

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 192

SBL Conference Interviews, Part 3

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Guests: Tim Mackie (TM)

Matthew Lynch (ML) (11:25 time stamp)

Our final set of interviews at SBL includes discussions with Tim Mackie from The Bible Project, and we learn about opportunities for biblical studies education in the UK from Dr. Matthew Lynch, a scholar in the UK familiar with the podcast and Mike's work.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 192: SBL Conference Interviews, Part 3. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike. Last day at SBL.

MH: Last day. I see a tear forming in your eye.

TS: I've got my bags packed. I'm leaving on a jet plane. [laughs]

MH: Well, I'm going to be here for a while because my wife and kids are coming in. We're going to do some Boston things and then drive down to PA for Thanksgiving, so have a good trip. I'm going to be here for a while! [laughs] Still doing the hotel thing.

Well, in this episode, we're going to talk to Tim Mackey of the Bible Project. Some listeners will have heard of that. It's really a wonderful content-oriented, visual presentation of scriptural truth—biblical theology. So we wanted to talk to Tim a little bit. We have a bit of a history between us there, so we were grateful to get some of his time. We talked with Matthew Lynch, who is in the UK and has a fascinating model of delivering high-quality education for students that is sustainable and sensible. I think you're going to be really interested if you live over there. What they're actually doing is growing and taking hold. So for those of you who have wanted to learn some scripture (good content) and you're in the UK, this is something you should check out. So another great set of interviews.

MH: Well, we're back at SBL, and we have with us Dr. Tim Mackey, a fellow traveler from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Hebrew Department. But more significantly, Tim has a wonderful ministry—The Bible Project—and he teaches part-time. But I'm going to let you introduce yourself and tell us about what you do.

TM: Yeah, thank you! I'm Tim Mackey. [laughter] I live in Portland, Oregon, and I'm a professor of Biblical Literature at Western Seminary. I'm part-time, but my main gig is the Bible Project, which is a non-profit animation studio in Portland that makes short, animated films about biblical theology.

MH: And does it really well! [laughter]

TM: Yeah, it's a great team. We're an educational YouTube channel. That's where we fit in the ecosystem of YouTube—in the non-profit education channel world. We also have a website where we have lots of other biblical theology resources.

MH: Listeners will know right away that this is sort of the sweet spot for us, because what we're trying to do is get good content (not like "Christian Middle Earth" crazy content) to anybody who cares—the non-specialist, the pastor, and really anybody. That's the mission. Just trying to do that. What you do is just a perfect example of what we would like to see done, just generally—stuff that needs to happen. I'm sure you're like me—you meet people all the time who have been Christians for 10, 20, 30 years and they just don't know a whole lot, and it's not because they're not smart or good thinkers. It's just that they're under-exposed to content.

TM: My growing conviction is that it is about content, but it's also about a whole cultural paradigm for engaging the Bible. It's not just like Western Protestantism, as if that's the problem with everything. It's more that there are symptomatic issues in Protestant culture, especially, where people engage the Bible only in environments where you encounter little bits of the Bible out of context [laughter] for your whole life. It's actually very difficult in that kind of culture to see how the Bible is actually designed to be read on its own terms—which is as an expansive, unified, epic narrative. It's very difficult! So that's a part of what you and I both have in common—helping people see always, every particular poem or story or verse of Paul is located within the larger scope of it.

MH: I'm sure you encounter people who say, "Tim, why should we care about all that external stuff? Why should we care about the big picture? That just sounds like work! [laughter] Can't I just flip open my Bible and look at a few verses and understand it? Why do I need to do all this?" How do you try to encourage them, or even possibly rebuke them?

5:00

TM: I became a follower of Jesus when I was almost 20, and I had not read the Bible at any length. But I was really compelled by Jesus—the person of Jesus. And so the Gospels were the first parts of the Bible I ever read. I still remember this. There was so much about Jesus that was so compelling—how he treated people, what he said and did—but there was a whole layer of "what is this guy talking about" most of the time! [laughter] Like, the narratives about what he did with people... Pretty much everything he was trying to communicate made no sense to me. And then someone taught me that these cross-references for when... I read the NASB (that was the first Bible put in my hands) and they put the Old Testament quotes in all caps. I remember asking my mentor, "Why is all this stuff in all caps?" And he was like, "Oh, those are quotations of Jesus from the first three-quarters of the Bible." So right from the very beginning, I just started working those notes. And I was more bewildered than ever. Then I realized, I want to follow Jesus and I want to understand him and who he is incomprehensible to me, apart from the first three-quarters of my Bible. So that was my journey. Really, to be honest, it was the New Testament use of the Old.

