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Essay: On Diversity, Competence, and Coherence in New Testament Studies

A Modest Response to Crossley's "Immodest Proposal"

In a previous issue of this journal, James Crossley identified me as "a debating partner" in a lengthy discussion that ranged over various matters, including the importance of scholars in biblical studies having an acquaintance with various methods and theories operative in today's academia, the particular importance of reception history in biblical studies, the desirability of an international perspective, the justifications offered for biblical studies in a modern university, and how biblical studies might best position itself in inter-disciplinary endeavours. In this more modest-size response, I wish to correct Crossley's characterization of my own emphases, and also speak to a

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few of the main issues that he engages, including the place of reception history in biblical studies, with particular reference to New Testament studies.[1]

Correcting a Misconstrual

So before we engage the other issues, I want to correct the impression that may be given from Crossley's rather negative portrayal of what I have advocated about New Testament studies.[2] Essentially, I think he mis-characterizes my view and so raises a false alarm about it that distracts from the real issues that deserve consideration (to which I turn later). At a few points in his essay he seems to glimpse that his criticism might not quite fit, and that we are perhaps not really at logger-heads over such things as the value of interdisciplinary research and drawing upon theories and approaches from other fields.[3] Nonetheless, he repeatedly presents my emphasis that New Testament scholars should have appropriate competences for exegesis as somehow entailing (or encouraging among others) a lack of appreciation (or even a disdain) for engagement with other disciplines and, in particular, the study of the reception history of biblical texts. But I am seriously puzzled at all this, for I cannot find any statement in my own publications that he cites that even implies the negative outlook that he imputes to me toward "wider" learning and the "bigger picture." In particular, I cannot find any "debate" over reception history (a topic to which I return later), certainly nothing from me questioning its value (154).

[1] James G. Crossley, "An Immodest Proposal for Biblical Studies," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2, no. 1 (2012): 153–77. Further references will be given in the text. I am grateful to the editors of *Relegere* for this opportunity to present this response in the journal. I also thank Crossley for comments on an earlier draft of this response.

[2] He particularly reacts to the following blog-postings: "Tools of the Trade," *Larry Hurtado's Blog*, September 4, 2011, http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2011/09/04/tools-of-the-trade/; "Tools of the Trade … Encore," *Larry Hurtado's Blog*, September 5, 2011, http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2011/09/05/tools-of-the-trade-encore/; "Languages, Theories, Approaches," *Larry Hurtado's Blog*, September 8, 2011, http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2011/09/08/languages-theories-approaches/. He also cites (somewhat less negatively) the published version of my Edinburgh inaugural lecture "New Testament Studies at the Turn of the Millennium: Questions for the Discipline," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52, no. 2 (1999): 158–78.

[3] E.g., in note 4, he demurs from contending that I would disagree with his concern for awareness of "wider basic issues in the Humanities" among biblical scholars, and he quotes my exhortation in my inaugural lecture that "the larger questions" require New Testament scholars to draw upon a variety of other disciplines (Hurtado, "Questions for the Discipline," 168–69).

Indeed, having served as the Associate Editor for a major reference work on reception of the Bible in English literature, having founded the University of Manitoba Institute for the Humanities (to promote research across Humanities disciplines), and being currently involved at various stages of three large inter-disciplinary research projects of international scope, it is a bit surprising to find my views characterized at several points in his essay as "insular," "narrow," "obsessed with language and exegetical study," as potentially having a "negative impact on British New Testament studies, and perhaps beyond," and exhibiting a "disconnect" with other disciplines.[4] Because Crossley belabours this characterization of my view across his essay, I ask readers' indulgence in trying briefly to set the record straight.

