

## Faith Based Scholarship Interviews from Café Apocalypsis

Monday, March 13, 2006

### Craig Blomberg on Faith Based Scholarship

I am very pleased to introduce to you a series of posts related to the question concerning the value of faith based scholarship. I have interviewed some leading evangelical scholars on this topic. Craig Blomberg, a distinguished NT professor at Denver Seminary, adds his voice to the discussion.



#### **(1) In what way does your faith enhance your scholarly investigation of the Bible?**

I know from my experience and the experiences of hundreds of evangelical scholars, that critical questions need not destroy my faith. I have seen too many remarkable events in my life and in the lives of countless other Christians, the timing and meaning of which fit perfectly with what have typically been called "answers to prayer," including the scientifically inexplicable, that I cannot logically attribute these to chance or random selection. I have watched Christians die with a peace and confidence I have never seen, even in life, among any other kind of people. I have researched enough on all of the "hard questions" for Christian faith to know that credible answers to them exist, and in most cases have existed for centuries, even if we cannot tie down every loose end by any means. I do not panic or rush to the latest revisionist hypothesis each time some new discovery or theory claiming to undermine historic Christian faith captures the popular fascination.

#### **How does your research differ from that of secular biblical scholars?**

However esoteric it may be at first glance, I don't do anything that I don't think somehow, even if only indirectly, is relevant for Christian thought and living more generally. I find a significant percentage of my writing intentionally trying to bridge the gap between the highly technical and the completely popular.

#### **What are some of your guiding presuppositions? What are some of the potential strengths and weaknesses of a committed evangelical view of the Scriptures?**

I believe that Yahweh, God of Israel exists. I believe that the best explanation for the rise

of Christian faith is that a group of Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth had experiences with him, both during his life, and after his death (as they experienced what they believed were appearances of him in bodily resurrected form and then as they experienced empowering for ministry that they attributed to God's Spirit) that the only categories they could use to describe these experiences were categories of deity, even while never rejecting monotheism. They likewise came to believe that Jesus' death atoned for the sins of humankind and that salvation was available through no one else (though that still leaves open whether everyone saved through his cross-work had to have heard of it; clearly pre-Christian Jews didn't hear of it but were saved).

The strengths and weaknesses of this view are basically the same as the strengths and weaknesses of anyone's worldview--weaknesses: when the results of one's research seem "in sync" with one's presuppositions, one may wind up not testing them as rigorously as one should; when they seem to challenge one's presuppositions, one may tend too quickly to opt for resolutions that are not fully satisfactory. Conversely, the strengths are that presuppositions keep one from having to rethink every issue from first principles with every new research project; truly doing that would mean that little else would ever get done! But presuppositions must always in principle be challengeable, even if the most bedrock principles are what Thomas Kuhn has called functional non-negotiables, short, that is, of a Kuhnian revolution.

## **(2) What are some of the potential strengths and weakness of secular biblical scholarship?**

Just invert everything I wrote above (sort of)! They will see blind spots in believing scholarship and not always notice weaknesses in their own; just as faith-based scholarship can "return the favor."

### **What does the academy have to do with the church and vice versa?**

One probably has to ask, "which academy" and "which church"? Academicians who are members of one or more religious groups can obviously tailor their research to the needs, real or perceived, of their religious groups, just as those groups can help inform the scholars how they can best be of service. But if, as I believe, "all truth is God's truth," then truth discovered anywhere in the academy has potential relevance to religious life, so that, although it doesn't happen nearly as often as it should, scholars and lay persons of faith should interact with each other, genuinely listening to each other's perspectives to see what can be learned from them. Too often, the academy has communicated a sense of superiority to and over religious groups, as if the scholars alone knew the truth. Too often, religious groups have put too many constraints on their scholars, often pushing them out of the groups in which they were raised. Neither of these trends is healthy or desirable.

### **What is your advice to evangelical scholars regarding how one might interact with secular scholarship?**

Never go it alone. Find faith communities, and plenty of them do exist, even if you have

to hunt awhile in any given location to find them, who are not anti-intellectual, who are willing to help you address the hardest questions you may confront, who will also provide nurturing, supportive, worshipping environments for your heart, and stick close to them. Build deep friendships within them. These may be local churches, they may be campus ministries, they may be home Bible fellowships, accountability groups, mentoring relationships, or more.

Second, go in with an open mind. See how many things you can affirm or agree with before becoming either offensive or defensive. But then be alert for whatever flaws in the scholarship may emerge as well.

### **(3) Who would you consider to be stellar examples of faith based evangelical scholarship and why?**

In New Testament circles, which are the ones I know best, my two mentors from seminary and Ph.D. work remain two of my heroes in life--D. A. Carson and I. H. Marshall. But many many more could be added and I'd risk offending countless friends by leaving them off any short list. But immediately off the top of my head I think of Darrell Bock, Ben Witherington, Grant Osborne, Eckhard Schnabel, Phil Towner, Bill Klein, Karen Jobes, Aida Spencer, Kazuhiko Uchida and Joseph Osei-Bonsu. Or in Old Testament: Bob Hubbard, Danny Carroll Rodas, Rick Hess, Cynthia Miller and Helene Dellaire. Or in Systematic Theology: Bruce Demarest and Sung Wook Chung. These and countless more are individuals who have never sacrificed the highest level of scholarship due to their faith nor a deep, abiding faith and local church involvement in the name of scholarship. They are also all wonderfully nice people.

