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Choosing a Doctoral Program (Chapter 1 of Prepare, Succeed, Advance: A Guidebook for Getting a PhD in Biblical Studies and Beyond)

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Choosing a Doctoral Program

Perhaps the greatest challenge for someone wanting to become a professor in biblical studies is selecting the best kind of program and institution at which to study. Furthermore, it is not only important to calculate the various factors involved in making the decision, but also thinking through the process and contingent issues ahead of time. Practically speaking, the advice offered in this book may be utilized and applied more efficiently for someone at the beginning of his or her master's degree (or, even better, during a bachelor's degree) than, for instance, at the stage of actually applying for the doctoral program. The reason why this is the case is because certain things can be done during one's earlier education to align more properly with the kind of institution at which one might desire to seek admission.

In this chapter, we will discuss the key factors that one must consider when choosing doctoral programs, the difference between the American and British systems of education, and various ideological and philosophical considerations that usually contribute to making the "right" decision.

THE BIG SIX FACTORS: THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION, PRESTIGE AND DIFFICULTY, MONEY, TIME, LOCATION, AND LIBRARY

Where does one begin when selecting prospective schools for doctoral study? There are natural places that one might turn. Some people look at where their own undergraduate and graduate professors have studied.

Others note where students who came before them in their institution tend to go. There appears to be, though, a cluster of factors that generally weigh into the decision for most students: theological orientation, prestige and difficulty, money, time, location, and library. It is important to note, though, that the significance of the various factors vary from person to person. Indeed, some people may only take interest in a select few of these or make their decision on the basis of only one or two. But, again, working on the principle that knowledge offers decision-making empowerment, I will discuss all six factors, and I hope it will become clear what their general relevance might be, though you may decide for yourself which factors are most crucial.

Theological Orientation

There are all kinds of places where one could choose to study for a PhD. There are Baptist schools and Methodist schools. There are institutions that are consciously ecumenical or interdenominational, and there are schools that are intentionally disinterested in ecclesial distinctives and “church” matters. It is reasonable, then, to consider what your educational goals are and how significant it is (if at all) to choose an institution that shares your theological interests, challenges them, or works completely apart from a “faith” perspective. On the one hand, some students desire to study in an academic environment that trains scholars to critically engage the biblical text without presumption about doctrine and creed. Others desire to teach within their own denomination and find it desirable to study at a doctoral level within that denomination to work more deeply within and for the benefit of their own tradition. Each person must decide on his or her own academic objectives and how best to go about fulfilling them.

On a personal note, though, I would add a bit of advice that was passed down to me with regard to this matter. There is a distinct advantage to studying in a university setting versus a seminary (that has no partnering university). From an academic standpoint, the university doctoral student often has access to a wide range of other departments, their faculty, and their library resources. This would permit, if desired, the potential for cross-disciplinary engagement, as a New Testament student could interact with and benefit from departments of history, classics, philosophy, anthropology, literature, sociology, and so forth. Some seminaries, though,

participate in institutional consortia where one could take courses at partnering schools in their region.

Prestige and Difficulty

There is no getting around the fact that certain institutions are well known for academic excellence (e.g., Princeton, Cambridge, Oxford, Notre Dame, Duke). And, of course, there is a *reason* why these places bear such reputations. In general, they maintain a strong commitment to offering the best education with leading scholars. Though we will later address which kinds of schools are acclaimed for their religion/biblical studies departments or programs, this factor is significant in general for more than just self-satisfaction (which is, of course, also important). When it comes to the highly competitive job market, *where* you studied matters a lot in many cases. If your doctoral institution is academically very discerning in terms of admission, and you made it through successfully, there is the prudent presumption that you have very estimable academic qualities.

