2

Preparing for Doctoral Studies

From Education to Application

It is not the experience of many people that they graduate from their master's program and then "decide" to do a PhD. In most cases, a lot of preparation work comes before the application. It often takes years to make headway in biblical studies and build up an impressive resume that will aid in securing a place in a coveted program. The goal is not to meet the minimum expectations as an applicant, but to far exceed expectations. When admissions committees have to sort through many dozens of applications, you want your cover letter and dossier to be impossible to ignore. In the following pages, we will discuss what it will take to accomplish that.

EIGHT FACTORS

When you consider the criteria on the basis of which committees sort through and select applicants, there appear to be eight primary factors: institutions of education, grade point average, preparatory coursework, references, standardized test scores, research/publishing record, teaching experience, and institutional "fit." Not all of these factors will apply in all circumstances. For example, most British universities do not require American students to submit Graduate Record Examination scores.[1] Also,

1. Cambridge University is the only British university I am aware of that *does* require American students to submit GRE scores.

the weight given to each area is not equal, and the balances differ from one place to the next. Nevertheless, thinking ahead about these factors should provide the appropriate amount of preparation for students with a view towards most programs. Interactions with recent graduates of an institution of interest may offer insight into how that school weighs these factors.

Institutions of Education

Where you studied prior to applying for a doctoral program is obviously an important indicator of suitability for admissions committees. However, they are not necessarily always looking for students who studied at Ivy League schools. Rather, you will want to make sure you choose places to study that have a solid reputation for respected faculty and an overall pursuit and achievement of excellence.

As we are dealing with religious studies, it is inevitable that some programs and schools may be biased against other schools showing distaste for certain doctrinal affirmations, approaches, or styles. While you do not need to compromise your own beliefs, showing an awareness and appreciation for a variety of perspectives and approaches may pacify some of these concerns. In my own experience, though, many doctoral programs encourage diversity of thought, background, and tradition.

Grade Point Average

The American educational system, whether we like it or not, depends on the grade point average (GPA) for assessing and comparing academic performance. From elementary school through to the highest levels of study, you are scored on a scale from 0.0 to 4.0. It is no surprise, then, to learn that doctoral programs in biblical studies look closely at the student's GPA.

Of course first-tier programs have exceptionally high standards when it comes to the GPA. Most admissions reports will state that there is no magic number to achieve, and that is true. They do not want to deter anyone from applying just because they don't meet a stated standard—they recognize that some exceptional students may fall a bit below. Nevertheless, it is helpful to have some indication of what is average or expected. There appears to be a general standard of working upward from the A- range, which begins at 3.4. In reality, though, the average of *accepted* students is probably

somewhere closer to 3.8.[2] Again, that does not mean that rejection is certain below this, or that acceptance is certain above this. Rather, it is useful to know where you stand with regard to *general* expectations. One indicator of achievement is the cutoff marks for graduating with distinction. At my undergraduate institution, a 3.5 or better was needed to graduate *cum laude*, a 3.75 or better for *magna cum laude*, and 3.9 or better for *summa cum laude*. American evangelical seminaries also maintain high academic standards for the GPA, though because many such programs can accept several students, the competition is not as fierce.[3] Overall, it is advisable to aim for a GPA higher than a 3.5, though, again, in reality accepted students would have probably exceeded these expectations on average.

The situation is a bit different when applying to study in the United Kingdom. Due to the high number of Americans that study at the PhD level in biblical studies there, admissions committees are undoubtedly familiar with the GPA system. However, they tend to be less discriminating when it comes to looking for a particular number.

As will be discussed further under "preparatory coursework" and "institutions of education," it is not enough to have a high GPA. It matters, with regard to GPA, what kinds of courses were taken and where. Generally speaking, the GPA of your master's work from higher institutions matters most, as well as the courses/majors that relate most closely to the area of study for which you are applying (i.e., Old Testament/New Testament). This means that if you struggled in your undergraduate program, a lower GPA may not signal rejection as long as the master's work is sufficiently impressive. On the other hand, it may not mean as much to an admissions committee if you earned a 4.0 in your undergraduate if the major was in a completely unrelated field.

