

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY, DIVINE REVELATION, AND CANON

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on encounter with the teaching and work of Robert A. Traina this paper develops a constructive account of his contribution to inductive bible study by responding positively to two objections that naturally arise. On the one hand, it answers an objectivist worry by noting that Traina's work readily fits into the tradition of *Geisteswissenschaft* and takes with radical seriousness a metaphysics of personal agency and action. On the other hand, it deals with a subjectivist worry by showing that Traina's central concerns transcend his relatively conventional theology of scripture. Through these strategies we can see that inductive bible study is a dynamic research agenda in hermeneutics that depends on crucial insights into the nature of observation and interpretation. Given the validity of these insights, inductive bible study is now poised to enter a new phase of its life as it moves forward into more conventional forms of academic research.

INTRODUCTION

Robert A. Traina was one of the finest teachers I encountered across the years as a student. When I first picked up a copy of *Methodical Bible Study*¹ I did not know what to make of it; it struck me as foreign, inaccessible, much too formal, and even arid. The contrast with the enthusiasm exhibited by students who used this text in his classes was a puzzle; I could not connect my first impressions of Methodical Bible Study with the excitement that was pervasive. This quickly changed when I enrolled in a course on the Gospel of Mark. At the beginning Traina gave a succinct overview of his hermeneutical commitments; he then set us to work on the text. After the first week or so we reached agreement together as a class that we would refrain from asking questions; such was the illumination provided by Traina in his presentations that we

1. Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study: A New Approach to Hermeneutics* (New York: Ganis & Harris, 1952).

set up discussion sessions outside the schedule to deal with questions that arose in the normal course of events. I was also fortunate to be able to take additional courses on the Pentateuch and on Romans where we followed the same basic arrangement. Beyond these encounters I acted as a teaching assistant for Traina for a semester; and on occasion I traveled with him to the Trappist monastery at Gethsemane where he taught the monks on a regular basis.

As I got deeper into Traina's interpretations of scripture I was surprised to discover that his doctoral work was not in biblical studies but in systematic theology.² In fact he had worked with Carl Michalson (1915-65) at Drew University (a remarkable existentialist theologian who was tragically killed in an airplane crash in Cincinnati, Ohio) and wrote a doctoral thesis on the doctrine of atonement. The thesis is a meticulous study that draws extensively on work in the philosophy of history, a sub-discipline within philosophy that was close to my own heart. To be sure, Traina's first love was the study of scripture; yet his vision of scripture and his exegetical work were by no means theologically underdeveloped; on the contrary, he brought to the text not just an innate perfectionist streak but a very rich theological sensibility. Furthermore, given what I saw of his life up close as a teacher and administrator, it was very clear that he was a saint in the making; his response to personal and professional opposition early in his career and to periods of intense physical suffering was nothing short of astonishing.

TWO IMPORTANT OBJECTIONS

I begin this paper with these background comments because they bear significantly on the argument that will be developed in this paper. I want to address constructively two objections that commonly crop up in responses to inductive Bible study.³ On the one hand, inductive Bible study looks like an effort to sustain an objectivist account of hermeneutics as a science of interpretation modeled on the natural sciences of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, inductive Bible study, given its origins and popularity within conservative forms of Protestantism, looks like a cover for a partisan and potentially dangerous theological agenda that is hidden from its best practitioners. The first

2. Robert A. Traina, *The Atonement, History, and Kerygma: A Study in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967).

3. I shall be assuming throughout here the inductive tradition as I encountered in the work of Robert A. Traina.

objection worries that inductive Bible study is pretentious intellectually; the second that its adherents are likely to be self-deceived. One might combine the two and urge that inductive bible study presents itself as an objective enterprise precisely because it is a cover for a pervasive subjective and even arbitrary theological agenda. As we proceed, let me indicate how *prima facie* attractive and natural these objections can be and begin to indicate how I plan to address them.

