

FINDING A COMFORTABLE HOME IN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: THE HOSPITALITY AND EXPANSIVENESS I FOUND IN INDUCTIVE BIBLICAL STUDIES¹

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I grew up in a small rural farming and factory town in the foothills of North Carolina, about fifty miles north of Charlotte. My mother and father were singers in a ten member gospel choir which came out of our home church, New Salem Presbyterian Church, and traveled each weekend to churches in various denominations (Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc.). Sadly, the choir's determination to sing the gospel message in other churches was partly in response to the decline in evangelical leadership in our church. As a young elementary-age boy, I traveled with my parents' choir for about seven years. When my parents were not singing themselves, we were often at other gospel singing services on the weekends. I heard the gospel so many times in song and sermon and from a host of different denominational perspectives that I knew I was without excuse for rejecting the good news of Jesus Christ. Thus, during the early years of elementary school, I had a spiritual rebirth and became a follower of Jesus Christ.

My family left the Presbyterian Church when I was twelve years old in order to find an evangelical church. I still remember one of our final Sunday morning sermons when our pastor, after reading from the Scripture lessons, closed his Bible and then picked up a secondary resource and read from it. He claimed that this other book more accurately portrayed the historical events recorded in his sermon text. My father, who has always possessed a high view of the authority of the Scriptures and has been a

1. I am grateful and honored for the invitation by the editors to write this autobiographical essay that portrays my experience with inductive Bible study.

serious student of the Word of God from his teenage years, told our family that we would be looking for a new church fellowship. Although I did not fully understand all the major issues at stake in interpreting Scripture, I was observing a struggle between my pastor's unsatisfactory rigid historical-critical method of understanding of the Bible and my father's unsophisticated and (sometimes) naïve historical comprehension of the final form of Scripture. I was gaining a rudimentary apprehension of some of the stakes in biblical hermeneutics.

In our search for a different church, geography and a warm reception played a key role; our new church home was the next closest church to where we live, and the sisters and brothers in Christ showed a generous receptivity for us. We began attending a Wesleyan Methodist church (now Wesleyan) where my father and mother felt comfortable worshipping and growing in their faith commitment. To this day, my parents are members and actively serving in this church. The Wesleyan denomination coordinated their quadrennial youth convention that next year, and it was at this convention in Urbana, Illinois at age thirteen that I responded to the call of God and dedicated myself to the pursuit of a life of full-time ministry. The next summer, a new pastor, came to serve our church. His name was Tony Dowdy; he had just graduated from Asbury Theological Seminary. I characterize his ministry as patient, non-flamboyant, steady, loving, and Scripturally centered. In just three brief years, he played a large part in shaping my life and gave me a really solid model of biblical and pastoral leadership, especially through the upcoming dissonant teenage years of my life.

I very much enjoyed our Wednesday night Bible studies that Rev. Dowdy taught, for I was eager to understand the Scriptures in their original historical and literary contexts. During his tenure as the shepherd of our flock, he methodically instructed us in numerous books of the Bible. Once the Bible study was announced, Tony would give us an outline or roadmap of what we would be covering each week and the number of weeks we would be studying each book. Thus, he had broken down the biblical book into structural units (not chapters!) for us so that we were ready to notice literary structures and answer his guided interpretive questions by noting literary context, scriptural testimony, and historical background. Sometimes, he would introduce us to an exegetical commentary by reading portions of an interpretation and then ask us to assess the conclusion in light of our own understanding of the text. Towards the end of the study, we would consider how the interpretation of the passage could be appropriated into our lives or another suitable context.

After high school, for almost three years, I worked as a customer

service agent for Piedmont Airlines, which merged with USAir before I left this industry. My career goal was to become an airline pilot until I had a crisis moment in my life that was precipitated by my unwillingness to remain obedient to my divine call into full-time ministry. One summer day, I was driving my fifty-mile commute to work, when the Holy Spirit was ministering to me in a forceful way. I had to pull off to the side of the road because I was sobbing so profusely. The Lord brought me to a point of surrender. Now, in my early twenties, I was ready to respond appropriately to the same God-given call that I received as an early teenager. Although I was still unsure of the specifics of the divine summons, one thing was certain. I needed a liberal arts college education to gain a broad general knowledge and develop general intellectual capacities in the arts and sciences and to further develop my critical thinking skills.

At Central Wesleyan College (now Southern Wesleyan University), I studied New Testament Greek for three years and earned a BS degree in Philosophy & Religion with a focus in Christian ministry. Overall, this degree prepared me well for the next step of my education, namely seminary. Unfortunately, many of my courses in Bible were more content based, deductively oriented, in which the professor offered the students ready-made interpretive conclusions designed to tell us what the Biblical texts and books meant. On the other hand, I took one capstone exegetical course in Synoptic Gospels that did incorporate elements of what I would come to understand as inductive biblical studies in my seminary education. The professor was a graduate of Asbury Seminary and had taken several courses in inductive Bible study. He taught us the foundational knowledge needed in book survey, structural analysis, and forming interpretive questions of the text as well as how to engage these elements of Bible study. My education in NT Greek and this one exegetical course with an inductive focus had whetted my appetite for more rigorous inductive Bible study.

