Something different, in response to an issue raised in response to my post yesterday, who made the following comment:

A COMMENT FROM A READER:

I have a minor suggestion. I hope you don’t mind me bringing it up. If you have heard it before, feel free to disregard it. If you haven’t heard it before and you disagree with it, feel free to disregard it. However, if you haven’t heard this before and you do find it helpful, then that’s cool!

As to the charge of elitism/air of superiority that you said is thrown at you from time to time, I think a good way to avoid that charge would be to always focus in on the information/facts/evidence that is the reason why the scholarly consensus is the scholarly consensus on an issue. I think this is a better way to go than emphasizing scholarly credentials as the reason why a scholar’s views should be listened to. Now don’t get me wrong. I admire your scholarly credentials and they are definitely evidence of your new testament/historical Jesus expertise. I’m just saying that if you want have a broader appeal to the Bible thumping, fundamentalist Christian, non-college educated, Joe the plumber type, focusing in on the evidence and facts that make the scholarly consensus the scholarly consensus is the way to go. An example of this could be, “the scholarly consensus on this issue is because of x, y and z……”

Again, I hope this post is not coming off as offensive, because that’s the farthest thing from my intent. Obviously, you don’t need me to tell you that you are free to reject it. I just thought it might be helpful in dealing with those who

RESPONSE:

I appreciate this suggestion very much, and in fact, I completely agree with it. But others have said the same thing and it makes me wonder if I haven’t stressed my view enough - because my view is not, and never has been, that authorities ought to be trusted because they’re authorities. They should be trusted when they have evidence on their side, and if the evidence isn’t on their side, then one should think something other than what they say.

But the reason authorities tend to agree on certain issues is because they are trained to look at the evidence, know what the evidence is, and have established ways of evaluating it. And if they all pretty much agree - well, that is not, is DECIDEDLY NOT, in itself evidence. I need to say that again: scholarly consensus is NOT EVIDENCE. BUT, a big but - if you have a view that is different from the view of the scholarly consensus, given the circumstance of who maintains the consensus, you probably should have some pretty amazing evidence of your own.

Often we learn about things in fields in which we are not experts. At all. For example, I don’t know the first thing about astrology. But what if I want to know the age of the earth? Am I to trust what every astrologer and related scientists says about it (they all pretty much agree, from what I can tell), or what a creationists with a degree in biblical studies from a fundamentalist Bible college has to say about it?

Or if I want to know who was responsible for the Boston Marathon bombing, do I want to trust what every single expert who has investigated the issue from the FBI down says about
it, and that we know the two suspects, or do I want to trust what conservative radio conspiracy theorists who haven’t looked at the evidence themselves and wouldn’t know what to make of the evidence if they did look at it have to say about about it. (They’re claiming, in case you haven’t heard, that the bombing was sponsored by the U.S. government.)

In any event, all I’m saying is (a) it is not elitist to think that there really are experts who know a lot more about something than we ourselves know; (b) if they all agree on a major issue – for example, that the earth is 13.8 billion years old; or that we know who did the Boston bombings; or that Paul was writing before the Gospels – we probably better have very good evidence ourselves before thinking otherwise; and (c) the mere fact that the experts agree is not ITSELF “evidence.”

In my scholarship, and in my textbooks, I focus heavily on the evidence itself. And even in my trade books I talk about the evidence and show what it is (I’m thinking, for example, of Misquoting Jesus, Jesus Interrupted, Forged, and so on). To my knowledge I have never appealed to scholarly consensus as evidence. If I have – it’s my mistake! Cause that certainly is not what I think.