The flip side to this matter of prestige is that such programs are usually rigorous, either in the difficulty of their examinations or in the standards for the dissertation or both. It probably seems like an obvious decision to shoot for the most prestigious program. However, there may be reasons why this may be unnecessary. For instance, if someone was teaching at a small institution with only a master's degree and he or she was guaranteed employment upon completion of the PhD, it might not be a high priority to choose a very exclusive and probably difficult program since the hurdle of job-hunting is not an issue.¹

Money

Academia, for many of us "academics," is about some of the best things in life: new ideas, dialogue, problem-solving, etc. However, as much as we would like infinite freedom to sit in a comfortable armchair and read good books, or discuss important ideas with colleagues and peers over coffee, the reality is that we need to have the resources to study and continue to

1. Of course, I am not suggesting that one aim high *only* for the sake of attracting the attention of employers. I raise the issue primarily because most doctoral students express concerns about finding a good and suitable position upon completion of their PhD and choose their program with the future and their own employability in mind.

fund our “lives.” In the sciences, institutions of higher education tend to have the funding to allow students not to incur too much tuition debt. In the humanities, however, opportunities for salary-like funding for doctoral students are very hard to come by. Therefore, for many prospective doctoral students in biblical studies (and other theological disciplines), it can come down to money. Some doctoral programs, if they offer no help with tuition or with a stipend, can lead students into a debt of over one hundred thousand dollars after the completion of their degree! Other programs, though they might offer a tuition waiver, still leave students with the responsibility for day-to-day expenses. Obviously, if one were wary of accumulating debt from student loans, it would be important to find a “funded” program. However, if money was not an issue—let’s say you were awarded some kind of denominational grant or you lived off of personal savings—then you might feel more open to programs that have limited or no funding available. Many of my peers during my doctoral program depended on their spouse’s income. Most people survive based on a combination of scholarship aid, earned income, personal savings, loans, and help from friends and relatives.

Time

Doctoral programs in biblical studies vary considerably in terms of length.² In the United States, for example, it is often expected that students will complete a PhD in religious studies programs in four to five years. However, the reality is that most students take an additional one to three years to finish. For the completion of a PhD in humanities, the statistic has become rather well known that (1) students can take up to nine to ten years to finish their PhDs, and (2) half of these students don’t finish at all.³ How

2. One should also observe that there is sometimes a discrepancy between the expected length of a program and the actual average length that students take for completion. For example, in the United Kingdom, doctoral programs generally expect a thirty-six-month period of registration, whereas in reality students often require an additional year (and sometimes more) to complete the degree.

3. See the eye-opening study by Ehrenberg et al., “Inside the Black Box,” 134–50. Similar findings have been borne out by the study of the Council of Graduate Schools called “The PhD Completion Project” (<http://www.phdcompletion.org/>); cf. the advice given by The Fund for Theological Education (<http://www.fteleaders.org/blog/entry/25-things-you-should-know-before-applying-to-a-ph.d.-program-in-religi>). Practically speaking, Yale puts their average rate of completion for department of religion at 6.7 years (<http://www.yale.edu/graduateschool/academics/profiles/religiousstudies>).

tolerable one considers the amount of time depends significantly on other factors such as financial stability and the level of difficulty of the program (and sometimes the patience of your spouse and children!). Also, it may be important to consider how much coursework you have already undertaken prior to the doctorate. For example, before beginning my doctorate, I had earned a master of divinity (three years) and a master of theology (one year). Therefore, after four years of undergraduate coursework and four years of graduate work, I did not desire to complete another two years of doctoral courses. Alternatively, some students may feel that the additional coursework is necessary for their depth and breadth as a scholar, to help develop a research proposal for the dissertation, and/or to attract the attention of academic employers who often take an interest in those candidates that can teach broadly.

Location

The location of a prospective institution may play an important role in the selection of a doctoral program. Of course, some may prefer to be in sunny southern California, or the culturally and academically attractive environment of Boston. There are other “practical” considerations. Are you restricted to your current area for any reason: specific health needs, proximity to dependents, spouse’s workplace, children’s school? Does your current financial situation prohibit moving across the country or overseas? Again, one can see that *money*, *time*, and *location* are often interconnected.

