This post is free for all readers. It can give you an idea of *one* kind of post you find on the blog, five days a week. Usually the posts are actually discussing what scholars say about the New Testament or the early years of Christianity; some are more like this. If you joined the blog you, could get all of them, each and every week, going back seven years. And comment on them. And hear me respond to your comments. So why not join?

In my most recent thread I’ve been talking about trade books (written for popular audiences, rather than for scholars) and have received this interesting question, that I don’t recall actually addressing head on before.

**QUESTION:**

Why don’t more scholars try their hand at trade books? I agree with another blogger who said that the general public crave knowledge about technical and complicated subjects (history, science, philosophy, religion, etc.). Is it considered crossing over to the dark side??

**RESPONSE:**

This is a great question, and one I think about all the time – and have thought about regularly for over thirty years – necessarily, since I’m a scholar who writes trade books. I certainly wasn’t doing that thirty years ago. I was trying, instead, to establish my credentials as a scholar. But I obviously knew, or rather, knew of, scholars who wrote trade books, especially in my field, and so had to think about the value and utility of doing so, and thought about it quite assiduously. My thought at the time was that there was no way on God’s green earth I would ever write trade books myself. That often seems strange to non-scholars but makes absolutely perfect sense to most scholars.

So let me explain why – at least from my experience – most scholars are not interested in, themselves, reaching out to the broader public. Let me stress that I am decidedly not saying that scholars don’t want others to know of their work, or that they think the public should be misinformed or uninformed. I’m saying that they themselves, as a rule, are not interested in writing such books, and often, ironically, look down on others who do. But why?

To begin with, no scholar, at least in any serious academic field, is ever trained to write a trade book. We are trained to produce scholarship. It’s a different universe. In graduate school we are trained to write serious academic book reviews of scholarly books; to produce term papers that replicate and that sometimes then turn into academic articles written for academic journals to advance academic knowledge for those with academic training; and to write dissertations that will be, in many cases, the first academic book published by an academic press, again for scholars in the field.

But why? Why not be trained to reach out to a popular audience? Because the ultimate raison d’être for scholarship is to advance learning and to create knowledge. As, in my strong opinion, it should be. I’m trying to think of an analogy. A world class painter is not normally trained or expected to produce mass-produced art for a PR firm. And most wouldn’t want to. And would look down on those who do. There are exceptions of course, but if you can think of them, it’s because they stand out from the crowd. Most artists want
to develop their craft, sales be damned. They aren’t going to go for mass appeal. They have a drive to advance their artistic passions.

I’m not sure that’s a perfect analogy, but I hope you see what I mean. (I have a very serious artist friend and this is *exactly* his view.) Most scholars have gotten into scholarship because they are passionate their field and they want to spend their research time learning more, developing their own insights, advancing the understanding of the serious topics they’re interested in, and, in effect producing knowledge. That’s why they got into the business.

Moreover that’s where the real cachet is in the scholarly world. If you want to be known as an important scholar in your field, you will never, ever (EVER) get there by writing trade books. Trade books almost never advance knowledge seriously. And scholars in the field almost never read the trade books of others in the field. Why should they? What are they going to learn? Either the book will say what they already know or what they already disagree with. (I’m not saying that’s actually true: there are couple of my trade books—How Jesus Became God, Jesus Before the Gospels, and the Triumph of Christianity that I wish scholars *would* read, because I advance serious arguments and support them with evidence and arguments that many scholars simply seem to be unaware of, especially in my least best known recent book, Jesus Before the Gospels).

And so scholars assume – usually rightly – that trade books aren’t gonna say much that’s new. Or if it is new, it’s not supported with sufficient scholarly evidence and argument (since it’s not a scholarly book) And that’s why there has been a (very) long tradition of scholars looking down on colleagues who write trade books. I think that has begun to change, to some extent (as I’ll explain later). But scholars who write trade books are indeed looked down upon, often, as “popularizers” (that’s a four-letter word in scholarly circles). They have sold out to market interests. Dumbed down complicated matters, grossly oversimplified things, sensationalized serious knowledge, forsaken their true love (the scholarship in their field) for popularity and money.

A lot of this is driven by blind jealousy — blind both because it’s blinding to the merits of good trade books but also blind because those who hold it don’t see its real roots, in a kind of professional resentment that someone else is getting the attention (and income) that they themselves would like to have. Without having to stoop so low as to communicate with normal human beings.

I will admit that part of this assessment does in fact make sense and has solid basis. A lot of trade books – maybe most? – really are written by people who are not experts in the fields they describe, and readers who are *not* scholars don’t have the tools to discern whether the author has solid scholarship supporting her or his views or is, instead, just blowing wind to make a buck or to influence public opinion. One naturally thinks of some of those crazy Mythicist books that so many people read (well, not millions of people; but I certainly hear from a lot of them).

But more than that. Most of the very best-selling books about Jesus have been written by people without serious training in the field, who, in fact, most of the time, can’t even read the New Testament in Greek. Good grief.

Scholars understandably get resentful about that. So there is a scholar who has spent 30 years studying the historical Jesus, mastering the ancient languages, reading scholarship on the topic in all the major research languages of Europe, publishing academic articles
advancing our knowledge, working diligently at the craft – and some other bloke comes along who has read a dozen books in English and writes up a sensationalized view based on no real scholarship, just a theory based on an opinion and a few readings of the Gospels, who sells hundreds of thousands of books to people who end up thinking, hey, this fellow’s really on to something! Of course there’s resentment.

On the other hand. Why would serious scholars object if other serious scholars write books explaining the findings of real scholarship to a popular audience? Those who do object almost always do so also out of jealousy – DAMN, that person’s getting all the attention, but MY work is much better! No one would admit that, of course. But it’s something we’ve all felt — all of us scholars.

Oh boy do I understand that. And there is, indeed, often a good basis for it. Even scholars sometimes overly sensationalize in order to get a reading audience. I won’t name names, but I have some in mind. And as you may know, this is an accusation sometimes leveled against me. What can you do? As a scholar writing these books, all you can do is proceed responsibly and do your best not to distort the truth in order to win a reader.

If others want to charge you of that, the best to do is to ask for an instance of it. I often get charged with doing this in Misquoting Jesus; and whenever I ask someone who charges me of it to tell me any factual mistake in the book, anything that I said that is just wrong, or even distorted. I have never yet received an answer. But maybe someone will point out one to me now!

I have more to say about the topic – more than I expected to say; but this post is already too long, so I’ll go at it again in the next post.

Some Pitfalls of Writing for a General Audience
How Did We Get Chapters and Verses?