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# The Bible and Scholarship: On Bridging the Gap between the Academy and the Church

**Christian preachers and teachers, especially those in an evangelical tradition, sometimes feel unease about how far they should mediate the findings of biblical scholarship to congregations. James Dunn invites us to reflect on the positive contribution academic biblical scholarship can make to Christian formation, and how it can act as a safeguard against the dangers of eccentric popular theology, distortions in Christian tradition, and naïve fundamentalism.**

Is theology a threat to faith? There are still students who come to departments of theology and/or religious studies in British universities who have been warned that studying theology at university level will be harmful to their faith.

And indeed there are students who find this to be the case. They have been discouraged from asking searching questions. When such questions are asked, as they must be at university level education, they begin to find the foundations shifting under their feet, not so much by the answers which might be given, but by the fact that the questions have to be asked; hard questions which cannot be ducked or dismissed. Students might have been told that truth is a seamless robe, so that to doubt any part of it is to doubt the whole. And when they find doubts arising, even on some minor point, they follow the logic that they were taught, and begin to doubt the whole.

But most students who come to academic theology with a living faith find that the study of the Bible at university level is an exhilarating, eye-opening experience. The asking of searching questions helps to inform and even correct their early or inherited faith formulations, to deepen and mature their faith. They also find that a living faith is what makes academic theology so exciting and sometimes life-changing. Of course, theology can be studied as just another academic subject, with interesting intellectual puzzles to be solved, facts to be learned, and questions to be debated with like-minded intellects. But such theology is a pale shadow of the real thing. For the real thing is dealing with the big questions of life and meaning. It can only be tackled existentially, by those not only eager to ask questions of the subject matter, but willing also to be questioned by the subject matter.

A faith which is closed to question and dialogue will never grow. A faith open to instruction and reformulation is a faith eager to go on from the A, B, C of its beginnings, a faith on the way to maturity.

If this is true for university students, it is true also for the churches at large. Too often preachers lack a proper respect for their congregations. They are afraid to preach on difficult subjects or to ask questions hard to answer. They fear to disturb the faith of their congregations. And all too often there are many in these congregations crying out in the silence of their hearts for answers to questions too difficult for them to deal with on their own. By closing their congregations off from the resources which scholarship provides the preachers leave them to sink or swim alone.

Let me give some examples of how scholarship can function as an ally and instructor of faith.

### **Scholarship can save us from the wilder excesses of 'popular' scholarship**

Christians will hardly need reminding that there are some very wild theories about Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity running around its fringes. The trouble is that it is usually these theories which catch the headlines in the media or are picked up by researchers for television programmes on Christianity. It is understandable, I suppose, since the objective of these articles and programmes is to be interesting. Whether they represent an accurate picture of scholarship on the subject in question is evidently a matter of less moment. The sensational is all! That is what secures the readers/viewers (not to mention the advertising revenue). I have had occasion to protest at the irresponsibility of some television presentations in the past – to little avail, I fear.

So we've had the origins of Christianity explained by the magic mushroom! The Dead Sea Scrolls had hardly begun to be published when (inevitably) there were those who found in them the answer to the silent years of Jesus' upbringing and before his baptism by John: where was he all that time? – in the Qumran community, of course! Or the Bible is a giant code book, whose cipher has only now been broken, and reveals now such information as Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene and their parenting of several children!

Fortunately, when such way-out theories are propounded there are usually a number of well-informed scholars on hand to set the record straight – if the paper or TV company bothers to consult them, that is. And even then, by the time the letter signed by an impressive array of the most respected authorities in the field is received or published, it is too late for many of the more gullible. The damage has been done.

More challenging is the new view which radically challenges traditional assessments of Jesus and Christian origins and which captures a number of scholars who have earned respect. Here is where the student or the thinking church needs the help of scholars who are as thoroughly grounded in the subject matter and who can therefore put the new view to an appropriately critical testing.

The best example of this in recent years is the impact of the Jesus Seminar in California. Through shrewd use of the media themselves, the findings of the

Seminar have been widely publicized, though too often presented as more representative of the sweep of New Testament scholarship than is actually the case.

