

## *My Journey to JIBS: An Autobiographical Reflection*

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Surely it was one of God's delightful little surprises. I've encountered them multiple times in my life, often enough to recognize that God has an amazing, perhaps even sometimes a wicked, sense of humor. And this event surely qualifies in that category. On January 29, 2014, I received an e-mail from Dr. David R. Bauer, a graduate studies colleague of mine in the 1980's at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (now Union Presbyterian Seminary) and now the Ralph Waldo Beeson Professor of Inductive Biblical Studies and Dean of the School of Biblical Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary. In his e-mail David invited me to join the Advisory Board of the newly-founded *Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies* which he was and is co-editing. David thought that I had had experience with Inductive Biblical Studies over time and that I might be interested.

He could hardly have guessed just how apt his invitation was. If there is one methodology that has characterized my teaching career at Eastern Mennonite Seminary over the past 30-some years more than any other, it is the "inductive method." If there is one task that comprises student assignments in my New Testament classes almost exclusively, it is the infamous "inductive study," complete with one or more central questions and a long string of sub-questions by which one might, in turn, "unpack" the central questions. And if there is one unfamiliar word that has, for that very reason, struck more (unintended!) fear into incoming students in my New Testament classes than any other, it is the word "inductive." Surely it was God's great sense of humor—or, if you prefer less theologically freighted vocabulary, poetic justice—that gave rise to the invitation I received that January day. Of course I said "Yes!"

But how did I get to the moment of this invitation? And what is the history behind this "inductive"-focused New Testament teaching career? The story is long, rich, and, for me, deeply gratifying. I have never before written just such an account. But with the invitation of the *JIBS* editors to write "an autobiographical statement about [my] work with IBS and IBS related issues" I now have both opportunity and necessity to do so. Here is that story.

## Beginnings

I always knew that I would be a teacher. That awareness goes back deep into my childhood. Nor should there be any surprise about this fact. I grew up in Harrisonburg, VA, in the heart of a small church college community (Eastern Mennonite College, now Eastern Mennonite University) and in the heart of the Lehman family, a family deeply involved and invested in that college community. Not only was my grandfather, Dr. Chester K. Lehman, the Academic Dean of EMC during my early years and a long-term and deeply-loved professor of Bible. But in fact most of the other family folks in my childhood world were educators. Even my grandmother (a Lehman by marriage) and my father (who married into the Lehman family and who died shortly after I was born) had been schoolteachers briefly in their day. If you were a Lehman, you were a teacher, so far as I could see. And when I thought about the course of my own life, the path was clear and uncomplicated. First I would go to elementary school, then to high school, then to college. And then, just like the rest of my family, I would become a teacher. Such were my childhood thoughts. I never once questioned this awareness.

So following high school graduation, I put my childhood thoughts and “knowing” into action and enrolled at Eastern Mennonite University. I named my major as Modern Languages, German and French. And so it was that I made my way through college. And so it was that I likewise traveled to Marburg, Germany for my senior year, to study “Germanistik” at Philipps University. And now my path was clear, as I imagined. I would become a German teacher. Or so I thought.

## Biblical Starts and Stops

But if I arrived at age 22 and college graduation firmly convinced that I would become a German teacher, there were other experiences preparing me for a very different vocation, even if I did not then recognize them as such. I was a child who grew up in the heart of an academically-oriented family and the church college community in which they were invested. But I also grew up in the heart of the church itself, in my case Mount Clinton Mennonite Church, a small rural congregation a few miles “back over the hill” from Harrisonburg, where my grandfather preached on Sundays in exchange for “love offerings.” And it was here that my first encounters with Inductive Biblical Studies took place in the most natural ways.

I remember sitting on the venerable old wooden church benches at Mount Clinton Mennonite Church Sunday mornings with my mother and my sisters, listening to my grandfather preach what were surely “inductively-grounded” sermons patiently worked out on the big wooden desk in his book-lined professor’s study at home, just a few blocks from EMC. One of his sermon titles remains with me to this day, because the King James language was so unusual to my ears: “Buying back the Time,” a New Year’s sermon based on Ephesians 5:16. And I remember Summer Bible School at Mount Clinton, where we marched into the little old red-brick meeting house every morning cheerfully belting out “Marching to Zion” and where we studied all manner of Bible stories in the most generic “inductive” fashion (“What happened here?”) and memorized the books of the Bible, first those of the New Testament then those of the Old Testament. It’s one of the most functional and constantly-used skills that I have carried with me from childhood onward.