During the last two years in college, I came to realize that regardless of the type of ministry which I would participate in my life's work, I needed additional education in Bible and theology. I considered about five different seminaries and graduate schools. I made the decision to attend Asbury Seminary after visiting the campus during my junior year in college and receiving encouragement from three of my college professors to consider the Asbury option. Within my M.Div. degree program, I was able to take a disproportional amount of Old and New Testament exegetical courses, Old and New Testament inductive Bible study courses, and theological courses because I received advanced standing in courses like church history, evangelism, counseling, and other theological disciplines. My seminary

degree program permitted me to explore the areas of Scripture study and theology in great depth. I became particularly interested in inductive Bible study courses and took almost every course offered during my time in the degree program: Pentateuch, Historical Books, Minor Prophets, Matthew, Acts, Romans, Pauline Epistles, General Epistles, and Hebrews. The hermeneutical finesse I was learning in these courses was particularly winsome for me.

Robert Traina had recently retired, so I did not have the pleasure of having him as my direct teacher. However, it became clear to me that Traina's inimitable voice was still speaking through the current inductive Bible study professors.² I had the opportunity to take inductive Bible study courses from three uniquely gifted professors—David Bauer, Joseph Dongell, and David Thompson—and at least two courses from each one. My first two courses helped me to learn the overarching rationale and specific ways to implement the major steps of the inductive Bible study process—observation, interpretation, evaluation, appropriation, and correlation—although I should hasten to add that I had had some preparation from my one inductive focused exegetical course in college. During my first course, I was encouraged to increase my attention to and acumen in the structural analysis of biblical texts both in terms of structural units and literary relationships and the interplay and connection between the two components. I also established skill in raising intelligent, perceptive interpretive questions from my observations of the biblical text. I discovered how to ensure that I was drawing from sources of evidence before I formed inferences in answering my questions as well as how to weigh the importance of different types of evidence.

In my second course in Historical Books, I gained needed competency in book survey, and found ways to interpret whole books or large divisions of books by answering my interpretive questions in survey. Moreover, I began the discovery process of evaluating my interpretation of specific passages in light of the canonical dialogue and other evidentiary sources like the progress of revelation. Engaging the step of inductive evaluation helped me to understand more clearly why Christians disagree on a plethora of theological issues such as pacifism, predestination, women in ministry, and the sanctification of the Christian. Although I was still not supremely confident in my ability to fully engage the step of evaluation

2. Traina's book, *Methodical Bible Study: A New Approach to Hermeneutics*, (New York: Ganis and Harris, 1952), although dense and in need of significant updating was the primary foundational text for all of my courses. The secondary text that was required reading in some of my coursework was David L. Thompson, *Bible Study That Works* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1994).

and appropriation in Bible study, I did develop a general evaluation of Old Testament texts which contained two notions: 1) God is unchanging whether evaluating Old or New Testament interpretations, and 2) God's covenant community in ancient Israel, Judaism, and Christianity provided models both to follow and to reject in the interest of the community of faith in the present age.

The other seven inductive Bible study courses gave me the opportunity to delve deeply into the intricacies of each step of the Bible study process and solidify my understanding and praxis of the entire hermeneutical process. Professors in these courses also taught me to move on from biblical interpretation and evaluation in the canonical dialogue concerning the interpretation to the shaping of my interpretation into a sermon and other modes of Christian education. My courses in inductive Bible study gave me a very important synchronic way of understanding Scripture. While in seminary, my calling to teach Scripture study continued to take greater and greater form.

Subsequent to my graduation from seminary, I was hired as a biblical language teaching fellow. I was hired primarily to teach Hebrew but also a few Greek courses. My great love for the Hebrew language was cemented. My three years of teaching biblical Hebrew afforded me a much greater facility with the original languages of Scripture and an easier facility to use Hebrew for structural and grammatical analysis of a text, a key component of the inductive Bible study method.

The next phase of my educational journey consists of my time in the doctoral program at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. I completed three years of course work in Hebrew Bible, Semitic languages, Second Temple Judaism, Rabbinics, and the History of Interpretation. After my comprehensive exams, I completed my dissertation in the area of the History of Interpretation in Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Jewish literature studying the theology and ideology of lengthy prose prayers. During course work and completing my dissertation, I explored critical methods for diachronic study of Scripture to which I had only minimal exposure while in seminary. I chose Professor Stephen Kaufman to be my dissertation advisor for several reasons. I will briefly mention two of them for the purposes of this self-reflection essay.