### **Who are some secular scholars that you respect and why?**

I'm not sure how you're using "secular" here. Presumably, that means people with no religious affiliation of any kind. Frankly, I don't know many such individuals in the New Testament arena, and many of those whom I do, understandably rejected an ugly side of fundamentalism that they encountered at some point in their lives and "threw the baby out with the bathwater" by rejecting Christianity altogether. While I can relate somewhat at an emotional level, I cannot respect such decisions at the intellectual level. I have great respect for many scholars who identify themselves with very liberal forms of Christianity or with Judaism. But off the top of my head I can't think of anyone I've heard of who grew up atheist, decided to go into New Testament studies, and remained an atheist, though there are probably are such people somewhere.

But for the sake of giving you at least one name in answer to your question, I might mention Bart Ehrman. More so than many, he has very candidly disclosed his religious pilgrimage, particularly in his most recent book, *Misquoting Jesus*. As I read his story (we are the same age, both came to Christ out of liberal mainline Protestant backgrounds through a Youth for Christ/Campus Life club in high school, both went on for academic Ph.D's in New Testament), I think, "there but for the grace of God go I." He went to Moody Bible Institute and encountered a brand of fundamentalism that harmed rather

than helping him in his intellectual and religious pursuits. He then went to Princeton and was encouraged to abandon his evangelicalism and, on his own it appears, he subsequently abandoned religious faith altogether. Yet he is a winsome writer, I love his sense of humor and I sense a kindred spirit in many ways. And he is candid enough about his experience that his writings don't come across as so many did when I was in school, as if dispassionate scientific study had led them to their conclusions.

I, on the other hand, went to Augustana College in Illinois, where a five-person religion dept. of ordained, white male Lutheran pastor-scholars all were seemingly trying to lead this once solidly Christian college down a path so that religion classes would be indistinguishable from what was taught in a public university. I saw through the narrowness of that approach just as much as Bart saw through the narrowness of Moody in his era, but was privileged to have the opportunity to do my M.A. in N.T. in what may have been the finest such program in American evangelicalism in the late 1970s, at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where no one avoided the hard questions but tackled them head on and encouraged us to continue studying them and improve on the positions of our professors. Whether or not I have succeeded is for others to determine. So while I deeply respect Bart's candor and his scholarship, I hope he will give the better side of evangelicalism the empathetic study that he may not yet have given it.

#### **(4)Any additional thoughts on this subject?**

I have always dreamed of finding a school that would teach the best of evangelical and liberal scholarship as even-handedly as possible but never found one. The two times I did a major job search, I couldn't even find a non-evangelical school, out of more than 200 to which I applied who would even give me an interview, though initially that was my dream in terms of a context in which I wanted to teach. I wonder if things would be different today in 2006.

Monday, March 13, 2006

### Scot McKnight on Faith Based Scholarship

NT scholar and blogger extraordinaire, [Scot McKnight](#), shares his insights and thoughts concerning faith based scholarship. For clarification: what I mean by "secular biblical scholarship" is "mainstream critical scholarship" of the same genus as Crossley, Ehrman, Crossan, Borg, Pagels etc... Some might say "liberal" or "higher critical", but I find that most labels because they fail miserably when it comes to all the shades and nuances of various scholarly viewpoints.



**(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?**

It is my daily prayer that all of my scholarly work be empowered by faith in Jesus Christ and be aimed at aiding that faith, both my own faith and the faith of others. I would not say it "enhances" my scholarship but drives it and shapes it. That notwithstanding, I believe all of scholarship, whether that of an evangelical or a non-evangelical, an atheist or an agnostic, is driven by that faith. All knowledge claims, as Lesslie Newbigin showed in his popular writings (like *Proper Confidence*), find their orientations in faith commitments or tacit assumptions. Scientists assume a scientific/empirical knowledge base and we Christians assume a Jesus Christ knowledge base. I do not look at the doctrine of Scripture as a presupposition but as the inevitable conclusion of faith in Jesus Christ, who sent the Holy Spirit, who empowers the Church to guide it into all truth, which finds its expression in Scripture.

**(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?**

"Secular" scholarship means, I think I can assume from your questions, non-believing scholarship and by that you mean those who do not derive their scholarship from faith in Jesus Christ. That sort of scholarship, which is very common in the religious academy, is seeking to make sense of the world in which those scholars live. To the degree that such a world coheres with a believers' world, that scholarship can be of tremendous use. This has led to the common description of "objective" scholarship as neutral and especially as it operates as a historical discipline. I don't believe in objectivity or neutrality; and I am more and more persuaded, as I essayed in *Jesus and His Death*, that history is an attempt

to find a narrative thread through a variety of facts, and I think that narrative thread is shaped by the questions one asks and one brings to the task – and those questions are shaped by one’s faith.

I think young scholars should find their scholarly orientation in the context of the Church and in the context, more particularly, of a local church. I do not think there is such a thing as “bracketing” off faith as one seeks to understand the Bible – to bracket off faith is to play a game that leads, actually, away from faith for it teaches the bracketing scholar how to think apart from faith – and one ends up where one starts: without faith. To interact with “secular” scholarship requires genuine listening, and that means allowing other questions to come to the fore and to the table – I know I have asked questions that have been “forced” upon me by scholars who come to the table from another faith orientation.

