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Daniel Becerra

Stephen Whitaker

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# APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND COGNATE FIELDS

DANIEL BECERRA AND STEPHEN WHITAKER

Applying to graduate school in religious studies will be one of the most stressful times of a student's college career. It is our hope that the following paper will offer a concise reference guide to those who are preparing to apply in the coming season. Specifically, we will focus on applications to master's level programs in biblical/religious studies or a cognate field, as these are the programs with which we are immediately familiar, although we will attempt to highlight approaches that could, we hope, successfully translate into PhD program admissions as well. Although there is no one way to compose successful statements of purpose, establish a rapport with potential advisors, and choose one's recommenders wisely, after months of emailing graduate students and meeting with experienced professors, our efforts have proven advantageous at admissions decision time. We felt that it would be helpful for others facing a similar process to compile some of the advice that we found most helpful. Thus, we offer what we have learned from our experiences.

## **Getting Started**

### *Be Interested*

The first step of the application process is to be interested in something. Many students might feel as if their general knowledge of a given subject is not sufficient to determine whether or not to dedicate themselves to said course of study for the next few years. Some students may only be able to say, for example, "Well, I know I like the Old Testament, but that is all I can say at this point." However, the fact of the matter is that unless your interests are more delineated than broad terms such as "the Old Testament," your statement of purpose/intent will appear vague, and favorable letters at decision time could

be less likely. A degree of specificity will be requested in a university's application form; thus, you should be able to articulate your interests in *at least* a sentence or two. An example might be, "I have a particular interest in how Jewish, Greek, and Roman philosophical and religious themes influenced ancient Christian literature and rhetoric." Another could be, "A major question that has driven my interest and study of religions in antiquity has been the confluence of Hellenism and Judaism, and I have sought to understand the development of Judaism in the Second Temple Period and the rise of Christianity."

Generally, schools will admit candidates whose interests match the expertise of the university's faculty. So, finding faculty whose interests match your own will aid in deciding to what schools to apply. While this may seem like an obvious approach to doctoral admissions where a specific advisor is required for dissertation work, in our experience and according to the advice of consulted faculty members, this seems to be increasingly important for MA-level admissions as well. This step of the application process takes a significant amount of time and research and presupposes that you have already decided on a general area(s) in which to focus (e.g., textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible, the Synoptic Problem, Second Temple Judaism, Dead Sea Scrolls, New Testament rhetoric, etc.). You can usually find the specific interests, publications, and projects of any given professor on said professor's respective university website.

If you are not already familiar with the leading scholars in your field of interest, you should contact your current professors and seek guidance on the matter or go to the library and look up *recent* books and articles. Given the difficulty of being admitted to graduate school with adequate funding, you should not put all of your eggs in one basket. Students who are passionate or even interested in a particular niche will likely find that there are at least a handful of scholars who share that interest, in some degree, throughout various programs. A good way to find multiple potential advisors is to search the footnotes of the most reputable publications in your field of interest. In doing so, you will be introduced to discrete lines of scholarship which will hopefully help in further honing interests and preferences.

### *Choose a Program*

It is very important to do the legwork of determining what kinds of programs will afford access to your professors of interest. Some schools, for example, have relevant programs in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (or something to that effect) as well as in a divinity school. At some research universities (Harvard and Yale, for example) there is a professional school that

is separate from, but often works closely with, the Arts/Sciences faculty. Other schools (such as the University of Chicago Divinity School) do not have separate programs conferring degrees in religion, and others still have virtually no distinction between the two. Divinity Schools offer ministerial training with degrees such as the Master of Divinity (MDiv) or Master of Theology (ThM), as well as more academically focused degrees with various names such as Master of Arts (MA), Master of Arts in Religion (MAR), Master of Theological Studies (MTS), etc. Some of these schools or programs will have a separate dedicated faculty, and your person of interest may teach primarily PhD courses or primarily Divinity School courses. It is important to understand how these programs work together at the various schools and whether it is reasonable to expect sufficient access to academic persons of interest in a particular program.

