

Trinity Centre for Biblical Studies

Post-graduates in Focus Series

An interview with Kate Oxsen, fourth year Ph.D. candidate in the School of Religion, TCD.¹

Kate, thank you for taking the time to share with us today.

Would you mind telling us about how you became interested in the academic study of biblical literature?

It really goes back to a time when I joined a Bible study course at a parish near my hometown in California. The woman who taught the course was a biblical scholar herself, so it was not the usual Bible study one might expect to find at a church. It was a heavily academic and we learned a lot about various scholarly debates and interpretations of biblical texts – not only that, but we learned a fair bit about Hebrew and Greek, too! I found it to be fascinating and exciting. So much so that it inspired me to pursue these studies myself

Why did you choose to come to TCD for your PhD programme?

I chose TCD because of David Shepherd, the prospective supervisor I had been communicating with during the application process. He was very responsive, enthusiastic, and supportive of me as I was applying. Through our various communications I came to feel that he would be someone I could work well with and trust to support me through the PhD process. The decision to accept the offer from TCD – and to move my entire life to another country – was easy for me because of this.

Would you mind sharing what your current project is about?

I am doing a narrative analysis of the book of Esther (focusing on the character of Esther) alongside the narratives in which we find Bathsheba and Jezebel. This means that I am looking at various aspects of their narratives together and analysing their commonalities and differences to see what new insights might arise.

You are currently in the final year of the four-year programme, how has the research environment at TCD influenced your project since you began?

The environment in which I work has been very supportive. Professors I have encountered in the School of Religion have been more than willing to share their experiences, insights, and “work styles” with me. These conversations have helped me grow as a researcher and writer.

There are also plenty of opportunities to attend (and present at) research seminars and conferences, which can be helpful for practicing and gaining the skills necessary for those seeking to work in academia.

¹ This is the second in a series of interviews with Ph.D. candidates who are members of the Trinity Centre for Biblical Studies.

This past summer I spent two months in Jerusalem thanks to the Erasmus+ scholarships available for students of the School of Religion. Fellow Ph.D. student Lynn Mills and I travelled there together and were able to meet with other biblical scholars and archaeologists. We spent time on an archaeological dig, toured many other dig sites, and attended a wonderful conference. During this time, we were also able to do research at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. We got to travel all around the land - from the northernmost border down to the southernmost, from the east to the west. It was an amazing experience that would never have happened if I had not come to TCD!

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

The weekly seminars and the lunches that follow have been some of my favourite experiences at TCD. They provide opportunities to hear about new or different areas of research – which is often a welcome break from thinking about my own project! The lunches afterwards are a nice way for us all to get together and chat about our lives outside of university and get to know each other better.

Dublin is a fascinating city with a lot to offer and explore. In fact, this is true for the entire island of Ireland! It is relatively easy to travel around and there are many types of day or weekend trips one can take around the island that will not leave you bankrupt. I have gone on almost all the day trips that leave from Dublin city and none of them have disappointed. Ireland is a beautiful place with a deep and rich history. I am so grateful I was given the opportunity to study here.

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

Finding the right supervisor may be the best thing you can do for yourself. You can go to the most prestigious university in the world or work with the “super star” of your field but if you do not have a good working relationship with your supervisor, the rest will be of no consolation to you.

When preparing to apply to schools, reach out to professors you might want to work with. Then narrow universities down according to the professors with whom you interacted and felt you would work well. Not all supervisors are able to provide support in the way you might need – and that is okay. Look for someone who can provide you the best support possible, while also understanding that no relationship is a one-way street. As with any relationship, compromise and sacrifice will be necessary at different points. If you find the right person to work with, though, the most important things will remain intact.

It is commonly known that doing a Ph.D. program is stressful and a lot of hard work (writing and editing and deadlines, oh my!), but this is only a part of what makes it so challenging. Going through a Ph.D. program is a transformative process that will force you to confront your insecurities and weaknesses, but it will also teach you wonderful things about yourself along the way. Be prepared to do that type of inner work, and do not hesitate to get help if/when you need it.

Thank you, Kate, we really appreciate you taking the time to speak with us.