

# Trinity Centre for Biblical Studies

Post-graduates in Focus Series

An interview with **Jesse Sykes** who began the Ph.D. programme in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

Jesse, we really appreciate your participation in this series.

It is my pleasure.

Would you mind telling us about your background and the path you took to a Ph.D. in biblical studies?

My path to a PhD in biblical studies is peripatetic. I had an interest in pursuing a PhD as far back as Highschool. The Bible fascinated me. I wanted to learn the original languages to understand it more. At UCSD I chose English as my major and studied Greek and Latin classics for language electives as preparation for Seminary. At Bethel Seminary I learned Hebrew and enough Aramaic to complete a Master's Thesis focusing on Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom. Instead of going immediately into a PhD program, I joined the Army and became a military chaplain. During this time, my academic interests were not bracketed out by the pragmatism of chaplaincy but instead became a limitless reservoir for creative reflection and application. I never lost sight of my desire to pursue a PhD. I watched and waited for the right time and opportunity. That time and opportunity became realized at TCD.

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

During my sojourn as a chaplain I determined that the style of UK PhD programs suited me better than American ones. I wanted to find an institution that had a good reputation for Biblical studies and, most importantly, had accomplished scholars whose work paralleled my interests. TCD met all these expectations.

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

Yes, at first glance my topic might appear strikingly narrow—the meaning of the First Beatitude in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, specifically the phrase *poor in spirit*. So much has been written in fact on this topic that one might legitimately question the viability of adding to the discussion. There are essentially two different approaches to reading the Matthean Beatitudes, one that reads them eschatologically, the other ethically. In the first reading, poor in spirit describes a socioeconomic reality from which one requires rescue; the poor in spirit are blessed, not because such a poverty is praiseworthy but because they are promised divine rescue. In the second reading, poor in spirit describes an idealized disposition that serves as an entry requirement or membership marker for the kingdom. Scholars have sought ways of reconciling this categorical divide. My study addresses this by focusing on a critical lacuna. Prior studies have focussed on the type of poverty figured in the first beatitude, whether literal or metaphorical, noting the importance of the addendum

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

in spirit but never defining it. Few have taken seriously the need to analyse the multifarious conceptualizations of spirit within Second Temple Judaism. Spirit belongs in a set of terms that map a range of anthropological, pneumatic, meteorological, and psychological phenomena. Further, spirit, as Carol Newsom has made compellingly clear, frequently maps an important aspect of models of self. My study seeks to take seriously the corporality of the Matthean Beatitudes as part of its didactic, rhetorical purposes for the formation of its ideal self and reads poor in spirit accordingly.

What are some of the highlights of your time at TCD?

I have found my time at TCD enriching and exciting. Engagement with fellow PhD students and with scholars in the field of Biblical studies has been truly formative. My experience working with my advisor has been ideal.

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

This is perhaps the hardest question for me to answer, partly because I fear my answer will be deeply personal and limited to my own experiences. Here it goes anyway. Be ready for a journey. I am thinking of some mountaineering experiences I have had, where in moments of deep exhaustion you see what you believe to be the summit, only to find that it was in fact a false horizon and that you have a great deal more to climb. Such experiences can be deeply disconcerting. Researching has been for me a constant process of refinement, clarity, mental malaise, inspiration, and fun. Sometimes I have written doggedly in a direction for the sake of producing something, without listening to a quiet voice within that knew I was on a false trail. Trust your instincts. Like Dante, sometimes going backwards to where you went astray is the only step forward. Have fun. What an exciting journey to take. Lastly, if you have a family, it goes without saying that they will be taking this journey with you. It is invaluable and essential to have a spouse or significant other who fully supports you. They will be sacrificing time and energy, handling things in your absence, and likely being the willing or unwilling recipient of all your esoteric musings.

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

I'm happy to share my thoughts and experiences with you.