Then there was the Children’s Bible Mission summer camp that I attended during my high school years. To win a week of camp the first year required Bible memory, lots of it. And the task preceding each successive year at camp was to complete what seemed for me to be excessively simplistic little home Bible lessons, but lessons surely filled with simple inductive study questions about the biblical texts. And at home, at church, and in my required Bible classes at Eastern Mennonite High School my efforts at reading and studying the Scriptures were growing in natural ways.

Other than devotional reading of the Scriptures, however, my closest brushes with biblical studies during my college years were actually brush-offs instead. I recall being thoroughly bored by the required lecture class on “Israel amid the Nations,” a study of the ancient biblical world. I also recall the disdain that I had for the men (only men in those days and the “seminary nerds” from my perspective) sitting in the seminary corner of the EMC library. Somehow neither they nor their studies had any sort of “draw” on me. (Did I mention that God has a wicked sense of humor?) Another brush-off memory comes from my senior year in Marburg, Germany. One day I walked into a lecture on the Psalms, thinking that this might be a fascinating lecture to “visit,” as the German idiom goes. But when I found the professor writing Hebrew on the blackboard, I knew immediately that I was well out of my league. So I turned and left that lecture hall, never to return. So much for my college years.

## The Preparation I Could Never Have Planned

When I returned to the US following my year in Germany, I was too late to look for teaching jobs. But I had to find employment. And to my astonishment the job that opened up for me was in New York City at the American Bible Society headquarters. I had never wanted to live in a large city and surely not one as massive as New York. But here I was in the heart of Manhattan, at 61st and Broad, serving as the Periodicals Librarian at ABS. In this capacity I regularly scanned church publications for articles on Bible translation work, gave people walking tours of the ABS rare book library of printed Bibles, and sent out “OB’s” (“Old Bible letters”) to folks writing for information about “the Bible that we found in Great Aunt Sally’s attic.” I even became skilled at whipping out the Bible concordance at my desk when necessary to help out the callers looking for “the verse that goes something like this.”

But the most profound impact that I brought away with me from my time at the American Bible Society came from our occasional staff meetings, gatherings in which we heard first-hand accounts from Bible Society personnel who traveled the globe on behalf of their work. I do not remember a single specific story from those staff meetings. But I remember clearly and vividly the collective impact of those stories. These were stories about persons from any of many far-flung corners of the globe, persons who knew nothing about the Christian Scriptures, persons who had just received Bibles for the first time ever. And as they read these Scriptures, their lives were changed profoundly, transformed through this firsthand and first-time-ever encounter with the words of Scripture and the Word of God. These stories spoke to me of the irrepressible power of God at work in the Scriptures, a power far beyond all human efforts to communicate the “good news” of Jesus Christ. In those ABS days I still had no notion where my own life was headed. But I knew deep down in my being that God’s irrepressible power was at work in God’s irrepressible ways through the words of the Scriptures. And this was—and is—a “knowing” that has transformed my own life.

## The Vocation I Never Saw Coming

And then came the transformational “biblical studies” event of my life: seminary . . . and the accompanying move from uptown Manhattan to a recently-converted cornfield in Elkhart, IN. What took me to Elkhart and Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (now Anabaptist Mennonite

Biblical Seminary) in 1974 was the very recent and unanticipated discovery that I was fascinated by the Scriptures and wanted to enroll in seminary to study Bible. This was no childhood fantasy of mine. Nor had anyone ever suggested such an idea to me. But it is my Bible-professor grandfather, Dr. Chester K. Lehman, who gets the credit indirectly for this completely unanticipated vocational shift. In fact it was just a few pages of reading—I never actually went any farther—in his newly published volume, *Biblical Theology, Volume One: Old Testament* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971) that sparked for me the sudden realization that what I really wanted to do was to study the Scriptures. And, in fact, I have never once looked back. The rest is, as they say, history.

My first—and surely most significant—decision as I enrolled at AMBS was to sign up for Elementary Greek, a six-week summer intensive preceding the fall semester. And I'm guessing that God was chuckling right out loud. I loved Elementary Greek. And my excitement in reading the Greek New Testament was impossible to disguise. By the end of the summer I was definitively “hooked.” And one thing led by the most natural route to the next. Before I knew it, I was off and running for a three-year marathon course of seminary work focused prominently on biblical studies.

