

Two interesting questions on this week's Readers Mailbag. If you have a question, just ask away!

QUESTION:

I just had a debate with a Mythicist who had no idea that any biblical scholar could be a historian. I have to admit, I was just as ignorant of this fact until a little less than two years ago. How mainstream is it that biblical scholars are also known as historians? Maybe people think of biblical scholar-historian as two entirely separate entities.

RESPONSE

It's a good question! I would say that most biblical scholars in fact are not historians. But some are. It depends on what their interests and expertise are.

In most PhD programs in biblical studies - for example, those provided in seminaries and divinity schools - the training is focused principally on the texts of the Bible and their meaning. The emphasis, in those circles, is on "exegesis," that is, the interpretation of the Bible. People trained like that are often adept at literary criticism of various kinds (or often of just one kind). Often there is also a secondary emphasis on the theology of the Bible. Theological training (at least outside of fundamentalist circles) is more closely related to philosophy.

Both foci have some ties to history, even though PhDs from these kinds of programs rarely are interested in history per se. But there are yet other approaches to biblical studies that are more historically oriented, and there are indeed Bible scholars who are historians. These scholars are not interested only in the interpretation and theological significance of the Bible, but also (or rather) in what the biblical texts can tell us about the history of the communities lying behind them.

There are a number of Hebrew Bible scholars, for example, who are particularly trained in and expert on the history of ancient Israel. In order to determine what happened, historically (say in the eighth century BCE, or the sixth century BCE, etc.). These scholars utilize the biblical texts and all other relevant information - including archaeology, texts from surrounding civilizations (Egypt, Babylon, and so forth). They are more interested in the social history lying behind the biblical texts (and their authors) than in the meaning of the texts per se.

So too with the New Testament, there are social historians who utilize the Gospels and other sources to write about what happened in the life of the historical Jesus or who focus on the letters of Paul and other sources to reconstruct the social history of the Pauline communities.

I would count myself in this latter camp, of biblical scholars who are particularly interested in social history. But there are also some (very few) biblical scholars who are interested in broader historical topics of Christianity starting with Jesus and Paul and others at that time, and moving up well beyond that into the early centuries of Christianity. That is where I have focused the vast bulk of my research for, well I guess for twenty-five years.

My expertise is in the history of Christianity from Jesus up to the early fourth century, not just the Bible. This orientation is evident in a number of my books, but will be seen most clearly in the book that is coming out in November, the book I'm calling The Triumph of Christianity. The book has very little indeed to do with biblical interpretation. I do have one chapter on Paul's writings - but not focused at all on exegesis but on what they can tell us about how Christianity was being spread throughout the Roman Empire during Paul's missionary activities (who was he converting? What were their religious beliefs and traditions? What did he actually say to them to convert them? What did he do/say that proved convincing? How effective was he? Where was he operating? What was his modus operandi? Etc.)

The other chapters are on later Christian history, outside the Bible - for example I have two chapters on the emperor Constantine and his conversion to Christianity in 312 CE and then his championing of Christian causes; one on how Christianity took over the empire to become the official state religion near the end of the fourth century under the emperor Theodosius I; chapters on what led up to Constantine in the second and third centuries as Christianity spread throughout the world (asking such things as how it spread, why it spread, why anyone found it convincing, what it was that people - both Jews and pagans - were converting from, and so on.)

So it is a rigorously historical book written from the perspective of a historian. To get back to the question asked: most biblical scholars would not be able to write a book like that, and certainly wouldn't be interested in doing so. They have other interests and expertise. But just as some biblical scholars are particularly adept at literary criticism or at philosophical enquiry, others are expert in history. And I'm one of those.

QUESTION:

Bart, you've probably heard this before, but have you considered publishing your blog in book form? It could be done by subject, or perhaps by year. Such a book or books would give an added dividend for all your effort - if a publisher could be found. And profits could still go to charity. I can imagine many people reading such a book but not trawling through the whole blog.

RESPONSE

Yes, I have been asked this before and frankly the only times I've ever thought about it are when I've been asked about it. There are several reasons I don't think it's practicable. To begin with, I couldn't simply publish the blog posts because of the length. I've written something like 1,400,000 words on this blog! That would be ten rather large books. So that ain't gonna happen.

But suppose I did a book with the highlights - just picking out the posts that I thought really said something of importance, or choosing ones that are all focused on a particular theme. The insurmountable problem there is that these posts have been written for the Internet, for a blog, and not for publication in a book. They are not polished literary products, the way you would like a book to be. That would mean either that I would have to publish something that was substandard, which is against my inclination, or that I would have to put in lots of

time to polish them, which would mean the book is not really a publication of my posts but something based on my posts. But if I want to publish something based on my posts, why not just write a book on that theme?

Here's the bigger problem. I have to limit what I publish in book form for popular audiences. Basically I'm on a schedule of publishing one trade book every two years. My view (a view worked out in close consultation with my agent and my editors) is that any more than that would dilute the effectiveness of what I produce. I can't flood the market or anything I write will be given less attention (Yikes - here's yet another Ehrman book this year....). So I have to be very choosy about what I publish about and how I produce the books.

I just don't think a collection of posts I've hammered out would be as interesting or effective as a book that I slave away on for two years. So I'm disinclined to do it. It's a nice thought, I'll admit! But I don't think it would have as much wide-spread interest as a one-off book.

To Get All the Posts on the Blog, you need to **JOIN!!** It really doesn't cost much, but with so many members, it raises lots of money for charity. Your membership fee goes to help the needy, and you get tons of benefit. So join already!!



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