It is also vital to note that the funding can be very different between these programs. Arts/Sciences MAs for example, can often be typically or exclusively unfunded, while divinity school MA/MTS/MAR programs at many schools will be at least 50 percent funded for all successful applicants. It is worth comparing how the programs compare at different schools in order to mix and match applications accordingly. Most importantly, it is helpful to understand these things when determining which faculty members to contact in order to ensure focusing efforts on those who can guide interested applicants most effectively in preparation for their program of choice.

### *Make Contact*

The next step is to contact those with whom you are interested in studying. This allows you make a good impression, to get advice on preparation, and to find out if you are a good fit for the program. Moreover, the professors you hope to work with are often on the admissions committee themselves and thus, it helps if they remember who you are come application decisions time. Keep your correspondence with professors short and to the point. The following is an excerpt from one of letters we sent, although some elements have obviously been changed.

Dr. X,

My name is X, and I am currently a senior in Ancient Near Eastern Studies at Brigham Young University. I am writing to tell you that I have been reading some of your publications of late and I appreciate the work you do. Also, this coming winter I will be applying to master's programs and I

am very much interested in the MA in Religious Studies offered at X university.

My interests include Early Christian hermeneutics and, more specifically, how the earliest Christian authors and divergent groups interpreted the texts which later became the New Testament. I think yours and Dr. X's interests match well with the work I would like to do for my master's degree. I understand the program is somewhat competitive and I would like to know what I might do to set myself apart as a candidate/prepare me to succeed in your program.

As far as my current preparation, I have a X GPA in my program. I am fluent in X. I have had X semesters of Greek, X of Latin, and X of Biblical Hebrew. I am currently a research assistant and do X. I feel these things are my strongest aspects. However, I would like to know what I could possibly do to better prepare myself for the caliber of study a university like X would require. Thank you for taking time to answer my questions.

Another way to establish a relationship with a potential advisor is to read his or her work and ask any *meaningful* questions you might have regarding their publications. This shows them that you are actively engaged in reading current scholarship and that you take a genuine interest in augmenting your knowledge in the subject matter. Do not ask them any questions which you could reasonably find the answer to on your own.

Finally, if at all possible, meeting with these persons of interest in person either on a campus visit or at a professional conference (such as the Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting) can be a very beneficial way to learn about the program, the faculty, and your fit with both. We have both benefited from this approach, and in some cases have been able to discern with some accuracy our chances of admission to preferred programs after these kinds of meetings. Some faculty members even made a point of encouraging us to mention the meeting in our statement of purpose as a flag to the admissions committee to talk to the faculty member, which is more likely to help than hurt your application and shows that your interest in the program is more substantial than just hedging your bets. When setting up meetings at a conference or campus visit, however, make sure to be considerate of what is likely to be a very busy schedule for your person of interest and make every effort to make sure such meetings are brief, to the point, and at the professor's convenience. It

is helpful to prepare thoughtful questions beforehand and to think of concise ways to explain your interests. In any case, informed and considerate contact with academic persons of interest whether through correspondence, meetings, or both can have a demonstrable effect on the success of your applications.

### **The GRE**

Most universities in the United States will require you to submit your GRE scores as part of the application process. The actual influence GRE scores have on determining an applicant's candidacy is somewhat indistinct. At the master's level, GRE scores are not likely to make or break an application. Nevertheless, many universities do have cut off scores, and how well you score on the examination can influence the allocation of funding. At the doctoral level, where the university will likely be investing significantly more in their students and competition is much more keen, the GRE becomes much more important in justifying the department's decision to recommend you for admission. Therefore, it is wise to prepare well for this test. The GRE assesses the student's ability to solve mathematical equations or synthesize quantitative data (for the most part, at no higher difficulty than secondary school-level geometry), to define vocabulary words and evaluate their usage in analogies and sentences, to make logical inferences regarding several paragraphs of text treating discrete subject matter, to analyze and comment on the logical/fallacious structure of arguments, and to compose a cohesive argument regarding a provided topic.