Consider the objectivist objection again. It is very tempting to dismiss Traina's whole approach to hermeneutics by portraying it as a relic of an older objectivist, neutral, even 'scientific' approach to the study of texts. The very idea of inductive Bible study can readily be the starting point for this temptation. I propose that we resist this natural temptation precisely because Traina's conceptual apparatus is not what it appears on the surface. In fact it involves a thoroughly defensible account of historical investigation that is lodged in a very particular theological vision. Far from belonging in the world of *Naturwissenschaft*, Traina's work belongs firmly in the field of *Geisteswissenschaft*. In addition, drawing on scripture, Traina was exploring various theological proposals and insights that were materially robust and important in their own right.

Consider the subjectivist objection again. Here the primary worry is that inductive Bible study is in fact a tradition of interpretation that is surreptitiously imposed on the interpretation of scripture by its adherents. In response to this objection I shall show that some of Traina's most compelling hermeneutical insights can be lodged in a theological vision of scripture that is significantly different from his own; they stand secure in that they transcend the particular theological commitments that Traina tacitly if not explicitly brought to the text of scripture. This constitutes a weighty reason why one should welcome the updated vision of Traina's work made available in the recent volume Traina co-authored with David R. Bauer.⁴ It is also a reason to celebrate a new phase of the tradition of inductive Bible study as an organized, public contribution to hermeneutics and biblical studies.

A Constructive Response to the Objectivist Objection

One of the driving forces behind Traina's embrace and updating of inductive bible study was his relentless commitment to let scripture speak for itself over against the persistent tendency to impose a

4. See David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), ch. 11.

reading of the text drawn from external doctrinal tradition, personal predilections, contemporary fads, lucky guesses, and the like. I suspect that this went back to early experiences where the text of scripture was used as a pretext for this or that theological agenda. He saw all such efforts as embodying a deductive approach to scripture. In picking up this manner of speaking he was simply using the language that had become conventional in the tradition of inductive Bible study that he had inherited. The inductive approach insisted that one began with careful observation of the text in its final form in scripture, moved by means of a series of rigorous questions to interpretation, and only then move, through a phase of evaluating and appropriation, to the final correlation or integration of one's findings.

It is surely legitimate to think of this kind of study as objective in nature. One comes to the text initially not knowing what it means; the text stands over against one as an object of study; and one of the principal goals is to find out what the author or implied author intended to communicate to his or her original audience. Only then should one proceed to work through what the text means for us today.⁵ This is a highly controversial claim in hermeneutics in some quarters; yet it harbors a non-negotiable insight for all hermeneutical inquiry. The primary access to the meaning of a text is tied to itself; the text stands over against us and we do not know what it means until we open and the read, mark, note and inwardly digest what it says.

In part the opposition to this basic hermeneutical platitude stems from persistent misunderstanding. To describe the task as objective in nature does not mean that we approach the reading of scripture without interests, prejudices, or presuppositions. On the contrary, it assumes precisely the opposite; it is agreed that we all come to texts armed to the teeth with a host of presuppositions and prejudgments; and especially so in the case of scripture. The mandate to engage in inductive study assumes this commonplace observation. Indeed it takes this observation so seriously that it recognizes that it is the existence of such presuppositions that often prevent us from hearing the text in all its rich content. Hence we need to develop practices that will take this reality into account and give us a much better shot at hearing what the text itself says to us from its own context.

The observation just made is a very general one. It can also

5. In this paper for the sake of convenience I shall use the term 'text' to act as shorthand for the author or implied author. For the notion of implied author see Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 45-49.

be approached as an inference from classical Protestant and Roman Catholic accounts of scripture which see scripture as dictated, inspired, or authored by God. Traina was clearly committed to some such vision of scripture. One might say that on this analysis the interpretation of scripture was a holy endeavor in which one sought to hear the Word of God in the words of scripture. The Word of God on this account necessarily deserves to be read with a reverence that distinguishes between the creature and the Creator, between the sinner and the divine, between projecting onto the text what one wants to hear and actually listening to the Word of God. One does not get to tell God in advance of listening to the text what God may want to communicate to us.