**(3) Who would you consider to be stellar examples of faith based evangelical scholarship and why? Who are some secular scholars that you respect and why?**

Stellar examples: Gregory of Nyssa, St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley – these have to come into play in every genuine Christian conversation with the Bible.

Contemporary scholars: the finest scholar I’ve ever been around is Murray Harris, now living in New Zealand. And I learned a lot from my teachers and I remain grateful for each of them: Joe Crawford, Ron Mayers, Walt Liefeld, Murray Harris, Grant Osborne, Doug Moo, Dale Allison and Jimmy Dunn. From the world of scholarship, I think I’ve enjoyed reading Tom Wright the most, but I have also learned from George Ladd, Don Hagner, Graham Stanton, Klyne Snodgrass, Mark Bockmuehl, Richard Bauckham, Howard Marshall, Joel Green, Ben Witherington, and I could go on and on.

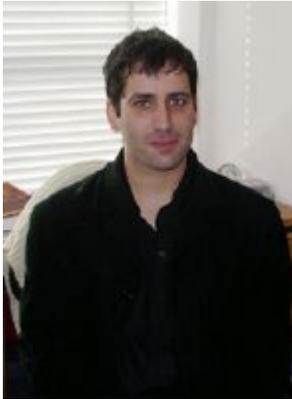
And I think more of us need to read theologians, like Stanley Grenz, LeRon Shults, Bruce McCormack, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Miroslav Volf.

More biblical scholars need to read great writers – and apart from Tom Wright, who only fails in writing books that are too long, very few biblical writers today are really good writers. Few have achieved the clarity of C.H. Dodd or C.F.D. Moule. So, I recommend that young scholars read good writers – like Michel Montaigne, E.B. White, Joseph Epstein, Charles Lamb, Samuel Johnson, and especially C.S. Lewis.

**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.

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 letters. 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 supposed 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.

Monday, March 20, 2006

### Darrell Bock on Faith Based Scholarship

Once again we are graced with another outstanding evangelical NT scholar. Darrell Bock joins us and adds his distinctive voice to this discussion.



**(1) In what way does your faith enhance your scholarly investigation of the Bible? How does your research differ from that of mainstream critical 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?**

I think my faith serves as a check against being too quick to think that passages are in contradiction or that an error is present in the text. We all know that different people see things slightly differently. In biblical scholarship this often results in quickly seeing a problem where a nuancing may be a better option in terms of the evidence. So I tend to ask if there is a way in which the materials can make sense with the premise that many of the writers of the NT were in contact with each other and shared a basic conviction about Jesus. This does not mean there cannot be nuance differences or differences of emphasis or development in thought. Everyone need not say the exact same thing. But the angle from which they consider it also must be taken into account. To keep this from being too abstract, let's take one often mentioned Paul versus James. My own take on Romans 4 versus James 2 is that Paul and James are asking distinct questions. Paul asks, "How does one get in?" He looks at the question of justification from its starting point. James 2 asks the same question, "How can one know one is in looking back?" In other words he asks from a different time frame. This produces the difference in their answer.

I would think that my research does not differ from a great deal of mainstream scholarship except for the likelihood that I have more room for divine action than some mainstream scholars. A methodological problem for all of us is what to do with claims of divine activity in our sources, especially when worldview presuppositions can control how such a question gets treated and answered. My own sense is that here is where much "parting of the ways" takes place.

I think the strength of an evangelical view of Scripture is that it operates with a tendency to seek a unity in the text and its perspectives. That strength can also be a weakness because it might see a tighter unity than may in fact exist. This is why the dialogue of the scholarly community can be helpful.

**(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 mainstream scholarship?**

Mainstream scholarship often shares the opposite problem. Its tendency to be skeptical of the sources means that it often leaps to find tension where it may be more apparent than real. It also looks for analogy so quickly in other contexts that it often downplays differences between materials in related movements that can show uniqueness. I find it intriguing how some sources in some mainline discussions are embraced more readily than others simply because they are associated with the side that "did not win." That is not a scholarly standard. All sources need to count in our historical work, but we also need to recognize that sometimes it was more than "favorable circumstances" that gave one set of sources more impact than another.

My hope would be that the academy and the church would talk more. My sense is from students at many schools where mainstream methods are used is that they sense an effort by some professors to tear down their views. I think part of an education is doing a better job of presenting all sides of a case.

My advice is to simply do the best and most complete work you can. We all work with the same materials. Also recognize that the standard of being able to show something from ancient sources is a high one that also will certainly lead to some difference of opinion.

**(3) Who would you consider to be stellar examples of faith based evangelical scholarship and why? Who are some mainstream scholars that you respect and why?**

I think in Jesus studies there are several good examples: Howard Marshall, Craig Evans, Ben Witherington, Scot McKnight, and Tom Wright all do very careful work in this field. They know the sources and the context of the materials they work with. They move through a range of sources well. Martin Hengel is a good example of a mainstream scholar. Again, his knowledge of sources is extensive and he is not closed to dealing with the difficult question of divine activity. I could add to this list people like Richard Bauckham, Raymond Brown and John Meier. J. D. G. Dunn has a wonderful ability to address a question with clarity and get to the nub of a problem, asking the right kinds of questions.