Library

Does the research that you desire to do require a specific set of bibliographic resources? I will admit that when I was reviewing various doctoral programs in the United States and the United Kingdom, I glided right over comments about library holdings. Looking back now, it is actually a very important part of the overall experience. Imagine that during both coursework (if applicable) and dissertation writing you need to access two thousand items (articles, books, specialized manuscripts or databases). Consider the amount of time spent locating, collecting, and/or copying these items

pdf); Harvard: six to seven years (<http://studyofreligion.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k70796&pageid=icb.page342438>); Boston University: seven to eight years (<http://www.bu.edu/cas/pdfs/faculty-staff/strategic-data/GRS-HegisStudies-v2.pdf>).

if they are not easily available through your institution. Of course, most institutions have some kind of interlibrary loan system, but the delivery time and the cost of late fees may be seriously prohibitive.

Another consideration is whether the topic(s) you wish to pursue require special collections. For instance, some university or seminary libraries will have better references for the study of the Dead Sea scrolls than others. Or, only a select few university libraries may have the kind of resources you may need to study ancient Greek or Roman inscriptions. It is worthwhile to take these very practical sorts of matters into account in the selection of a doctoral program. All things being equal, it is attractive to pursue a school with a larger theology or religious studies collection, but if you are studying such topics like the historical Jesus or justification in Romans, you would probably be safe to assume that most major libraries will have the basic resources.

RANKING INSTITUTIONS: A TIERED APPROACH

It is quite obvious that institutions have their strengths and weaknesses, in terms of academics as well as a number of other qualities. Nevertheless, it is a normal practice and expectation that schools are ranked according to academic excellence. Americans often turn to the *US News and World Report* college and graduate school rankings. In the United Kingdom, several national higher education councils cooperatively sponsor the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which scores and ranks universities according to a number of academic criteria.⁴ When it comes to deciding on a graduate school, such general reports can be useful. However, this information tends to be very general, and often one is better advised to focus on the ranking of the particular department of interest. In 2012, R. R. Reno wrote “A 2012 Ranking of Graduate Programs in Theology.”⁵ Though the list is annotated, it is clearly subjective and certainly looks at the field of theology and religion as a whole. Nevertheless, it is a useful point of entry into the discussion.

For Reno, the ranking is as follows: (1) Duke Divinity School, (2) Notre Dame (Department of Theology), (3) Catholic University, (4) University

4. The REF evaluate scholars based on “the quality of outputs, their impact beyond academia, and the environment that supports research”; see Research Excellence Framework, “What Is the REF?”

5. Reno, “2012 Ranking.”

of Toronto, (5) Boston College, (6) Princeton Theological Seminary, (7) Perkins School of Theology (SMU), (8) Yale University, (9) Marquette University, and (10) University of Dayton. Whether or not one agrees with Reno's theological concerns, he goes on to make an important point about selecting the right graduate school: at such a level of study, the quality of the faculty is generally the most important factor. The natural corollary of this fact is that, as professors are constantly moving from one school to another, the ranking will change accordingly.

The approach we will take, instead of merely listing schools (which, again, is subjective and always in flux), is to think in terms of four major categories: first-tier American schools, second-tier American schools, American evangelical seminaries/graduate schools, and British universities. First-tier programs are universities and seminaries that are marked by distinguished faculty, a high level of faculty publishing, strict standards for acceptance, a generous level of student funding available, excellent library holdings and resources, and—usually as a natural outcome of these factors—a high placement for students seeking academic employment (among other things). Second-tier programs, while still excelling in some of these areas, simply do not reach the caliber of the first-tier schools, though in any one or two areas they may be outstanding. Of course, there will inevitably be third-tier and fourth-tier schools (and so forth), but if you are reading this book, chances are you are hoping to find an esteemed program into which you would fit. Therefore, we will only be discussing tier-one and tier-two institutions.

A large number of students choose to study at evangelical seminaries such as Fuller Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Dallas Theological Seminary, and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.⁶ Offering this group as an entirely separate category does not mean that they are not “first-tier,” but, rather, they tend to be discussed and ranked separately as they are mostly private, theologically-oriented institutions (as opposed to divinity schools linked to universities). Some students, especially evangelicals, prefer to study at a theologically-based seminary, so they may prioritize such an institution over other schools. In fact, though, it is often the case that students end up applying to a mixture of schools, some first-tier, some evangelical seminaries, and a few second-tier institutions.