Preparatory Coursework

Beyond a glance at the GPA, admissions committees are interested in the kind of coursework a prospective student has done. One of the reasons why transcripts are required is because they want to inspect the breadth and

2. See, for example, Duke Graduate School's statistics: http://gradschool.duke.edu/about/statistics/admitrel.htm.

3. Duke Graduate School has about ten students graduating per year (http://www.duke.edu/web/gradreligion/documents/NRCAssessment.pdf), while many evangelical seminaries will have thirty to fifty students graduating.

depth of the courses taken and how prepared the student is for doctoral-level courses and/or professional research. Especially for biblical studies, six dimensions of an education round out the preparatory coursework: biblical content, hermeneutics, backgrounds, languages, history of interpretation, and critical thinking skills.

In terms of *biblical content*, there is obviously going to be the expectation that the prospective student is actually acquainted with the biblical texts, both generally and specifically in the area of interest. This usually comes through survey and exegesis courses. It should not take a book like this to tell you that such preparation is essential. The more common problem is that seminary students (in particular) assume that exegesis courses are most important and focus on them to the neglect of the other preparatory ones. As with all things, balance is crucial.

An advanced understanding of *hermeneutics*, the study of the principles of interpretation, is absolutely essential to good preparation in biblical studies. Normally a graduate degree in biblical studies will require a basic hermeneutics course, but it is advisable to learn about more advanced methods in use in your field(s) of interest. While your master's institution may offer such a course, it may happen that you will need to design an independent study course that will meet these needs.[4] It may be profitable to choose one advanced exegetical tool to study for an independent course such as social-scientific criticism, rhetorical criticism, or narrative criticism.

It is also difficult to overestimate the utility of studying biblical *backgrounds*. For Old Testament study, this would largely involve Ancient Near Eastern backgrounds, and for the New Testament, Jewish and Greco-Roman ones. Much advanced research at the doctoral level involves an awareness of and interactions with texts, artifacts, and developments that arise from these ancient worlds and how they inform, overlap with, support, and challenge voices in the Bible. Later I will adumbrate what is basically expected of a New Testament doctoral student with respect to such knowledge.

In terms of early Judaism, one should have a grasp of several features: (1) the general history of the Jewish people in the second temple period; (2) the most insightful and significant works produced during this time (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls, the works of Philo and Josephus, the LXX [including

4. Some important resources to consider in this area would be John Barton's *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, Paula Gooder's *Searching for Meaning*, and Joel B. Green's *Hearing the New Testament*.

the Old Testament Apocrypha], the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, etc.); (3) the culture and social dynamics of that period; and (4) the methods of interpretation common at the time (*pesher*, *midrash*, etc.). A helpful place to begin such a study is with George W. E. Nickelsburg's *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah*. A wellspring of information can also be found in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter's *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (*DNTB*).

Equally important for New Testament study is a grasp of the Greco-Roman world in which the early church was born. Again, it is important to know: (1) the general history of the classical world, hellenization, and the rise of the Roman Empire; (2) the literature of the Greeks and Romans (broadly); (3) the religions and religious atmosphere of the Greco-Roman world (including the imperial cult); (4) Greco-Roman rhetoric (again, broadly); (5) the secular ethics and popular philosophies of the times; and (6) the basic geography of the Roman Empire, with specific attention to major cities in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Italia. Alongside consulting the *DNTB*, students are often directed to James Jeffers's *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*. Also very useful are Warren Carter's *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* and Paul Sampley's edited volume *Paul in the Greco-Roman World*.

In terms of the general study of backgrounds of the New Testament, two more suggestions can be made. One should be aware of the eminent book series called *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (in English, *Rise and Fall of the Roman World*), which treats numerous aspects of the ancient Roman world, including politics, literature, philosophy, arts, and religion. The many contributors come from various fields, including classics and religious studies. Some of the articles are written by biblical scholars.[5] Secondly, there are a number of textbooks in existence that offer readings of primary texts such as C. K. Barrett's *New Testament Background: Selected Documents*. Another option is *Readings from the First-Century World: Primary Sources for New Testament Study*, edited by Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, which has an Old Testament counterpart: *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study*, edited by Bill T. Arnold and Brian Beyer. In the end, it may be most profitable to create your own list of texts by mixing and matching, alongside following the recommendations of your academic course advisor.