One can also think of this operation in epistemological categories. The overall orientation is methodist, evidentialist, and internalist. It is methodist in that it seeks to be explicit on what method or methods are deployed; it is evidentialist in that it operates by appeal to observational considerations derived from features of the text; and it is internalist in that the reader becomes self-conscious of the various steps in play. However, this description by no means rules out externalist considerations that focus on the cultivation of various intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility, apt curiosity, spiritual sensitivity, and the like; and that eliminates such intellectual vices as dogmatism, idle curiosity, hasty judgments, and the like. We might legitimately look on inductive bible study as a network of epistemic practices that cultivate good hermeneutical judgment; the tacit assumption is that we are more likely to have a more accurate interpretation of the text than would be the case were we to eschew such practices or were we to deploy a competing network of practices.

THE CHALLENGE OF OBSERVATION

The challenge posed by the mandate to engage in accurate observation is an acute one; and it is not the least of the virtues of inductive Bible study that it provides explicit instruction on how to proceed in a productive manner. Once again the language initially developed within inductive Bible study is off-putting if not misleading. We were instructed to look for laws of relationships, suggesting once again that we are engaged in some kind of scientific endeavor.⁶ In reality, the various laws of relationships are best understood as crucial structural features that

6. This language has happily been dropped from the most recent update of inductive bible study. See Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, ch. 11.

expose the mind of the author. One looks for repetition, the continuation of various themes, preparatory moves, turning points, climactic episodes, contrasts, causal claims, various inferential strategies, significant concluding comments, and the like. For the most part we engage in such observations on an *ad hoc* basis; inductive Bible study limits the hit-and-miss character of such work by providing an agenda that gives relevant literary tools to discern the patterns that show up in the text as a whole. Interpretation continues this process by taking one back to one's initial observations and then, utilizing a network of probing questions, drives one even deeper into the details of text both in part and as a whole. It is hard to articulate the liberating effect of such practices. In time it builds an appropriate self-confidence that can displace the initial confusion and erode the besetting temptation to prejudice and dogmatism.

Traditionally it has been common to think of this kind of operation as an effort to gain access to the intentions of the author. Critics have often poured scorn on this whole notion by insisting that all we have is access to the text before us.⁷ We do not have any kind of external access to the explicit intentions of the author; and, even if we did, this would not help because all we would have would be more textual materials in need of interpretation. This is a misleading way to think of what is at stake. Inductive Bible study agrees that we are generally limited to the textual material before us. What talk about intentions signals is that we are in search of the relevant speech acts of the agent or agents who produced the text. It is the actions of the author that matter and these are captured by the relevant practices of observation and interpretation. It is in, with, and through the deployment of contrast, repetition, climactic moments, and the like, that an agent succeeds in communicating what he or she intends.

SOME BACKGROUND PHILOSOPHICAL COMMITMENTS

Traina at this point drew on the insights of idealist philosophers like Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943) in order to provide a deeper rationale for his hermeneutical commitments. We might capture the crucial issue in an oversimplified fashion in this way. An author begins with certain intentions and purposes, say, to communicate certain information; these intentions are inescapably

7. I trust it is needless to say that every interpreter has to draw on a wealth of extra-textual information in the interpretation of any text. The issue here is the focus on interpreting the text in hand.

internal to the mind; unless one is a positivist or behaviorist, they are not publicly available to others.⁸ Hence the challenge is to find appropriate causal means to communicate the relevant information to others. The various laws of relationships constitute the causal means for achieving one's intentions and purposes in communicating this or that piece of information. The challenge for readers is then obvious; they need to reverse the causal process. By careful practices of observation and interpretation one can get appropriate access to the mind of the author. It is a case of reverse engineering, so to speak. One pays attention to the strategies deployed to discern the speech acts of the author.

Materialist forms of hermeneutics in their extreme versions reject this whole way of thinking. Here the effort is to set aside the personal agency of the author and to search for material causes like class, gender, social location, colonial conditions, and the like, as the key to understanding the meaning of texts. The price to be paid for this shift in perspective is dramatic. Those who take this kind of extreme position are open to the charge of self-referential incoherence in that their agency can equally be called into question by deploying a materialist causal narrative that treats them as passive objects or processes rather than as personal agents. The actual claims advanced in any materialist interpretation can be reinterpreted as a concealed expression of this or that interest rather than as a claim about the causal conditions about the author posited by the materialist interpreter. Hermeneutics in the materialist tradition becomes an exercise in quasi-empirical observation that ferrets out hidden causes rather than an effort to understand the actions of human agents. Not surprisingly, materialist interpretations rarely go all the way to the bottom. Their adherents arbitrarily protect their own written texts as exempt from the application of their own theoretical principles.⁹

Another way to press home the point is that Traina rightly drew

8. This example can readily be extended to deal *mutatis mutandis* to other speech acts. It even applies to the case where the aim of the author is to deceive or dupe the reader.