MH: Wow.

TM: I just realized that everything the apostles are trying to tell us about who Jesus is and what it means to follow him...

MH: It comes from somewhere, yeah.

TM: They see it as part of a much larger story that takes a lifetime to immerse yourself in. For the apostles and Jewish readers of the Bible, that's the joy of the scriptures—how much work it takes! [laughs] Psalm 119—it's a joy! So it's a different culture we have to learn how to...

MH: It is, but that's a good tack. I try not to let a person's reticence about work deter me from actually giving them the right answer. Yeah, it is work. But like most things in life, anything really worth your time is going to be work.

TM: That's like a relationship. Relationships take work. But there's something about these texts—these precious texts from the Jewish and Christian tradition... I often feel now about the Bible that it's like having a friend who is eccentric and odd [laughter] who everybody misunderstands, and you want to help the world see how awesome your friend is. [laughter] You could call it work. I just call it time, and being able to step out of my way of seeing the world into this epic storyline, which is from a different culture, time, and place, and it reveals God to us. But it's from another world, so to speak, so you have to humble yourself and get on a plane and go fly to another culture, bring your phrasebook.

MH: That's a good analogy. I like that.

TM: You need to learn to say your numbers and "hello" and "goodbye." You know what I mean—it's like traveling.

MH: Absolutely.

TM: So it does take work.

MH: But it's an investment, ultimately.

TM: Yeah, that's right. So there you go! I agree. I love what you guys are doing through all the Naked Bible resources. It's my easiest place to go to for exegetical stimulation [laughter]. While I'm riding my bike to work, I'm like, "I want a session on Leviticus 10 this morning." So I know where I'm going—episode 37, or whatever! So thank you guys for what you're doing.

MH: Well, we're excited about what you do, too, and we admire the effort and the results that go into it. We would encourage everybody who listens to us to check out the Bible Project. Do you want to give the URL again?

TM: The easiest thing to do is just google The Bible Project. Or if you're ever in YouTube, just search The Bible Project and the videos will come up pretty quickly. Our main website is just www.thebibleproject.com.

10:00

MH: You should know that there's a lot of scholarship—a lot of grunt work—that goes into these videos. Tim has an earned PhD, he knows what he's doing. We've chatted off the podcast about the work that he does. So you can trust that what you're getting in the videos is not just eye-candy. It's good stuff. It's good thinking distilled in a very comprehensible way.

TM: Yeah. I cut my teeth in those early years teaching the Bible to Jr. High skateboarders. I came to Christ through an outreach ministry to skateboarders in Portland, so my first teaching responsibility was for the Jr. High Bible study—kids that had become Christians. That's when I first started drawing. I would draw stuff on charts for them to just try and make it comprehensible. I had some teachers who drew a lot. For me, it was the genesis of using a heavy reliance on visuals to communicate how the Bible works. Then when I met my friend, John (the co-founder of the Bible Project), he had been professionally making short, animated explainer videos for clients—mostly tech companies. So he pitched the idea to me to marry my bad drawings [laughter] and hopefully good content with his skill set and team, and then the Bible Project happened. It's super-fun. I get to be a nerd and read and study and write, and then the art team takes over after that.

MH: Somebody else can make it beautiful.

TM: Totally. [laughter]

MH: Well, thanks for spending a few minutes with us.

TM: Yeah, cheers! Thank you.

11:25

MH: We're back at SBL and we're with Matthew Lynch. I'm going to let Matthew introduce himself. Give us a little bit of history of who you are, what your degree is in, what your focus is—but more importantly, what it is you do.

ML: Sure! Thanks, Mike. Thanks for having me on the podcast.

MH: Sure.

ML: My name is Matt Lynch. I am Dean of Studies and lecturer in Old Testament at Westminster Theological Center, which is based in the UK. I did my doctoral studies in Hebrew Bible at Emory University in Atlanta. I had done my Master's degrees at Regent College, Vancouver. I ended up moving over to the UK four or five years ago. I work at Westminster Theological Center now. The WTC is a unique college. First of all, we're unabashedly Charismatic and interdenominational, and we're not an ordination-track college. A lot of colleges are specifically for people going into the Church of England or something like that, but we're looking to equip the whole people of God, no matter what area of ministry of work they're going into. The way our model works is that students study with us part-time in a local hub, which is a place where they gather with a cohort of other students in a local community. I can explain how that works.