5. A searchable database of the article titles can be found at http://www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/scaife/anrw.html.

Another option for gaining some of this experience with background material is to see if your current institution is part of a local consortium. This could open up the door to courses not available at your school and it may lead to developing a relationship with another professor that could one day serve as a referee.[6]

Studying backgrounds is not just another hoop that one must jump through, but is absolutely essential for a precise understanding of what is going on in the biblical texts. In fact, it is often the case that acquaintance with parallel ancient texts inspires theories and ideas that become doctoral project proposals. Thus, it is important to read these texts actively, thinking through convergences and divergences with the ideas and theological perspectives of the biblical authors.

A large part of doctoral research is interaction with the biblical texts in their original *languages*. In seminary or graduate school, it is common to study Greek and/or Hebrew at the basic level. For doctoral studies, though, the expectations in terms of language skill are very high. For New Testament, it goes without saying that the candidate knows Koine Greek very well (in terms of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary). In general, it would be advisable to know the New Testament Greek vocabulary down to words that occur twenty times or less. An advanced knowledge of grammar can be gained through studying Daniel B. Wallace's *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, or the more recent offering by David Mathewson and Elodie Ballantine Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*. New Testament exegesis classes will further strengthen one's knowledge of New Testament Greek. After getting a sufficient amount of grammar under one's belt, the most profitable thing to do is *read, read, read*! That is, take rapid reading courses where you just read through a large number of texts without taking too much time to analyze it theologically or rhetorically. I regularly recommend to students, as a must-have resource, *The UBS Greek New Testament: A Reader's Edition*, which offers a "contextualized translation at the bottom of the page of all vocabulary items occurring thirty times or fewer in the New Testament." Additionally, a dictionary is appended to the back that has lexical entries for the remaining words that occur thirty times or more.

Aside from studying New Testament Greek, you can further strengthen your language skills by exposure to Attic Greek, the most important and influential dialect of classical antiquity.[7] Many students of the New Testa-

6. A "referee" is a term used to designate someone that writes references.

7. One might consult the Joint Association of Classical Teachers' *A Greek Anthology*

ment also find it helpful to engage with the style, grammar, and vocabulary of the Septuagint.[8] Finally, one might consider studying the Greek of the church fathers.[9] Conceivably, a course could be designed that worked through a sampling from various materials and periods.[10]

For students of the New Testament, it is also important to know the original language(s) of the Old Testament. Hebrew is, of course, often required in master of divinity programs. For academic study, it is invaluable. For instance, when looking at the New Testament quotations and allusions of the Old Testament, it is helpful to note the differences between the LXX text and the Hebrew Masoretic text to discern whether the New Testament writer was relying on one of these as the *vorlage* (the underlying text). Beyond a basic first year of grammar, an intermediate course in Hebrew grammar and a set of readings can really enhance your understanding of the Old Testament language and literature.[11]

There are a number of other ancient languages that one could learn with profit. Aramaic, for example, is a Semitic language that could be useful if one were studying portions of Old Testament, such as the Aramaic parts of Daniel and Ezra. It is also useful for studying the Second Temple *targumim* or the Elephantine papyri. Syriac is a particular dialect of Aramaic, and learning this language affords one access to the Peshitta.

Another important ancient language is Latin. At the most utilitarian level, many scholarly terms and abbreviations are in Latin. In addition, classical Latin offers the ability to read Roman literature that can inform our reading of the New Testament. Ecclesiastical Latin can aid in reading early church liturgies, epistles, and early commentaries. Latin can also be very handy for purposes of textual criticism—regarding especially the Old Latin manuscripts as well as the Vulgate.[12]

for a list of readings.

8. A number of reading texts can be found in Rodney J. Decker's *Koine Greek Reader*.

9. Again, consult Decker's *Koine Greek Reader* and its relevant sections; also Rodney A. Whitacre's *Patristic Greek Reader*; cf. Michael W. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*.

