

As some of you know, I sometimes try to work on two books at once. I've actually tried *writing* two books at once, but doesn't work too well. (Writing part of one one day and part of the other another. Yuk!) But I can be doing research and planning two books at once, if they are on a related topic - one a popular book for a general audience and the other a scholarly book for academics. That's what I did about ten years ago now for my books Forged (trade book for general readers) and Forgery and Counterforgery (hard-hitting scholarship decidedly not for general readers).

Last summer I mentioned on the blog that I was thinking about doing that again, and now it's for real - I'm doing it. I wasn't sure if I would because I needed to get a sabbatical from teaching to pull it off. But I have now learned that I've been given a fellowship for all of next year at the National Humanities Center and so I will be on leave from all teaching and administrative responsibilities in order to work on the scholarly book.

My idea is to have the popular/trade book written first, before I start at the Humanities Center. I will then spend the year doing intense research for the scholarly book. Both will be on similar topics: ancient Christian understandings of the afterlife.

First: the National Humanities Center. This is a wonderful - in fact, absolutely fantastic - institution. It receives some funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and also raises private funds. It has a number of functions, but the most visible and relevant to me is their fellowship program.

Every year the give about twenty fellowships to scholars from around the United States and around the world who are working in the humanities (everything from History to Philosophy to Literature to Art History to Musicology to Classics to ... Religious Studies!) in order to free them up for a year to do research for a scholarly project (not for trade books or textbooks!). They get hundreds of applications and have a rigorous winnowing process to choose the annual fellows.

Each fellow is provided with an office with phone, computer hook-ups, desk, table, chairs, book cases - and an amazing library service. If a fellow wants a book or an article, the library staff gets it from a local university library and brings it in to the Center. Most fellows get literally hundreds of books and articles over the course of the year, scarcely having to lift a finger for them.

The only requirements for fellows are that they do their work (at the Center) and have lunch with the other fellows every weekday. That's it. Otherwise fellows are free simply to do their research. (There are other things that one *can* do: public lectures to give and attend; reading groups; social occasions.) But it's absolutely fantastic, a year to do nothing (basically) but your own work.

Most of the fellows fly in and spends the year in local housing - going to the Center every day to read, think, and write. As it runs out, though, the Center is located in the Research Triangle Park. It's twelve minutes from my driveway.

I had a fellowship there in 2009-10 and it was amazing. I got so much done I still can't believe it. This was when I did all the research for Forgery and Counterforgery. As with all scholars who work in my field, it meant spending masses of time working through Greek and Latin texts from antiquity and reading what scholars have said about them in English, French, and German. Hard core work that people like me thrive on and *love*!

It is really hard to get one of these fellowships. I'm unbelievably lucky now to have gotten two. (One of my closest friends and colleagues, Elizabeth Clark at Duke [who works in Christianity in Late Antiquity], got three - but to my knowledge she's the only one in the history of the place to pull that off; my wife Sarah [who works on Shakespeare] has also had two, so I was completely envious until now).

The popular book is the one I've talked about before on the blog - I was doing a long thread on it before I got sidetracked and then sidetracked from my sidetrack and then Well it was months ago. I'm going to be returning to the thread now soon, possibly next week. I'm tentatively calling the book "The Invention of the Afterlife." It will deal with the question of where the Christian views of the afterlife come from, that when a person dies their soul goes to heaven or hell. That's not in the Old Testament, and it's not what Jesus taught, so ... why is it what everyone thinks? (OK, not everyone: but traditionally in Christianity it's what everyone has thought - for many many centuries. But why?)

The scholarly book will be on the early Christian accounts of people who were given glimpses of, or even guided tours of, heaven and hell. I've also talked about that a bit on the blog - but I'll say a few more things about it before returning to my general blog on the invention of the afterlife. For now I'm just sharing my now-written-in-pen writing plans: first the trade book then intense research for a year on the scholarly book. I'm totally thrilled!



[My Scholarly Project on the Afterlife](#)
[Reading The Triumph of Christianity at Quail Ridge Books](#)