

Bad and good scholars and conferences

I would like to clarify how to detect bad or good scholars (or scientists) if you ever get into academic research over many months and years. My arguments also assume that this would apply to the sciences since I have experienced similar observations for the past 10 years.

I have been discussing with some people about research and scholars last month, and those who do not practice academic research seem to think (and rightly so) that if one individual, or a group of people, reference particular scholars while discussing a subject, that it all becomes subjective to our own knowledge or preference of one scholar over another (or a group of scholars over another group). Thus, the question arises on how to detect bad or good scholars. When I use “**bad**” and “**good**”, I am referring to the overall quality and erudition of the research. I am *not* using these adjectives in an accusatory sense. Nevertheless, these adjectives can include attitude, character, and behavior as well, but these are not what I normally have in mind. Therefore, I use these adjectives (“bad” and “good”) in a scholarly sense, not as a personal attack to the ones I refer to as “bad”. For example, by “bad” I might refer to my observation that a particular scholar is not up-to-date with the latest academic research and data; or makes silly arguments that have already been refuted elsewhere; or oversimplifies various issues that other careful scholars have considered at length; or yet ignores some crucial datum. In the end, some lay-people that are not scholars nor researchers and not familiar with a particular field of study might think that anyone can back up their claims by citing one scholar over another arbitrarily. (I consider myself to be an independent researcher—I am not a scholar). One of them said:

“You have your scholars and they have their own scholars!”

“How can we know who is right?”

This is somewhat true, but not wholly true. I understand that it all becomes a can of worms. In other words, it all becomes very granular and nuanced, unfortunately. Welcome to the world of academic studies. However, this also occurs at workplaces within an enterprise. Therefore, it is not like this sort of thing only occurs in scholarly settings. It is simply the nature of various subject matters and the nature of communication by different individuals and groups of people.

To be able to detect bad or good scholars, one has to become familiar with the literature, debates, and conferences. There is no way around this. One has to become familiar with who says what and the reasoning behind their claims. One has to become familiar with rejoinders and stay updated on the latest arguments back-and-forth between different experts. It's not surprising that anyone who does an investigation over several or dozen years will eventually shift views or convert to other paradigms within a field of study at least one time, if not more times, through several years of research.

Now, to the point. Some scholars are bad because:

- they have too much of an apologetic bent in their endeavors and do not seem to be honest enough with the data;
- they might overstate the data and interpretations that seem to favor their preferred viewpoint;
- they might oversimplify or ignore problematic data points;
- they might be childish in their criticism and critique points that have already been thoroughly defended by others who do not have a particular apologetic inclination at all.

For example, some scholars are more objective and historical in their writings and do not care about defending one pre-conceived view or another (e.g. Dr. Larry W. Hurtado). For yet other scholars, it is the opposite: they want to defend their pre-conceived notions and they will write in a more subjective, simplistic way (e.g. Dr. Mal Couch, 1938-2013). It takes months and years to detect these things unless someone else tells you about who is who in a particular field of study—as I am about to give you some examples.

Examples of bad scholars and good scholars

The good scholars I recommend investing your time with and who publish some or all of their work online are documented under “**Resources**” in the upper-right corner of this blog page.

Some bad scholars that I do not recommend because they are too conservative, misinformed, not updated, or plainly silly in their reasoning are as follows (with better-informed scholars as contrasts):

