

My Journey with Inductive Bible Study

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Introduction

For nearly four decades, Inductive Bible Study (IBS) has provided me with a disciplined, fruitful manner for not only my study of Scripture, but for God's examination of me through Scripture as well. What I have gleaned through patient encounters with God's Word has shaped my understanding of God, his purposes, and the nature of life within those purposes in ways too numerable to count. In what follows, I share some of my journey with IBS across multiple decades and continents. I will do so in four parts: Introduction to IBS at Asbury Theological Seminary, IBS within my approach to teaching, the value of IBS, and where I have grown over the years.

Introduction to IBS at Asbury Theological Seminary

My introduction to IBS came indirectly through Asbury Theological Seminary alumni. After completing a BA in Biblical Studies at Oral Roberts University in the early 1980's, I took several months off

from school before entering seminary. During that time, I served as a pastoral intern in a Christian and Missionary Alliance church near my childhood home in rural Ohio. While there I met several CMA pastors who had graduated from Asbury. Everyone raved about their experiences in IBS classes, particularly those with Robert Traina. Although a confluence of factors led me to choose Asbury for my seminary education, one important issue was the expectation that studying IBS with Dr. Traina (among others) would provide me with a practical hermeneutic for lifelong ministry.

My first experience with IBS, like that for many Asbury seminarians of my generation, came through Dr. Traina's introductory Gospel of Mark course. I was lost from the outset. Our first assignment involved reading his nearly indecipherable (for me) *Methodical Bible Study*. We then had to conduct a full book survey of Mark. Besides learning all the new concepts in the book, we had to apply them to such a large section of Scripture that it overwhelmed me. As I recall, this future Professor of Inductive Bible Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary did not exactly distinguish himself in that course. But I was attracted by Dr. Traina's disciplined approach and the insights into Mark's gospel that resulted from his work. (Insights from my own work in this first course? Not so much.)

The IBS light came on for me in a second IBS course with Dr. Traina, this time on the Pauline Epistles. My progress with IBS may have stemmed from my greater attraction to the rational argumentation of Paul's letters than to the narrative style of Mark. But it may also be that by the time I launched into my second attempt at IBS I had enough experience with applying its concepts that it was becoming easier. Either way (or some combination of both), through the application of IBS methods, Paul's letters came alive to me in a new way.

My "enlightenment" found expression in three ways. First, I could see how each letter functioned as an entire unified argument. My interpretive experience up to this point had been to read Paul's letters as a series of individual, disconnected arguments and exhorta-

tions. I simply read to identify what “spoke to me.” I possessed no way to put the arguments together into a single whole. Using structural relations, however, I began to see how Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians *worked*. I could then fit pieces of Paul’s argument into their larger literary context. Scripture spoke to me in a whole new way. I was hooked.

Second, I now had in my hands a practical means for studying Scripture. IBS showed me the extreme inadequacy of my previous ‘skills’ for reading Paul’s letters. Although I had basic working knowledge of New Testament Greek, when interpreting a New Testament text, all I could do was grab a commentary off the shelf and see what it said. No more. I was now gaining skills and concepts that guided me from first steps to follow for encountering a biblical book to integrating the details into the whole. I cannot understate how this transformed not just how I engage Scripture but also the confidence with which I did so. In terms of a biblical hermeneutic, the old had passed away, behold the new had come!

Two final courses rounded off initiation into IBS at Asbury: Romans with Dr. Traina and Minor Prophets with Dr. David Thompson. Before the course on Romans, portions of the letter already made sense to me, other parts not so much. How the entirety of this most influential letter held together remained a mystery. But IBS tools in the skilled hands of Dr. Traina once again put the pieces together for me. *There was more!?!?*

Our final paper, a paraphrase of Paul’s argument through the first eight chapters of the letter, nearly killed me. Yet it forced me to *think* carefully and thoroughly about the text itself, the hallmark of IBS. Looking back on that assignment now, I also see Dr. Traina’s deep commitment to see his students learn. From a Professor’s perspective, such assignments not only draw moans and groans from students, they also must all be graded carefully. That takes work.