One of their principal findings/claims is that Jesus was primarily a teacher of wisdom, whose main mode of teaching was in aphorisms and parables. For several of the leading members of the Seminar this finding is the outcome of a belief that the Galilee of Jesus was quite distinct from the more southerly Judea, centred on Jerusalem and the Temple. Galilee, it is argued, had been settled by a mixed population following the transportations of the residents of the northern kingdom (Israel) to Assyria. So Galilee had become much more Gentile in character ('Galilee of the Gentiles'). It had Hellenistic cities built in it – Sepphoris and Tiberias. It was much more urbanized than had previously been thought. (It was such information which had provided the basis for one of the more infamous monographs of the Nazi period in Germany, arguing that Jesus was a Galilean and *not* a Jew! – a theory attractive to Nazi audiences.)

Add to this the fact that Sepphoris lay just over the hill from Nazareth (only 5km distant), and was being rebuilt during Jesus' youth, and a quite appealing picture begins to emerge. A picture of the young Jesus mixing with the Hellenized citizens of Sepphoris on market days, or of helping to build the new theatre (now uncovered by archaeologists) – as a carpenter, of course – but presumably drinking in some of the atmosphere, and perhaps attending performances. 'Hypocrite', after all, basically means 'play-actor'. So where might Jesus have learned such language?

Add to this also the fact that a fair amount of Jesus' aphoristic/proverbial teaching seems to echo the criticisms of society attributed to wandering Cynic philosophers. And the fact that some famous Cynics are remembered as coming from Gadara to the east of the Jordan. Out of this potent brew a fascinating possibility emerges: that Jesus was himself like a wandering Cynic, that what he taught was influenced as much (or more) by Cynic thought than by his Jewish heritage, and even that what he taught was a kind of Cynicism.

What is the student or the person in the pew to make of all this when confronted by it in what appears to be a well-informed article in the press or programme on television? It is precisely here that knowledge of scholarship can provide the necessary response. The way to answer the challenging questions of scholarship is to provide or consult better scholarship.

In this case archaeology has come to the aid of the perplexed believer. The most recent finds repay close attention.

First, it is now clear that Galilee was devastated by the Assyrian conquest. It was depopulated, but not repopulated. The evidence of villages being re-established does not begin to appear till the end of the second and beginning of the first centuries BC. That is when the now independent kingdom of Judea reconquered Galilee – and resettled it. The population at the time of Jesus was predominantly and properly described as 'Jewish'.

Second, the archaeological evidence of Galilee for the time of Jesus includes many examples of what one archaeologist has described as the four indicators of Jewish identity. These are ritual baths (*miqwaoth*), stone vessels (which do not communicate impurity), absence of pig bones, and burial practices distinctive of

Jews. The inhabitants were evidently devout Jews, careful for the most part to observe the Torah.

Third, the same evidence is found in the two cities, Sepphoris and Tiberias. At the same time, they lack extensive evidence of most of the signs of hellenistic culture. They were only 'lightly hellenized'. In fact, they were much smaller and unlike the major hellenistic cities elsewhere in the region – like Caesarea Maritima (on the coast), or Scythopolis (south of the Sea of Galilee), or Caesarea Philippi. They were administrative centres for the tetrarch, Herod Antipas, provincial capitals. Not the sort of places to evidence the kind of luxury which attracted Cynic hostility. And indeed we know of no Cynics actually functioning as such in Galilee.

Add the serious question marks which hang over the date of the theatre in Sepphoris (probably not built till the second half of the first century AD). And most of the pillars of the wilder hypotheses regarding Jesus the non-Jew, Jesus the Cynic, have been so heavily undermined as to be able to bear little or no weight.

The answer to threatening scholarship is not to denounce all scholarship, but to consult better scholarship.

### **Scholarship can save us from damaging features of our own (Christian) traditions**

Protestants are heirs to the recognition that the developments of historic Christianity were not always for the best, and could go seriously wrong. This recognition that the church needs to be properly critical of its past – *semper reformanda* (always needing to be reformed) – is a crucial part of being 'Protestant'.