Each student will have singular needs when it comes to studying for the GRE; however, consider a few general suggestions. First, take as many practice tests as you can and become familiar with the format of the test. Aside from the study practice, doing so will acquaint you with the directions of each test section thereby eliminating the need to waste precious minutes reading them during the actual timed test. You can find small practice tests at ets.org and larger ones in GRE study books. Second, try to keep perspective. While the whole test is important, certain aspects are more important than others. The verbal and writing sections, for example, will be more important than the quantitative section. Both of us scored fairly low—well, to be honest, significantly low on the quantitative section—yet we were both admitted to high ranked schools with no less than 75 percent funding (of course, your experience may be different). Finally, the last time you take the test (as you may want to take it more than once in order to get your scores up) should be *at least* a month before the application is due. The only scores you will receive immediately after the test are the verbal and quantitative. The wait for the writing score

is about two to three weeks, and the time it takes to send the test scores to the schools to which you are applying takes a couple of weeks at most. Thus, to be safe, you should plan on completing the test about a month before the application is due. We think it is wise to use the summer before the last year of your undergraduate studies to prepare for and take the GRE.

## The Application

### *The Statement of Purpose*

The statement of “purpose” or “intent” is where you make your case for being admitted to the university. Each university will have specific criteria for writing the statement of purpose. Generally, these criteria will inquire about the following subjects: (1) how you came to be interested in pursuing religious studies; (2) your academic influences, interests, and professional goals; (3) your preparation for graduate study; and (4) why you feel you are a good fit for the program and the university. However, the most important thing you should remember is that the statement of purpose should best represent your intellectual interests and that those intellectual interests should match, in some degree, the expertise of the faculty at the university. Delineating academic interests which are out of the general expertise of the university’s faculty is the quickest way to be rejected from a school.

Again there is no single way to write the statement of purpose; however, there are several guidelines you could profit from following. (1) Tell a story—this will help you to avoid, inasmuch as it is possible, writing two pages of “I have done this and I have done that.” While some degree of self-adulation is necessary, you don’t want this letter to sound like a list. (2) Show that you are serious and knowledgeable about the people with whom you want to study, (3) Know the strengths and goals of the program to which you are applying and show how you possess those strengths and share those goals, (4) Follow the directions exactly and proofread (and have another person proofread your statement). The following two examples will seek to illustrate these guidelines.

I am writing this letter to express my interest in your Master of Arts in Divinity degree. I am confident that my course work, language training, and work experience have sufficiently prepared me to succeed at the University of Chicago. My commitment to biblical scholarship began in 2004 while volunteering in Quebec, Canada. Consistent with my daily routine, I would wake up every morning at 6:30 for

personal scripture study and then teach lessons on biblical topics throughout the day. As I became more familiar with the stories in the Bible, I began to study Bible dictionaries, extrabiblical literature such as the apocrypha and pseudepigraphical works, and any commentary that I could get my hands on. When I returned to the United States in 2006, I summarily changed my photography major and transferred to a university with a religious studies program. I knew that I would pursue an education in biblical studies, and at present I am completing my training as a senior at Brigham Young University, majoring in Ancient Near Eastern Studies—New Testament track.

*Academic Influences, Interests, and Professional Goals*

Although my interests in the New Testament and Early Christianity are broadly based, I have developed a special affinity for ancient Christian literary culture. The contributions of scholars like Margaret Mitchell, F. M. Young, Bart Ehrman, E. A. Clark, and Hans Josef Klauck have greatly contributed to my understanding of the ancient Christian world. However, Dr. Mitchell's work in ancient Christian hermeneutics and rhetorical analysis has particularly influenced me. As a master's student at the University of Chicago and in my studies towards a doctoral degree, I hope to focus my research on the following issues:

1. How Jewish, Greek, and Roman philosophical and religious themes influenced ancient Christian literature and rhetoric.

2. The reception and appropriation of the biblical text by early Christians and its use in homiletic, apologetic, philosophical, and other types of literature. I hope to push pass the standard dichotomy between Antiochene literalists vs. Alexandrine allegorists and study the literature in the framework of what Dr. Mitchell has termed the "agonistic paradigm of interpretation."