## Encountering Inductive Methodology

And here it was, at AMBS, that I discovered inductive methodology in a formal way. Dr. Howard Charles, long-time and beloved Professor of New Testament at AMBS, deserves the bulk of the credit for this. Howard, a graduate of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (BD, 1944), Princeton Theological Seminary (ThM, 1948), and the University of Edinburgh, Scotland (PhD, 1958), was deeply schooled in the methodology of Inductive Biblical Studies. And for long years Howard, who taught most of the New Testament book study courses at AMBS, instilled in his students a commitment to rigorous and detailed inductive study of these New Testament texts. Inductive study sheets, with multiple questions meant to lead us into the text and guide our personal learnings, were the “meat and potatoes” of our daily class preparations. And multiple full-blown exegesis papers were a standard component of our overall course requirements. Howard's New Testament courses were never for the faint of heart.

But for me there was rich and lasting reward for all of the efforts I expended. It was in Howard's classes above all that I first named and claimed my vocation in New Testament studies. I recall sitting in class

and listening to Howard exposit the New Testament and thinking, “*Yes! This is what I need to do with my life. I want to spend my life opening the Scriptures for others, just as Howard is opening them for us.*” I do not recall whether this was a single experience, an occasional happening, or a daily event in Howard’s classroom. But I will never forget the profound impact that Howard had on me with his careful, patient, and always inductive approach to the biblical texts. Nor will I ever be able to leave behind the inductive rigor and the methodological instincts that Howard implanted within me. My own students at EMS have no idea whose very large shadow they are encountering, as I pass out inductive study guides day by day and insist on the chapter/verse references for all of the “evidence” they cite in their essays.

A story from my seminary days reflects Howard’s unmistakable influence on my emerging pedagogical method. One semester I took a “Supervised Experience in Ministry” course in which my assignment was to teach a Bible study at Belmont Mennonite Church, my home congregation. I chose the book of Hebrews for this Bible teaching venture. And I approached this task with all the rigor I could muster, producing detailed sheets of questions for the Bible study group to work with week by week. My class, in turn, responded with solid energy, good interest, and great discussions. And when the time came for the group to evaluate my work, they gave me strong affirmation for my efforts with the Bible study on Hebrews. But, they wondered, would it be possible to leave *some of the detail* aside? I chuckle when I remember their gracious and ever-so-gentle guidance. Clearly I had learned well from my mentor, perhaps a bit too well for my Bible study group.

But Dr. Howard Charles was not the only seminal influence on my emerging identity as a biblical scholar and an inductive methodologist. Dr. George R. Brunk III, then Professor of New Testament and Academic Dean of Eastern Mennonite Seminary, also played a crucial role, when he came to AMBS on a faculty exchange one January to teach a course on “Theology of the Synoptic Gospels.” The era was the mid-70’s. And redaction criticism still occupied the energies of Gospels scholars in significant ways. George’s course, growing out of his own redactional work on the Gospel of Luke at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (ThD, 1975), energized my own study of the Gospels in remarkable fashion.

After struggling under the weight of historical-critical study of the Gospels, I now discovered that there was in fact rich theological “pay dirt” out there for all those who put in the “sweat equity” required for redactional study of these texts. In fact all those multitudinous divergences between the Synoptic Gospels, which, when viewed strictly historically, remained a

persistent “problem” to be resolved, now became the prime “evidence” for establishing the theological portraits of the respective Gospels and their respective Gospel Writers. I still remember my genuine excitement at this revolutionary discovery. And the labor-intensive redactional task at hand was inductive to the core.

But there was yet one more inductive influence on me during my seminary years, namely the influence-at-a-remove provided by my Bible-professor grandfather, Dr. Chester K. Lehman. Grandpa was a member of the first generation of graduate biblical scholars within the North American Mennonite community. And he was solidly schooled in Inductive Biblical Studies through his own academic career at Princeton Theological Seminary (ThB, 1921) and Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (ThM, 1935; ThD, 1940). I recall him on one occasion speaking to me with enthusiasm about Dr. Robert Traina and his method of Inductive Biblical Studies. My grandfather’s long and storied Bible teaching career, first at Eastern Mennonite College and then at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, came to an end shortly before I began my seminary studies at AMBS. I never knew my grandfather in the classroom. But I was keenly aware of his commitment to Inductive Biblical Studies. And that awareness surely played an identifiable, if somewhat more subliminal, role within my own commitment to such studies.