6. The Association of Theological Schools contains over 50 institutional members with doctoral programs.

Below, the factors involved in making such a decision will be discussed further.

A fourth group is British universities. As a graduate of a British university, I often get this question from relatives and friends: “Why did you choose to do your PhD in England?” The fact of the matter is that the study of theological disciplines has a very long and distinguished history in the United Kingdom. Thus, there are a high number of departments of theology and religion that are thriving. Indeed, many of my seminary professors studied in England or Scotland. In fact, in my doctoral program at the University of Durham, the majority of biblical studies doctoral students were American. This is also the case at many major British universities in their theology departments (and especially in biblical studies). In the end, though, the choice of many Americans studying in British universities comes down to the desire to work with particular supervisors on a research project.

FIRST-TIER AMERICAN SCHOOLS VERSUS BRITISH UNIVERSITIES

In general, when graduate students in biblical studies examine the top doctoral programs, attention usually turns to top-tier American schools or prestigious British universities.⁷ Before comparing the advantages of each kind of program, we will briefly describe the approach to the doctorate of each type.

First-Tier American Schools

As noted above, schools that typically maintain a first-tier status in the area of New Testament include places like Princeton Theological Seminary, Yale Graduate School, Notre Dame, and Emory Graduate School. Places such as these hold a worldwide reputation of academic excellence. Almost all of these schools are top-notch institutions in a variety of fields and are recognized worldwide for academic excellence. Many of them have historical

7. There are, of course, other possibilities, such as studying in Germany, Australia, or Canada. We will not discuss these programs for two reasons. In the first place, my own experience (in terms of making applications) has been focused on America and the United Kingdom. Secondly, the majority of students of the New Testament study in the latter two places.

connections to a denomination, though for some of these such a history plays only a small role in the current life of the community.

First-tier American programs tend to be five to seven⁸ years in length. Almost all American programs require doctoral-level coursework and examinations (typically two to three years) and the writing and defense of a dissertation (typically two to four years). In terms of course and examination structure, students are often required to select a minor field in addition to New Testament. The number of doctoral students in New Testament tends to be quite small, as such places normally accept only a few students in this subdiscipline of religion. As for funding, first-tier American programs tend to be very generous with financial aid packages: usually incoming students receive a tuition waiver or reduction, as well as a living and research stipend. At many of the first-tier schools, additional income can come from teaching fellowships.

British Universities

The British system of education is remarkably different than the American system. In the first place, British PhD programs typically require *no* coursework; the focus of the degree is squarely on the dissertation—both its excellence as a written piece of original research and a successful defense by the student before his or her examiners. Because of the nature of the program (independent research under supervision), the timeframe is normally three years of study. However, in reality, students in biblical studies tend to require more time to complete the degree.

While coursework is not required for the degree and work on the dissertation begins immediately, it is a tradition of most British theology departments to have a New Testament or biblical studies “seminar” that meets regularly. This seminar is not technically a course, but a regularly scheduled meeting for graduate students where a schedule is set up of professional scholars (both from inside the university and outside) who come to the department to “give a paper” (i.e. present a lecture or scholarly proposal).

8. Duke Graduate School lists the average years-to-completion for students in the religion department to be 6.7 years—in the first edition of *Prepare, Succeed, Advance*, about ten years ago, that number was 5.7 years (<https://gradschool.duke.edu/about/statistics/all-departments-phd-time-degree-statistics>). According to an orientation document for prospective students of Princeton Theological Seminary, the PhD program is designed to be completed in no more than five years of full-time study (see Princeton Theological Seminary, “PhD Studies”).

PREPARE

After the paper is presented, there is usually a time of questions, comments, and critical feedback from the audience of students and scholarly staff. Some seminars meet frequently (e.g., once a week), and others meet only occasionally (e.g., twice a semester or term). Students are not usually “required” to attend these seminars, but they are very strongly encouraged to do so to further their breadth of knowledge, develop their understanding of how to develop an argument and utilize evidence, and to engage in the material themselves by offering feedback.