10. In 2018, I coedited a graded reader called *Intermediate Biblical Greek Reader: Galatians and Related Texts*. This textbook offers guided readings from Galatians, James, the Septuagint, and a reading from St. John Chrysostom. It is an "open textbook," which means it is freely available online. See the bibliography for more details.

11. One example of a reader text would be Donald R. Vance's *Hebrew Reader for Ruth*; for more advanced study, see Ben Zvi et al., *Readings in Biblical Hebrew*.

12. For a reliable introductory textbook for classical Latin, one can hardly do better than *Wheelock's Latin*; for the Latin of the early church, see Collins, *Primer of Ecclesiastical*

There is a common expectation that well-prepared doctoral students can not only engage well with the biblical text, but also the relevant secondary literature. While many books, essays, and articles are in English, there is also a wealth of information relevant to biblical studies in German and French. It is highly recommended that a basic knowledge of German grammar is acquired before beginning a doctoral program. Acquiring this language knowledge can happen in a number of ways. One route is to take a course (or series of courses). It is not necessarily the best option to take a traditional modern German language course. These kinds of courses tend to focus on carrying on everyday conversations, are often pitched at students that have never learned a language before, and frequently work at such a slow pace that one must advance through three to four levels to progress to reasonable fluency. What a doctoral student in biblical studies needs is competency in *reading*, not necessarily *speaking*. More suitable would be a course specifically designed for graduate students who are learning a language only for reading academic works. These sorts of classes are not uncommon. For example, Harvard offers a summer course called "Introduction to German for Reading Knowledge." A course like this introduces the student to basic grammar and requires her to learn vocabulary that is most important for academic study.

Another option, if you are not able to enroll in a grammar course, is to develop an independent study course. There are two excellent textbooks specifically geared towards teaching basic grammar to graduate students for research purposes: April Wilson's *German Quickly: A Grammar for Reading German*, and Richard Alan Korb's *Jannach's German for Reading Knowledge*. I tend to refer students to Wilson's textbook, as she includes some theological and philosophical reading exercises.[13] Aside from learning foundational grammar, the most profitable route for strengthening German knowledge is simply to read German. I highly recommend *Modern Theological German: A Reader and Dictionary*, which works through a number of biblical texts in German and progresses to excerpts from theologians such as Martin Luther, Adolf Schlatter, and Karl Barth, giving grammatical helps along the way. Again, once basic grammatical concepts and paradigms are committed to memory, one is best served by a trial-and-error approach

Latin.

13. More bibliographic and research advice pertaining to German study and usage appears in the discussion of dissertation writing in [x-ref].

where you attempt to translate a text and then compare your work with a professional translation.

Is it acceptable to learn German "on my own," without a course? From one perspective, the only thing that really matters is that you know enough German to work well with the secondary literature of your field. However, two factors are important to consider. First, it takes a lot of self-motivation and discipline to sustain a regular program of language study. For most people, it is important, and sometimes necessary, to have the built-in work of regular tutorials, graded assignment, and the ability to ask questions and interact with others. Also, having peers who are going through the same language battle can be an important source of encouragement and motivation. Secondly, it is difficult to prove your level of proficiency on doctoral applications without evidence from your transcripts.

How do you know when you have learned enough German? My recommendation is that you should be able to translate a scholarly piece of work at the rate of one page every 15–20 minutes with the aid of your grammar helps and a German-English dictionary. It is not unreasonable to aim for this goal with two graduate-level independent study courses that work through a basic textbook such as Wilson or Kolb/Jannach.

Though German is, by far, the most important modern language that students of the Bible need to learn (aside from English), there is also a good amount of literature in French. Once you have built up a comfortable proficiency in German, a course of study in French is highly recommended. For many doctoral programs, some training in German is assumed (prior to application) and French is "highly recommended." Obviously, to put oneself in the most impressive position, facility with both is encouraged. In terms of resources, I have found no better textbook than K. C. Sandberg and Eddison C. Tatham's *French for Reading*, which follows a similar teaching philosophy as the German books mentioned above.