The Enlightenment, whatever the wrong directions in which it took Western culture, was also important for a similar reason. It taught us all that to accept assertions simply on some august authority is never going to be enough for the mind eager to discover and to delve deeper into truth. We have to appropriate our heritage critically; otherwise we simply compound any errors or imbalances of its earlier expressions. To be critical, of course, is not the same as to criticize. It does not mean finding fault, as though that was an end in itself. It means to scrutinize, to check and test for ourselves, and if faults are discovered, to seek to rectify them. It is the best kind of pedagogy. And to be properly critical – too many 'critics' forget this – means also to be *self-critical*.

Now it so happens that western Christianity, or better, Christian scholarship has one of the best records in the exercise of self-criticism of all academic disciplines. Because it has had to defend its right to a place in the academy in an era of increasing secularization, it has learned that it must be totally honest about itself, its presuppositions and claims. Its language must be as transparent as possible.

It is that academic dialogue which helps keep Christian scholars honest. But which also helps Christian scholarship to maintain its place within the academy and to demand that its voice be heard in the forums of public debate. And it is that openness to criticism which helps secure the right of Christians to proclaim their gospel, and helps to ensure that what is said is able to be heard, its language understandable by those outside the Christian tradition.

Probably the best example of Christian self-criticism in recent decades is the realization that Christianity had some measure of responsibility for the Holocaust. One of the most distressing features of historic Christianity has been the virulent strain of anti-semitism which runs through it from early days. 'Anti-semitism' is probably not the best term to use, since it implies a hatred of the Jewish (semitic) *race*, and that only became a feature in the nineteenth century. Prior to that a Jew could escape persecution by conversion. The antipathy was directed towards Judaism rather than Jewishness, if we might put it so; that is, against the religion, not the race. So the better term is probably 'anti-Judaism'.

The roots of Christian anti-Judaism lie in the very early claim that Christianity has 'superseded' Judaism. From the second century on, the loudest voices among Christian apologists claimed that the old covenant was dead and gone, and with it Judaism's claim to continuing existence. Christianity was now the new Israel. There was no rationale or place for the old Israel.

This attitude continued for decades after the Second World War in the description of first century Judaism as 'late Judaism'. The underlying rationale is that first century Judaism was *late* Judaism, because the only proper function for Judaism was to prepare for the coming of Christ and of Christianity. Once Jesus had come, once Christianity had appeared, there was no further need for Judaism, no further role for Judaism. It may baffle us now how the phrase could have been used for so long, by highly respectable Christian biblical scholars. But it was indeed so used, and still appears in some textbooks.

It wasn't just this dismissive attitude which constituted Christian anti-Judaism. Much more serious was the strain of antagonism, even hatred, which followed in its train. Jews were accused of not simply rejecting their Messiah, but killing him. They were treated as 'Christ-killers', as decides, the scum of the earth. There are Polish Jews alive today who can recall being abused in their pre-war childhood as Christ-killers. The pogroms which often followed continue to be a black stain on Christian history. One of the most gut-wrenching features of Nazi persecution of Jews in the 1930s and 1940s was that they could quote Martin Luther in justification. Synagogues could be pulled down and Jews killed on the authority of one of Christianity's greatest sons.

So one of the redeeming features of Western Christianity in the second half of the twentieth century has been its repudiation of that heritage. The Second Vatican Council, itself led by the wave of theological and biblical scholarship which had grown steadily in the previous decades, showed the way by condemning as false all such accusations and attacks on Jews in the name of Christ. And in his more recent expression of repentance for Christianity's history of anti-Judaism, the Pope spoke for all Christians. All this has come about because it has been possible for scholars to take a properly critical look at Christianity's own history.