3. Patristic literature, particularly in terms of christological issues and the development of orthodoxy and heresy.

I also look forward to improving my facility with Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. After graduate school I hope to secure a full-time position as a professor at a university with a vibrant religious studies program. Ultimately, in addition to my research, I would like to teach courses in New Testament studies, Early Christian literature, and Greek.

#### *Research Skills and Academic Tools*

Since beginning my studies at BYU, my priority has been preparation for graduate school and a professional career in biblical scholarship. While my core classes trained me in ancient history, critical thinking, historical methodologies, and clear and concise writing, I understood that additional effort would be necessary to succeed in the field. I attended school year round for my first three years at BYU in order to take as many extra classes as I could while other students were on break. This time allowed me to enhance and solidify my writing and language skills as well as to publish several papers in undergraduate journals. I also completed several courses in ancient philosophy, modern philosophy, and advanced philosophical writing. During this time, my professors approached me and suggested that the best preparation for graduate school would be “languages, languages, languages.” Thus, I began seeking every opportunity to ameliorate my language skills, including sitting in on several classes when my finances would not permit me to take them for credit.

Already being fluent in Spanish and French, I focused on the relevant ancient languages. I wanted to be able to read primary texts and to identify grammatical constructions, word forms, and rhetorical devices. I began to translate authors whose writing exemplified the quintessential style of the language. Therefore, in addition to a majority of the Greek New Testament and Latin Vulgate, I translated works from Antiphon, Demosthenes, Thucydides, and Plato, as well as from Caesar and Cicero in the Latin tradition. However, my

thirst for languages continued to grow. I began studying classical Hebrew, and my professors had such confidence in my abilities that I was invited to substitute teach beginning classical Hebrew for one month as well as contribute to the BYU classical Hebrew online course. As patterns in grammar and morphology became easier to recognize, I augmented my language repertoire to include Rabbinic Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac, and took a course in Greek prose composition. Studying these languages provided me with valuable skills and opened many doors of opportunity.

Towards the end of my college career, I expanded my research and gained more experience in the field. I worked for over two years with Donald W. Parry preparing the critical apparatus for the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* edition of Isaiah and translating for Brill's *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader* series. I was given the task of finding and evaluating textual variants in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Septuagint, Peshitta, Targums, and Latin Vulgate. I also worked with Syriologist Kristian Heal digitizing Syriac colophon, and with Thomas Wayment on copublishing an edition of 29 fragments of book 6 of Homer, *Iliad* found at Tebtunis (to be submitted in 2011). These scholars taught me the importance of attending academic conferences and making contributions to the field. And with their guidance, I wrote and presented a paper at the 2009 SBL International meeting in Rome, which dealt with how the *ktiv/qere* readings in the book of Isaiah are reflected in the versal witnesses of the Hebrew Bible. Upon my return, I was elected president of BYU's student club, Students of the Ancient Near East, and apart from helping to organize, direct, and participating in two other academic conferences, I was able to help younger students prepare to succeed in undergraduate religious studies.

Pursing a Master of Arts in Divinity would allow me to take courses from a variety of professors who specialize in my fields of interest. Having read their work and attended some of their presentations, I know that being under the tutelage of accomplished scholars like Drs. Mitchell, Klauck, and Martinez would expand my skill base and assist me

undertaking rigorous academic research with the goal of producing significant, publishable work.

Another approach might be:

Since entering university, I have come to the important realization that I have a voracious zeal for inquiry that will engage me for the rest of my life. This fundamental desideratum has led me to the Master of Arts in Religion program at Yale Divinity School, and to the concentrated program in Judaic Studies in particular. I am primarily interested in the program because I feel that the University, the Divinity School, and the associated faculty have a fine record of preparing students for careers in research, and because the research interests of many members of the faculty strongly coincide with the trajectory in which I would like to eventually direct my own work. My academic and career objectives include ultimately earning a PhD and subsequently continuing to produce important work while teaching in a Religion or Divinity program. As a master's student, I hope to be able to effectuate a breadth of contextual understanding to support depth in research, to gain familiarity with the relevant sources, to understand the cultural confluence, context, and ideas that produced these sources, and to further develop my abilities in the languages in which these were produced.