This misconstrual begins in his opening sentence. He characterizes one of my blog-postings (from September 2011) as outlining "*the* [his words, emphasis mine] essential features of a British doctorate in New Testament studies," and then quotes my comments advocating the importance of New Testament scholars having a competence in Greek and certain other languages and the ability to handle the features of the Nestle-Aland Greek NT. But his statement gives the incorrect impression that I present these particular abilities as outlining fully "*the*" competence that should be reflected in a PhD in New Testament, to the exclusion of anything else. In point of fact, immediately prior to and shortly after the comments that he cites from my blog-posting, I clearly posit these particular competences as "*a few*" of those that are important.[5] I cannot see why my underscoring certain competences as "essential tools" for those who wish to operate as New Testament scholars should be taken as a disparagement of, or tacit encouragement to neglect, other competences as also important.

Moreover, in my blog-posting that seems to have then generated various responses (by Crossley and a number of others), I specifically indicated what prompted me to underscore these particular "tools of the trade." There

[4] "Narrow" (156, 168, 176), "obsessed" (158), "negative impact" (158), "a disconnect" (166–67). At one point, however, Crossley does acknowledge that "Hurtado's model [i.e., my emphasis on basic tools of exegetical competence] is obviously not entirely without merit" (176). I suppose I should feel encouraged! The reference work I mention is David L. Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

[5] Hurtado, "Tools of the Trade." My statement preceding the material that Crossley quotes: "Put another way, there are some basic 'tools' that every NT PhD graduate should be able to use, preferably well. I'll mention a few that I think are important;" and following the statements that he quotes: "There are other things that ought to characterize the PhD in the field, but these are essential tools."

were recent reports from a couple of external examiners about PhD students having submitted theses that involved exegetical work who seemed unable to read the Greek New Testament, unable to engage relevant work in German or French, and out of their depth when it came to something as basic as handling (or even noticing) textual variants in the Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek New Testament. That is, contrary to the impression readers might take from Crossley's essay, the intention in my blog-posting was not to set out a full proposal for what should comprise a PhD in New Testament, and certainly not to dictate or forbid what lines of inquiry PhD students and scholars could undertake in addition to exegetically-based studies. I find it puzzling that simply (re)affirming that New Testament scholars should have certain basic and appropriate competences (which then and now I regard as uncontroversial) aroused the "heated" responses from some others in the "blogosphere" (to use the jargon) and the anxiety that Crossley expresses in his lengthy essay about the supposed effects of my statement (155).

In addition to misconstruing my blog-postings of September 2011, Crossley seems to me to confuse matters by introducing other issues. I reiterate that the point of those postings was to underscore (for the reasons stated) certain basic competences we should expect of PhD-level students who wish to become New Testament scholars. This has nothing to do with whether scholars from another discipline can make a contribution to the study of the New Testament and/or early Christianity. Within the limits and angles of their expertise, of course they can! Nor is the issue whether PhD theses in New Testament may, for example, focus on the literary properties of biblical writings or may take a social-scientific approach to early Christianity. Biblical scholars have been producing these sorts of studies for decades.

Crossley expresses concern about an "uncritical acceptance" by others of my argument that certain competences should not be treated as optional in New Testament scholarship, worrying that this may leave little scope within PhD studies for "intellectual risk-taking and invention." He also alleges that "Hurtado and his supporters would not be happy" with "a more nuanced and creative notion of history and historical explanation" or with requiring "some more vigorous testing in wider *historical* methods" (159n11).[6] He does not give any examples of the reactionary, narrow-minded attitude toward genuine

[6] He graciously notes, however, that the narrow attitude he fears is "not necessarily" my intention, and that I am "much more careful than some" in referring to French and German scholarship "irrespective of relevance."

scholarly creativity that he fears may develop from my views. This seems to me, therefore, close to being a red herring, and not the only one in his essay.