But now, what do we do with those texts in the NT which seem to give some ground to these ancient expressions of anti-Judaism? What about the sermons in Acts where Jews are accused of crucifying Jesus (Acts 2:23)? What about the words of the crowd before Pilate in Matthew: 'His blood be on us and on our children'

(27:25)? What about the passages in John's Gospel where 'the Jews' are shown as resolutely hostile to Jesus and described by Jesus as children of the devil (John 8:44)? I have sat, cringing, under a famous pulpit not far from where I write, when John 8 was the reading for the day, and the exposition could only see an unqualified condemnation of Jews and Judaism.

What do we do? Do we simply read the text at face value and accept, in effect, that the strain of Christian anti-Judaism is rooted deep within the NT itself? God forbid. It is precisely at such a point that we need to be able to turn to specialists in these texts to counsel us on how we should hear them. And how does such counsel run?

It points, for example, to the historical context in which these words were written. We naturally read them on the assumption that these were the words of the dominant religion (Christianity) denigrating its lesser rival (Judaism). That is how it has been for most of the last two millennia, when these words have been heard within cultures long shaped by the dominant Christendom. But the situation was very different in the first two centuries. The new Christian movement for most of that time was operating in small house groups, whereas Judaism was the long established, and usually widely respected national religion of the Jews, with the synagogue sometimes serving as a major architectural edifice in one of the main squares of a city where Jews were populous. In such a context, the smaller, newer movement may understandably use strong language to shape and defend its emerging identity. It should not be read in the same tones in a different historical context, when the boot is on the other foot.

It notes that any accusation that Jesus was crucified by Jews is factually inaccurate. Under the Roman Empire the Jews never had that power. Crucifixion was a peculiarly Roman means of executing slaves and traitors, and they jealousy retained its use within their own power. So language like Acts 2:23 (read it carefully) has to be read as an imprecise way of attributing some responsibility for Jesus' death to Jews. But not to all Jews. And certainly not to all Jews of all time. Even Matt. 27:25 limits the blood-guilt to one generation, not to the third or fourth generation more typical of Jewish self-condemnation (Ex. 34.7). Any guilt indicated applies only to the people present at the time, and particularly the Temple authorities. As regards John's Gospel, most recognize that the phrase, 'the (hostile) Jews', refers to the Jewish authorities in their strongest antagonism to the new small movement related to Jesus. But remember, there are more or less an equal number of references to 'the Jews', the crowd, in between, whose final response to Messiah Jesus is still contested and awaited.

Specialist scholarship is also able to note that the language of accusation and vilification which makes such passages so grievous to us today was much more run of the mill at the time of writing. We flinch at a canonical text which can call blessed those who mercilessly kill the infant children of their enemies (Ps. 137:8-9). The curses which the Qumran covenanter was expected to utter against outsiders, fellow Jews, are blood curdling. And we should not forget that Paul could speak of competing Jewish Christian missionaries with scathing dismissal and crude allusion (2 Cor. 11:13-15; Gal. 5:12). In days when heretics could be burnt at the

stake (for their own good!) and the Pope vilified in terms which seem outrageous to almost all Christians today, the fierceness of the polemic against the stronger Jewish groups in Mediterranean cities would hardly seem strange. But for us today, with consciences sensitized by the horrors perpetrated in the past in the name of religion, it is no longer possible to read such texts without something of a shudder.

So what do we do? Simply read such texts when they occur in the lection, without comment? Here we need to look to expert translators: can the texts be properly translated in terms which are less offensive and misleading today? Or we look to expert liturgists: can we ensure that such texts are never read without comment and at least minimal explanation? Or we look to responsible preachers to ensure that some time, some space is given to explaining how historical texts need to be heard with historical sensitivity and not just read as though they expressed timeless truths.

In all this the church looks to its scholars to inform and to advise.

### **Scholarship can save us from the dangerous tendencies of fundamentalism**

One of the main thrusts of Christian fundamentalism is good. It wants to insist that there are key issues and beliefs which are fundamental to Christian identity and faith, for example: the reality of God as far more complex than can be expressed in a straightforward monotheism; the centrality of Jesus as the clearest expression (embodiment) of what God is like; the role of the New Testament scriptures as providing the definitive definition (canon) of Christianity.

