

Now that I have finished writing the draft of my book on the afterlife - which I'm tentatively titling "Heaven, Hell, and the Invention of the Afterlife (that will be the title until my publisher changes it!!) - I have received several questions from blog members about aspects of the writing itself. One reader wanted to know how I keep track of all the things that I read in preparation for writing a book like this (or like anything else). Here is how:

When I decide what the next book is going to be, I start in on research by reading some of the most basic, thorough, and relatively recent discussions of the topic by competent scholars. I typically know already what those books are because, well, I'm a scholar in the field and one gets to know these things. Plus, if you want to write a book about something, you already know a good deal about it, including who has written what about it.

From there I start compiling bibliography of everything of importance written about it (both by searching library catalogues and, more important, seeing bibliographies in the books I've read, noting the relevant books and articles cited, reading those, seeing what books and articles they've cited, and so on and on). For a trade book written for a general audience, I typically stick *mainly* to reading books - although if there are really important scholarly articles, I'll read those too. I expand and expand and expand the bibliography until just about everything of importance is on there, and I keep reading and reading and reading.

The reading for the book typically takes a couple of years. But how do I keep track of it all?

I sometimes get asked if I have my graduate students do the reading for me and tell me what this, that, or the other scholar says about this, that, or the other thing. I think people who ask me that (or who claim that this is what I do) simply don't believe that I'd go to the bother of reading all this stuff myself. And, well, that's completely wrong. I read everything myself and take notes on everything I read.

I do sometimes have graduate students do some work for me, and they can be very helpful indeed. I typically assign them one of two tasks. Both tasks are designed to train them in how to do research and do provide some useful assistance for me. The first task is I have them compile bibliography for me. And so I'll tell as student, "Come up with a bibliography of every book and article (in English, French, German, and Italian) written in the past 50 years about ancient Christian views of reincarnation" or "about Christ's descent to hell" or about "Origen's understanding of universal salvation" etc. I then use those bibliographies as a *starting* point for my work - I read what's on them and use them to build up even bigger bibliographies (since I can't trust that even my very fine graduate students have found everything).

The other task is I'll have them do is read articles and books and write summaries of them. Usually I'll tell them I want a one-page single-spaced summary of an article, or a two-page summary of a book. I let them choose which articles/books from my bibliography they want to do. This is a fantastic assignment/exercise for them, because it teaches them how to find the core of the argument of an article or book, and to summarize the evidence and logic that the author uses to establish the argument, in a short amount of space. Terrific for the grad student to acquire these skills.

But I never trust what my graduate students' summaries tell me. I use them to decide which books and articles I probably don't need to bother with myself, and which ones I need to read quickly, and which ones I need to read in depth. I read everything I need myself, even if I have a summary from a student in hand.

And I myself take notes on everything I read and summarize it, for myself. If you do this enough, you realize that there are some books and articles that are so important that you have to take copious notes on them, pages of notes. Others are pretty important but you don't need to make note of all the play-by-play, because the author is not telling you much that you don't already know. Others are not so important, and you can simply say in a few sentences what the book/article is about. Others are of almost no importance, and you can just write a sentence about what the book/article does.

I do all the above, and I do it the old fashioned way. I know a lot of scholars/writers use software programs to help them take and organize their reading and notes. Not me. Way too much fuss. One of my few actual skills as a researcher is an inherent sense of how to organize things. My system is very basic, very simple, and very affective. I simply take notes on a word processor (the one I'm using this moment to write this blog); I save each file by author's name and a short title of the book/article; and I put it in an appropriate folder, or subfolder.

And so, for example, I have a folder on the Afterlife. In it will be subfolders - one for scholarship, one for notes on all the primary texts, one on ideas/thoughts/reflections I've had while doing all the research, one on sketches/outlines of how I'm imagining the book will look like, one for the actual chapters I'm writing, and so on. Each subfolder will have its own sub-subfolders, by topic: but very basic ones. For example, under "Scholarship," for this project, I had a sub-subfolder for "Greek and Roman" (meaning scholarship that discussed Greek and Roman views of the afterlife) one for "Jewish and Christian" one for "Near Death Experiences" (since at one point I thought about having a lengthy discussion, maybe an entire chapter on NDE's in antiquity) and so on.

All these files are searchable, of course, and so it's very easy for me to locate anything that I need to refresh my memory on in them. Suppose I seem to remember an article that I read on the church father Origen's understanding of reincarnation: I just go to "Scholarship/Jewish and Christian" and do a word search for "reincarnation" and boom, I get the file.

I am much better at taking notes on what I read than on remembering everything I read. And so when I have read just about everything of relevance for a book, my next step is to read through every single note I've taken on every single thing I've read, and decide then how to structure the book, what to include, what to exclude, how much depth to go into each thing, how to structure it, and so on and on.

Whatever the final product looks like, I have my hundreds of notes on everything I've read (primary texts; scholarship) for perpetuity. Over time, that adds to a lot of scholarship, all available to me.

I consider this aspect of writing a book the real grind. Some people (my wife) relish the reading part of writing. For me it's hard work. As I look back on a project, the only part I genuinely relish is having it finished!



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