MH: Yeah, tell us how it works and how many there are. If you have those numbers off the top of your head, let us know.

ML: Yeah, I do. And we're a growing college. We have 11 locations around the UK and we have a hub in Stockholm, as well. We just opened a hub in Northern Ireland this year, so those are the farthest reaches of our hubs. If someone was going to study with us, they would pick a particular hub around the UK or up in Stockholm and enroll. The way they would do their course is let's say they're doing a certificate in theology or they're doing a graduate diploma or a Bachelor's degree. Essentially, you enroll at the local hub—say Northeast London or Manchester or down in Bristol or out in East Anglia. We have hubs all over the place. You would study part-time in the local hub about 20 nights a year on Monday or Tuesday evening. But then you have two annual residentials where all of our students gather together. There are about 200 of us at the college. We gather in Telford, which is a pretty central location. Those are really fantastic times. Our vision and mission is really to integrate an openness to the Spirit and deep academic study, and not divorce those two things.

15:00

MH: That's important for my audience because there will be some in the audience that hear the term "Charismatic" and they think that's going to be incompatible with scholarship. One of the reasons I wanted to have Matthew on is that's not the case here. We have a credential scholar who stays up with his own interests and tries to do serious academic work *and* transmit a sense of the need to do that in his school, but yet not ignoring the other side.

ML: Exactly. I think we find that among a lot of our students, there's a real hunger to go deep—to put those sure foundations on top of an experience they've had. An experience is important—we believe God is living and active and wants to actually meet with us—but at the same time, you can't build your life simply on experience.

MH: Right, right.

ML: You need foundations to sustain you when you don't have the experience or when you're doubting the experience. So I think the integration of those two things is really important.

MH: We could probably all give a grocery list of the bad examples we've seen, where everything is experience-oriented. I want to go back to the hubs. How does a hub form and operate? Do you have to have a graduate or a scholar or a pastor? Who leads the thing? How does that work?

ML: Each hub has a hub director, who is a facilitator of the hub and oversees the marketing side of things and is a kind of pastoral support there. They're not meant to be academic support. We handle that centrally, as a college.

MH: Do you do that over the internet or through Skype? How do you do that?

ML: Both/and. So first of all, if a student studies with us, you don't have a distance-learning relationship with a lecture because you've already met them at the residential. We start the year in September at the residential together with a time of intensive study and worship. So that's the context out of which you form the community. But then a local hub is usually based in a church that we have a relationship with. A student will come to a hub on a hub evening (one of those 20 evenings a year if they're doing a certificate or grad diploma or BA) and they would watch pre-recorded content, they would have a time of worship and discussion together, but also a video conference with the lecturer, who will help them unpack it and ask questions about what they've seen in the content. So some refer to it as a "flipped classroom model," where you get the content in the recorded section and then discuss it.

MH: So if you're an instructor, you're doing 20 of these in a term?

ML: Each individual instructor doesn't have that kind of load. The students will have different instructors for 20 evenings.

MH: That's really interesting. Are there fewer or more obstacles to creating a degree-granting program in the UK? Do you have accreditation issues? Is that separate from granting degrees? What was the dog-and-pony show that you had to go through to do this?

ML: To get degree-granting status in the UK, you need to be affiliated with a university. So all of our students are awarded a degree from the University of Chester, which is our validating or accrediting university. It's a fully-fledged academic degree, but we have relative autonomy to develop a program how we want, and that's where we can do what we do. So we have a really good relationship with Chester, but there's a lot of red-tape and paperwork...

MH: Did you have friends there, or how did you... Why there?

ML: The relationship with Chester preceded me—the formation of that. They have a really good Theology and Religious Studies program there that we connected with. We got to know the folks in that department. I'm not sure of the precise reasons for the decision to go with Chester. We had been with a different university before, but I think Chester also has an openness to...

MH: ...trying new things?

ML: To confessional theological colleges operating in their orbit. I'm not sure all universities are.

MH: Yeah, that's probably an understatement! [laughs]

ML: In the UK, unlike in the US, where you have an accrediting body like the ATS, there it's all run through the universities. You don't have freewheeling operations in quite the same way.

MH: I'd like to get your impressions on the state of believing Christianity in the UK. I tend to hear the laments. So what are your thoughts?

