I have a lot more to say about the development of the views of the afterlife in ancient Jewish and Christian thinking – specifically, about how we got from an understanding that there would be a resurrection of the body (the view I’ve been discussing) to the idea that when a person dies, their soul (not their body) goes to heaven or hell — the view most (not the *vast* majority, of course) people have today. It’s a good thing I have a lot more to say about it, since, well, that’s what my next book is about!

But I want to introduce at this point a thread-within-the-thread, about a related topic (involving the afterlife and my larger understanding of it) that I am more fervently passionate about at just this time. And to explain just why I’m passionate about it, I need to take a brief detour into my personal life.

I think that a good while back (last year at this time? I don’t remember) I talked a bit on the blog about how I was seeing my career path at this stage in my life. This school term (classes started yesterday!) marks my 30th year teaching at UNC. I’ve been very active as a scholar over these thirty years. As it turns out, I have published almost exactly a book a year over that entire time: the book coming out in February, *The Triumph of Christianity*, is my 31st book; my first book, *Didymus the Blind and the Text of the Gospels* [Really!], came out before I arrived in Chapel Hill.

As you know, I have published a wide range of books over that time: scholarly works (e.g., *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture; Forgery and Counterforgery*); editions/translations of Greek (and Latin) texts (*The Apostolic Fathers; The Apocryphal Gospels*); textbooks for college/university courses (*The New Testament; The Bible*); anthologies of ancient writings (*Lost Scriptures; After the New Testament*); and trade books for broader audiences (*Misquoting Jesus; How Jesus Became God*).

About a year ago I was feeling worn out, and started wondering: do I really need to produce a book every year? Why is that? I started feeling like I had little drive to keep producing scholarly works, translations of texts, or textbooks. And I was thinking I wanted to enjoy life a bit more.

I should say, I enjoy life a *lot* as it is. I travel an awful lot, to some rather amazing places; I go on hiking trips virtually every summer; I read a lot of fiction; I manage to get work-outs in three or four times a week; I spend time with my family – all to the good. But still, I have a very (unusually) disciplined life, and I work a *lot*. As you may know, being a university professor *can* mean just showing up to classes and teaching them. But for someone like me, it means working from the crack of dawn until it’s time for bed, most days of the week. And I started thinking: you know, I would love to have the free time to take more walks, to watch more sports on TV (when was the last time I could stay up to watch Monday Night Football???), to read more non-fiction outside of my field, to … just to live life.

And so I decided, as I think I announced on the blog, that my current plan was simply to write the next trade book on the Afterlife. I could put two years into that, and since really it would take me only a year, I would have so much more time on my hands!

Well, as it turns out, that decision lasted less than a year. I’ve been bitten by the research bug again, and now that the batteries are a bit recharged, I’m eager to write a scholarly book. But it will be a book on the same broad area as *The Invention of the Afterlife*. I am tentatively calling it: *Observing the Dead: Otherworldly Journeys in the Early Christian Tradition*. It will be about narrative accounts that we have from early Christianity in which
a person is given a guided tour of heaven and hell. All of these accounts, of course, are anticipatory of the great Dante. I won’t be dealing with Dante, but only with his early Christian predecessors, from roughly the first four or five Christian centuries. And the new thread-within-a-thread that I will be now shifting into will be explaining what these journeys to heaven and hell are all about.

What initially motivated my eagerness to write a book like this was a very practical consideration. As you know, professors at research universities (and most colleges) are given “sabbaticals” from teaching in order to pursue their research. At UNC, faculty members typically get one semester off every seven years. Next year is to be my year. But as also usually happens, I would like to have *both* semesters off next year. Having one term off is great (fantastic, actually), but having both terms off is more than twice as great, since really that means you are free from May of one year till August of the next – more than a full year.

To get the other term off, I would need to land some kind of fellowship. There are several places that provide fellowships/funding that allow an additional semester (or an entire year) off: Guggenheim, American Council of Learned Societies, National Humanities Center; or at UNC, the Institute for the Arts and Humanities; etc. But to get such a fellowship, one needs to have a bona fide and compelling research project, involving a heavy-hitting scholarly monograph. (Writing a trade book or a college-level textbook would not work, since these groups are supporting the advancement of knowledge.)

And so I started thinking about what might be a scholarly project that I’d be interested in pursuing, and it occurred to me that I was sitting right on top of one, one that would involve significant research in a major subfield of scholarship within the broader field of early Christian studies, one that has not been “overly worked” by scholars over the years. So much of the scholarship on early Christian studies involves going over and over and over again the same terrain that other people have been publishing on for hundreds of years – e.g. the historical Jesus; the interpretation of the Gospels or the writings of Paul; the formation of the canon; the manuscript tradition of the New Testament; and so on. All of these are vital areas of research, and I’m deeply interested in all of them – and there remains lots and lots to be done in them. But I am at a stage where I want to focus on areas that have not been massively overworked over the years.

And so my new project, that I’m undertaking while continuing to do work on The Invention of the Afterlife, a study of the katabasis (= Descent to Hades/Hell) and anabasis (= Ascent to Heaven) traditions in the early church. I am right now (today!) working on writing up a proposal for fellowships on the project to lay out what the project will entail. I’ll explain it all in the coming posts.

If you want to see these coming posts, you will need to belong to the blog. So why not join? You’ll get tons for your money, and every penny of your membership fee (it’s less than seven pennies a day!) goes to help those in need. So join!