

Introduction

When I was an undergraduate at Miami University (Ohio, not Florida!), I took several business classes. It happened that the main archway of the business school building had a striking inscription etched into the brick: “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Now, of course, these are Jesus’ words from John 8:32, though the inscription bore no reference. I don’t know exactly why these words were written on the building, but even if it was not in the name of recognizing religious truth, there is still a general maxim that fits these words: knowledge offers power. The more you know about a situation or a subject, the more options you will have. Your eyes are opened, as it were, to the wider landscape. Having a deeper knowledge of “what is out there” allows one to prepare for the future, and such preparation offers a measure of freedom to control where one ends up. I desire to offer my own experience and knowledge to others in hopes that they will be able to have the freedom to discern the best academic and professional future.

This book is one that I wish I had seven years ago when I first began to think seriously about pursuing a doctoral degree. It is a very practical book, a nuts-and-bolts kind of book. It was written out of a desire to de-mystify both the preparation for and experience of a PhD. At the end of my doctoral experience, I did not just sit down and begin writing a how-to guide. Over the last four years, I compiled many questions and most of their answers. I had very few people who gave me direction as to how to apply to, gain entrance, and survive a

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PhD program, and I hoped one day to have some answers, based on my own experience, that I could pass on to others. So, on the one hand, many will find this book useful as it comes from my own trial-and-error experiences. On the other hand, in these pages you will find the experience of basically only one person—me. I have had the distinct advantage, though, of testing much of my advice in an open forum, namely, my [we]blog: www.nijaygupta.wordpress.com. I started a “blog” in 2007 primarily to chronicle the progress of my PhD, with a view towards helping others who would come after me. In post after post, I welcomed feedback from my readers and I have benefited from the correction and collective wisdom of many readers and commenters.¹ Therefore, though I draw almost exclusively from my own life, my advice has been tested by other professors and especially by other doctoral students.

MY JOURNEY

A very natural question to ask when perusing this book and assessing its accuracy and utility is *what makes you (the author) a reliable guide?* What I offer, as stated above, is subjective. Nevertheless, it is true that most people venturing into this world will have similar questions to answer, challenges to face, and obstacles to overcome academically. It might help, then, to know where I am coming from and what I have done.

I studied for my Bachelor’s degree at Miami University (OH) where I majored in Public Relations and also concentrated on Classical Greek. Largely out of a love for studying Greek, I went to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (MA) and received a Master of Divinity and Master of Theology with a focus on New Testament Greek and biblical theology. During that time, I had a number of formative academic experiences including serving as a Greek teaching assistant for a few years. The next year, I worked full-time at Hendrickson Publishers as their academic specialist for sales and marketing while teaching as an adjunct instructor for Gordon-Conwell’s urban campus in Boston. It was at this time that I applied to doctoral programs in New Testament and accepted an offer to study at the University of Durham

1. By the middle of my doctoral program, I could track about 5,000-6,000 hits per month with about 200-300 “regulars.” The main post that I wrote on preparing for a PhD had attracted over 10,000 hits by the time I finished this book.

(England) with Prof. John M. G. Barclay and Dr. Stephen C. Barton. I completed my PhD in just under three years and my dissertation was subsequently published with Walter de Gruyter (Berlin, Germany) under the title *Worship That Makes Sense to Paul: A New Approach to the Theology and Ethics of Paul's Cultic Metaphors*. During my PhD I also wrote and published over a dozen journal articles and about seventy book reviews.

Immediately following the completion of my doctorate, I took up a visiting instructorship at Ashland Theological Seminary (OH) where I taught Greek and hermeneutic courses. Currently, I teach Biblical Studies and Christian formation courses at Seattle Pacific University (WA). I also serve on the adjunct faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary (KY) where I teach New Testament courses for their virtual campus.

THE FOCUS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE BOOK

As the title of the book makes clear, the focus of our attention is on those interested in biblical studies. There are several reasons for this specificity. First and foremost, my own degree is in New Testament and, thus, I can write most accurately about that academic world and its processes. Furthermore, I chose to pursue my doctorate in England, even though I am an American. However, two caveats should be made. Firstly, I researched American New Testament (and Christian origins) programs intensively when I was at the stage where I was applying to doctoral programs. Though they certainly differ in many ways, and noticeably in format and length, there is still a great deal of overlap in terms of criteria for acceptance and the significance of the writing project for earning the degree. Secondly, while I cannot comment in depth regarding all fields of religious studies, my advice is, I believe, relevant in many ways to those interested in pursuing a PhD in many divisions of theological and religious studies (and especially Old Testament/Hebrew Bible research). Therefore, my hope is that this book will be accessed by and useful to more than that small group of academics who desire to pursue New Testament studies. Many issues related to choosing the right program, writing the thesis, or presenting papers at conferences are common to all researchers and students. Beyond only entering and completing a doctorate, I also offer counsel on engaging in the academic teaching world beyond the PhD as new professors often feel lost in a world without supervisors.

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SIZING UP THE CHALLENGE

There are a number of reasons why people decide to earn a doctorate in biblical studies or theology. Often, though not always, it is borne out of a faith commitment and a hunger to learn about the Bible (or doctrine) and to become prepared to teach the Bible. For others, the attraction involves a fascination with that peculiar group of people that made such an impact on world history—whether the people of Israel in the ancient Mediterranean world or the early Christians in the Greco-Roman world. Such ambitions and inspirations can be exhilarating and naturally lead to dreams of giving lectures, researching for books and articles, and interacting with scholars in the faculty lounge or conference hall. I feel that it is appropriate at this point, though, to put the academic path in perspective, as I have seen some students flippantly decide to become a professor or professional researcher without sizing up the challenge. In the first place, it is, for almost all people—especially in an academic context—that one is praised for excelling and ignored when struggling. Therefore, one must be prepared for some tough times, as supervisors and examiners can sometimes be terse, blunt, or even boorish. But that is getting ahead of ourselves; the first hurdle is, of course, gaining entry into a program. Many people are unaware of how difficult it is. For instance, and we will return to this matter later, top schools like Yale, Princeton, and Duke only admit a small handful of doctoral students in New Testament (or Old Testament) per year, and they usually make their selection from over a hundred applicants! Another factor to consider, before glibly planning out your future, is the reality of the job market. Every year, students graduate from scores of doctoral programs and compete for a relatively small number of jobs. Despite these bleak numbers, though, excellent professors and researchers in biblical studies are still needed and some doctoral programs are thriving. I believe, nevertheless, that one should be aware of the difficult road ahead. I hope my role will be—once the decision has been made to push forward—to help you succeed in your education and vocational goals.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

There are basically three parts to this book that enable one to gain entrance to and survive a New Testament PhD program as well as to

advance into the professional academic world. The first part, *Prepare*, involves the work that goes into selecting and successfully gaining admission to a doctoral program. The second part, *Succeed*, focuses squarely on the experience within the program and is geared towards writing a cogent and defensible dissertation.² These two parts are meant to lead someone to complete his or her doctoral degree successfully. However, if one is hoping to gain academic employment, usually the institution judges candidates based on factors in addition to their degree status, including teaching ability and experience, research interests, publications in periodicals, and academic service experience. Therefore, a final part will handle these matters under the rubric *Advance*. This area will also be relevant to recently hired professors as they launch their careers.

2. In America, the doctoral-level research project is typically called a “dissertation.” In England, the same kind of project is referred to as a “thesis.” For the sake of consistency, I will use “dissertation” for a doctoral project, and “thesis” for a master’s project.