I was breezing through ancient blog posts this morning and came across this one from exactly eight years ago. It involves a question I get a lot (got it last week!), from people interested in doing graduate work in the field of New Testament or early Christianity. What is it like and what does it take? Here is what I said back then, which is pretty much what I would still say today!

I sometimes get asked what it takes to become a professional scholar in the field of New Testament/early Christian studies. The answer, in short, is the same as for any academic discipline. It takes years of intense training.

My own training in the field of New Testament studies was nothing at all unusual, but rather was fairly typical for someone in the field. What is unusual is that I knew that I wanted to pursue this kind of study already when I was in college. I started taking courses in New Testament as a 17-year old. For my foreign language requirement in college I took Greek, since I knew that I wanted to read the New Testament writings in their original language. I was pretty good at Greek and so, while still in college, decided that I wanted to be trained in the study of the Greek manuscript tradition of the New Testament. My beloved Greek professor at Wheaton College, Gerald Hawthorne, informed me that the leading scholar in that field was Bruce Metzger, who taught at Princeton Theological Seminar. And so I applied to Princeton Seminary, who taught at Princeton Theological Seminar. And so I applied to Princeton Seminary, got admitted there, and worked three years to gain a Masters of Divinity degree.

In my Masters degree I took as many courses in biblical studies and the history of early Christianity as I could – exegesis class after exegesis class, in particular. En route I learned Hebrew, so I could read the Old Testament in its original language, and took graduate level German for reading across the street at Princeton University, so that I could read German scholarship on the Bible. I wrote a Masters Thesis at Princeton Seminar under Professor Metzger's direction, on the question of the “Majority Text” – that is, the theory (abandoned by most scholars, for good reason) that the vast bulk of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament present the NT in a better form than the much earlier, but far fewer manuscripts discovered in more recent times.

I then applied to the PhD program at Princeton Seminary, again to work with Professor Metzger. I was his final PhD student before he retired.

I sped through my PhD program – it took me only four years (it normally takes five years after a masters; I was a bit faster because I knew exactly what I wanted and needed to do – many students flounder around for a while – and because I already knew the ropes at Princeton Seminary, having done my first post-graduate degree there). Two of those years involved taking PhD seminars on early Christian history and the interpretation of books of the New Testament in the original Greek (so, for example, I would take a semester-long class on the Gospel of Mark, or the Gospel of John, or Paul’s letter to the Romans, or 1 Peter, etc. etc. - all based on the Greek text). During those years I also learned French (a requirement for most PhDs in the field: one has to be able to read French scholarship, as well as German), Latin (in which a number of early Christian texts appear), and Coptic (an ancient Egyptian language). After the seminars came the PhD Comprehensive Exams (the most challenging, intense, and intimidating part of anyone’s PhD program); and then the dissertation, which itself took two years to write.

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