Advantages of the First-Tier American Programs

Funding

It is a serious relief to study in graduate school without incurring too much debt or overextending yourself with earning income outside of the university. Though stipends are not extravagant, many students opt for American first-tier programs largely because of the financial stability that is offered.

Prestige and Excellence

Let’s be honest. Many people dream of attending institutions such as Yale and Notre Dame. These schools have reputations for being birthplaces of world-changing ideas, programs, discoveries, and initiatives. As a result, at such places one has the opportunity to learn from world-class faculty, as well as alongside excelling students.

Cross-Discipline Training

As most American first-tier schools have coursework and require a non-New Testament minor, there is a significant element of cross-disciplinary training built into their programs. One can have advanced training in such areas as classics, social sciences, philology and linguistics, and/or ancient Judaism.

Library Holdings

Again, it is easy to underestimate the importance of the quality of the library. To have extensive and often rare book and resource collections means not only that these places are heavily invested in the research of their students, but also that students can progress in their research more quickly and efficiently in comparison to other programs.

Advantages of the British Programs

Prestige and Academic Excellence

Many UK universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, benefit from world-ranking academic classifications.⁹ As such, they certainly rival, in terms of prestige and academic excellence, the American top-tier programs.

International Study

It is usually seen as an advantage to be able to study internationally where one's culturally-formed views are challenged. Also, studying in England offers Americans easy access geographically to places of interest for New Testament research such as Rome, Greece, and Turkey, and also European conferences in places like Germany and Scandinavia. Additionally, if one is interested in the Roman Empire, Britain has much to offer in and of itself, including preserved Roman fortifications, columns, bath houses, and various "Roman Britain" museums and historical records. Finally, the small size of the United Kingdom and the relative ease of travel via train afford an ease of opportunity to travel to other universities for conferences and academic workshops.

9. In *US News'* 2018 "World's Best Universities," two British universities (Cambridge and Oxford) rated in the top seven ([http:// https://www.usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/](http://https://www.usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/)).

Program Length

If one has studied in higher education for five to six years, entering a lengthy doctoral program could be daunting. The British programs, as they are solely focused on the dissertation, allow students to finish in about three years.

No Coursework

Closely related to the program length is the fact that there is no coursework in traditional British programs. For those who desire coursework at the doctoral level, obviously this is not an advantage. However, for many students, having no coursework or examinations (other than the dissertation defense) allows a significant measure of freedom to publish articles and attend conferences.

SECOND-TIER AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Our classification of “second-tier” American schools refers to those institutions that offer graduate programs in biblical studies, but are not of the same caliber as the widely recognized first-tier schools. It should be recognized that one can have an excellent education at such a place; perhaps even better than at some of the first-tier schools. The fact of the matter is, though, that institutions are often compared according to broad criteria and based on reputation, prestige, and history, these schools are not as exclusive or academically-recognized. The program structure at these institutions is very similar to the first-tier programs: five to seven years in length, with a system composed of coursework, examinations, and dissertation research.

Advantages of the Second-Tier American Programs

Potential for Acceptance

A second-tier program, as it is by definition lower in rank than the first-tier programs, would attract fewer students. Thus, the likelihood of being accepted would increase.

World-Class Faculty

Despite the fact that such places are not Ivy League institutions, often the biblical studies faculty members at these schools are still considered to be experts in their various fields, and the overall education can be very rewarding.

Disadvantages of the Second-Tier American Programs

Funding

It is typical that second-tier programs rarely offer full-funding (let alone living stipends) to more than a select group of people. Thus, one must face the prospect that the five to seven years will involve major financial debt. Some schools can provide teaching fellowships and other “working” scholarships, but again, these tend to be few in number and they often fall below the rate of remuneration found at first-tier schools.

