

I occasionally get asked what I'm "working on," and it seems like January 1 is a good time to lay out my research goals/directions for the year. As some of you know, a couple of years ago I decided to cut back and become less busy with research. That lasted a couple of months. But, well, it was a *nice* couple of months. Now I'm back in over my head - but enjoying that immensely as well.

I have four major research goals (at this point) for the coming year.

1. Finish The Invention of the Afterlife. This is the trade book (that a few of you have read in draft!) that deals with the question of where the ideas of heaven and hell came from. As I've mentioned before, 72% of Americans believe that there is a literal heaven, a place for blessed souls after death, and 58% in a literal hell, a place of torment for sinners. The thesis of this book is that heaven and hell - as places of eternal reward and punishment for souls after they die - is not at all in the Old Testament, and it's not what Jesus himself taught. So where'd the idea come from? Good question. I try to answer it in the book. I finished writing the book months ago, sent it to readers (including five experts in the fields of Ancient Near East, Hebrew Bible, Greek and Roman Religions, New Testament, and Early Christianity), received their comments, made the appropriate corrections and edits, sent it to my editor, and received her comments. Based on these, there are a few cleaning up operations still, and I hope to finish them off in the next couple of weeks. Then the book will enter in production. My guess is that it will be published next year (2020) about this time. I don't know what the actual title will be yet - that's all down the road.
2. Do all (most?) of my research for the scholarly book that I'm calling, for now, something like "Journeys to the Otherworld: Katabasis in the Early Christian Tradition." This will not be a book for normal folk but for abnormal scholars. I am on sabbatical this year working diligently on the research for the book, and am making very good but also frustratingly slow progress. It's a tough one. I have made an editorial decision - which I am completely open to reversing at any point - to make it less of a *monograph* with a single thesis played out and argued over however many hundreds of pages (that's what my books Orthodox Corruption of Scripture and Forgery and Counterforgery were) and more of a *collection of studies* on various aspects of katabasis in Christian texts. The term "katabasis" is Greek; it refers to guided tours of the realms of the afterlife. For Christian texts such as the Apocalypse of Peter or the Apocalypse of Paul this entails tours given to a living person to see the blessings enjoyed by the saints in paradise and the gruesome torments experienced by the sinners in hell. My book will be looking at different aspects of these traditions, from why something like the Apocalypse of Peter did not make it into the New Testament (I've done the research on that one) to how a pagan account and a Christian account, from about the same time, of a katabasis can both deal with the problem with living for material goods and the accumulation of wealth, but see/portray vastly different explanations for *why* this is a problem. It's actually extremely interesting. I had hoped to get this book written before moving on to the next thing, but that's not going to happen. The next thing is too pressing. So I will try to do the *research* for this book for the first half of this year, set it aside while I do the next thing, then come back to writing it once the next thing is finished. That seems to be how I organize my life....
3. The next thing. I've decided that I want to write a trade book (for a general audience) that is (roughly) about the book of Revelation. Specifically I am - and for a long time have been - interested in Christian interpretations of the book that argue that the End of Time is coming soon, within our lifetime, possibly next Thursday. These interpretations are invariably based on detailed explorations of the book of Revelation (and other relevant biblical books). And they have been around for a long time.

I first became familiar with them when I was absorbed by the question as an evangelical Christian myself, who believed that Jesus was going to be returning to earth before the end of the 1980s (this was in the mid-70s), based on the massive best seller Late Great Planet Earth by Hal Lindsay (the best-selling book in English in the entire decade of the 70s, apart from the Bible). Later, another immensely popular book that came out in 1988 (1987?) argued that Jesus was returning that year; it was called “88 Reasons Why The Rapture Will Occur in 1988” – two million copies in circulation at the time, largely where I lived in the American South.

Near the end of the 1990s I started looking into the phenomenon of conservative Christians reading the book or Revelation as a blueprint for what would happen in their own time. As it turns out, it’s not a modern phenomenon. Such expectations were rife in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. And the 1850s. And the 13th. And the 10th century. And the 2nd century. And ... and all the way back.

My book will be about the modern phenomenon (maybe starting in the 19th century, and coming up to today), and show what the problem with this way of reading Revelation is. I suppose the big problem should be evident to anyone with sense: of the thousands and thousands (millions) of people who have interpreted the book of Revelation to show what was about to happen in their own time, every single one of them, without exception, has been incontrovertibly *wrong*. Why is that? I’ll be arguing that it is not because they have missed one clue or detail or another and so messed up their calculations; instead, the very approach to Revelation *itself* is wrong. It was never meant to predict what is to happen in our future.

My plan is to start doing the serious research for this book in July or August. I should think it would take a couple of years to write, altogether. Assuming the world doesn’t end first.

4. Finally, I have been asked to do another course for the Great Courses, on The Triumph of Christianity. It will be 24 lectures, each of 30 minutes. It will be based on my book, but it will be set up very differently. I’ve just started thinking about how to do it. This year I will need to write the lectures. I’ll be producing the course in 2020. So that’s my life ahead. It should be a full year, but all of it is good.



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