Under the influence of developments such as the New Perspective on Paul, my understanding of the letter has changed somewhat

since my baptism into its argument under Dr. Traina, but only somewhat. Even where my understanding of a portion of Paul’s argument would now depart from that of my IBS mentor, I remember his interpretation well and must grapple with it thoroughly in order to justify my own. In doing so, I hope I honor his legacy of scholarship and teaching.

The second course that rounded off my IBS training was my final course at Asbury. This New Testament focused person ventured into a course on the Minor Prophets with Dr. David Thompson. The Old Testament prophets were entirely new biblical turf for me. But this was a necessary step for my growth as it forced me to apply my growing IBS skills on an unfamiliar portion of the canon. Once again, a skilled IBS mentor who laced his teaching of these books with his own unique sense of humor brought light into my darkness. The foreign to me became familiar.

IBS Within My Approach to Teaching

I began my teaching career at Daystar University, a fledgling Christian institution in Nairobi, Kenya in 1989. Obviously, Daystar had no IBS curriculum like that at Asbury. But I structured my teaching methods around IBS skills and concepts. For example, in a course on an individual New Testament writing such as Romans or on a collection of books such as Synoptic Gospels, I typically presented my take on the structural relations in a passage then assigned interpretive questions based on one of those structures as homework. At times we simply answered questions in small groups in class. Either way, the heart of the work involved learning and applying IBS concepts and skills.

The response to my approach was interesting in that context. The expectation, based on customs in higher education in Africa, was that a “lecturer” would do just that—lecture. Students did not know what to do with someone who not only did not lecture but who also

asked *them* questions. Students later told me that at first they thought I either had not prepared for class (and thus could not lecture) or that I simply did not know what I was doing. It was only as the course progressed that they realized *why* was doing what I was and how much they were learning as a result.

I returned to the US and began teaching at Asbury Theological Seminary's Florida Dunnam campus in 2008. My course load includes both IBS and New Testament exegesis courses. I often get asked how I teach these two approaches to New Testament interpretation. Most readers of this journal would find my presentation of IBS fully in line with their experience at Asbury Theological Seminary or with their knowledge of this approach to studying Scripture.

With New Testament exegesis courses, I make use of IBS concepts but employ additional exegetical approaches as well that are in line with Asbury's Student Learning Outcomes for exegesis courses. While I am committed to developing text-centered skills for interpreting Scripture, we *will* misinterpret biblical texts unless we attempt to understand them within their social-cultural context. Thus, students get a healthy dose of Jewish and Greco-Roman background in both my New Testament Introduction and New Testament exegesis courses.

I do not pit IBS and exegesis against one another. I may designate a section of a New Testament letter for study based on structural relationships, but we will also make use of the tools of social-scientific criticism or rhetorical criticism among others in our actual interpretation of the passage. I deliberately make the two approaches complementary because I see them as such. As a faculty member with a foot in both methods, I find myself perfectly placed to integrate them. I would not want it any other way.

I have also taught IBS in local churches, introducing people without formal theological education to the basics. Once I taught a series of sessions at a large church located in an area comprised mainly of retirees (common in Florida). The audience was around 60 peo-

ple, none of whom were under 65 years of age. During the first session I had introduced several basic terms and concepts of “IBS.” Afterwards an elderly woman approached me and said that she understood what I meant by “IBS,” but what that particular audience heard was “irritable bowel syndrome.” I have thought carefully about where and when I use the acronym “IBS” ever since.