## **Taking Inductive Methodology to High School**

My first way-station following seminary was a two-year stint teaching German and Bible at Christopher Dock Mennonite High School near Lansdale, PA. Somehow I knew instinctively that I needed to engage some practical work in the “real world” before I headed into graduate studies in some “ivory tower” somewhere. So here I was. Previously I had found myself overdoing the “detail” in congregational Bible studies. But now my challenge was even greater, as I attempted to bring inductive Bible studies to my high school classroom. Over time I tested out multiple sorts of classroom exercises to gain the attention and pique the interest of my high school students. Many of these exercises emerged from the field of “values clarification.” But there was ultimately no method in my pedagogical “tool kit” more basic than the “inductive” method for walking the teenagers at Christopher Dock into the study of the New Testament. Howard Charles had taught me well. And there could be no unlearning what by now was deeply instinctive. Asking open-ended questions of the text and requiring the text to provide the answers was always the central and unquestionable “modus” of my classes.

## Graduate Studies and Gospel as Story

My tenure at Christopher Dock, however, was of short duration. The high school classroom was not ultimately where I belonged. So I now set off for graduate school. In 1979 I followed in the footsteps of my grandfather and my seminary mentors and enrolled as a doctoral student at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. It was an outstanding choice for me. UTS was a school that engaged in the most rigorous of biblical scholarship not as an academic exercise per se but rather, by a deep sense of corporate calling, on behalf of the church. Here I worked under the mentorship of such gifted biblical scholars as Drs. James Luther Mays, Patrick Miller, and Paul J. Achtemeier. And I remain profoundly grateful for the opportunity to study with and learn from these remarkable biblical scholars.

But it was ultimately my ongoing work with my adviser, Dr. Jack Dean Kingsbury, which had the deepest and most lasting impact on my own identity as a New Testament scholar and which has ever since shaped my scholarly instincts, my scholarly interests, and my scholarly efforts most profoundly. I arrived in graduate school in the late-70's, just as Gospels scholarship was poised to make a major methodological shift away from redaction-critical studies and towards a wide range of literary-critical approaches to the Gospels. And in fact I "rode out" that very methodological shift within my own doctoral program.

When I entered the program, Jack was still engaged in redaction-critical studies of the Gospel of Matthew. His signal redaction-critical monograph, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Fortress, 1975), had appeared a mere four years before my arrival at UTS. And when he suggested Matthew's Missionary Discourse (9:35-11:1) to me as a potential topic for study, he likewise accepted my initial dissertation proposal for a redaction-critical study of this text. But partway through my program Jack gave me clear notice that if I "wanted to be relevant" I would need to move into literary criticism. Ultimately, I did. And before I was finished with my dissertation, now a literary-critical study of Matthew 9:35-11:1 (*Matthew's Missionary Discourse: A Literary-Critical Study*, Sheffield, 1990; Bloomsbury, 2015) Jack had published his own path-breaking foray into narrative-critical studies of the Gospel of Matthew, *Matthew as Story* (Fortress, 1986).

And here it was, at UTS, that my use of Inductive Biblical Studies gained distinctly new focus. If I had learned the basics of inductive

methodology from my seminary professors within the broad context of historical criticism and the sub-category of redaction-critical studies, I was now learning how to turn my inductive skills to the analysis of biblical narratives and even to the analysis of discourse material within biblical narratives. The inductive work with the text was no less detailed and no less rigorous. But the focal point of my new efforts was crucially different. Now I was not comparing Matthew's text to its Synoptic parallels within the Gospels of Mark and Luke and wrestling with the redactional history of the bits and fragments of tradition comprising Matthew 9:35-11:1. Nor was I gathering historical data of any kind at all. Now I was reading the "surface" of Matthew's text, now understood as Matthew's "story," and assessing the narrative methodology and the resulting narrative rhetoric of this "story" told by Matthew, who was no longer simply a "Theologian" redacting the texts and traditions available to him but now a "Storyteller" in his own right. And this shift, from redaction-critical research to narrative-critical research, transformed my doctoral work and has been hugely formative and transformative ever since, both in my ongoing instincts as a New Testament scholar and writer and in my ongoing pedagogy as a New Testament professor.

