

*Autobiographical Reflections on IBS*

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“If you look carefully at the text of Mark 8, you will notice the author’s use of the structural law of interchange leading up to the Great Confession.” Bob Traina’s perspicacious tone enveloped the silence of the room. It was becoming clear to each of us that day that the enigmatic story of the blind man who saw people as trees (Mark 8:22–26) held the clue to the substance of Mark’s portrayal of the disciples’ crises of faith articulated in the opening verses of the chapter, which was intensified in 8:14–21 and which culminated in 8:27–29.

Three years prior, I had been accosted in the quadrangle of my alma mater, the Queen’s University of Belfast, by an arrogant law student. “I understand you are a Christian,” he interposed. As President of the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship chapter, I was evidently a target for atheistic traffickers on the University campus. “Explain to me,” he continued, “why anyone would want to follow a savior who couldn’t get a miracle right the first time.” He left hardly waiting for an answer—none would be forthcoming anyway—with a smug, satisfied grin on his face. I was obviously not the first Jesus follower he had left deflated and taciturn.

He was referring to Mark 8, the only recorded instance of this miracle. Back then the passage was new to me and to all those whom I consulted, whether pastors or lay leaders. No one provided a satisfactory explanation of the enigma of the man who saw people as trees! The Christian world I knew was impotent to ease my dilemma. Disconsolate, I read and re-read the offending verses, felt the

frustration of ignorance, called imprecatory judgments on the gospel writer, and then resigned myself to uncomfortably categorizing the puzzle of the man who had to be touched twice as yet another unresolved biblical conundrum. Time passed and there were other more pressing things to contemplate.

Everything changed that April morning in Dr. Traina's IBS class in Kentucky. The veil enshrouding the mystery of the man who needed a second touch was torn away. A light went on that would forever dispel the smugness of the quick-witted law student and his minions were I to encounter them once again. I had learned a way of viewing Scripture that would radically transform my understanding. I was provided with a methodological approach utilizing inductive study tools, which would allow me to unlock seemingly inexplicable passages and enhance those more readily comprehensible.

By viewing the gospel contextually and comprehensively, the solution to the enigma became self-evident. By interposing the account of the blind man who needed Christ's second touch before he could properly see in Mark 8:22–26, between the disciples' lack of insight in 8:14–21 (*Having eyes do you not see?*) and Peter's final recognition in 8:27–29 (*You are the Christ!*), Mark marvelously and strategically communicates a poignant message: evidently the disciples, like the blind man, needed a second touch to enable them to see clearly, to recognize who Jesus really was.

That was a beginning point. The methodological approach of Inductive Biblical Studies continued to expand my horizons, ubiquitous in its application to view the text through new eyes, to uncover new realities that had laid in unintentional seclusion from the authors' intent under the inspiration of God's Spirit.

So, after graduation, I was ready to test the efficacy of the IBS method I had learned from Professor Traina in a wider academic setting. I attended the University of Edinburgh and completed a PhD degree in Old Testament studies. With the citation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle of Irish descent ringing in my ears: "You see, but you do not observe" (from "A Scandal in Bohemia," 1891), my youthful enthusiasm propelled me to undertake what I hoped would be a groundbreaking perspective of the book of Exodus. In particular, it

was my desire to expose a second, more subtle and overlooked exodus event in the latter section of the book allowing me to conclude that the second book in the Bible contains not one but, in actuality, two exodus events: one from the threat of genocide by an Egyptian pharaoh, the second by divine fiat.

Obviously, the incident after which the book is named occupies the major portion of the material in the book dramatically portrayed in the first eighteen chapters. The occurrences at Sinai occupy the latter portion of the book outlining the giving of the law and the building of the tabernacle. And yet, interposed amid the seemingly innocuous and rather mundane litany of requirements, the narrative of the golden calf emerges in ostensible disconnection.

However, as the IBS method insists, the job of the biblical exegete is to examine the complex intricacies of the text with the framework of the book-as-a-whole, to discern the context in which a writer or redactor has placed a particular pericope, and to determine why it was included and how it functions within that context. So, in scrutinizing and contextualizing the perplexing placement of the story of the golden calf and harnessing the inductive tools I had been trained to use, I advanced the idea of another, underrated exodus event.

Exodus 32 functions as much more than an isolated story recalling happenings in the unfolding history of a fledging nation. The author intentionally placed it within the context of a story of deliverance for a reason. It behooves the scholar to uncover the rationality of its deployment. By relying on the structural relationships used by the author or redactor, it is possible to discern similarities between the “main” exodus event and its subsidiary, which is no less real. Indeed, even though only three chapters are given to the description of the golden calf and the consequences emerging from its worship compared to the much lengthier portion of the book provided for the departure from Egypt, the threat of genocide is more far-reaching in its repercussion. The Abrahamic nation would cease to exist as such. Its almost complete annihilation reflects the seriousness of God’s dismay on Israel’s apostasy.