Employment Potential

Again, there are many factors that play into how one gets a job, but it is a reality of the discipline of biblical studies in general that first-tier schools are perceived as more rigorous, exclusive, and of a higher caliber in education. Thus, the first-tier students have a higher potential, from an institutional standpoint, of employability.

AMERICAN EVANGELICAL SEMINARIES

As mentioned above, there are dozens of well-respected evangelical seminaries that offer doctorates in biblical studies. The program structure, again, is similar to other American institutions in terms of length (five to seven years) and structure (coursework, examinations, and dissertation).

Advantages of American Evangelical Seminary Programs

Potential for Acceptance

While usually maintaining a high standard, seminaries tend to have the resources and desire to accept a higher number of students than first-tier schools. The obvious result is that one's chances of getting a place in a program are more predictable.

Potential for Faith-Based Learning

Some students find it a distinct advantage, or perhaps even crucial, to study in a faith-based environment where certain doctrinal or theological distinctives are upheld (such as the authority of Scripture).

Denominational Affiliation

Those schools that are denominationally affiliated can be attractive if the student comes from that tradition and has a desire to seek academic employment in the same denomination. Some hiring institutions, in fact, *expect* prospective professors to have their doctoral degree from a school of their own denomination. Such practical considerations can have a major impact on the choice of a doctoral program.

Disadvantages of American Evangelical Seminaries

Funding

Much like the second-tier programs, the evangelical seminaries tend to offer less funding than the first-tier, or if full funding (with a living stipend) is available, it is only for a very select few.

Potential Limitation of Employment

The faith-based nature of seminaries has a double effect, it would seem, for employment. On the one hand, if you are seeking employment primarily in Christian universities and seminaries, it can be seen as valuable to study in a confessional program. However, the opposite effect could happen as well. If you are seeking employment at secular or public institutions (or those that do not value conservative viewpoints or faith-based learning), your application may be discounted on these grounds. Again, the reality is that most students tend to apply to whatever jobs are being advertised, as the number of positions are limited, and this involves a mixture of Christian and non-Christian institutions. Overall, from my own experience, Christian institutions respect degrees from non-Christian and Christian programs, while there is a strong tendency for non-Christians schools to treat doctoral degrees from seminaries with suspicion (both academically and doctrinally).¹⁰

RANKING THE PROGRAMS

I hesitate to offer a listing of the various tiered programs, because it will inevitably be subjective based on my own knowledge of the field and my experience. Moreover, it should be recognized that ratings are based, to a significant degree, on the faculty present at any given institution, and the list could change drastically in a matter of a few years. Nevertheless, for those readers that desire even a basic list, just to get an idea of where to start researching and looking, I humbly offer a list of schools that currently fit this category:

First-Tier American Programs (in Alphabetical Order)

- Baylor University
- Duke Graduate School
- Emory University

10. Some of this, perhaps, comes from ignorance about what goes on in a seminary program. Those who have never studied in such an environment might guess or presume that these programs are not rigorous or “critical” in terms of method and approach. In my experience, there are some seminaries that rival the first-tier schools in terms of difficulty, advancement of research, and exploration of new methodologies.

PREPARE

- Harvard Graduate School
- Marquette University
- Princeton Theological Seminary
- University of Notre Dame
- Yale University

British Universities (in Alphabetical Order)

- University of Aberdeen
- University of Cambridge
- University of Durham
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Manchester
- University of Oxford
- University of St. Andrews

American Evangelical Seminaries (and Graduate Schools)

- Asbury Theological Seminary
- Dallas Theological Seminary
- Fuller Theological Seminary
- The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
- Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
- Westminster Theological Seminary
- Wheaton Graduate School

Let me reiterate, again, that this list is not meant to be exhaustive, nor does it reflect a ranking of schools from best to worst. It is merely a sample of schools that fit these kinds of categories. It is up to each individual and their priorities and desires to decide what a hierarchy of “best schools” would look like. This decision, again, would be based on your timeframe, financial situation, academic achievements, theological interests, ability to relocate, vocational goals, and also potentially philosophical, religious,

and denominational considerations.¹¹ And, again, the lists of high-ranking schools will change from year to year, largely based on the movement and/or retirement of attractive faculty members.