## **IBS and the Seminary Classroom**

Throughout my doctoral program I knew that I was headed into the seminary classroom. And before I completed my dissertation, I needed to interrupt my graduate work and find a job to support myself. So it was that in Fall 1984 I found myself at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, standing in front of a classroom of first-year seminary students enrolled in "Reading the Biblical Text." This course, a "flagship" course of mine for long years, gave me opportunity to combine my inductive methodology and my work in biblical narrative into an entry-level course focused on the Gospel of Matthew.

In this course I lectured briefly at the beginning of the semester on "Gospel as Story." Then I set the class loose to pursue their own narrative-critical analyses of the Gospel of Matthew, one block of text at a time. Their task, session by session, was to read the text in focus multiple times until they could name a specific and appropriate narrative-critical question. Once they had framed this question, their task was then to go back and scour the text once again in order to identify and articulate Matthew's own answer to this question. The short-term results of their studies provided energizing class discussions. And for several students in this course this short-term narrative work resulted in long-term vocational outcomes,

biblical drama on the one hand and the interface between “Gospel as story” and spiritual direction on the other.

Elsewhere, in my other book study courses—and even in the New Testament introduction course which eventually replaced “Reading the Biblical Text” in my course load—I began the slow and patient task of creating my own inductive study questions, course by course, with which to engage my students regularly in first-level exegetical work with the texts of the New Testament. Nor was this—or is this—a minor aspect of my ongoing pedagogy. Over time students have frequently expressed specific appreciation for the “inductive studies” that they have been required to do day by day in my classes. And one such student, a recent EMS graduate, has even requested me to publish a volume including all of my inductive study sheets for each of the courses that I have taught. I have not yet assessed the actual viability of such a proposal. But this request clearly tells me that my long-term efforts with Inductive Biblical Studies have indeed been fruitful in the classroom.

## **IBS in the Scholar’s Study**

If inductive methodology is the “meat and potatoes” of my seminary classroom, it is likewise the prime methodology at work in my office as well, as I regularly wade through pages of lists filled with “evidence” gathered inductively on any of a wide range of (mostly) New Testament research topics.

There have been the contributions of the New Testament generalist, biblical/theological studies assessing New Testament or wider biblical perspectives on a broad range of topics: mission; forgiveness; holiness; political advocacy; the environment; the beginning of life and the status of the unborn; AIDS; confronting the powers; diversity and unity within the ministry of Jesus; Paul’s views on resurrection; Luke’s views on possessions; John’s Passion Narrative vis-à-vis the Synoptics; the biblical motifs of “barrenness and fertility” and “authority” and the New Testament motif of “breasts and womb.”

There have likewise been the contributions of the Matthean scholar, numerous narrative studies ranging across the breadth of Matthew’s story and growing out of my ongoing work with Matthew’s narrative rhetoric. These studies have focused on such motifs or themes as the political leaders (Herod the king, Herod the tetrarch, Pontius Pilate); the Roman characters; the Jewish chief priests; the women; those who exercise political power; those who suffer violence; Matthew’s rewriting of the messianic script; the mission of God’s agents in the world; the intersection

of mission and peace in the lives of God's agents; Jesus' saying on "not resisting the one who is evil"; and Jesus' saying on "inheriting the earth."

And there have, to be sure, been a plethora of more narrowly focused exegetical studies expositing single texts. Such studies include exegetical essays for theological journals and church periodicals, Sunday School curricula for denominational use, plenary Bible studies and workshop presentations for church conferences, and sermons for the local congregation.

Each of these studies, whether academic or ecclesial in character, whether broadly framed or narrowly focused, whether formally published or occasional and oral, has required prominent inductive efforts from me. For a broadly framed study this means searching the concordance and/or the narrative itself, gathering the linguistic "evidence" corresponding to the topic at hand and then shaking down that "evidence" to identify the broad thematic threads which run throughout the text in question. For a narrowly focused textual study the inductive work required is often a visual/poetic layout of the text which highlights the internal structure of the passage, uncovers the verbal parallels and/or contrasts, and reveals the logical or narrative progression of the text from beginning to end. In my scholar's study there is ultimately no exegetical "pay dirt" apart from the first-hand and labor-intensive "sweat equity" of inductive study.

This, then, is my journey with Inductive Biblical Studies, my journey to *JIBS*. It is the journey of a lifetime, both a life-giving task and a life-long vocation. I can only give thanks.