One final recommendation: while the goal is to be able to read German and French, and it is not necessary to learn to speak fluently, many students I know have benefited greatly from spending some time learning these languages (or practicing them) in Germany and/or France. The Goethe-Institut offers a very flexible program of language study in Germany that provides world-class grammatical instruction alongside immersion in the culture.[14]

14. Visit their website at www.goethe.de/enindex.htm.

To summarize this section on language learning, for those studying New Testament, my recommendations for proficiency are as follows: Greek (high), Hebrew (moderate), German (moderate), French (basic), Latin (basic), Aramaic (basic). Ideally, prior to applying for a doctoral program, a student will have secured knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and some German.[15]

References

A standard part of doctoral applications is scholarly references. Academic references give a personal look into the lives of the applicants and serve as further evidence that the prospective student is the kind of person represented in the transcripts and curricula vitae (CV). Typically, an application will require between two to four recommendations from professors that you have known for at least a year (but preferably two or more). It is important to choose your referees carefully. You want to maintain a good balance between picking someone that adores you and will say the "right things" and someone who is well-known but cannot speak knowledgably about your coursework and research capabilities. Here are a few principles to help guide how you shape and build relationships.

First, aim for at least one "senior scholar" referee. A senior scholar is someone who has gained a high level of respect in his or her field (usually through publishing, teaching, and discipline leadership). Normally, to obtain a good recommendation from such a person, you would need to take a course (ideally two or more) from him or her and do well enough to draw attention. This should not be done as a sycophant, but by hard work and a genuine interest in the course content.

If you can obtain references from three senior scholars, that is admirable and will strengthen an application. However, it is difficult to have close contact with so many of them and, thus, it is inevitable for most people that recommendations come from other educators. It is important to ensure that all referees are men and women of integrity and that they know the applicant well enough to give an informed reflection on his or her suitability for doctoral work.

It is helpful to aim for some diversity in your referees. Your application can appear a bit bland if all three references come from New Testament (or

15. For Old Testament study: Hebrew (high), Greek (moderate), Aramaic (moderate), Akkadian (moderate), Ugaritic (moderate), Latin (basic).

Old Testament) scholars from the same situation. A better scenario would be to have at least one reference from another institution (e.g., if you studied at one place for a master of divinity, and at another place for a master of theology).

Thirdly, help your referee by preparing a set of informative personal materials. Though referees may like you and show eagerness to endorse your application, they are often writing recommendations for numerous people, and sometimes forget specific achievements. A list of items to help them write their recommendations may include transcripts (undergraduate and graduate), your CV, and a writing sample. You may also want to include, for the referee, personal information about nonacademic achievements, ministry involvement (if applicable and relevant), and significant cross-cultural experiences. Imagine yourself in the position of the one writing the reference—what kind of information would you want and need to know to write an accurate and appealing endorsement?

You may also want to furnish your referees with your research proposal if the program to which you are applying requires one (e.g., British programs and American ones such as Wheaton Graduate School). This allows the referee to make useful connections between your topic of interest and those courses which you took that contributed to your knowledge of that area.

How can I know if a referee will write something good? It is helpful to keep in mind that the referee usually knows that the student is specifically relying on good references to gain admission into a doctoral program. Nevertheless, we have all heard horror stories about negative references. To be clear, it is poor practice to open a reference without the permission of the referee. In many cases, the referee will be required (by the doctoral program standards) to seal the envelope, place a piece of tape over the flap, and sign across it to prove that the student has not looked at it. A helpful way to know for sure how the referee feels about your work is to ask him or her in person. Set up a time to sit down with a potential referee and say, "I am interested in applying for a doctoral program at [such and such a university]. Do you think I am ready for that academic level? Would you be willing to write a *strong* reference for me?" It would be unusual for the professor to give you direct feedback that would contradict what he or she would write on paper.

Standardized Test Scores (Julianna Smith)[16]

The GRE (Graduate Record Exam) is a standard admissions requirement for many graduate programs. There are two different types of exams: subject tests and the general test. Many graduate programs only require the general test, although it is a good idea to look at your desired program's requirement before beginning the exam preparation process.

