

Trinity Centre for Biblical Studies

Post-graduates in Focus Series

An interview with Michael Morris who completed the Ph.D. programme in 2016.¹

Michael, sincere thanks for participating in this series.

Do you mind telling us a little about what you have been doing in the last five years since finishing your Ph.D. at Trinity College Dublin?

Upon completion of my programme, I taught biblical studies classes for the St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado. After two years in Denver, I joined the theology faculty at the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota. One of my duties at U Mary is as director of the Christian Leadership Center, which is the ecumenical arm of the university. As director, I am in charge of organizing panel discussions, speakers, and other events for pastors and religious leaders in the area. There was a strong sense of ecumenism and support for interreligious dialogue during my time at Trinity, which I believed prepared me for my current position. And while settling into my new duties could be, at times, overwhelming, I was still able to revise my thesis for publication, publish a couple book reviews, and work on several conference papers which are forthcoming. I also got married, so life has been full of exciting changes.

You published a revised version of your Ph.D. thesis, can you tell us a little about your research and your experiences publishing? [here please give title of book with bibliographical info]

My thesis, *Warding Off Evil: Apotropaic Tradition in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Synoptic Gospels*, WUNT II 451 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck) was published in 2017. The first part of my study is an assessment of anti-demonic traditions represented in early Jewish literature, especially the Dead Sea Scrolls and Jewish Pseudepigrapha. Special attention is given to the distinction between curative (“exorcistic”) and preventative (“apotropaic”) prayers and practices. After this initial effort to explore the complexities of early Jewish demonological traditions, the potential influence of these traditions upon the synoptic gospels is examined. One result of this inquiry is that, just as there is a distinction between apotropaic and exorcistic prayers and practices in early Jewish literature, so too this distinction appears in the synoptic material. Moreover, understanding the nuances of apotropaic and exorcistic passages is helpful for gaining a deeper insight into the synoptics’ reception of early Jewish tradition. For instance, the presence of apotropaisms in the synoptic gospels can have broader implications for demonology, eschatology, and the depiction of Jesus and his confrontations with evil.

It was an honour to have my thesis accepted for publication by Mohr Siebeck, especially since most of the critical works used in my research were Mohr Siebeck publications, especially from the WUNT I & II series. In all honesty, preparing my

¹ This is the fifth in a series of interviews with Ph.D. students, and recent graduates, who are members of the Trinity Centre for Biblical Studies.

manuscript for publication was a bit more time-consuming than I anticipated. However, the editors at Mohr Siebeck were patient and helpful. Once the editorial process was complete and my thesis published, the feeling of accomplishment was (and still is) tremendous.

Why did you choose to come to TCD for your Ph.D.?

My interest in the biblical world made me very curious about early Judaism and the complexities of Jewish traditions during the time of Jesus. I was familiar with some of Seán Freyne's contributions in this area, and his profile on the TCD website included an email address so I wrote to him. We corresponded several times initially, and when he learned of my interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls he suggested I contact Benjamin Wold. Dr. Wold and I conversed over email and Skype, and he even met with me during a summer trip to Dublin. It became clear that I had a lot to learn from Dr. Wold, and he, in turn, was very supportive of my research interests. Dr. Wold followed up with me and guided me through the programme application process. I had been told by numerous professors and mentors that a healthy, productive the student-supervisor relationship is critical for a successful completion of the programme. Therefore, when I was offered the chance to study under Dr. Wold, it was an easy decision.

What are some of the highlights of your time at TCD?

It is great being in the city centre of Dublin. At the University, the symposiums and conferences were top-notch events with some of the best speakers. I was able to meet and talk with many top specialists in my field at Trinity events. My relationships with my supervisor and my fellow postgrads was also a highlight. And, of course, the library is fantastic!

Do you have any advice for prospective Ph.D. students?

Take your time when deciding on a specific programme and research topic. At a certain point you'll inevitably get frustrated with or tired of your topic, so it's important to choose something you're genuinely interested in to carry you through the stretches of monotony! Also, the student-supervisor relationship can really make or break your Ph.D. experience. Take your time deciding who you want to study under for the next few years. It's also important to choose a supervisor who is supportive of your research interests, but still pushes you to do critical research.

Thank you, Michael, we really appreciate you taking the time to respond to our questions.