I have received a particularly interesting question that has led to a bit of back and forth between me and a person on the blog. This person pointed out that in my writings I often indicate that a view that I have (e.g., that the Gospel of John was not written by John the son of Zebedee; that the book of Ephesians was not really written by Paul even though the author claims to be Paul; or that the Gospels are all 40-65 years after the death of Jesus, etc.) is held by the majority of scholars. But fundamentalist and conservative evangelical scholars say just the opposite, that their views (e.g., that John the son of Zebedee did write the Gospel of John, or that the Gospels date to before the destruction of the Jerusalem in the year 70) are the views of the majority of scholars. So who is right? And how can a person know?

In my initial response to this person, I told him that what I always try to say (maybe I slip up sometimes? I don’t know, but I try to say this every time) is what the majority of “critical” scholars think about this, that, or the other thing. What I mean by that is that apart from scholars who have a firm commitment to the infallibility of the Bible (so that there cannot be a book, such as Ephesians, that claims to be written by someone who did not write it, because that would be a “lie” and would be impossible for an author of Scripture) and to the established traditions of Christianity (so that John the son of Zebedee really did write the Gospel of John since that is what Christians have always claimed) – apart from those people, the majority of scholars who leave such questions open to investigation and do their best to know the truth rather than to confirm what it is they have always been taught to think — the majority of those “critical” scholars think x, y, or z.

The questioner then came back with this more detailed response / query:

Not to be persnickety, but how do you even come to “that” conclusion? How do you decide who is a “critical” scholar, and who isn’t? I ask in utmost seriousness. Dr. Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary told me, to my face, at an apologetics conference in Dallas, last year, that “most scholars” thought that Luke was written by Luke and John by John. He pointed me to Craig Keener’s huge work on Luke/Acts as the exhaustive guide to everyone’s opinion, on the matter. I presume he would consider himself and his aforementioned scholars “critical” scholars, in the sense that they do want to at least see themselves as thinking critically about the question, and not just assuming inerrancy (even if they believe in inerrancy, in the end). I would assume, if I took your prior response back to Bock, he would brush it off as an attempt to dismiss conservative/evangelical scholarship. Now I’m not saying that many evangelicals don’t deserve to be dismissed (because I think they probably do – just from my own prior experience), but I’m sure you see my dilemma. How do you determine who is a “critical” scholar? How do you determine whose opinion “counts”? How do you do this without just simply unfairly brushing off conservative and evangelical scholarship?

So I have a number of responses to this very good and fair question. The first is that I do not at all discount what conservative evangelical scholars such as Bock and Keener have to say. (They are smart people and they know a lot about biblical studies.) As a critical scholar myself, I believe in listening to all sides and weighing the evidence to reach a decision – whatever that decision happens to be – i.e. whether it supports a traditional Christian view (about Ephesians, or John, or the dates of NT writings) or not. That is what the word “critical” means. The word comes from the Greek word KRISIS, which means “judgment” – not “judgment” in the sense of condemnation but in the sense of listening to both sides of an issue and rendering a decision/a judgment based on the fair evaluation of
Some scholars are not critical even if they say they are. They end up simply concluding - even based on a survey of all the evidence - precisely what they thought prior to conducting the investigation. They presuppose their conclusion. They may tell you they're not doing that, but if time after time after time after time after time after time they end up arguing precisely for the view that fits their theological and ideological views, views they had prior to the investigation, views that coincide perfectly with those of the communities of faith that they belong to and serve, then there is precisely no evidence at all that they are engaged in krisis – judgement. That is, they are not being critical scholars.

Why would conservative evangelical and fundamentalists scholars think, then, that their views are the majority views among all scholars, not just evangelicals and fundamentalists? On one level I suppose for the same reason that most hobbits who have never left the Shire tend to think that everyone in the world is about three feet tall. They don’t have a wider experience of the world, for example by taking a trip to Gondor or Mordor. They teach at conservative evangelical schools. Their faculty colleagues are all conservative evangelicals that hold basically the same views they do. Their students are all conservative evangelicals. Their administrators are all conservative evangelicals. The conferences they attend (such as an Apologetics conference) are for conservative evangelicals. When they go to other, broader based conferences, they tend to associate there with the conservative evangelicals, even if they go to other parts of the conference to hear what other scholars have to say. The views they have are reinforced by the majority of people they come in contact with.

Aren’t I guilty of the same thing? Don’t I principally associate with non-conservative-evangelicals.? Yes indeed – even though my background precisely is conservative evangelical so that I know something of their world. But the reality is that there are lots and lots of kinds of Christian and lots and lots of kinds of scholar, and I pretty much associate with all of them, not just one brand. (Let me stress something since I do not want to be misread: I am NOT saying that Darrell Bock and Craig Keener do not know or talk to non-evangelicals. That’s not true at all. But most evangelical scholars like them had their education and formative training at conservative evangelical places and their closest associates are evangelical students and colleagues.)

So here is the key question: How do I know that the majority of critical scholars say one thing or another (e.g., that John did not write the Gospel of John; that Paul did not write 1 Timothy; that the Gospels are all 40-65 years after the death of Jesus; and so forth). I know this because I know the people who teach New Testament throughout all of North America. There are two ways to look at this. First, what is taught about the New Testament to undergraduates at the colleges and universities that are NOT evangelical? You can pick any type of school you want, and I (and virtually every other scholar in the field) can tell you the answer, simply because I (and they) know (either personally or through reputation) virtually every senior (and many junior) scholar at those places. These scholars pretty much all toe the line that I indicate: about John, 1 Timothy, the dating of the Gospels, and most other critical issues. Take the Ivy League schools, for example Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Brown. The professors at all these schools pretty much agree on these issues. Take major state universities in the East: Florida State, North Carolina State, Virginia, Rutgers; in the Midwest: Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Michigan State; in the West: Washington, Oregon, UCLA, Berkeley. Take top-level liberal arts colleges: Mount Holyoke, Oberlin, Barnard,
Holy Cross. At all of these schools—and they can be multiplied at will—very similar things are taught, and they are not the conservative views held by Professors at conservative evangelical schools, whether Dallas Theological Seminary, Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College, Trinity, Westmont, or wherever. Outside those evangelical schools, most scholars think John did not write John, Paul did not write 1 Timothy, and the Gospels all date 40-65 years after the events they narrate.

Second, you can look at what is taught at the major PhD granting institutions in the country in the field of New Testament. These would include many of the same places, for example Princeton University, Princeton Theological Seminary, Harvard, Yale, Emory, Virginia, Florida State, Chicago, Stanford, UC Berkeley, and so on. All of these programs teach positions on key critical issues that are different from what is taught in the PhD programs at Dallas Theological Seminary, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, and so on.

So when I say that “most critical scholars” hold one view or another, I am referring to the views held by the research scholars who teach at these schools.

Then what does it mean to say that “most” scholars hold one view or another? It always depends. If you mean “most scholars total” then you would have to include fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals. And I frankly don’t know the proportion of evangelical to non-evangelical scholars in the country. That’s why I do not say (or at least try not to say) that “most” scholars think x, y, or z, unless I’m sure that even evangelicals agree on the point (for example, whether the woman taken in adultery was originally in the Gospel of John). What I do say is what most “critical” scholars think, and when I say that, I’m usually pretty sure what I’m talking about. I might make a mistake about that on occasion. But then again, no one would ever claim that I am inerrant or infallible!

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