In another part of his essay, for example, he cautions that "avoiding reception history would not be wise as *a blanket decision*," and he asks "if reception is not to be part of the British doctorate" (I presume he means in New Testament studies) what is to be done with students doing theses in this area, and with departments and staff involved in this sort of study (162). Though he does not name me there, one can take the impression that he is contending with my stance. I offer a view of reception history in biblical studies later in this response. At this point, I will simply say that Crossley's statement amounts to another red herring. Neither explicitly nor by implication in any of my statements that Crossley posits as framing this "debate" with him is there any such exclusion or forbidding of reception history as a legitimate area for PhD studies or scholars.[7]

Likewise, Crossley's assertion that "if we go by the skills Hurtado demands of New Testament scholars … the discipline remains largely limited to the ancient world" is simply baffling to me (166). So, his allegation of a "disconnect between Hurtado's vision of New Testament … studies and the use of the Bible" in other disciplines seems to me mis-judged and groundless (166–67). He cites a passage in my inaugural lecture in which I underscore the importance of engaging the religious ideas reflected in the New Testament, but he fails to indicate that in it I was specifically critical of New Testament scholars who profess simply to be ancient historians or social scientists of early Christianity. Moreover, a bit later in the lecture I applaud the "increasingly international and cross-cultural diversification" of the field of New Testament studies, and the inclusion also of hermeneutical issues and the "critical consideration" of the New Testament writings and the ideas and practices reflected in them posed, for example, by feminist scholars.[8]

In sum at this point, I regret to have to say Crossley seems to me to have framed the supposed "debate" by ascribing to me a stance that allows him to use it as a convenient foil. But this involves mis-characterizing my views, drawing dubious implications from them that have no basis in what

[7] There is also a red-herring in his querying the propriety of testing a doctoral candidate for knowledge of Greek who presents a thesis on "New Testament texts in twentieth-century pop culture" (163n20). A student who cannot read Greek may well produce a good thesis in pop culture, but the question I addressed was what basic competence to expect of students who wish to become New Testament scholars.

[8] Hurtado, "Questions for the Discipline," 170–72.

I have actually written. There is in fact no "debate" between us over matters such as whether New Testament scholars can pursue questions beyond 300 CE (including specifically reception history of biblical texts), or engage in cross-disciplinary projects, or employ methods and theories derived from other disciplines, or take part in critical reflection on the nature of the discipline itself, and I see no basis in anything I have written for Crossley to have alleged otherwise. To my mind, the question is whether those who wish to be *scholars of the New Testament* (not specialists in pop culture or film history or nineteenth-century Americana, etc.) should have certain basic "tools," among which are competence in Greek and at least the main languages of scholarly publication in the field. I am unrepentant in affirming that they should. I turn now to discuss some other issues raised in his essay.

"Internationalist" and "Euro-centric"

After approving allegations made by a couple of "heated" bloggers that my stance is "Euro-centric … to the exclusion of non-Western scholarship," Crossley goes on to claim that expecting PhD students in New Testament to be able to engage work in German and French "limits what a PhD student can do and means that certain potentially creative and innovative scholarship … is downplayed or even excluded by default" (168). In the context of this statement, it appears that Crossley means PhD students from a culture outside of the European and North American settings. But his claim is dubious.

Surely, accusations of insularity and consequent exclusion of "potentially creative and innovative scholarship" require corroboration. But neither Crossley nor either of the two (somewhat abusive) bloggers he cites with tacit approval offers any instance where I (or my supposed "supporters") "exclude" non-Western scholarship or stifle creativity and innovation in PhD students from "non-Western" cultures. I simply reject the charge, therefore, and turn to consider briefly what makes "internationalist" scholarship.

Since first offering a PhD in theological subjects in 1919, the University of Edinburgh has a rather long and strong record of welcoming PhD students from many countries, and these include some fine New Testament students from various settings in Africa, Asia and Latin America as well as Europe and North America. Those who come for New Testament study, from whatever cultural setting, come here precisely to acquire the competence to function as New Testament scholars back in their home countries. They eagerly seek to consolidate their abilities in Greek, and also recognize the need to engage

relevant work in the European languages that remain the most frequently used for scholarly publication on most topics in the field. That is, they seek precisely to become scholars able to participate in the international dimension of the field of New Testament studies. But they certainly bring their own experiences and interests, which are very much shaped and prompted by their home cultures, and their theses often directly reflect and relate to their own provenances. It is, therefore, curious to suggest (without substantiation) that their work may not have been "creative" and "innovative," or that the concerns of those from a "non-Western" setting have been somehow "downplayed or even excluded."

