

Trinity Centre for Biblical Studies

Post-graduates in Focus Series

An interview with Stephen Huws who began the Ph.D. programme in 2020.¹

Stephen, we really appreciate your participation in this series.

Would you mind telling us about how you became interested in the reception of the Bible?

As my interest in art grew it was Christian art and architecture which I gravitated towards more and more. My desire to understand these works and their relationship to their source material did too. The reception and reinterpretation of ideas and texts is something that fascinates me, especially in how it has continued to evolve over the centuries.

Why did you choose to come to TCD for your Ph.D.?

My MA dissertation supervisor put me in touch with David Shepherd who had a great opportunity that fit in perfectly with my interests and experience. David was hugely supportive and enthusiastic throughout the application process, helping me to secure funding. From this I knew that I was making the right decision.

Being able to study remotely was of huge benefit as it meant I didn't have to completely uproot my life. It was especially handy during the pandemic and the many months of lockdown to be close to my support system, my family, and friends. While I continued living in England, I was able to join in with many aspects remotely such as a few modules and the Biblical Studies Research Seminar which helped make me feel a part of the community. Furthermore, the access to the online resources of the library was also very helpful as I could read widely while remote.

Would you mind sharing a little about the topic of your Ph.D. thesis?

My project is on depictions of the Virgin Mary in stained glass, using Dublin as my case study. Stained glass is a very unique artform which I feel many people admire but few appreciate. A window is always a bespoke creation and unlike many other ecclesiastical arts its almost always still in the location it was made for. This gives fascinating insight into worship and liturgy in a way that's very tangible and exciting to experience still today. There's a huge wealth of material in Dublin which has never been studied for what it reveals about devotional practice and the reception of art history and the Bible. I've had to do a lot of primary research to build a database of the stained glass in Dublin, who made it, when, where, because there is essentially no full repository of this information. Once I was able to come to Dublin I visited ninety churches to photograph the stained glass for my database and further analysis. Luckily, photography is a side-passion of mine which I get to bring into my project.

¹ This is the sixth in a series of interviews with Ph.D. students, and recent graduates, who are members of the Trinity Centre for Biblical Studies.

What do you hope to do after completing your degree?

Currently, I hope to pursue a career in academia or heritage, ideally something that combines the two. I love writing in-depth articles on specific topics where I can really explore detail and nuance. But I also love sharing my passion with others and finding ways to link it with their experience. I've given a few tours about stained glass, and this is something I've taken great pleasure and I hope to share my insight with a wider public in the future. I really enjoy teaching, so would definitely like to continue that, whether it's at a university or through public engagement. Getting people excited about stained glass is what brings me most joy.

Do you have any advice for prospective Ph.D. students?

Don't think of too big an idea! My project began too big, looking at too many examples, so I've had to keep narrowing my research question. Make sure your idea is manageable and achievable. But also make sure it's really something that you want to spend the next several years thinking about, because there are going to be hard and boring bits! You'll want to still be able to find that spark in something to reinvigorate your interest.

The other most important thing is your supervisor. You should definitely try to speak to them a few times and make sure it's someone you can enjoy having a conversation with but also be challenged by to further your ideas. I always recommend friends to ask their prospective supervisors for references from current or past students to get a sense of what to expect and if it is a good fit. A good working relationship needs both aspects so make sure they're someone you feel will make your work better in a way that also makes you comfortable.

Thank you, Stephen, we really appreciate you taking the time to respond to our questions.