The general test (the most commonly required test for biblical studies, religion, etc. programs) is a 225-minute, computer-based test divided into three sections. The first section is analytical writing, and it tests critical thinking, the ability to develop coherent ideas on complex issues and clarity of written expression. The writing section contains two writing prompts: analyze an issue and analyze an argument. Test-takers are given thirty minutes for each prompt.

The second section is the verbal reasoning section. It evaluates the test-taker's ability to discern relationships between words and clauses, as well as analyze written material. One of the challenging parts of this section is its breadth of vocabulary. It requires the examinee to use words she might not use in daily discourse. The written material presented for analysis may cover a variety of subjects, including literature, history, "hard sciences," and social sciences, etc. This section is divided into two thirty-minute units.

The final section is the quantitative reasoning. This section covers basic problem-solving and evaluation of quantitative data and requires the use of arithmetic, basic algebra and geometry, and data analysis. This section does not measure the test-taker's ability to use advanced mathematical concepts. The quantitative analysis section is divided into two thirty-five-minute units.

During the exam, time is allotted for a short break. Some test-takers may receive additional test sections for research purposes, which are unscored. As the test-taker, you may or may not be informed if you are receiving an unscored section; therefore, it is in your interest to treat each section as if it will be included in your final score.

There are a blessed few people applying for graduate programs who will clear the GRE hurdle with grace and ease. Many more will struggle through this test, and their scores will be more reflective of their grit and tenacity than verbal or quantitative ability. Accept early in the process that

16. This section on the GRE was kindly written by Julianna Smith, a former student of mine at Portland Seminary and currently a doctoral student at UCLA.

preparing for the test might take more hours than you want to give it and more money than you want to spend on it.

One of the important keys to scoring well on this exam is familiarity with the types of questions the GRE asks. Through repeated exposure, one learns the logic of the test. This is important because most people do not encounter test questions like those on the GRE anywhere in their university education. Related to this is training to sit for a 225-minute exam. Even if one has mastered the material covered in the test, he might not have ever had to maintain that level of focus for that long. Learning the test form matters almost as much as mastering the test content.

How can one appropriately prepare for this form of exam? Taking a series of full-length, scored practice tests is the best way. There are many GRE test-preparation companies that sell this type of practice test. While investing in these scored practice tests might not be the way anyone wants to spend their money, most of the tests will analyze the test-taker's performance and identify content areas in need of improvement. Equipped with these analytics, it is easier to determine which content areas to study. After studying those content areas, one should take another test and see if the score has improved to an acceptable level, repeating the process as necessary. These practice tests, running about twenty US dollars apiece, can give one a good sense for how she might perform. This investment pays off in the long run. It is much cheaper to buy multiple practice tests than to pay to take the actual test, running around two hundred US dollars, more than once.

Each graduate committee functions differently and gives each of the component parts of the application different weight. It is probably safe to say that most programs are not heavily weighting the applicant's GRE score when they consider all of the application materials. That said, a poor score does not ever do the applicant any favors. Elite programs attract elite candidates, and it is accurate to assume these programs will annually attract multiple applicants who have flawless transcripts, strong recommendations, and compelling writing samples. In this type of applicant pool, a good GRE score demonstrates a certain consistency in academic performance, and a poor score may eliminate an application from consideration.

In order to determine the score for which you should aim, check the website of the department/college to which you are applying. Sometimes you can find information on the average GRE scores of admitted applicants or "tips" for applying. Most schools do not publish a minimally acceptable

GRE score, so determining a score for which to aim is highly subjective. By way of anecdote, committees for biblical studies, history, and the like are more concerned about verbal and writing scores than quantitative analysis scores. Again, however, in a strong applicant pool, there is less room for application weaknesses—even a quantitative analysis score. Although identifying a definitive score for which to aim is fraught with challenges, elite programs in biblical studies *generally* accept applicants with verbal scores of 160 or higher, quantitative scores of 151 or higher, and analytical writing scores of five or higher.

