

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

### Peter Williams on Faith Based Scholarship

We are grateful to have [Peter J. Williams](#) from Aberdeen to offer his insights on the task of scholarship and its relationship to faith.



**(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 Christian faith is what initially gave me the impulse to read the Greek New Testament as a teenager and to do my first degree in Classics and Oriental Studies (Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic) so that I could read the Bible in its original languages. Faith has also been the main thing that has motivated me to choose study over sleep on many an occasion. In so far as I have made any contribution at all to scholarship faith has played a part in this. When I engage in study of the Bible convictions of the truthfulness and faithfulness of God and of his close connection with the Bible are both presuppositions and conclusions. They feed into scholarly engagement and also result from it.

I have found that an evangelical view of scripture has often informed hunches and shaped research questions. For instance, in my text-critical research the faith-inspired hunch that the text of the Bible would not, upon further study, be in such a mess as many said has been helpful in informing my approach to early versions of the New Testament. I found the hunch fruitful in research, but would also hope that the linguistic arguments that I have made about, for instance, the Syriac versions would be able to stand independent of any hunch or faith approach.

Evangelical views of scripture obviously can cause problems. One veteran of Old Testament studies once said, 'we don't mind having an evangelical on faculty so long as he takes the text seriously'. The fact that evangelical should become associated in scholars' minds with avoidance of the plain meaning of the text results from the frequency of attempts by evangelicals to explain away texts that do not fit preconceived notions. If evangelicals are known for explaining away the Bible and secular scholars are known for accepting what it says then secular scholarship becomes very attractive for any person who sees themselves as a friend of the Bible.

**(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?**

Never having studied or taught in a confessional institution I am not well placed to evaluate them. I have obviously benefited much from scholarship that is not confessional. However, I am wary of giving secularism all the credit for this since the majority of my teachers were probably not thoroughgoing secularists. To say that once explicitly confessional elements are removed what is left is 'secular' is one of secularism's great coups. So to answer the question I'd need to define the boundaries of what scholarship may be called 'secular' and what 'faith-based'. This is difficult, because we are in a situation where often faith-based scholarship feels and is made to feel inferior to secular scholarship. Consequently, evangelicals tend to publish their brightest ideas in non-confessional journals, allowing people like Michael Fox (in the SBL Forum) to claim that secular scholarship should take credit for all advances in human knowledge. This being so, it really is hard to assess just how much scholarship is confessional, how much is strongly secular, and how much just exists in the common ground between confessional and secular (which is often wrongly defined as secular).

There is a great advantage in the plurality of world-views that we encounter in our modern society, since individuals have to be prepared to defend their approach in relation to those of others. Where faith-based learning and secular learning never meet each other thinking tends to become lazy. I see biblioblogs as providing an extremely fruitful crossover between faith-based and secular biblical scholarship. I cannot see journals or conferences being able to do so to the same degree.

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

I don't particularly like the division between 'evangelical' and 'mainstream'. Secular criticism is only mainstream in some parts of the globe. However, I can say that I've learned much from evangelical scholars like D.A. Carson, D.W. Gooding, A.R. Millard, and Moises Silva, but that the scholar who has helped me the most was not very evangelical at all, namely James Barr. I love his books, despite their negativity. It is his book *Fundamentalism* that taught me not to want to explain away biblical statements. Aside from him, I have to say that I appreciate Julius Wellhausen because of his rare ability to make his stories convincing.