

Do the best biblical scholars love Jesus?

Some questions—as opposed to a categorical judgment—about Joel Green's post

by [Greg Carey](#)

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Joel B. Green's recent blog post ["What Makes a Good Biblical Scholar?"](#) has gotten a lot of attention. Green opens,

The best biblical scholars genuinely love Scripture, and come to its pages ready to hear God's address. They exhibit both a certain posture vis-à-vis the text and their own formation in relation to it, and a commitment to the hard work of reading Scripture that takes seriously the nature of the text.

Green maintains that the "best" biblical scholars read the Bible as disciples who look to scripture to shape their lives. He argues that since "the Scriptures yearn to reshape how we comprehend our lives and identify our greatest needs," the best interpreters will read them according to that purpose. Moreover, "good" scholars will interpret the Bible from within the church and "engage the grand tradition of the church's faith and life."

My social media feeds blew up in outrage, probably a sign of the particular breed of nerds I follow. I perceive three major lines of criticism among the many responses:

1. Some read Green's post as a sectarian power play, as it marginalizes scholars who do not share Green's faith or presuppositions.
2. Others maintain that scholarship and faith don't mix well: How can we be critical if we impose our convictions upon the text, and how can religiously motivated interpretation contribute to a nonsectarian public?

3. Perhaps most compelling, some colleagues note that while Green's Christian ethos excludes interpreters of other faiths and those of no faith, it is especially dangerous to Jews. Under the banner of "theological interpretation of scripture," some prominent Christian interpreters argue that the Jewish Scriptures prefigure Jesus, a position adorned with so many layers of antisemitism that we lack space to pursue it here. Green contributes to the theological-interpretation-of-scripture conversation. His [opinions](#) on Christian interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures are nuanced but in my opinion troubling: "Faithful readings of the Old Testament take seriously its witness 'in advance to the sufferings coming to Christ and his subsequent glories.'"

In fairness, Green teaches at a prominent Christian seminary, where he once served as dean. Perhaps he measures "good biblical scholars" in terms of their value for the church, not necessarily according to their contributions to a more general public. Unfortunately, Green never says as much, and his contribution comes across as a blanket assessment of all scholars.

Social media has a way of polarizing public conversation. Either we defend Green's opinion or we assail it. I believe we need a more nuanced conversation here. Why not tease out questions rather than render a categorical judgment?

First we might contextualize "best": best for whom? Many Christians might initially agree with Green if we apply his position to the church. There's an intuitive appeal to the case that for Christians and their institutions the most helpful interpreters will be insiders, people who can interpret the Bible in conversation with the theology and practices of Christian communities. I teach at a Christian seminary myself, and I certainly teach differently than when I taught at a private liberal arts college and a state university. In preparing students for public religious leadership, I consider it an asset that I know something about the communities they will serve and the conversations that surround them. I celebrate the bond that unites us as people who look to the Bible as a resource for faith.

Yet as soon as I privilege Christian interpreters for Christian contexts, objections immediately present themselves. Closed circles of interpretation lead to closed minds. Don't readers who reside outside the church bring insights we need to hear, often leading to our reformation? And do we not encounter our sacred texts afresh when we learn from readers who share other assumptions and interests?

I think immediately of my graduate instructor Amy-Jill Levine, who describes herself as an agnostic Jew. Out of love for her students and for the world, Levine challenges Christian divinity students to do their best theological reading, often resourcing them with respect to the profound Jewishness of the New Testament writings. Bart Ehrman also comes to mind, a first-rank scholar who has left behind his conservative evangelical roots but repeatedly identifies the questions that preoccupy Christian readers. Christians constitute large audiences for scholars like Levine and Ehrman. Upon reflection, I don't believe the "best" scholars are necessarily Christian believers—even for Christian settings.

On the other hand, I reject the exclusion of theological interpretation from the public arena. At best, those who condemn theologically interested reading as unscholarly or unsuitable for public consumption are deploying a double standard. We welcome postcolonial, Marxist, feminist, queer, and global readings to the public conversation, a development more recent than we might appreciate. Some such readings are theological; others are not. Yet all have value. We are whole people. Our particular interests both nourish and restrict our capacity for interpretive insight.

In my view, two tests apply to every public interpretation. First, does the interpretation add value to the conversation and reflect appropriate critical rigor? I welcome such scholarship from all kinds of perspectives. And second, if we know a particular interpreter's commitments, can we predict that person's conclusions in advance? If we can, then we have reason to suspect that ideology has overrun scholarship.

In the end, I protest against those who demand either piety or "objectivity" in scholarship. Both positions commit a common error, one that suppresses critical conversation: they tell us what we may not say. I welcome a conversation in which Christians bring no particular privilege, where interpretation is self-critical and other-critical, and in which a diverse range of voices are embraced.