Crossley emphasizes "post-colonialist" approaches in biblical studies as particularly illustrative of the commendable internationalization of biblical studies. Certainly, post-colonialist criticism is *one* of the colours in today's exciting rainbow-diversity in biblical studies, both in approaches and demographics. But in my own visits to various "non-Western" countries, I have not found much enthusiasm for the negative view of at least some post-colonialist advocates toward the biblical writings and those who brought them to their lands.[9] In fact, overwhelmingly, Christians of the various cultures with which I have any knowledge find in the biblical writings deep positive meaning and inspiration. They certainly read the Bible in their own settings, but the nature of biblical interpretation in "non-Western" settings is too rich and diverse to privilege post-colonialist criticism as a particularly crucial criterion.[10]

To return to the main issue, however, I am baffled that Crossley seems to regard it as "insular" to expect PhD students who wish to become New Testament scholars, from whatever culture, to have adequate abilities in the Greek New Testament and to engage at least the main bodies of scholarly discussion of the New Testament. How is it less "internationalist" for students from various cultures to be expected to include in their preparation this sort of competence? How does urging good abilities in Greek detract from "creative" and "innovative" work, or from engaging theory and approaches from other disciplines, or from an internationalist perspective? Why is it all

[9] Cf., e.g., M. W. Dube Shomanah, "Post-colonial Biblical Interpretation," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hays, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 299–303.

[10] In comments on an earlier draft of this response, Crossley assured me that (contrary to the impression one can take from his essay) he meant no prioritizing of post-colonialist approaches, and that "it means little to me if someone doesn't embrace postcolonialism" as particularly crucial.

posed as a zero-sum game, in which if one thing is emphasized something else must be minimized?[11]

The British PhD

One contributing factor in Crossley's anxieties about what should be expected of PhD students is likely the time-frame for completion of the British PhD (thirty-six months optimally). In the North American PhD pattern, students typically spend a couple of years taking courses in a set of fields (in preparation for qualifying exams that must be passed before proceeding to thesis work, demonstrating general competence in these fields), and during this time they can also make up for deficits in competence in languages or other matters. But in the UK pattern, there is scarce provision for this and they commence thesis research immediately. So, for example, if students commence PhD work without any reading ability in either German or French, and with scant acquaintance with how to use the Greek New Testament, it might well be difficult for them to acquire these skills in addition to completing their thesis within the set time-frame.

Two rather obvious responses present themselves: Either adjust (reduce) what to expect of PhD students in the UK or else advise applicants to gear up in advance for the British PhD more (or earlier) than what is necessary for commencing a PhD in the North American pattern. In Edinburgh, we take the latter approach, expecting PhD applicants to have a working ability in the relevant languages at the outset of their studies. Other universities, of course, are free to chart their own course.[12] But I stress that there is no inherent necessity to play off against each other the expectation that PhD students in New Testament should have the basic skills that I have emphasized and should also acquire an acquaintance with the theories and approaches appropriate to their research and to being knowledgeable and current in the field.[13]

[11] This may not have been Crossley's intention, but it is an impression one can take from his rhetoric.

[12] But in the UK the examination of PhD theses by external examiners seems to presuppose a certain sector-wide shared expectation of what kinds of basic competence should comprise a doctorate in a given field.

[13] In a note to me, Crossley asked whether this implies that certain thesis topics (e.g., use of the NT in American politics) are excluded as "a NT doctorate." But my point is that, whatever the topic of the thesis, someone called a "NT scholar" should be able to consult the Greek NT and engage at least the main bodies of scholarly publications in the field. There is more to being a NT scholar than what may happen to be the topic of one's thesis.