First, Kaufman's approach to understanding Semitic languages and more particularly to interpreting the Hebrew Bible contained an inductive posture or attitude. He challenged all of his students never to begin our study with quoting "the experts." Indeed, he made it his mission to scourge many a so-called scholarly consensus of interpretation. Second, and very much related to the first, Kaufman would demand that

his students provide evidence from the biblical text first and then from our evidentiary consultation with and evaluation of secondary resources as the basis of our interpretive conclusions. One of my favorite quotes from him is one in which he admonishes scholars to repel the dangers of superficiality on the one hand and over-specialization on the other hand and to become synthetic thinkers: "What, then, do I see for the twenty-first century? ... I see a field where a lot of people know a lot of nonsense about very little, while fewer and fewer learn how to learn the truth about a lot more. I urge all of my colleagues, as scholars and, more importantly, as teachers, to prove me wrong."³

As I was nearing the end of my dissertation writing, I interviewed for two teaching posts at Christian universities. I would have had the opportunity to teach inductive Bible study courses at both institutions to college students. I was offered a position at one of these schools, but I declined the invitation. I needed one more year to complete my dissertation and the institution was not willing to extend me the course reductions I needed to finish my dissertation. Thankfully, by not accepting the position, I had the time necessary to finish my dissertation without the rigors involved in the first year of teaching. The next year, I applied for my current teaching position at Asbury Theological Seminary in inductive biblical studies and Old Testament. Throughout my doctoral program, I had sustained the hope of teaching Scripture through the inductive Bible study method that I had learned in seminary and honed while in doctoral studies. But I had not imagined that I would get the wonderful opportunity to teach at the seminary where I formally learned inductive Bible study and become a part of the instruction that has been a mainstay since the 1940s.

Now in my seventh year of teaching inductive Bible study at Asbury, I endeavor to balance the same rigor of induction modeled for me with the graciousness that was afforded me by my seminary teachers of this hermeneutical method. My teaching has been enriched by a new collegial relationship with my former teachers—David Bauer, Joseph Dongell, and David Thompson—as we serve together in the fertile field of inductive Bible study. When David Thompson retired from full-time teaching at the end of the 2012-13 academic year, I cheerfully and eagerly accepted the invitation to become the chair of the Department of Inductive Biblical Studies. Certain administrative responsibilities have given me added

3. Stephen A. Kaufman, "Semitics: Directions and Re-Directions," in *The Study of the Ancient Near East in the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Jerrold S. Cooper and Glenn M. Schwartz; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 273-82 (282).

opportunities to promote the study of inductive Bible study among our student body.

I will briefly mention two resources that were not available to me as a student but have enhanced my teaching of inductive Bible study. First, my students have greatly benefited from the recently published inductive Bible study book by David Bauer and Robert Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*—the long awaited update of Robert Traina’s text, *Methodical Bible Study*.⁴ Moving beyond the annotated syllabus style of Traina’s former text, this new book provides a rich narrative description of the theoretical foundation and steps of the method as well as numerous illustrations of this type of Bible study. Second, I have also utilized the online course platform, Moodle, to leverage varied and more robust feedback that I offer to student as they learn the methodology through praxis.

As a teacher of inductive Bible study, I want the hermeneutic we teach to be assessed by the current value these courses create in students’ lives and ministries now and in their years to come as they apply the ideas, procedures, and skills taught in the courses. Teaching and learning this Inductive Bible Study method can be compared to the young married couple that needed a place to live.⁵ After looking at many apartments for rent, they found the place they liked and signed a lease with the landlord. They wanted their apartment to be their home, not just a couple of rooms to rent. So, with a little imagination, the couple began to picture what the apartment would need to look like in order to feel like their home. But they had to keep in mind that this was a furnished apartment, and they must consult the landlord in order to keep the covenant lease that they had signed together. If the light fixtures, the color of the curtains and walls, the type of carpet, and the furniture were to be changed, the landlord must be consulted and they would soon find out that some things could be changed while others most certainly could not. The negotiation between the landlord and the renter must be worked out.

So, too, within the hermeneutic I teach in my Inductive Bible Study courses, this negotiation must occur. God is the “landlord” of the Scriptures, and we, the Bible students, are the “renters.” Therefore, my goal is to teach my students to read well by paying careful attention to the details of the Scriptures of Israel and the Church and paying homage to the

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

5. In the remaining paragraphs, I am drawing from my recent magazine article, “Inductive Bible Study Undergirds the 2023 Strategic Plan,” *Asbury Herald*, Spring 2013.

inspiration of the Spirit and the authors of the texts. In order for the gaps of appropriation to be filled in by a Christian reading of Scripture, Bible students must address the many author–reader gaps such as the linguistic, literary, theological, cross-cultural, historical, and the social gaps. I want my Bible students to discover how much latitude there is for re-reading, or what we call evaluating and appropriating the texts, taking note of what can be changed and what must stay the same to “live in” the Scriptures.

Much more could be said about my pilgrimage in the inductive Bible study method, but I hope these selected recollections will provide the essence of my odyssey up to this point in my life. In sum, the hospitality and expansiveness I have found in inductive biblical studies has been first-rate in mining the depths of what a biblical text has meant as well as what it can and does mean.