Research/Publishing Record

Beyond taking certain courses and acquiring various degrees, a good doctoral program will be impressed to see any published work or evidence of scholarly interaction. At the undergraduate and master's level, it is rare to see students who have published books and articles (though not impossible!). There are a number of ways to get experience in this area. One route is to try and publish a book review.[17] Another option is to become a part-time research assistant for a professor of your current institution and ask him or her if you can contribute, even if in a small way, to their work. Perhaps it may only be by working on an index or bibliography, but any experience is useful. A third consideration is presenting an academic paper at a conference.[18] Finally, there may be some merits to beginning an academic blog. Any practice that you can get writing, revising, and thinking on paper (or screen!) contributes to improving the process of reflection and communication. It has yet to be seen, though, how blogs are viewed in terms of academic validity. Merely writing for a blog will not instantly give credibility; content is certainly the key to proving the worth of one's writing and research skills.

Teaching Experience

Teaching is, of course, the ultimate goal of many students who wish to pursue a doctorate. However, very few students have the opportunity to teach

17. A more thorough discussion of how to write and publish a book review appears in [x-ref].

18. A more thorough discussion of how to write an academic paper and get it accepted appears in [x-ref].

prior to beginning a postgraduate program. Seminaries in particular rarely have teaching fellowships available to master's students. But, if your institution does have teaching assistants for biblical studies, Greek, or Hebrew, it is a worthwhile opportunity. Aside from the assumption that it looks good on a CV, it allows you to sample the atmosphere of the lecturer/instructor and see if it is a good vocational match. It also provides a context for creativity, a place to learn pedagogical skills, and an atmosphere where you must learn to be clear, direct, and organized.

Other possibilities to pursue are teaching as an adjunct instructor at a local community college or working with any schools that have online teaching opportunities. And, of course, there may be occasions in faith-community settings for teaching non-academics. Any little bit can help to gain experience and also to demonstrate skills in communication and pedagogy.

Institutional "Fit"

Prospective doctoral students are often wise to send out a set of applications to several programs—elite programs have very limited spots, so the theory is that *applying to more programs increases the chances of acceptance somewhere*. Indeed, applying to more than one program is advised. But the danger in applying to several programs is the temptation to reuse application materials like CV, cover letter, application essays, etc. This can give such materials a generic quality. But it is important to know that admissions committees are eager to know (a) the student has a specific interest in *their* program with its distinctives and (b) the application materials demonstrate that the prospective student will contribute meaningfully to that particular programs research interests. Thus, while reuse of some application materials is necessary and unproblematic, each application to each program ought to address that program's unique faculty and program interests.

The "X" Factor

We have addressed eight elements that appear to factor into doctoral admissions. But there is another dimension that we can add that should not be ignored—what I call the "X" factor. In the end, one can check every box, so to speak, and follow every recommendation and still not find a place in a good program. The simple reason is *competition*—admissions committees

have to sort through (sometimes) over a hundred applicants, which include dozens of highly qualified candidates. The only way to get noticed is to be *noticeable*. There is no magic formula for how to do that. The first step is awareness that most of the applicants have good grades, good references, and studied at good schools. You have to ask yourself, *what can I offer that is unique?* One way to distinguish yourself is to "diversify" your background and portfolio.

Diversification can occur on many levels. One is, of course, the institution(s) of education. Studying for one bachelor's degree and two master's degrees at the same institution can give the impression that a student has had a very homogenous and one-dimensional education. Compare that with a student that went to a state college and studied some form of humanities (classics, literature, history, or anthropology), then went to a seminary for a master's, and then went to a different seminary for another master's.

For some students, they will stand out because they have learned specialty languages (such as Syriac or Coptic). Others will impress a committee with exceptionally high grades or test scores. Another person may pique interest because she studied in Jerusalem for a term. Or perhaps a committee takes interest in a student's degree in classics. Again, the point is to place yourself in a position that will cause your application to be noticed.