Reception History

In a section of his essay headed "In Defence of Reception History," Crossley sketches what he calls his "agenda" for biblical studies, underscoring reception history (160).[14] He rightly emphasizes that studies of the reception of biblical writings can be conducted across the many centuries and cultures in which these writings have had influence and been appropriated (or reacted against). Then, once again, he draws a contrast with the "limited" scope that he ascribes to my emphasis on competence in the New Testament texts, their (ancient) historical context, and the scholarship on them as necessary for those who wish to be New Testament scholars. As I have indicated already, however, this contrast is based on inferences that I find dubious. So let us turn now briefly to the question of how reception-history may be seen from the stance that I take.

I first register agreement that it is not necessary to be a biblical scholar to do some kinds of interesting analysis of the reception history of biblical writings. Crossley seems at pains to emphasize this, as if we differ, but here again he misconstrues me. For example, Victorian historians can trace the rise of biblical criticism and reactions to it in Britain. Scholars trained in cultural studies can study how the Bible features in films, pop culture, or modern music. And, yes, as Crossley notes, it is remarkable that several contemporary philosophers (e.g., Stanislas Breton, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek) have written on the Apostle Paul, something that he rightly says should be noticed by biblical scholars.[15]

I also agree that it is perfectly appropriate for biblical scholars to study the history of the reception of the biblical writings. Indeed, as William Lyons intriguingly proposed, we could even think of New Testament studies more

[14] He also refers here to "various approaches relating to critical theory, poststructuralism, and cultural studies" as part of his "agenda", but he seems to focus on what he calls "reception."

[15] For enthusiastic discussion, see, e.g., Ward Blanton, *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Though I find these works intriguing, I am not myself so taken with them as is Blanton, largely because they suffer from an inadequate engagement with biblical scholarship. See, e.g., my own more limited comments on Alain Badiou's book on Paul: Larry W. Hurtado, "Paul and the Continental Philosophers," *Larry Hurtado's Blog*, February 29, 2012, http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/paul-and-the-continental-philosophers/. See also John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff, eds., *St. Paul Among the Philosophers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), esp. the essay by Paula Fredriksen, "Historical Integrity, Interpretive Freedom: The Philosopher's Paul and the Problem of Anachronism," 61–73, for a frank critique of Badiou.

broadly as a kind of "reception history."[16] For example, prominent among other things reflected in the New Testament writings is the early Christian "reception" and creative appropriation of the scriptures of ancient Judaism (the Christian Old Testament). Moreover, tracing the development of early Christianity across its formative centuries surely includes analysis of the composition, distribution, use, influence and emerging canonization of the New Testament writings, in short their early reception history. Indeed, as Lyons noted, modern biblical studies is itself a historically-conditioned development reflecting the intellectual and cultural trends of any given time since it first emerged as a discrete discipline in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century.[17] So, modern biblical scholarship (in all its varied nature) and the scholars who practice it are included in the reception history of the biblical texts.

In short, reception history is certainly in my view not a marginal facet of biblical studies. So, I dissent from Crossley's assumption that an emphasis on New Testament scholars being well grounded in the texts themselves and the historical context in which they appeared and first circulated involves *confining* New Testament scholars to what he portrays (somewhat tendentiously to my mind) as an arid preoccupation with things ancient. Indeed, quite the opposite. I think it is an asset to be able to read the Greek New Testament and draw upon the scholarly investigation of its texts in tracing their subsequent reception history. To be sure, scholars without this competence can observe and comment on the use of the New Testament in this or that culture, period, or medium. But New Testament scholars (with the competence that I urge) would be able, for example, to consider the reception of New Testament writings in light of how they were read and used in the early settings in which they originated and were first used, giving a distinctive perspective on the matter.

Diversity and Coherence

In the final section of his essay, Crossley turns to concerns about the place and future of biblical studies in modern universities. His seems to urge that

[16] William John Lyons, "Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010): 207–20.