9. The argument here does not mean that more moderate versions of materialist interpretation are unavailable to the wise interpreter. The crucial considerations related to whether (and to what degree) one should or should not develop a materialist interpretation of an author are these: the falsehood of the author's proposals and the unavailability of relevant rational support. Materialist interpretations of an author focus on the interest-driven motivations of authors, looking for external causes, say, in gender or class identity to explain the meaning of a text. Notice that what is at issue here how it is best to interpret

on the kind of robust vision of human agency that is central to the idealist metaphysical tradition and that resolutely rejects rival positivistic and materialistic metaphysical competitors. One does not have to embrace a full-scale idealist package to see the value of Traina's commitments. It suffices to have in play a categorical account of personal agency and intentionality and to reject reductive forms of naturalism and materialism as applied to authors and their texts. Expressed in historical categories, one places hermeneutics in the arena of *Geisteswissenschaft*. Expressed in terms of agency theory, one comes to know the mind of personal agents by attending to the actions they perform.

In his own exegetical work on the book of Exodus Traina sought to show that this principle also applied to knowledge of God. God was made known in his mighty acts in history, a theme which he shared with scholars in the Biblical Theology Movement.¹⁰ In his analysis of Exodus 6: 2-9 he brought this out with exemplary clarity. However, Traina was not interested in endorsing this or that movement in contemporary theology. Such was his perfectionism and his insistence that students reach their own judgments on the meaning of the text that he rarely published his own judgments in conventional scholarly sites. He only shared his own conclusions in his courses after the students had sought to work out their own account of the meaning of the text under review. While he related his conclusions to wider intellectual developments in the church and culture, and while he was fearless in challenging conventional doctrinal proposals that failed the test of scripture, he was adamant that students come to their own conclusions on the basis of their own observations and interpretations. This was not a casual judgment on his part. It was constitutive of a carefully constructed vision of pedagogy that he developed in print for his personal use but never published.¹¹

Two illustrations of Traina's theological sensitivity in reading the text of scripture stand out. In his observations on Exodus 32-34 he worked through the challenge of divine passibility posed by the text, pointing out that various efforts to secure the impassibility of God dodged

the actions of personal agents. The enduring problem with merely materialist interpretations of the speech actions of an author is that they all too readily emerge from the contemporary moralistic interests of the interpreter. The issues here are extremely subtle; extended treatment would take us far beyond the boundaries of this paper.

10. The relevant organizing concept for the divine is that of agency rather than, say, that of being, process, serendipitous creativity, and the like.

11. Traina shared with me a copy of this unpublished manuscript.

the theological agenda of the final form of the text. This was not a mere exercise in proof-texting. Traina knew how high the theological stakes were. He was not parroting the new waves of scholarship that pressed the case for divine passibility. Moreover, we knew as students that he was drawing on years of evaluating, appropriating, and correlating the data of scripture.

The other illustration involves years of reflecting on the doctrine of atonement. On the one hand, Traina walked us through the whole sacrificial system as laid out in the book of Leviticus after we had studied it for ourselves. On the other hand, he insisted that any account of the death of Christ in reconciling the world to God must first begin with the Gospel accounts of the historical events that led up to the death of Christ on the cross. We could not simply begin with a vision, say, of substitutionary atonement and impose it, say, on the text of Mark. Any account of divine action in atonement had to be consistent with an initial rendering of the historical causes identified, say, in Mark as the relevant causal nexus. This was a revolutionary observation that called for a fresh engagement with the doctrine of the atonement. Even as we were left puzzled as to where Traina himself stood, we were also liberated and even intellectually empowered to follow through on our own.

A CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSE TO THE SUBJECTIVIST OBJECTION

It is not at all surprising that inductive Bible study struck a chord with conservative Protestants inside and outside of the United States of America. As already indicated, Traina and his forbears were committed to a broadly Protestant vision of scripture that saw it as normative and salvific. The practices of evaluation, appropriation, and correlation fitted neatly with the goals of reading scripture soteriologically and of grounding one's theological commitments in scripture. Traina did not see these normative and spiritual features of hermeneutics as antithetical to his resolute commitment to read scripture inductively. Even so I suspect that many contemporary scholars will feel that there is something fishy about this. Surely, it will be said, one is cooking the books in advance by locating scripture in such a rich if contested theological and confessional horizon. Surely, it will be argued, one is bringing a host of prior illegitimate commitments and interests to the reading of the text; there must be some element of trickery or self-deception in play here.

We might capture this worry afresh by saying that inductive

Bible study has already identified scripture as a holy book and therefore has lodged it within a tradition of inquiry that would appear to call into question the whole idea of induction as applied to hermeneutics. I trust I have indicated my sympathy with this worry in that I have made it clear that inductive Bible study as practiced by Traina is unintelligible outside a network of specific philosophical and metaphysical commitments. Hermeneutics clearly belongs in the humanities rather than the hard sciences; its primary subject matter is human action and its interpretation; so its logic is not that of physics or chemistry. At this level metaphysical commitment about human agency, human action, and human meaning-making in the form of texts is unavoidable. So I think that those committed to inductive Bible study should readily own up to the relevant metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions that govern their work. Of course, this then opens us to the charge of subjectivism; for it makes manifest the relevant person-relative or tradition-relative contested commitments in play. What is especially troublesome, it will be thought, is the tradition-relative vision of scripture as normative and canonical that is in play. So let me focus on that specific worry.

Here is how we should respond to this objection

What really matters to the cause of inductive Bible study is the resolution to give pride of place to the agency of the author. The author deserves the best hearing we can muster before we seek to evaluate what is on offer.¹² This cannot be done without holding to an ideal of impartiality that gives pride of place to observation and interpretation. In this effort the goal of inductive bible study is at one with the great tradition of biblical scholarship that was birthed within the synagogue and church long before its later developments under the banner of biblical criticism in its various incarnations. The conventional narrative of the rise of biblical scholarship as a purely secular enterprise that eschewed normative and spiritual goals in the historical investigation of the Bible has to be completely revised at this point. Even the work of Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-77), who is often heralded as the great hero of critical biblical scholarship, has to be completely reinterpreted at this point.¹³ The effort to associate critical biblical scholarship with heterodoxy and secularism is all too often a self-serving narrative of historical development that is

12. The limiting case is where we seek to express the author's intentions even better than the author has done.

13. See Graeme Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005).

inaccurate. Careful inductive study of the text in its historical settings does indeed call into question various inflationary accounts of scripture. However, it is not the case that this development either challenges the basic orientation of inductive Bible study or undercuts more healthy visions of scripture in the life of the church. I shall now seek to show this by displacing Traina's own normative account of scripture yet retaining his fundamental hermeneutical horizon.

Let's agree for the sake of argument that standard forms of inductive Bible study have been motivated by a sense of scripture as the *norma normans non normata* (the norm of norms that is not normed) of Christian theology. Within this tradition scripture is understood as canonical in the sense that it is constituted by special divine revelation and thus understood primarily in epistemic categories. Thus the interpretation of scripture is housed within an epistemic tradition that brings to the text a hermeneutic of generosity.¹⁴ Suppose we displace this background vision of scripture and replace it with a more deflationary account of scripture in which canon is reconceived as a list rather than a criterion and in which the canon of scripture is lodged within a wider heritage of canonical materials, practices, and persons. Is the inductive approach to scripture so tied to the traditional conception of canon that it cannot survive the displacement of that conception by a very different conception of canon? If it can, then it is clear that the benefits of inductive bible study are not dependent on the theological tradition in which it was birthed.

Putting the point more aggressively, the inductive approach to scripture undermines the tradition in which it has been embedded and works much more felicitously within the alternative vision I have just sketched. If I am right about this, then I have undermined one crucial element in the charge of subjectivism. The inductive study of scripture will in fact have called into question the confessional position on scripture in which it has been embedded. So let me pursue this line of argument.