- **Hector Avalos**, Professor of Religious Studies: He specializes in the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern studies. I have read his book “The End of Biblical Studies (2007),” and I have found it extremely childish. I have also watched his presentations on similar issues about slavery and violence in the Old Testament on YouTube, and I find that he has very weak arguments. He criticizes the OT uncarefully and goes out of his way to criticize evangelical scholars, sometimes for no good reason. He is correct at times, but in those cases it’s not as serious as he presents it. I find many of his arguments very misinformed. I have nothing against his person. I do not mean to attack him personally (ad-hominem). This is an intellectual critique of his work.
 - **In contrast**, I would prefer Dr. Paul Copan and Dr. Michael S. Heiser one thousand times more. Copan and Heiser are careful Old Testament scholars who happen to be evangelical. They do not show that they want to illegitimately defend nor attack the Bible. They are objective. Avalos, in contrast, is inattentive to details that do not support his views.
- **Jason David BeDuhn**, Professor of Comparative Cultural Studies (Northern Arizona University): He is a “historian of religion and culture.” He has in the past supported the New World Translation (Jehovah’s Witnesses Bible). In doing so, he denied that John 1.1c should be translated, “**and the Word was God.**” Instead, he insisted that it should be translated, “**and the Word was a god**” or, “**and the Word was divine.**” I read his articles on this and I sent him an email on July 2012 entitled, “*A Grammatical Analysis of John 1:1 - Filologia Neotestamentaria, vol 21: 2008.*” The title of that email is actually the title of a peer-reviewed journal article by Greek grammarians Chrys C. Caragounis and Jan Van der Watt. In this authoritative article, they both prove that John 1.1c cannot be translated “and the Word was a god.” In addition, I pointed out that reputable NT scholars agree that it should be, “and the Word was God” in the sense that, “and the Word’s essence was God.” In other words, the Word became incarnate (Jesus) and he is—in essence—God, just like the Father. This matches other places where we know grammatically and semantically that Jesus is explicitly and implicitly called God (e.g., **John 1.1, 18; 20.28; Rom. 9.5; Titus 2.13; Heb. 1.8; 2 Peter 1.1; 1 John 5.20**). This is especially true in Romans 9.5 where Paul calls Jesus “theos” (i.e. God). Last but not least, the “Word” and the “angel of Yahweh” in the OT are clearly

Yahweh in some sense; and some Yahweh OT passages are applied to Jesus in the NT by the NT authors. Therefore, BeDuhn might be a good comparative religion scholar, but NT studies is clearly not his specialty and it shows in his misapprehension of the biblical, textual data.

- **In contrast**, I would recommend Dr. Daniel B. Wallace and Chrys C. Caragounis. There are plenty other NT scholars that could be recommended, but I choose Dr. Wallace and Dr. Caragounis because they excel in this area and they have proven mastery of Greek grammar and syntax for the past decades at the highest levels of academia. They are far more precise and accurate in their interpretations of the NT data and the Jewish-Hellenistic and Greco-Roman literature.
- **Dr. Norman Geisler**, PhD, Professor of Apologetics: He is a philosopher and apologetic. He has written dozens of books on bibliology and theology. The problem with Geisler is that he writes for apologetic purposes and he doesn't seem to go through academic criticism and peer-review before publishing his works. I have read some of his website articles and two of his books on Inspiration and Inerrancy, and he sadly makes obvious mistakes and overstatements of facts. Even Dr. Daniel B. Wallace kindly [pointed out](#) how Geisler got his information wrong on textual criticism and textual variants in "Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics." Geisler has also harshly accused other evangelical scholars of denying inerrancy for the wrong reasons, such as [Dr. Michael Licona](#).
 - **In contrast**, I would recommend Dr. Michael Licona who, like Professor Bart D. Ehrman, is an excellent NT scholar and historian who goes through peer-review and academic conferences and debates before publishing his views in academic monographs. He respects others and does not resort to faulty accusations against others, unlike Geisler. Another scholar that is worth mentioning here Dr. Wayne A. Grudem who specializes in systematic theology and has dealt with Inspiration and Inerrancy, which I find Geisler grossly mishandles.
- **Dr. Richard C. Carrier**, Ph.D., Ancient History (Greco-Roman): He is a professional Greco-Roman historian and focuses much on the origins of Christianity. He has spent the past decade debating evangelical scholars on the historicity of Jesus. Dr. Carrier is a historian and Jesus Mythicist. He believes and defends the position that Jesus never existed in history and that the Gospels are Jewish fabrications (i.e., Myth). His views are somewhat similar to the Jesus Seminar and Dr. Robert M. Price. I have read many of his articles and I have watched many of his debates with Dr. Michael R. Licona