Monday, March 20, 2006

### Mark Goodacre on Faith Based Scholarship

One of the blogfathers, [Mark Goodacre](#), has recently transitioned from the UK to the USA and now teaches at Duke. He has provided a substantial response to my questions.



#### **(1) How would you describe the role of personal faith as it relates to biblical scholarship?**

If it's scholarship that one is doing, my feeling is that personal faith has no part to play, at least not in the way that one's arguments are constructed or in the evidence one adduces. In other words, I am interested in scholarly arguments based on publicly available evidence, arguments that make sense to an audience of scholars and students who may not share one's own faith perspective. As soon as my arguments only work for those who share my faith perspective, at best my arguments become apologetics and at worse my arguments run the risk of becoming weak and unscholarly. As soon as I begin to use evidence that is not in the public arena and that cannot be submitted to scholarly scrutiny by everyone, I am not engaging in academic scholarship. I do not expect my students to use their personal faith in their essays; how much more would I not expect professional scholarship to bring personal faith into their work.

Lest that sounds unduly harsh, let me add that I understand that there are lots of different kinds of "biblical scholarship," and that there will be theological, spiritual, homiletical and devotional approaches in which of course Christian faith will have a part to play. But when one is engaging in historical, critical work on the New Testament, personal faith does not have a role to play. When studying the Synoptic Problem, for example, or the Historical Jesus, or Pauline chronology, it's publicly available evidence and publicly coherent arguments that count.

#### **What are some presuppositions that you might have when it comes to the interpretative task?**

I am assuming that this question is asking about faith-related presuppositions. If so, my key presupposition is that others may not share my own presuppositions, and therefore I should make sure that I am trying hard not to allow them to influence my scholarship. I would personally think it self-indulgent to engage in scholarship that aims to reinforce my own presuppositions. Rather, one should always be looking to test one's presuppositions when one engages in scholarship -- that's how one stays honest and interested.

### **What are some advantages and pitfalls of evangelical views concerning scripture?**

I am not an expert on evangelical views concerning scripture, but I would say that one of the pitfalls is most clearly illustrated in the way that Robert Gundry was treated several years ago by the Evangelical Theology Society. As I understand it (and I am subject to correction here if I have got it wrong), he was expelled from the society because of his views on Matthean literary creativity. What I find depressing about that is that the arguments are not engaged on their merits (and the merits are considerable) but on whether or not they fit with a creedal affirmation about what Scripture is thought to be like. I would find it hard myself to engage in scholarship where I was constantly worrying about how it measured up against a prior affirmation about inerrancy or the like.

But let me add that it is too easy to caricature different wings of scholarship, and to cast the discussion in terms of "evangelical" versus "liberal" or "secular". To throw just one complicating factor in, what about Catholics and Biblical scholarship? When John Dominic Crossan wants to choose an opponent who illustrates a conservative approach to the Biblical text, and especially the Passion Narrative, he famously engages not an evangelical scholar but a Catholic, Raymond Brown. And arguably the most strongly worded, single minded attack on the Jesus seminar is not written by an evangelical but by a Catholic, Luke Timothy Johnson.

And if I may, let me add too that the term "evangelical" has different connotations depending on the context its used in. Having lived in America for six months now, I am beginning to get a feel for how differently evangelicals are viewed over here than in the UK. There are so many evangelicals here, and the political dimension of the term is much stronger here. To be left wing and evangelical is not a contradiction in the UK. I know that it's not a contradiction here either (e.g. see the work of Jim Wallis), but it is the case that the term evangelical is often associated with those who are politically conservative.

But you asked also about the advantages of an evangelical view of scripture. I would say that one potential advantage is that the evangelical often gives the benefit of the doubt to a given Biblical writer, and that can enable a good case to be made for something that might otherwise not have been noticed. Or the scholar's evangelical perspective might help him/her to see something that another scholar might have missed. For example, Richard Bauckham's *Gospels for all Christians* is one of the most evangelical sounding titles to any academic book on the NT for many years, and no doubt on some level its thesis emerged from an evangelical agenda, yet it's also one of the most important books to emerge recently -- an important challenge to the sectarian community models. Or take Larry Hurtado's *Lord Jesus Christ*, in many respects a profoundly conservative book, but also a brilliant one.

### **(2) What are the advantages and pitfalls associated with a more "secular" brand of biblical scholarship?**

In some ways, I feel as uncomfortable with the term "secular" scholarship as I do with terms like "evangelical" scholarship. I want to engage in responsible, critical scholarship of the Bible in which there are not specific "brands" that we join ourselves to. I don't

know how I could be sure that I was keeping my scholarship honest if I were to ally myself to a particular brand, or a particular perspective on the evidence. I am not saying that those who do associate themselves with a particular perspective are not being honest; I just don't know how I could do it myself and make sense of what I was doing.

But let me at least attempt to answer your question head on. Among the advantages of a more "secular" perspective are that one might avoid a prior religious commitment influencing one's views of the evidence. As a Christian myself, I am conscious of wishing certain conclusions to be true, and so aware of the danger that I might give more credence to poor arguments than a non-Christian might. I sometimes envy the atheist and the agnostic here in that they don't have to deal with the same baggage. But however much one might wish certain conclusions to be true, one should never arrange the argument and the evidence to support the desired-for conclusions -- and that is what I mean about honesty, or scholarly integrity. If you know that you are predisposed to think a certain way, that's all the more reason to test yourself, and to make sure that your faith has not become an excuse for sloppy thinking.