In the course of preparing for graduate study, I was particularly excited to discover Yale Divinity School's concentration in Judaic Studies. While at the Society of Biblical Literature's most recent annual meeting in Atlanta, I had the opportunity to meet with Professor Collins and to discuss the program, and have been further encouraged by his candid thoughts about the Divinity School and his support of my interest in the Judaic Studies concentration. A major question that has driven my interest and study of Religions in antiquity has been the confluence of Hellenism and Judaism, and I have sought to understand the development of Judaism in the Second Temple Period and the rise of Christianity. Since discovering the concentration in Judaic Studies some two years ago, I feel like this is the program for which I have

most carefully prepared. The course work and the faculty are very compatible with many of my own interests and goals. As I have pursued these interests as an undergraduate, I have referred frequently to Professor Collin's work on the literature of the Hebrew Bible and Judaism in the Diaspora. I have also referred to Dean Attridge's work as I have studied Hellenistic Jewish literature. I have been impressed with the meticulous research and careful circumspection of each and hope to work with them and to learn from their approaches. In addition to working with Dean Attridge and Professor Collins, I am also anxious to work with Professors Adella Collins and Dale Martin, given my interest in the formation of Christianity and my intention to pursue a PhD in New Testament. I would specifically like to develop my understanding of Second Temple literature and history to give breadth to my interest in ancient Jewish and Christian literature, and to my understanding of the cultural contexts that have produced these texts, and in my assessment Yale Divinity School is the ideal environment in which to do so.

I have made a serious effort to prepare to undertake rigorous graduate work at Yale Divinity School by seeking opportunities to develop skills in research and language study. As an undergraduate, I have made a marked effort to incorporate opportunities to learn the craft of research into my coursework, student employment, and extracurricular endeavors. Early on in my undergraduate career, I interned as a research assistant for a company that produced content for educational materials. More recently, I worked for a year researching and writing for the Joseph Smith Papers Project, a major Mormon history documentation venture. Concurrently, I worked as a New Testament research assistant for BYU's Religious Studies Center, assisting professors with research projects and writing content for publication for the web and print. I am currently preparing to work with a faculty mentor on a research project dealing with treatments of Adam and the inception of death in various pseudepigraphal texts in conjunction with early Christian literature. Over the course of my undergraduate studies, I have both published papers in student journals and have made an effort

to remain abreast of current scholarship through conference attendance and membership in learned societies such as the Society of Biblical Literature and the Association for Jewish Studies. These affiliations have introduced me to the work of important scholars and have helped me to assess my own approaches to critical analysis. In addition to these efforts, I have undertaken as much language coursework as my schedule has allowed. My major emphasis has been in Greek, in which I have taken several advanced courses, including readings seminars in Matthew, Luke, and, by the time of graduation, apocalyptic literature. My earlier coursework in Greek included Attic grammar and readings courses that focused on classical prose and rhetoric. I have also taken courses in Hebrew (Biblical and Modern), Aramaic, Latin, and German to prepare further to engage a wider range of texts. In addition, I am fluent in Modern Greek, having spent two years living in Greece and Cyprus. One of the major advantages of studying at Yale Divinity would be the opportunity to continue coursework in the relevant languages with excellent faculty. I specifically intend to take as many readings courses in Hebrew as I can, to take relevant seminars in Greek, and to strengthen my German reading skills to prepare for doctoral research.