This innovative approach to understanding the message, in this case of Exodus, was never fully embraced by the old liberal perspective of Wellhausen’s textual dissection pervasive in Europe at the time, but it struck a chord with Brevard Childs at Yale and F. F. Bruce in Manchester, England. I am particularly indebted to Professor Childs whose insights were accommodating and whose encouragement was boundless. Emerging from the research I completed at Yale and at the University of Edinburgh was a profound sense of gratification and ultimate vindication of the IBS method through the external examination of my thesis by F. F. Bruce. The inductive, contextual study had stood the test of rigorous academic study on both sides of the Atlantic. It was time to popularize its application within the wider church.

Traina’s insistence on detailed and exhaustive observation has always been the hallmark and foundational core of the IBS approach. Sadly, it may be the most neglected facet of the hermeneutical endeavor. Understandably everyone wants to interpret the text, to gain a sense of a passage, to answer the question, “What is the meaning of what is here?” The problem is a complete neglect of the *a priori* consideration from which the interpretive question arises: simply, “What is here?”

In other words, how can one reasonably justify answering the interpretive question, “what is the meaning of what is here” before reaching the prior logical supposition of “what is here” in the first instance? The interpretive question rests on what has been observed. But it is precisely here at the level of thorough observation that most attempts at understanding the text go astray. As such, exhaustive analysis of the biblical material is paramount if one is to fully grasp the message of the Bible.

Eventually, my parish ministry took me to Virginia, Texas and California. Heavy on my heart lay not only the task of sound teaching but of inspiring the Church to delve into Scripture for themselves to discover its profound truths. I reasoned with the people placed in my charge that if God does actually exist and is best defined by Judeo-Christian theology, and if the Bible truly is the word of God addressing the plight of broken humanity—if one really believes that

to be the case, more than a rote affirmation of faith—then to understand the Bible aright must be the most vital undertaking in the world and the most important activity in which humankind can engage. If this is what Almighty God is communicating to His creation, it behooves us to expend every effort to comprehend what is being disclosed and to act upon its message.

When, as a young preacher in Virginia, I asked my congregation to turn to a reference in the book of Zephaniah and perceived puzzling frowns as a result, I was provoked to systematically begin a midweek class on inductive Bible study. A dozen people attended the classes formulated in specific twelve 10-week courses of study covering Old and New Testaments. Each class lasted two hours. There were daily assignments during the entire 10-week sessions and an examination at the end of the course with an attendant certificate of completion when the requirements of the course were fulfilled. We made do with study guides already on the market but which were rather paltry in their attempts to analyze every biblical book in three component parts. Arguably they were better than nothing and little else was available at the time.

Once the disconnect between the content of the study guides and the conclusions reached inductively by the class was blatantly obvious, it became necessary to produce our own material. Over the next twenty years as parishes changed and the material was repeatedly revised, the study guides took on new analytical life and the dozen faithful attendees swelled in number to over 700 participants who met each Wednesday evening in the sanctuary of Hollywood Presbyterian Church where I was serving as senior pastor.

It seemed that a latent appetite had been awakened among many people who simply wanted to engage in a journey of discovery of God's Word. They came from all over the Los Angeles basin, from a wide spectrum of denominations, including agnostics and people no longer interested in "church" per se but willing to encounter the presumed message of God. They came with their multifarious, preconceived notions and their varied cultural backgrounds but also with searching hearts and a genuine openness to hear afresh the timeless message of the Bible. They came by the hundreds such that

our large community centre could not contain them, which forced the class into the vacuous sanctuary.

For the six-year duration of the study, every book in the Bible lay exposed to the scrutiny of IBS methodology. It was gratifying to see Christians reveling in a study of the source documents of their own faith through detection: observing biblical books as wholes and discerning structural relationships within a book's component parts. By simplifying and facilitating techniques of study, it was encouraging to witness so many overcome their unease of reading the Bible for themselves.

The success of IBS within the context of a local congregation prompted unanticipated expansion. Truth to tell, I could not have foreseen the overwhelming response our study elicited. After all, the unpretentious idea was merely to help interested people find their way to the book of Zephaniah! What transpired was beyond imagination. So, perhaps it was inevitable that other entities at home and abroad, churches, missions and institutions enquired how they might replicate what was being done in Texas and California.

Like the mustard seed in Jesus' parable, what began in the most inauspicious manner gave way to a mission movement that we called "The Word Is Out." This ministry now operates in one form or another in twelve countries throughout the world. Its first Centre for Biblical Understanding is now flourishing in Lusaka. All of it was prompted by the arrogance of an atheistic law student in Ireland, inspired by an IBS professor in America, and sourced by the story of a blind man in Mark's gospel who needed a second touch from Jesus to see clearly. I am immensely grateful for that second touch!