Consider the challenge posed to traditional epistemic conceptions of scripture by inductive study along the following lines. In order to arrive at apt conclusions based on scripture the standard proposed by inductive Bible study is exceptionally high. It requires that one read all of scripture moving from observation, through interpretation, on through evaluation and appropriation, before one reaches the coveted climactic

14. The limiting case would involve doctrines of the inerrancy of scripture; however, this need not be assumed here.

phase of correlation. Anyone who is seriously schooled in inductive Bible study knows from experience how difficult this is even in the case of, say, a single Gospel. Frankly, I see no way in which the requirement of correlation can be anything other than extremely provisional when applied to scripture as a whole; truth be told, I am skeptical it can ever be met, especially so, if one follows the exact instructions developed in inductive bible study.¹⁵

Arriving at apt theological conclusions on the meaning of scripture is not a new problem; it has emerged again and again in the history of Protestant interpretation of scripture. Once the interpretation of scripture was cut loose from the teaching authority of the medieval church, the result was theological and political chaos.¹⁶ Scripture failed in practice to be the canon of truth that it was supposed to be; interpreters could not agree on the doctrines it did or did not establish.

In time various strategies were developed to solve this problem. One crude response was to get control of biblical interpretation and simply impose this or that confession of faith on others using the executive powers of university, church, and state. Another was to hold the line and somehow prove that this or that set of doctrines were truly derived from scripture. Alternatively, one might insist that a favored interpreter, like Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, or Barth, is privileged in securing the meaning of scripture.¹⁷ Another was to lay claim to special assistance of the Holy Spirit that underwrote the favored confession of faith supposedly derived from scripture. Yet another was to argue that scripture only provided warrant for the essentials of salvation and then enumerate the relevant list of essentials, say, in the Apostles' Creed, or in doctrines of the Christian life (the *ordo salutis*), or in the simple mandate to love God and love one's neighbor. All of these strategies, except perhaps the appeal to force on the part of the state, represent recurring

15. What is at issue here is whether we think that comprehensive biblical theologies are really live options for us. For my part I am skeptical of such projects; but this is a controversial position to adopt and I happy to leave the debate about the viability of biblical theology to others.

16. Even then, we must not underestimate the complexity that shows up in the medieval period.

17. The favored version of this currently in place is to turn to the Church Fathers and confidently designate the enterprise as the theological interpretation of scripture. However, the Church Fathers are as much in need of interpretation so this is another dead-end as a resolution of the problem I have identified here.

patterns in the history of Protestantism.

Two other responses deserve mention. On the one hand, one can simply abandon scripture as a norm and turn to the inner light, intuition, reason, experience, and other foundationalist maneuvers, and then try to rebuild everything, including theology, from scratch. The varieties of Enlightenment modernity and the varieties of postmodernity are simply the playing out of this option on a global scale. In our day the latter options take the chaos all the way to the bottom by denying the existence of the author and leaving any stable meaning of this or that text in ruins. No doubt there are clever ways of making virtues of these necessities; we can even look forward to harvesting the hermeneutical fruit of such deconstructive strategies; but there are severe limits to this trajectory in hermeneutics. On the other hand, one can hold on to a doctrine of *sola scriptura* and attempt to fix the problem of interpretation by appeal to the magisterium of the Western Catholic Church and to papal infallibility. Where the teaching of scripture is pivotal for faith and morals, the magisterium of the church, it is claimed, has the relevant epistemic charism to determine the meaning of scripture. The acute problem with this option, aside from the host of difficulties it poses historically and epistemically, is that it simply shifts the problem of the interpretation of scriptural texts to the problem of interpreting extra-scriptural texts. Think of the complications involved in sorting through the texts of Vatican I and Vatican II and in determining the exact meaning of papal pronouncements.