The trouble with fundamentalism, however, is that it itself is a slippery slope. From such assertions about the fundamentals as most Christians would accept, it finds it necessary to become more and more prescriptive.

(a) Fundamentalism wants to see truth as a whole, and all interconnected. So not just the central claims need to be affirmed, but a much larger range of supporting claims. As the rabbis sought to build a fence around the Torah, to ensure that the Torah itself would not be breached, so fundamentalists seek to build a fence around the fundamentals. And as the fence around the Torah often became as, if not more, important than the Torah in the disputes which the fence-building engendered, so often with Christian fundamentalists. When everything is fundamental we have forgotten one of the gifts of the Spirit most to be cherished – the ability to discern what really matters from issues about which one can (and should) be indifferent (e.g. Rom. 12.2; Phil. 1.10).

Here the churches need professionally skilled and sensitive leadership, such as Paul provided. He did not treat the words of Jesus forbidding divorce simply as a blanket prescription for all time and all circumstances. His counsel in 1 Cor. 7 was more realistically lenient. Similarly, he did not cite the authority of the Lord, that the labourer was worthy of his hire, as a prescription to be obeyed willy-nilly. In 1 Cor. 9 he explains that his own priorities and the circumstances of his mission pointed to a different practice. Similarly, when confronted with an issue where fundamentals were at stake – covenant identity on the one hand (as marked by laws of clean and unclean, and the Sabbath), and Christian liberty on the other – he did not ruthlessly press the logic of one or other fundamental. Rather in Rom.

14.1-15.6 he followed the logic of love and called both for full respect for the view which he himself had abandoned and for willingness to limit the liberty which he himself so cherished.

The tendency of fundamentalism is to suppress or override such sensitivities and divergences, to insist on conformity and consistency without regard to the circumstances such as Paul displayed. Fundamentalism needs to learn to listen to the voices of scholars who are as well or better versed in the scriptures than its own gurus and who recognize the shade as well as the light, the diversity as well as the unity in the New Testament writings.

(b) Fundamentalism wants to see truth in black and white terms. It tends to be eager, even desperate for *certainty*. It wants to know the certainty of that in which it believes. So the tendency is to insist on certain formulae, or rituals, on the understanding that they alone provide the certainty which they lust after. A typical argument, which trades also on the first feature (a), is that if we cannot be certain at one point of faith, then we cannot be certain at any point of faith. Certainty is the glue which is thought to prevent the whole pattern of faith from unravelling. And so the necessity of certainty becomes in effect yet another of the fundamentals to be preserved as all costs.

In this not least we need to hear loud and clear the wiser voices of those long steeped in the Christian tradition who warn us that such certainty is never possible, particularly not in formulations. Words are at best an imperfect form of rendering meaning and effecting communication. Because individual words mean slightly (sometimes very) different things to different people. There is an element of interpretation in the hearing and grasping of any communication. Those who are familiar with the problems of translation from one language to another know full well that there is no such thing as a perfect translation.

And when it comes to talk of God and of the work of God, how on earth can human language be adequate to speak of God and of that work? It is the scholars who are able to remind us that most descriptions of God and of his work have a heuristic element. That is, they use language to indicate something of what is there, but not in any hope of providing an adequate description of it. When, for example, the Fathers distinguish the eternal 'generation' of the Son from the 'procession' of the Spirit, it is not because they know what these words signify. They know that there is a difference to be taken into account, but the words used are simply labels to indicate the fact of the difference, not to describe the difference itself. The simple fact is that it is not possible to achieve certainty in the verbal definition of any of the fundamental elements of the Christian faith.

But should that concern us? Do 'certainty' and 'faith' actually go together? It is Paul, after all, who reminds us that 'we walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor. 5.7). The point is that 'certainty' belongs to a different 'language game' from 'faith'. Certainty is a term which lives and moves and has its being in the artificial world of mathematics. When there are only a very limited number of variables, then it may indeed be possible to achieve a 'certain' outcome – QED. But 'faith' belongs with the language of relationship. Its partners are trust, confidence, assurance. At no point in our typical daily lives is it realistic to speak in terms of 'certainty' – whether



eating beef, or crossing the road, or getting married. But trust, assurance – faith – is what enables us to live at all. A community which makes ‘certainty’ its watchword is very different from the community where ‘faith’ is the watchword. I am very confident that the latter is a much more appropriate description of the community around Jesus, the communities established by Paul, than the former.