Looking broadly at the kinds of doctoral programs is a necessary prerequisite to the work of actually preparing for entrance into one. In the next chapter, we will venture into the details of what admissions committees are looking for and on what basis they choose their best candidates. Before that, I want to briefly address online/distance PhD programs.

ONLINE AND DISTANCE PHD PROGRAMS IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

One of the most frequent questions that I am asked via Facebook, email, or in person is whether there are legitimate distance-learning options for the PhD. The reality is, there are many intellectually capable and eager students who simply cannot move to take up residency for several years in a traditional learning environment. Perhaps they have dependents to take care of in a fixed location. Maybe a spouse is working and they must stay put. And now, well into the twenty-first century, good technology exists to make distance learning vibrant and engaging. So, many are wondering if they can stay where they are and get a good PhD.

The answer to that question twenty years ago was no. The answer now is probably not. Yes, there are several American schools that now offer an online PhD program in theology, biblical studies, church history, etc. But no elite schools offer such an option. UK universities appear to be opening up distance-learning possibilities; most religion and theology departments continue the British tradition of the PhD, focusing on independent research and not coursework, so practically speaking it makes sense that meeting “online” with a supervisor would suffice. But even if some UK departments make this opportunity possible, it continues to be viewed as

11. My own journey was as follows. I had an interest in studying in an ecumenical and rigorously academic environment with a world-class faculty and a reputation for excellence. I was interested in a place where traditional exegetical methods were employed, but there was some interest in theology and sociology. While I did not desire to study at an evangelical institution *per se*, I hoped to find a place where I would not be hastily labeled and looked down upon because of my confessional interests. I pursued the following schools: Yale, Princeton, Emory, Notre Dame, University of Oxford (England), University of Durham (England), University of St. Andrews (Scotland), and University of Aberdeen (Scotland).

a lesser experience. There is no comprehensive list of institutions offering distance/online options for the PhD. Just by a quick Google search, I found several UK programs that explicitly mention distance options (e.g., Birmingham, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh).¹² Other schools allow distance living, but require the student to come to campus one or twice a year for face-to-face supervision.¹³

My general approach to thinking about distance-learning PhD programs is this: there are several major downsides to this way of earning a PhD, and therefore it is not ideal and even discouraged; however, if the PhD cannot be done in residency, there are some good options. But *why* is it discouraged? There is the stigma that this is a lazy form of education for the student, as if it is a hobby or a matter of convenience. Whether or not this perception is accurate, it persists nevertheless. More importantly, while it is true that digital educational technology has improved, there is still something special about regular, in-person communal learning that you can't replicate online. Also, the reality is that networking plays such a crucial role in getting a job and navigating AAR/SBL, and distance students tend to be isolated.

When students ask me about distance PhD programs, I tend to discourage this option. The best path to getting a good education and then getting a job in the academy is to “go big”; aim to enter into a top-tier PhD program, and fully immerse yourself in the academic world. There are certainly stories of people doing distance programs and then finding gainful employment in teaching. But these are few, and such exceptions probably involve *exceptional* people that also found a bit of luck.

Now, if it comes down to it, and you simply *can't* move to a top-tier institution, and your only options *are* distance programs, I think there are some ways to “close the gap,” as it were. First, you will need to foster some kind of learning community. It may be through your doctoral institution—perhaps they have a weekly seminar that you can engage via Skype or Zoom. It is best if it is more than a one-off; it ought to be regular. Go to academic conferences, intentionally meet peers, and give presentations. And, if you can, publish an article or two with a major journal. Some students

12. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/postgraduate/courses/research/thr/theology-and-religion.aspx>; <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/sdhp/courses/research-by-distance-learning-1352.php>; <https://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/postgraduate/degrees/index.php?r=site/bySubject&sid=36>.

13. Durham University explicitly mentions this expectation: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/postgrad/researchdegrees/residence/>.

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overcompensate by self-publishing or publishing with several low-tier journals—don't do this. Quality over quantity is crucial.