity of early scribes, including the evangelists themselves, in editing the final product, before being transmitted as authoritative Scripture. In the conservative mind, Scripture is not supposed to be this way—and usually ideas akin to dictation theories of inspiration are entertained. Conservative Bible teachers may assure students that dictation is not correct, but their treatment of some of

these critical aspects of Scripture may well leave students with the impression that Scripture should be viewed in such a way. I find it intriguing that the admissions of people like Robert Funk, James Robinson, Robert Price, and Bart Ehrman, who describe their drift from their conservative Christian roots, run along these lines. When they discover that the contents of the Bible did not in fact drop down from heaven, they have a crisis of faith. When it turns out that not everything attributed to Jesus in the New Testament Gospels actually derives from the historical Jesus, they collapse. What a pity. I invite them to read again Acts 2 and perhaps a few of Paul's letter. Christian faith is a response to the good news of what God has done in Christ, including above all the resurrection. Christian faith is not suppose to be a response to an inerrant New Testament which contains four Gospels that can be perfectly harmonized, free from scribal errors, emendations, and glosses.

Christian faith does not rest on a particular view of Scripture, as though it must be inerrant if the gospel message is to be true. I remind my students that Peter in Acts 2 proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus and his divine sonship; he did not proclaim the inerrancy of Scripture. In my view, Christians create a lot of their own problems by advancing a dubious apologetic concerning Scripture. This dubious apologetic sometimes comes back to haunt students, who in later years and after more study find their earlier teaching unpersuasive.

(2) What are some of the potential strengths and weakness of secular biblical scholarship? What does the academy have to do with the church and vice versa? What is your advice to evangelical scholars regarding how one might interact with secular scholarship?

The only potential strength of "secular" scholarship is not being bound by a restrictive theological view of Scripture and history that prevents one from engaging texts and artifacts critically and fairly. However, secular scholars are themselves often guided by personal beliefs and agenda that interfere with critical thinking, just as surely as in the case of Christians (or Jews, or Muslims, etc.). Some of the silliest "left-wing fundamentalism" that I have ever encountered comes from former fundamentalists, who have given up faith and now have an ax to grind. In their minds skepticism becomes criticism. But skepticism is often no more critical or informed than naive conservatism.