I see the pitfalls most clearly when I look at something like Gerd Lüdemann's Christmas 2005 press release. I feel that Gerd, whose scholarship I greatly admire, sometimes allows his secular, humanist perspective to morph into a kind of polemic that fails to represent traditional, Christian perspectives and arguments accurately. Thus, last Christmas when I read his press release, its harsh, polemical tone encouraged me to respond in spite of the fact that I agreed with a lot of the scholarly substance behind it. I think that there is sometimes a missionary zeal about that kind of secular perspective that runs the risk of becoming unscholarly. I tend to think of that as an equal danger to an uncritical conservative perspective and it illustrates the importance of the scholarly task as a communal task, a democratic discipline, in which -- to repeat -- the key things are publicly available evidence and publicly coherent arguments.

### **What does the church have to do with the academy and vice versa?**

I am lucky in that I teach in a department of Religion in an American university in which there is no link with the Church. I think that gives a kind of freedom that I don't think I would have if I were teaching in the Divinity School here, where I would undoubtedly be more conscious of the interaction between church and academy. I really value the freedom that one has teaching in the American liberal arts set up, but it's a freedom that comes with responsibility, and I take that responsibility seriously.

### **What are the some possible avenues of fruitful dialogue between "faith-based" and "secular" approaches in biblical scholarship?**

My problem with this kind of question is that I don't like the terms, or the idea that there are these camps that might benefit from engaging in "dialogue", as if one always knows where one's scholarship is going to fit in, or how one will find one's views getting aligned. I would hope that the majority of Biblical scholars would not see themselves as fitting into either a "faith-based" or "secular" approach. They see themselves as

attempting to do good scholarship which they submit to their peers for review, and which they review in line with how strong the arguments are, and not in line with whether they fit a "faith-based" or "secular" approach.

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

I am a bit wary about the terminology, and hope that it does not imply that "evangelical" and "mainstream critical" are opposed. Some of the "mainstream" are in fact evangelicals, no? If I were to pick out my favorite evangelical scholar, I would say Richard Bauckham, who is always worth reading. But then let me add that the reason that he's great is not because he's evangelical. Indeed, who cares whether he is evangelical or not? The key thing is the strength of his scholarship, the clarity of his argument and his ability to think in creative, original ways.

The two scholars who have most influenced me, though, are without any doubt Michael Goulder and E. P. Sanders. My guess is that Michael, I am sorry to say, will only be fully appreciated after his death. I suppose that he is a case in point for this discussion because he has been ignored or dismissed by many evangelicals, and to the detriment of their scholarship, and often the reason that he has been ignored or dismissed is because of the non-conservative friendly nature of some of his writing, not because of the quality of his arguments. Ed is appreciated much more widely, of course, but even there I am consistently surprised to see misreading, misunderstandings and ignorance of Sanders' writings.

**(4) Any additional thoughts on this subject?**

I appreciate your taking the initiative in asking these interesting questions, and I am honored that you would consider my opinion worth listening to.

uesday, 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.

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

### Peter Bolt on Faith Based Scholarship

From Down Under, [Moore Theological College](#), Peter G. Bolt offers some brief comments concerning the importance of accepting the Bible as the word of God.



**(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?**

Biblical Scholarship should be an enterprise of 'faith seeking understanding'. As we seek to understand the Bible, we do so because we want to hear God's Word. We presuppose that the word of the apostles is just as understandable as any other human conversation, but, because these were the eyewitnesses of God-made-flesh, through their word we hear the word of God. The basic task then becomes: what did they say? The basic challenge: to live under their word as the word of God.

**(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?**

If the basic task is discovering 'what did they say?', then all kinds of people and resources can help us in that journey of discovery. Much fruitful dialogue here. The basic challenge is to be confronted by the apostolic word and to hear it and respond to it as the word of God. The scholar who is a 'believer' knows the God of grace and, like any believer, seeks to invite others to hear the voice of the gracious God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ.

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

A good scholar is someone who listens carefully and patiently to his/her sources, reading what is there, not reading what is NOT there. The 'stellar examples' of evangelical scholarship are those who do this, and seek to live by what they discover. The best

examples of mainstream critical scholars are still those who listen to the sources, those who don't take the stance of the 'critic' in the first instance, but who seek to use their greater skills to become better readers.

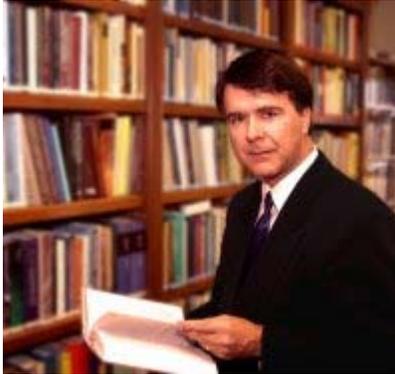
**(4) Any additional thoughts on this subject?**

Anything that is not from faith is sin, according to the apostle. From that point of view, scholarship -- like any other area of life -- ought to arise from and lead to faith in Jesus Christ. Scholarship properly begins in wonder, and the wonder of God's love for a lost world seems to be a perfect place to begin biblical scholarship.