In conclusion, I have confidence that pursuing graduate work at Yale Divinity School would prepare me for success in academia and help me to develop the aptitude for inquiry necessary to make significant contributions in this field. I feel that I have carefully prepared for the rigor required for such development and look forward to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

### *Letters of Recommendation*

Letters of recommendation do not require very much effort on your part outside of requesting them well enough in advance for professors to have adequate time to finish them. It is likely that you will be asked to provide between one and four letters per application and it is not unusual that a single professor will write several letters for you. Keep in mind, however, that your letters are probably not the only ones your professors are writing this application season, and that they have their own classes to teach, work to grade, and projects to

work on. So be considerate and ask well in advance. Although each prospective university will have different criteria for letters of recommendation, with regards to the applicant's (your) qualifications for graduate study, your professors will generally be asked to speak to the following issues: (1) performance in independent study or in research groups, (2) intellectual independence, (3) research interests, (4) capacity for analytical thinking, (5) ability to work with others (6) ability to organize and express ideas clearly, and (7) drive and motivation. Thus, it would be unwise to request a letter of recommendation from a professor who does not know you well enough to address these topics, or from one who knows you well but feels he or she cannot speak favorably of your performance. Because you need quality letters of recommendation, it is important to get to know well and work with at least a few of your undergraduate professors *before* your senior year.

### **Financial Outlays**

It is important to be realistic about the rising costs associated with the application process and to create a budget accordingly. While applying to several programs helps to ensure more favorable odds of acceptance and funding, the costs add up quickly. Very few programs do not charge application fees, and of those who do, the fees can range anywhere from \$25–\$150 per application. Additionally, sending transcripts from all the schools you have attended can add up, especially for transfer students. Transcript fees range anywhere from \$2–25 per copy, or possibly more depending on the school and shipping method selected. In total, even these most necessary fees can approach or exceed the \$1,000 mark for students applying to 5–8 schools. Add to that the fee for each attempt at the GRE (around \$160 at the time of writing), travel costs, express shipping for last minute materials, “bribes”, etc., and the investment can become significant.

How much those odds are worth is something for each student to decide, but important to consider no matter the conclusion. As was mentioned above, campus visits or conference meetings can be very helpful ways to engage persons of interest, but can be fiscally or temporally prohibitive. Things like applying for help with conference travel costs, attending a conference where several scholars in your field will likely be available to meet with you, or paying attention to visiting scholar lectures in your area can help to alleviate those financial strains and may make such visits more plausible. The best way to determine the viability of each of these factors is to approach these considerations early on and to create a loose but realistic budget.

## **Funding Resources**

Each situation is different, and we hesitate to give any kind of financial advice, but at least a passing familiarity with the options available to students to avoid or minimize debt are worth encouraging here. In general, it is helpful to be very familiar with the funding and financial aid policies of the schools and programs of interest. As indicated above, even within a single university some relevant programs may be completely unfunded, while others may be completely or partly funded as a matter of practice. The packages in which the funding comes vary by program. Some, for example, may offer different grades of grant offers based on merit, while the rest of the package may come in a combination of subsidized and unsubsidized loans, a work study agreement or teaching fellowship, or some other form of university or federal aid adding up to anywhere from a portion of tuition costs to tuition, fees, and cost of living. Schools will likely require tax and employment information along with whatever other documentation they may deem necessary to determine financial need (e.g., current statement of your checking and savings accounts). Most programs are “need blind,” meaning that they make the decision to admit or reject a student without any knowledge of that student’s ability to pay. Many programs will use this information to determine whether funds in addition to merit scholarships will be needed or available to facilitate students’ needs. It is therefore helpful to have as much of that information readily available as possible to give an accurate projection of financial need.

In addition to university and federal grants and loans, private scholarships may be available. Academic advisors and other faculty members may be able to point you towards relevant scholarships or scholarship databases that can be beneficial resources for applicants. Again, this is something worth doing early in order avoid a great deal of stress as deadlines approach.

## **Conclusion**

In short, the best overall advice we can offer is to start the application process early and to be considerate of those whose help you will need to solicit. Trying to squeeze all the necessary steps into a month or two will cause a lot of unnecessary stress on you and your professors. Be aware of the various deadlines of the schools to which you are applying and give yourself time to meet these deadlines as comfortably as possible. Whether you will be applying to graduate programs in the coming application season or sometime in the future, we wish you the best of luck with your preparation and academic pursuits!