CHOOSING A DEGREE PROGRAM

It should be obvious that any doctoral program will expect that, prior to entrance, a student has completed a bachelor's degree. Additionally, in almost all cases, a master's degree is also expected, and this information has been presupposed here. However, in biblical studies, there are several kinds of graduate programs, and it is sometimes difficult to decide which one is best both for preparation and in the eyes of the admissions committee.

It is common for students in this field to consider either a master of divinity or a master of arts in some area of biblical studies (e.g., MA in New Testament, MA in Biblical Studies, MA in Biblical Languages). The decision regarding which degree program is best depends on a number of factors: time and money available to complete degrees, vocational interests, type of doctoral program of interest, and subject interests. At this stage, a few notes should be made. First, a typical master of arts is two years (full-time). Though it is focused on a particular (sub-)discipline (such as

New Testament), it is difficult to fit in all of the language and methodology courses needed in such a short time, unless one has already studied this field in depth in an undergraduate program. What ends up happening is that students choose to do two master's degrees at the same time (or consecutively) and, because some classes overlap, the total time spent is about three years. It is more likely that the appropriate skills and information can be learned in that amount of time.

One must keep in mind that applications for doctoral programs are sent several months in advance of matriculation (about six to eight months), and if one is doing only one Master of Arts, she has had only one year under her belt before writing a CV or writing sample for the academic portfolio (see the next chapter for application details). This can feel intimidating and premature.

Many students opt to earn a master of divinity (MDiv). This degree is typically longer than a master of arts (MA). However, since it is a practitioner's degree (geared towards vocational training for pastors), and not primarily a research degree, it is difficult to prepare for a PhD with a traditional MDiv. There are several ways to compensate for this. In the first place, it is imperative that electives are chosen carefully, focusing on biblical languages, exegetical methods, and the development of research and writing skills. Others, including myself, have chosen to earn a master of theology (ThM) after the master of divinity. A ThM is a short research degree that follows an MDiv and is used as a stepping stone from ministerial training to advanced academic research. While some of the courses of a ThM may resemble MA courses, they are meant to be at a level slightly higher than normal master's work. Two elements typically make a ThM distinct. First, there is often a seminar-like component where students interact and discuss advanced issues in a more doctoral-like setting. The kind of debate and feedback in such courses are intended to prepare students for the setting of the supervision meeting, doctoral seminar, and academic conference. Secondly, there is typically a strong *writing* component, often in the form of a thesis whose word count ranges from fifteen thousand to fifty thousand.

When considering final employment, some seminaries tend to hire only students who have an MDiv. This usually demonstrates the applicants' commitment to a ministry focus and shows solidarity with the majority of students of a seminary (where the MDiv is the most commonly earned

degree).[19] At other places of employment (such as a university where research in religious studies in the focus), the MDiv would not be a preferred degree.

In the end, it should be recognized that, in most doctoral programs, there would be little or no bias against an MDiv, though the committee may look carefully at the coursework and observe whether the student has studied at an advanced-enough level. In some cases, it may be advised that students pursue a ThM beyond the MDiv to prepare them more suitably for the doctoral level.

In any case, I highly advise writing a master's thesis to gain the important experience of research towards composing a single piece of work that involves the defense of a unique contribution to knowledge (however modest it may be). There is no substitute for the trial-and-error skills gained by attempting to develop and pursue research questions, determining the best supportive material with clear goals and conclusions. Typically, the experience of the master's thesis will include an oral defense, which offers a crucial opportunity to experience critical dialogue and interaction on the thesis.

CONCLUSION

The journey to the PhD can be very daunting. The point of this chapter was not to turn students away from the path, but to give a reasonable set of expectations for what it would take to be competitive in the application pool. Becoming an academic scholar in biblical studies is not something one can do on a whim. At the same time, it is not necessarily an occupation reserved for the genius. A professor once told me that getting a PhD is one part brains, two parts ambition.

In the next chapter, we will discuss what the application process actually looks like and how to navigate through it.

19. However, according to the Association of Theological Schools, over the last ten years there has been a decrease of students earning the MDiv (-14 percent), and an overall increase of students earning professional/academic MAs (+11 percent); see Association of Theological Schools, "Transitions: 2017 Annual Report," 9.