A much more elegant solution that sets aside these developments is to revisit the doctrine of scripture, relocate it within the great canonical heritage of the church, rework our account of the relation between scripture and divine revelation, and focus much more sharply and systematically on the soteriological function of scripture.¹⁸ To enumerate but one aspect of this alternative, as we place scripture alongside the church's canon of doctrine as found in the Nicene Creed, we are no longer anxious as to prove whether the content of the creed can be secured from an impartial reading of scripture. We abandon the quest for a summary of the teaching of scripture and look elsewhere for a summary of canonical teaching, most especially, in the Nicene Creed. With this in place we can then allow scripture to be itself in all its tense-filled diversity. We need precisely the resources of the

18. The background historical and conceptual work for these moves is worked out in my *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

inductive hermeneutical tradition to arrive at the best interpretation of both scripture and creed. So we can allow, say, the internal conflicts between Deuteronomy and Job, or the obvious tensions between Paul and James, to stand as they are, rather than shoe-horn them into some preconceived harmony derived from traditional doctrines of scripture. We can unleash the practices of observation, interpretation, evaluation, and appropriation in their full integrity in order to fathom the complex riches of the scripture. At that point we can either drop correlation altogether or treat it as an unattainable counsel of perfection.

The upshot of the preceding argument is that inductive Bible study can readily handle the charge of subjectivism as focused on its origins within a particular vision of scripture. Inductive Bible study is not dependent on the particular doctrine of scripture in which it flourished. On the contrary, as I have briefly indicated, inductive study of scripture can readily lead one to develop a different conception of scripture, its place in the church, and its primary function. Thus the values of inductive Bible study transcend the tradition-relative world in which it was invented.

To be sure, one can reframe the objection by calling attention to other crucial elements that I have argued have been central to inductive Bible study, to wit, the metaphysical and epistemological commitments that show up in its development. One can immediately think of an obvious way to articulate the new worry. One simply insists that biblical study should be construed along the lines of an entirely secularist outlook which rules out any appeal to theological considerations in the study of scripture. One must treat scripture as just one more book among others that has arisen naturally as an entirely human endeavor. To put the matter simply, one has to read the text as a functional atheist.¹⁹

However, to develop this line is not to abandon contested metaphysical and philosophical commitments but to implement a family of such commitments with a vengeance. If the reading of texts is in part a historical endeavor (and surely it is), one cannot even begin the process without relying on a host of epistemological commitments, starting with such obvious epistemic commitments as the reliability of perception, memory, testimony, and the like. Cutting even deeper, one cannot distinguish between literal and figurative discourse without assuming a host of causal-ontological claims about the world. One interprets a

19. This is common in many graduate programs that pride themselves on the academic study of scripture. The response to graduate students who do not share this way of thinking can be brutal.

speech act or semantic phrase as figurative precisely because it cannot be ready literally given what we know about the causal agents at work in the world. Metaphysical commitments, that is, large-scale beliefs about the world as a whole, including large-scale theological or atheological commitments, are simply inescapable. So saying that inductive Bible study will involve such matters is either irrelevant or question-begging. It is irrelevant because all interpretation will involve such commitments; or it is question-begging because it has already assumed as privileged one set of such commitments.

CONCLUSION

Inductive Bible study has now come of age. It represents an extremely important development in hermeneutics whose fundamental insights have been tacitly around since human agents sought to interpret the written and unwritten speech acts of others. As a research program or tradition of inquiry it has gone through a period of incubation operating at the margins of contemporary theological and biblical studies. To change the metaphors, it has been developing under the radar and its hidden status has permitted both the testing of its principles and its enrichment by conventional and more recent forms of Biblical scholarship across the years. We are not dealing here with some kind of naïve reading of scripture. Inductive Bible study involves not just a network of epistemic practices for the reading of texts; it also involves more broadly extremely important philosophical commitments that tacitly if not explicitly are in play. There is no need for apology on this score; on the contrary the practices of interpretation of texts give rise to their own fascinating philosophical queries that deserve to be articulated and examined in their own right. Moreover, in the work of Robert A. Traina, there is a network of very significant formal and material insights that were available to his many students and that are worthy of critical appropriation and deployment.²⁰ Given that the next phase of inductive Bible study will involve the sharing of the material results on the meaning of scriptural texts, as well as continued reflection on hermeneutics, we can now look forward to a period of public discussion that is of first rate importance to the future of biblical studies and to theological studies more generally.

20. It is much to be hoped that one day some of the fruit of Traina's own life-long engagement with scripture will be available.