Thursday, March 23, 2006

### Andreas Köstenberger on Faith Based Scholarship

I would be remiss not to include an excellent interview with my Doktorvater, Andreas J. Köstenberger. I am truly grateful for his wisdom, conviction, and scholarly acumen.



#### **In what way does your faith enhance your scholarly investigation of the Bible? How does your research differ from secular biblical scholars?**

If I were not a Christian, I would not be a biblical scholar. Prior to becoming a Christian, I was not interested in the Bible at all. At my conversion, I came to see God's Word as living and active (Heb 4:12) and as words of life (John 6:68). Ever since, my study of Scripture has been part of my quest for truth, my response to divine revelation, and an integral part of my relationship with God and my worship of God.

At a recent panel discussion in which both he and I participated, Bart Ehrman said that at some point he realized he did not need to "throw away his mind" to engage in biblical scholarship. Ever since that "liberation," he has been free to engage in critical (I would say "skeptical") scholarship. My response was that, for me, scholarship is an act of worship, and there is no dichotomy between the intelligent exploration of Scripture and some independently conceived "life of the mind."

I could not imagine engaging in scholarship apart from my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. My guiding model is "faith seeking understanding," as aided by the Holy Spirit and in community with like-minded seekers for truth in ages past and present. In this quest, I have found Scripture to be true. The inerrancy of Scripture is not a dogmatic, deductive imposition for me but an experientially verified attribute of God's written Word.

In some ways my research does not differ significantly from what you call "secular" biblical scholars to the extent that both of us are drawing on the same evidence. My view of Scripture leads me to a certain view of the Christian canon and to a positive assessment of the reliability of the books of Scripture, which is different from those who level the distinction between biblical and extrabiblical material or even privilege the latter over the former (e.g. E. P. Sanders).

**What are some of the potential strengths and weakness of secular biblical scholarship? What is your advice to evangelical scholars regarding how one might interact with secular scholarship?**

I think it is ironic that the people you call “secular” biblical scholars look askance at “faith-driven” scholars and accuse them of bias. In my view, it is the other way around: those scholars are the ones who are truly biased and are improperly aligned with truth as it is revealed in God’s Word. As Scripture itself affirms, it is not merely a historical depository or a literary text, but divine revelation. Those who fail to recognize this miss the most crucial element of all. How sad and tragic!

By way of advice, I think we should not let others set the agenda for biblical scholarship but decide for ourselves what are wholesome directions for research and writing. I have recently presented a paper on the topic, “Currents in New Testament Scholarship,” which you can read at my website, [Biblical Foundations](#). I’d love to get any feedback on this paper if any of you have time to read it! Also, read Adolf Schlatter’s essay on “Atheistic Methods in Biblical Scholarship” (trans. R. W. Yarbrough)!

**Who would you hold out as stellar examples of faith based evangelical scholarship (past or present) and why?**

I have the greatest admiration and respect for Don Carson, Peter O’Brien, Bob Yarbrough, and Adolf Schlatter. In each case, these are men of God whose scholarship is an outgrowth of their love for Christ and who view themselves as servants of the church. I have also benefited greatly from the scholarship of Herman Ridderbos, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Richard Bauckham, among others.

**Any additional thoughts on this subject?**

Read the excellent response to Michael Fox’s article by [Albert Mohler](#), especially his comments on Fox’s “secular, academic, religiously-neutral hermeneutic.” This is an important discussion, and as director of our doctoral program here at Southeastern I am very concerned that our students are familiar with these issues and develop confidence in their ability to contribute to scholarship. So, thank you very much, Alan, for hosting this important discussion.

Monday, March 27, 2006

### Michael Bird on Faith Based Scholarship

Fellow biblioblogger and rising NT scholar, [Michael Bird](#), has agreed to contribute to this series of interviews. He was born in Germany, teaches in Scotland, and was raised in Australia, despite the potential for some serious confusion; he really does have some good things to say.



**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?**

My faith it is what feeds and drives my research in biblical studies. I am not a disinterested observer in the origins of the early Christian movement, but I approach it along the lines of personal faith, a faith quickened, challenged and stimulated by my studies. For me the key questions are why did Christianity begin, why did it take on the shape and character that it did, and what does that mean for us today? When I enter the class room and begin to instruct my students it is kind of like, "Well guys and gals, this is what were' studying today and this is what I've come up with in the course of my studies." I have two basic presuppositions in approaching biblical studies: (1) God exists and has revealed himself in Jesus Christ; and (2) Australians are by far the best exegetes in biblical studies! (If you don't believe me think of these names: Bruce Winter, Graham Twelftree, Rikki Watts, William Loader, Doug Green, Brendan Byrne, Frank Maloney, Colin Kruse, Philip Esler, Peter O'Brien, Paul Barnett and the list goes on). The advantage of an evangelical approach to Scripture is that it takes seriously the view that God speaks in these texts, therefore, they are religious in nature. You can't explain away the New Testament simply by appeal to sociological models - that's reductionistic. The problem I have with some evangelical approaches to Scripture is that they construct their doctrine of Scripture independent of the phenomenon of Scripture. You must wrestle with the Synoptic problem, look at the way "history" was written in the ancient world, be cognizant of the issues pertaining to genre, get a grip on textual criticism, and appreciate the that the concept of "authorship" in antiquity was a bit broader that we might think. But if you start with 1 Tim 3.16 and then extrapolate how we must therefore have gotten

our Bibles in their current form, then guys like Ehrman and company are going to have it over you every time. Get the history right and hopefully the theology will look after itself.