on the historicity of Jesus and the resurrection. I have also seen Dr. Carrier interact with other NT scholars here and there. The problem with Dr. Carrier is that he already made up his mind that the biblical God doesn't exist and that Jesus is a fabrication because of all the inconsistencies found in the biblical text, especially the NT in the Gospels and the Pauline letters. This leads him to push very harshly against protestant and evangelical scholarship. But the problem is that he seems to only want to poke holes all over the place and doesn't take sufficient time to study the apparent issues in light of their ancient contexts. In this particular case, I don't find Dr. Carrier to be a very bad scholar, per se. He is a legitimate historian. But he seems to only want to enlarge the difficulties in NT studies while at the same time making mistaken interpretations of the data. Of course, he would turn the table around and accuse us of committing these mistakes!

- **In contrast**, I would recommend Dr. Dale C. Allison and Dr. Larry W. Hurtado. There is also Dr. Licona. However, Licona's arguments are a bit weak at times when responding to Carrier in public debates. I have seen Allison and Hurtado give more cogent responses to Carrier's contentions in writing. Allison is also a historian of Christianity. There is also Dr. Bart D. Ehrman! Dr. Ehrman is an excellent NT scholar and historian. I like him very much. However, Ehrman is an atheist and agnostic! Yet he defends the historicity of Jesus against Carrier. However, Ehrman doesn't believe that Jesus was really the son of God and, in fact, he doesn't believe that the God of the Bible exists (atheist), but he doesn't reject out of hand the possibility of the existence of a supreme being (agnostic). Therefore, Ehrman and many NT scholars and historians believe Jesus existed because the historical data says so and they all argue the case very well. In doing so, they all disagree with Carrier that Jesus never existed at all in ancient Palestine in the first century.

Extremist viewpoints and idiosyncratic conferences

Some scholars out there, especially those who work for Answers in Genesis (AiG) and Creation Ministries International (CMI)—who are Bible young-earth-creationists (YEC)—do have Masters and Doctorates (MAs and PhDs) in Hebrew Bible. When I read AiG and CMI articles on how the Bible does not contradict science and how the biblical text is apparently scientific, all I see are

fallacious reasonings and exegetical mistakes. They mishandle the textual data in the Hebrew Bible. But why? Some of them who are OT scholars can read Hebrew! This is precisely the problem. **Simply because you have a Ph.D. in front of your name does not make your viewpoint correct.** You must go through peer review and academic conferences for your views to be assessed and criticized by those who master the same field of study. Can you read English? Yes, if you are reading this, of course! Does this make you an English scholar and historian of the English language? Does this make you an expert on English lexicography? No. Even if you are, you should go through criticism before publishing your views. The problem with AiG and CMI is that they hold to a particular traditional (not to say fundamentalist) view of biblical Inspiration and Inerrancy, and this leads them to conclude what I think is actually a premise: **If God inspired Scripture and God does not make mistakes, therefore the Bible cannot have scientific mistakes. This premise (but for them it IS a conclusion) makes them seek to prove what they have already settled on believing: The Bible cannot err in theological, historical or scientific matters since it is the Word of God.** This forces them to inject (*eisegesis* instead of *exegesis*) scientific views into the biblical text and, in my view today, this is plainly mistaken and unnecessary. The methodology is wrong and the interpretations are wrong as well. Of course, they argue on their websites that *we* are the ones doing the eisegesis and not them!

Since they cannot convince the scholarly community nor the scientific community of their extremist views, they set up to create their own Institute and their own peer-reviewed Journal (i.e., *Answers Research Journal*). Not only they make gross mistakes in biblical hermeneutics and exegesis, but they equally make gross mistakes in the sciences, especially in astronomy and geology.