(c) Things begin to become rather frightening when fundamentalism slides still further down its slippery slope. For a characteristic of the modern fundamentalisms of all the three main monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) is the conviction that their fundamentals are *alone* right. Any who disagree with them are therefore simply wrong. For the fundamentalist, I cannot be *right* unless you who disagree with me are *wrong*. Fundamentalists by predisposition do not recognize that there may be different ways of expressing what is actually the same, much more complex truth. Since their faith depends on the certainty of that which they believe, any alternative or counter faith is a threat to that certainty. The tendency of fundamentalism, in other words, is to build monolithic blocks of faith, all held together with the same certainties, and all denying the validity of alternative formulations of faith, even within the same religion, even of the same fundamentals.

The real horror begins when the logic is further played out (one of the curses of the fundamentalist tendency is its reliance on a rigid logic). The alternative, or different viewpoint, is seen as a threat to faith (faith thus rigidly conceived). The alternative or different formulation is seen as culpable heresy. The securing of the fence around the fundamentals, the safeguard of faith’s certainties, is seen to require a uniform obedience from the wider society, and to justify violent opposition to and suppression of any alternatives.

That is the fundamentalism of the Taliban in Afghanistan. But in their heart of hearts, many Jewish fundamentalists long for the restoration of the theocratic state centred on the Jerusalem Temple, just as many Christian fundamentalists long for something equivalent to the Puritan Commonwealth. But it is also the fundamentalism of the Inquisition and the stake!

My point here is that it requires a good knowledge of the key texts of the Bible, and of the history of Christianity if we are to be aware of such fatal tendencies in Christian fundamentalism. A better knowledge of the texts, in their historical context, would make it clearer that Jesus and Paul were themselves opposed to such fundamentalist tendencies. A better knowledge of Christian history would remind us of how often Christians in the past have gone well down that slippery slope, with consequences most now abhor. And it is precisely the work of scholarship to make the wider church aware of the character of ‘New Testament Christianity’ and of the lessons to be drawn from history.

## A Two-Way Bridge

I have focused my primary attention on the traffic going only one way across the bridge (between academy and church) – the contribution of scholarship to the needs and concerns of the church. Perhaps I have focused too much attention on this aspect. So let me conclude by taking up one of my initial points and bringing it more fully into focus – and thus recall that the bridge is two-way.

I have already stressed that academic theology needs the vitality of living faith to breathe life into what otherwise would most likely be dead and deadly dull discussions. The point is that theology, including academic theology, is itself about faith. A large part of it has to take account of value systems and ethical principles in discussion of major issues of politics and medicine. It can hardly exclude the role of worship and liturgy in the whole business. Faith and history cannot be put into separate compartments, because the history of Christianity, of its influence in the world, is the history of faith.

So it is important for faith to speak as faith, not just as scholarship. For it has played, and needs to continue to play an important part in the shaping of individual and community lives, and in informing the values and the principles which enable us to decide wisely, at both public and private level. To bracket out faith, as some scholars do, is to remove the heart from theology (or religious studies) and to leave it gasping for the breath of life in an alien environment.

To put the same point another way. Faith needs to enter into a genuine dialogue with a whole range of academic disciplines and policy makers. It should not only be reactive, responding to an agenda set by others, on their terms. It needs boldly to insist that it too has items for the agenda of public and community discussion, and to press the case that a community, academic or whatever, which does not have a faith dimension, is a deprived community, functioning on only three cylinders.

The point which ties the whole of what I have been trying to say together is that the faith which has allowed itself to be instructed in the areas outlined above, by its own Christian scholarship not least, is all the more likely to gain a hearing for what is its real and most enduring message. A properly self-critical faith commends itself to its audience by enabling them thus to recognize faith's own proper humility.

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