**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 advantage of the secular approach is that it does not come with the preconceived ideas and agendas of some faith based approaches. I do not think for a moment that secular scholarship is more objective than faith-based scholarship, but the presuppositions that secularist bring to the biblical studies party are of a different ilk. In terms of secular scholars I have to give credit to James Crossley as a guy who does not let secular anti-Christian agendas overpower his reasoning and argumentation (for an aggressive secular soliloquy on the Bible go read the tripe written by Gerd Lüdemann). James has the courage and conviction to give credit where credit is due, even if that means that he's going to say, "Well darn it, the evangelicals are right on this one!" (e.g. James' view on the authenticity of the temple incident in Mk 11.15-17). The poor guy even gets mistaken for an evangelical at times (although if you look at how he dresses you would be more likely to mistake him for someone going to a funeral, a Marilyn Manson concert, or starting a career as a Ninja warrior \* he likes wearing black a lot). I don't necessarily agree with everything James says (esp. on the Resurrection), but James and those like him represent a voice that can make its own contribution to the field of biblical studies and one that deserves a place at the seminar table. In fact, James and I are about to engage in a collaborative project called Two Views of Christian Origins: A Secular and Evangelical Conversation (SPCK, 2008) where we will debate the historical Jesus, the resurrection, Paul, the Gospels and the early Church. You could pray for me that I would be given the grace to listen and learn from what James has to say, but also that I would be given the ability to give him the thrashing of his life! It is also our hope that this project will represent a fruitful engagement between faith-based and secular approaches to the study of early Christianity.

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

Well, one or two Australians come to mind! Otherwise, N.T. Wright is one of my favourite authors. I can read his books all day long and feel like I've been chatting with an old friend the whole time. It was reading *Jesus and the Victory of God* that ingrained in me a desire to be a New Testament scholar \*a desire that I thank God that I've been able to realize. I like Stan Porter and Ben Witherington, if only for the breadth of their study and the magnitude of their output. Ben and Stan are prime examples of generalists NT scholars who try to embrace the whole NT and not just segments of it. Craig Evans, Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock and Scot McKnight are a quartet of evangelical Jesus scholars that I'm always willing to listen too. Some older guys like E Earle Ellis and Richard Longenecker would be the ultimate supervisonal dream team for a Ph.D.

candidate. I'd love to spend an hour or two picking their brains. It is worth buying books by anyone who teaches at Aberdeen University (Howard Marshall, Francis Watson, Simon Gathercole, etc). I think Mark Seifrid is probably the best evangelical Pauline scholar going around at the moment (contra the opinion of James White!). David DeSilva is a rising star in evangelical circles and one to keep an eye on. Craig Keener deserves a medal for the largest number of primary and secondary sources used in a commentary. Richard Hays is someone you could be stuck on a desert island with and never get bored by the conversation. But Richard Bauckham has got to be the guy I respect the most \* every time he puts pen to paper you know it is going to be rigorous, insightful, provocative, and announce the end of some poorly argued assumption in biblical scholarship (e.g. the existence of Gospel "communities"). On the mainstream side E.P. Sanders is the FC Baur of the 20th century and all scholarship on Jesus or Paul must be done in dialogue with him. Thanks to Sanders we can now give Bultmann much less airtime than he has had in the past. I've read several helpful volumes by Leander Keck and Peter Achtemeier. A somewhat unknown chap called Jonathan L. Reed has impressed me in both his studies on Jesus and Paul. Craig Koester strikes me as a chappy that I'd like to get to know more, his commentary on Hebrews is bodacious. I confess to being a closet admirer of Dale Allison \* although I seem to spend most of my time critiquing stuff he says \* I still find him immensely stimulating. Markus Bockmuehl is also someone I'd always be willing to read whenever possible.

**Any additional thoughts on this subject?**

Did I mention anything about the quality of Australian biblical scholars? Finally I have enjoyed all of the interviews you have done so far and I am very grateful for the invitation and consider it an honor to be thought of along the lines guys like Bock, Evans, McKnight and Blomberg. Alan, I hope the Ph.D. finishes up well for you. Pity you're not Australian. Blessings.

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?**

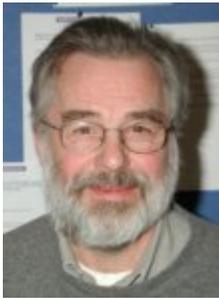
It’s a pity that biblical scholars are in a discipline that has top deal with a large

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.

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.

Wednesday, April 12, 2006

### George Guthrie on Faith Based Scholarship

George Guthrie, NT professor at Union University (Jackson, TN), chimes in on this topic. His work on the structure of Hebrews has significantly influenced me in the area of structural studies.



