

Tuesday, April 04, 2006

Thomas L. Thompson on Faith Based Scholarship

It is good to be back and provide you with one last interview. Thomas L. Thompson, OT professor at the University of Copenhagen, offers his thoughts on the relationship between faith and scholarship. I wanted to thank Jim West for suggesting that I contact both Dr. Thompson and Dr. Davies. I hope that I now have succeeded in providing a balance in the diversity of perspectives. Note: Dr. Thompson has slightly revised some of the questions (this explains the asterisks)



How would you describe the role of (*) 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? + What does the church have to do with the academy and vice versa. ***= delete "personal"**

I delete the adjective "personal" here as I find it inappropriate in the context of the professional functions of a university scholar. For a biblical scholar, the way that faith influences his professional obligations raise a very serious question concerning conflict of interests. To the extent that a university scholar accepts the guiding principles of a specific faith, he or she is incompetent in the performance of their work as scholars. To the extent that an institution presupposes such a commitment, it is, I believe, incompetent as a university. Accordingly, among the premises I hold as professor of theology is the need to investigate and analyze the bible and religion in accord with the critical principles of secular scholarship, what I have often described as "secular theology." In my experience, secular theology or university scholarship in the field of biblical scholarship is incompatible with the premises of a faith-based scholarship, which belongs to the realm of apologetics, a pursuit which may have some legitimacy within the context of a particular faith community, but which in the public or "secular" sphere is inappropriate to both the civil service role of the university professor--and in direct conflict with open and critical scholarly discourse. The legitimacy of such apologetics--exploring the rationality of the intellectual foundations of faith--is limited to propaganda fidei, as Catholics used to call it.

If such conflicts of interest that a scholar has with faith-based understanding of religious texts are avoided, church, synagogue and mosque have much to learn from a secular theology, particularly in regard to their own efforts to control and lessen the violence and hatred which religious commitment is capable of commanding. They can use secular scholarship to struggle against the lies and hypocrisy of well-meant religious efforts to maintain a given religious tradition's

distortion and manipulation of the tradition. They can also be served by the perspectives with which secular scholarship takes up the task of exegesis, without being tied by traditional commitments to a particular understanding.

What are the * pitfalls associated with a more "secular" brand of biblical scholarship? What are the some possible avenues of fruitful dialogue between "faith-based" and "secular" approaches in biblical scholarship? *** = deleted: "advantages and"**

The apologetically based resistance to scholarship by faith-based teachers of bible can influence scholars to ignore the dynamics of struggles for sincerity that exist among many faith-based colleagues, as well as influence scholars to ignore the potential offence their scholarship might give to the feelings of believers, whose understanding of reality can be threatened by a secular perspective on issues felt to be sacred. While I hardly consider a "faith-based approach" as a legitimate approach to scholarship, the history of Catholic biblical studies over the last 70 years clearly shows that what begins in a faith-based project of study and enrichment can often end in solid contributions to secular scholarship.

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

Among evangelical scholars, the first name that comes to mind is Gustav Dalman, with his great work in 7 volumes, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*. I also much admired William Albright--especially for his work in Semitics, though I found his faith-commitments were always so much in his way in both biblical and historical studies that his results were never trustworthy. Similarly, I find William Hallo's work in Sumerian studies and his great anthology simply wonderful, but his contributions to biblical studies are in comparison both weak and insubstantial. Among critical scholars, I have much admired Kurt Galling (editor of the third edition of *Religion in der Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 5 vols. 1953), not only for his encyclopedic competence and integration of biblical, ancient near eastern and archaeological scholarship, but also because he shunned every form of pious distortion in scholarship. This was also a characteristic of Gösta Ahlström's scholarship (*A History of Palestine*, 1993) which I much admired. Among living scholars, I much admire Jack Sasson (editor of *CANE*), not only for his similar integrity as a scholar, but also for his great sensitivity for the personal motivation of scholars--even those he disagreed with.

Any additional thoughts on this subject?

I find the issue terribly important, particularly as evangelical scholarship is undergoing a development that in many ways reminds me of what occurred among Catholic scholars in the 1950s and 1960s. More and more evangelical scholars have acquired competency--especially in the cognate fields of biblical scholarship--over the past generation and have shown themselves at times to be as competent (in the sense as above question 1) within these narrow fields as critical scholars generally. They now stand at a turning point where they are undergoing a very serious struggle for academic recognition which goes hand in hand with an equally serious struggle for academic integrity, which, for many of the individuals involved, is consonant with personal struggles of faith.