I used to be a creationist like them in the past (2003-2007). I abandoned their view once I started doing Biblical Studies under Dr. Michael S. Heiser (in 2008) who evidently, to me, surpasses their interpretations by a long shot. Of course, Heiser is not alone here. Heiser is on the same page along with hundreds of other OT and NT scholars in academia. Heiser is part of the *Society of Biblical Literature* and the *Evangelical Theological Society*, and he is well accepted and reviewed by other OT and NT scholars.

In contrast, Hugh Ross, who is an old-earth-creationist (OEC) and a professional Astronomer, gets the biblical interpretation wrong at times just like YEC, but at least he gets the science right in astronomy. Although Ross doesn't make gross mistakes in astronomy, he does still display faults in biblical exegesis. Yet, Dr. Heiser interviewed Ross in [November 2017](#). I will blog about YEC and OEC another time in another blog post once I get to biblical cosmology.

Therefore, some scholars out there have Masters and Doctorates in particular fields of study, but sometimes do not go through criticism and review before publishing their views; or they do but mostly only through their own non-international, non-prestigious scholarly journals. Some of them have pre-conceived notions or beliefs that they do not want to put aside, and this partly misleads them down a particular path. This amounts to gross mishandling of the data even to the point of becoming an extremist like YEC and the Jesus Seminar (and Dr. Richard Carrier—that Jesus of Nazareth never existed). Also, some of them only seem to know one particular field and are not aware of other fields of study that might give evidence to the contrary.

Scholarly conferences for interaction, review, and criticism

There are annual conference meetings for scholars every year. There are popular academic conferences such as:

- **Society of Biblical Literature (SBL);**
- **Evangelical Theological Society (ETS);**
- **American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR);**

I have become aware over the years of some scholars who defend a particular view on a specific subject and then are taken to task at annual scholarly conferences by other scholars (i.e., they are corrected at the conferences while other scholars who specialize in the same field are present). One recent example that I became aware of dates from last summer (2018), where I had watched a 2013 video on YouTube (Seedbed, “*Yahweh and the Ancient Gods [John Oswalt]*”) from Professor John N. Oswalt in July 2018. Prof. Oswalt explained in his 2013 video that the biblical text

shows that the gods of the Old Testament are representative of the forces and elements of nature, and so he seems to have denied that the biblical authors actually believed in the literal existence of the gods. Although not completely off, Oswalt's understanding of the OT gods does not seem to have been up-to-date in 2013 about the gods of the nations in the OT. Subsequently, in a personal email conversation with Heiser about this, Heiser responded that, "*Oswalt actually got publicly corrected about the reality of the gods at an ETS meeting—Dan Block told him to read my book and articles.*" Dan Block being the Daniel I. Block, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Wheaton College (which is where Professor John H. Walton also teaches).

An additional non-exhaustive list of bad and good scholars

The following additional lists are not exhaustive. There are too many to list and I would be lying if I pretend to actually be familiar with the writings of all existing scholars. Therefore, these lists only include the ones I am familiar with and that are still alive today or that were still living at least a decade ago. So, I will not list good and bad scholars that have passed away decades or centuries ago.

Recommended (“good”) biblical scholars:

- Andreas J. Köstenberger
- Ben Witherington III
- Craig L. Blomberg
- Craig A. Evans
- Donald A. Carson
- Darrell L. Bock
- David A. deSilva
- Dennis R. Bratcher
- Donald A. Carson
- Douglas J. Moo
- Eugene Peterson
- Grant R. Osborne
- Gregory K. Beale
- Gordon D. Fee
- Tim Keller

- I. Howard Marshall
- Scot McKnight
- Stanley E. Porter
- Wayne Grudem
- Nicholas Thomas Wright (aka N.T. Wright or Tom Wright)
- Joel B. Green
- James D. G. Dunn
- Michael F. Bird

Not recommended (“bad”) evangelical scholars or apologists:

- Mal Couch
- Mark L. Hitchcock
- Norman Geisler