#### **How would you describe the role of personal faith as it relates to biblical scholarship?**

I assume that you primarily are asking about Christian faith, but we should be clear from the beginning that every scholar has a system of belief with which he or she approaches the biblical text, a view of reality that governs how data is addressed. Unfortunately, in contradistinction from the biblical literature, “faith” has been redefined somewhat in the modern era to mean “a leap against the evidence” (i.e. you must turn off your brain to have “faith”). Thus, at times in the history of biblical scholarship there have been those who have presented themselves as purely objective, over against those who approach the text with faith commitments. Bob Yarbrough’s monograph, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy*, demonstrates this tendency, for example, in the approach of F. C. Baur, who described New Testament theology as a purely historical science that sought “the pure and impartial investigation” of the biblical text (Yarbrough, 9). This posture simply will not do. Every scholar has a pre-understanding, and every pre-understanding affects interpretation in one way or another. At times we are not dealing with critical over against devotional approaches, but rather approaches that reflect different worldviews.

It is true that Jews or Christians approaching the biblical literature at times have skewed the meaning of the text in favor of their pre-understanding on how the world works, and how God works in the world, but the same certainly could be said, for instance, of naturalists, or those coming from a Kantian perspective. Conversely, some devoutly Christian scholars—I think of scholars such as J. A. Bengel or Adolf Schlatter in past generations—have taken careful, critical study of the biblical text to be the pursuit of

truth (rather than the confirmation of an already held “truth”) and a matter of integrity. They cared about the text and the message it embodies so much that they demanded of themselves, from an integrity standpoint, the best and most honest approach to the text.

Now on one level good biblical studies scholarship is good biblical studies scholarship. Whether one is a Christian or not, evangelical, or some other stripe of Christian, or one who has no interest in or association with a particular religion, the way one uncovers and analyzes the data of history, archaeology, documents, etc. is going to be the same. That is why there can be quite a spectrum of worldview commitments in an organization like SBL; if you don’t bring data to the table, you will not be given a place (unless of course you are there to add shock value!). The reason evangelicals have been much more visible at SBL in the last two decades is that they, at times, genuinely have something to offer in terms of the uncovering and analysis of data. At the same time, poor biblical studies work is poor biblical studies work, and no particular orientation has a corner on that market—I have read somewhat poor doctoral theses coming out of both evangelical and broader university contexts over the years.

So, everyone approaches the biblical text with a pre-understanding. My view of the way the world works affects how I approach the text in at least three ways: 1) My motivation to study the biblical text, both in relation to the academy and the church, certainly has to do with my understanding that Jesus really is Lord of the universe. I am motivated to do well, to analyze the text accurately, and to help others in understanding the text, by a sense of obligation to him; 2) since I believe there really is a God who is involved in the world, I, therefore, believe the supernatural is possible (this is not to say that it is inevitable or constant or rules out the normal, natural processes of the created order). Thus I do not approach the NT, for instance, assuming that things like resurrection from the dead must be ruled out from the start. 3) Application. I am compelled as a Christian to act on the truth I discern in the text. Rather than just interesting stuff, or just facts, I believe the materials of the NT call for response and often an adjustment of life thoughts or patterns.

**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?**

I am with others who don’t like the labels. I suppose by “secular” you mean “those who have no particular interest in or commitment to a religion,” but, as noted above, a “non-religion” posture still constitutes a “religious” posture in a sense. Some in institutions that are not aligned with a particular church or religious body probably have more freedom to shift positions pretty radically without repercussions (unless of course they become too evangelical!). As for pitfalls, I think they can be the same as for evangelicals—pressure from peers to maintain certain positions, a temptation to not be open to positions that call into question one’s philosophical commitments, and given the commercialism of our

contemporary context, the temptations to follow the money, or fame—i.e., “what can I put forward that will be sexy, or that will shock, or that will please, or that will sell books, or get me a better post, or get me on television?” These are very human temptations.

Since I teach at an institution that overtly works at the integration of faith and learning (and I realize that there are many who call that whole program into question), I believe in the synergy between the church and our type of academic context. I would not be here if I did not. The church needs us, both in the sense of training those coming out of , and those going to, the church to think well. Most of the grand academic institutions of the Western world were founded with this intention. There would be no “Cambridge” or “Harvard” apart from such beginnings. Since we are a university, not a seminary, we do not focus on the practice of ministry skills as such, but rather the liberal arts and the classical disciplines—the languages, philosophy, theology, biblical studies, ethics, etc. At our best, we can help the church to deal well with all of these areas and to process its encounters with the broader cultures of the world in terms of information and worldview.

At the same time, I think we need the church. The church gives us a community context in which to do what we do. We get great students from a lot of churches. We are supported by the churches financially. I realize this could be seen as problematic to some, but the church also gives us a measure of accountability both morally and in terms of the grand Christian traditions.

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

Again, I am going to resist nice, neat categories. I have mentioned Bengel and Schlatter. Scholars I admire for a variety of reasons are people like Martin Hengel, F. F. Bruce, Richard Bauckham, Howard Marshall, Albert Vanhoye, L. T. Johnson, Richard Hays, Harold Attridge (especially his Hebrews vol.), Tom Wright, Earle Ellis, Murray Harris, Gordon Fee, Moises Silva, Douglas Moo, Anthony Thiselton, Kevin Vanhoozer, Darrel Bock, Scot McKnight, Grant Osborne, and Craig Keener. Don Carson and Craig Blomberg always impress with the breadth of the areas in which they are conversant. I think there is a great group of younger scholars coming up, such as Mark Goodacre and Simon Gathercole. There are many others from whom I benefit, including other friends, who I hope will pardon me for not mentioning them.

**Any additional thoughts on this subject?**

I probably have given you more than you wanted. Thanks for the invitation to participate.