[17] I refer to my own brief discussion of this in Larry W. Hurtado, "The King James Bible and Biblical Scholarship," *Expository Times* 122, no. 10 (July 2011): 478–89.

the future of biblical scholarship lies in demonstrating active engagement with other disciplines, taking on board theories and approaches from them. I certainly support such engagement, both for the enrichment of biblical scholarship and also for the contributions that we may be able to offer to other disciplines. But it is not entirely clear to me what he thinks constitutes the field or discipline of New Testament studies (and/or biblical studies) as such, or even if there is a field or discipline to define. The diversity that he celebrates is certainly a prominent characteristic of New Testament studies, especially over the last several decades.[18] But can we also identify a basis for a coherence that would allow us to speak of a field or discipline?

I contend that this coherence should be seen precisely in the texts of the New Testament. To be sure, simply to engage these writings in their ancient setting adequately involves acquaintance with a demanding body of other texts, data and approaches.[19] In addition, modern scholars should also be alert to the insights offered in other disciplines. But I propose that it is the investigation of these texts, their literary properties, the forces that prompted them to be written, the religious movement that they reflect, the beliefs and ideas that they attest, and their continuing significance and appropriation that provides the coherence that enables us to speak of "New Testament studies" as a field or discipline in its own right.[20]

Unless I mistake him, Crossley seems not to regard the New Testament writings as quite so important. His references to exegesis in the essay seem to me to have a slight whiff of disdain, and he appears to prefer focusing on the history and politics of readers of the New Testament rather than the New Testament itself. Fair enough. In this, as in other things, "*Chacun a son goût*." I rather doubt, however, that this sort of focus will constitute a coherent field of study for New Testament scholars collectively. In any case, I think that the New Testament writings have intrinsic qualities and a distinctive significance that fully justify serious and direct engagement with them, and with their subsequent reception as well.

[18] I have noted this in a commissioned survey of scholarship: Larry W. Hurtado, "New Testament Studies in the Twentieth Century," *Religion* 39, no. 1 (2009): 43–57.

[19] It is now difficult for any one scholar to develop in-depth and independent expertise in the panoply of what is involved, and so it is all the more important for New Testament scholars to work collegially with one another and also with scholars in cognate disciplines and subjects.

[20] As will be apparent, I continue to refer to a "discipline" of New Testament studies, for I contend that there are some basic competences that should characterize it.

Moreover, I think that to justify the place of "New Testament studies" or "biblical studies" in today's universities it will be all the more important to demonstrate a coherent field of study, even a discipline. There is a danger if biblical studies becomes essentially an *entrepôt* where data, ideas and approaches from other fields are acquired and applied. We had better have some goods of our own to offer, some identifiable contribution to Humanities scholarship in particular that cannot easily be made in other disciplines. In universities today (and more so in coming years), it will be necessary to justify to administrations every post and every department. In those universities with any historic sense of mission, an intellectual defence will be considered, and it will be wise to be able to show that "biblical studies" represents something identifiable and distinctive that would be lost were it absent from universities. I think it will be important to show what particular kind of expertise biblical scholars bring to the study of the biblical texts, enabling analysis of these texts and related matters that will not likely be done as well in other disciplines, such as history, literature departments, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, film studies, etc. In short, there are practical reasons as well as intellectual ones to promote, along with all the impressive diversity in New Testament studies today, a connecting coherence in the field. As indicated, I think that coherence lies in making the texts of the New Testament the focus, to which the diversity of scholarly abilities and approaches can be directed.[21] To use a musical metaphor, I propose that New Testament studies should be thought of as a large jazz ensemble, comprised of people with various kinds of particular expertise, but all of them competent in certain core skills, and all bringing their respective virtuosity to bear on a piece of music that gives coherence to their performance.

[21] In his concluding footnote (177n53), Crossley suggests that the difference between his "wider" and my "narrower" views of New Testament studies may reflect his being in a Department of Biblical Studies and my having served in the School of Divinity in Edinburgh. I suggest, however, that differences between us have more to do with our personal world-views, not the labels of the university units in which we work.