ML: As you can tell from my accent, I'm American, so I hesitate to make broad pronouncements about the state of faith in the UK. But I can say that... I'll take it from our angle. What's exciting to us is that the Charismatic/Pentecostal churches are growing in the UK, across denominations. For us, that bodes well for our college, but it also signals that something exciting is happening there. I think one of the reasons those wings of the church are growing is because there's been an infusion of immigrants into those denominations. Some people suggest that in some ways, revival will happen in the UK, not internal to...

20:00

MH: From the outside.

ML: Yeah, from the outside, so to speak. The Anglican Church, which is the state church in the UK, is broadly in decline, although in the London area, it's growing. That's the only major sector of the UK where the Anglican Church is growing, which probably has to do with Holy Trinity... the major church and influence are there.

MH: I keep hearing and reading things about some ridiculous percentage of people in the UK are Jedi—like they identify with this weird sort of neo-occult...

ML: Oh, you mean literally Jedi!

MH: Yeah, like the Jedi religion or something.

ML: We see them walking around all over the place, yeah. One out of every two Brits are Jedi, that's true. [laughter]

MH: No, but I'm sure you've seen these stories about these percentages of people who identified as Jedi on a religious... I'm sure a lot of it has to be a little bit of a prank at some point.

ML: A related story... A friend of mine was teaching one of the massive open online courses and he made an offhand comment when he was talking about ancient Greek gods that no one worships them anymore, and then he went on to make some other point. Well, of course, a listener wrote in and said, "I do, in fact, worship the ancient Greek pantheon and I take offense at that."

MH: It's probably the guy that interviewed me last year! [laughs] I was on a pagan podcast, and that's his thing.

ML: I guess you bump into these folks a little more often than I do. But to get back to the point about the state of the Church in the UK, the other major issue is moral decline of the Church. That's been a question that people have been banging their heads against the wall over for quite some time—what to do about that.

MH: That's really an interesting program you've got—collectively 200, which is a good number. That would be sort of a good, thriving seminary community over here, minus the ones that have been here forever. That's a really good number.

ML: We were at about 135 in 2014 and we've been growing steadily each year, so it's partly to do with adding new hubs, but we're also tapping into a kind of hunger for depth. People find a very exciting environment that also fits around their work and life. Very few people can take off from their work and go to a full-

time brick and mortar seminary, so I think it's a really good model. It allows us, as well, to tap into some of the best lecturers around to do this.

MH: Yeah. How about resources? How do you get your students to resources? Is that a factor in where a hub is—that they're near a good library or something?

ML: Yeah, and we try to mitigate the disparity that you would have... If you're in London, you would have access to all kinds of great libraries, whereas if you're out in East Sussex (which is where we have another hub), you have slim pickings out there. What we do is we furnish a small library at each hub, which has all the core books for the modules. (We call the courses "modules" in the UK.) But they also have access to a huge database on line, and through Ebsco they have about 7,000 e-books in biblical studies and theology. That gives them much better access.

MH: Does Chester give you access to that, like with a student identification and all that?

ML: Yeah, they give us access to their databases.

MH: That's really nice!

ML: We bought the library, though—the e-library—to help support students. I think if you have a small library of only a thousand books, you just can't do substantial research or study. So that's been really helpful.

MH: Yeah. Well, that's really interesting. We get good spiritual news from the UK! [laughter]

ML: I think so!

25:00

MH: Like I said, I just keep getting laments by email and what-not, but I wanted to have you on because we have a lot of listeners that are going to be in that area. And there you go—you can be part of a community. You can learn something of quality. Take advantage of it. There it is!

ML: Should I share the website?

MH: Yep, share the website again.

ML: www.wtctheology.org.uk You can always go on there and email me (Matt Lynch) if you have questions about anything. I'd be really happy to speak with you.

MH: All right. Thank you!

ML: Thanks, Mike.

TS: Okay, Mike, that was good! Another year down—2017. Looking forward to 2018, which is in Denver, I believe—the Rocky Mountains.

MH: Are you going to say "in Denver" with everything?

TS: No, I've been in Denver several times, so...

MH: So it was just the Rhode Island thing.

TS: It was just Rhode Island, yes. The New England area is like another... like the UK for me.

MH: Maybe they'll do it in Alaska sometime.

TS: Hence, the reason why they call it "New" England. [laughter] We were in New Jersey and I asked you, "Where's the old Jersey?" And nobody knew. [laughter] There you go. All right, Mike. Well, I've enjoyed it. We appreciate everybody that came on. We'll pick up Hebrews 8 next weekend. With that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.