The Value of Inductive Bible Study

Looking back, three bedrock commitments emerged from my initiation to IBS at Asbury Theological Seminary and they continue to shape my teaching and personal practice to this day. First, I remain firmly devoted to the text-centered approach embodied in *Inductive Bible Study*. I tell students in my exegesis courses that I can teach you all the “tricks of the trade,” (such as the rhetorical or social-scientific approaches I mentioned above). But if you cannot read texts well your exegetical work will remain stunted. How, for example, will you referee among different interpretive conclusions reached by commentators unless you can argue with those commentators based on your own careful, responsible reading of the text? Furthermore, how do you protect yourself from simply becoming swayed by the assumptions of others unless you possess your own skills with which to engage the text? I offer additional arguments for prioritizing text-centered approaches below.

Second, I remain dedicated to the practice of IBS as a teaching and learning tool. Through my experience as a student, I found nothing comparable to the learning generated through the hands-on labor of applying IBS practice to a particular text followed interaction with a professor’s own work on the same passage. That insight shapes my applied pedagogy to this day. Lecture remains necessary. But for forming students to hear God speaking through Scripture in a manner that can inform and sustain a lifetime of ministry, I simply know of no other comparable approach.

Third, whether we like it or not, the way we live and minister is informed by some form of a multi-faceted biblical theology. We have some way of understanding God, God's purposes expressed through Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst that enables us to make sense of our circumstances and plot the way forward in a God-honoring manner. IBS, with its emphasis on hearing an individual biblical book on its own terms before collaborating one's findings with that from other biblical writings, offers multiple advantages for the task of forming and growing responsible biblical theology. Consistent with the text-centered nature of IBS, I remain committed to a constructive biblical theology that allows individual biblical writers to speak in their own voice without prematurely forcing an alien theological agenda upon them.

Where Have I Grown over the Years?

Perhaps IBS has been so integral to the way I read Scripture for so long that I simply cannot see how my use of it has changed over the years. I can, however, identify two ways in which my use of it has *grown*. For one, I now conceive of teaching far more as *formation* than I ever have before. I am certain some of this development stems from reading the works of Stephen E. Fowl. His concern for forming habits and dispositions in biblical interpreters focused my thinking on this issue. But what pushed me even further was grappling with the post-modern context in which we read Scripture today. Let me explain.

Scholars recognize that the center of gravity in biblical interpretation has moved in recent decades. At one point, it was thought that the key to understanding a biblical writing lay in the background *behind the text*. In other words, to understand the Gospel of Mark, we needed to understand who Mark was, his supposed relationship to the Apostle Peter's testimony, when Mark wrote, to whom he wrote, etc. On that basis could grasp why the gospel was written and how it should be interpreted. But much of that information is lost to history.

As a result, scholars disagree on basic “behind the text” issues. How then does one understand Mark?

If we lack access to Mark and/or Peter, we do have the text of the Gospel of Mark itself. In time, scholars migrated to text-centered methods such as narrative criticism. In these approaches, meaning is found *in* the text. Historical questions are legitimate; they just are not the concern of narrative critics. I count IBS among text-centered approaches (though its relationship with its text-centered relatives would need further definition).

Yet, in our so-called postmodern era we have come to realize that we cannot erase *ourselves* from the interpretive process. As human beings we come to scripture with pre-existing interpretive frameworks that shape our understanding of biblical texts. At one time it was common to think that there was such a thing as a neutral, objective interpreter; we now know that such an idea is a pipedream. In its extreme forms, there is no meaning in the text. Meaning is only found *in front of* the text, in the interpreter herself.

Here is the problem. If we hold a high view of Scripture, we believe that God speaks to us through the biblical writings. In other words, the interpretive momentum runs from the text toward us. But the truth we now recognize in our postmodern context is that we can never remove ourselves from the interpretive process. The interpretive momentum *also* runs from reader toward the text. How then can we prevent our interpretive biases from cutting off our ability to hear God speak to us through the text by our predisposition to hear only what we want to or are able to hear?

My response to this dilemma can be summarized in three points. First, and briefly, one of God’s good gifts to us is the ability to become aware of our own interpretive biases. What pet doctrine do I seem to find everywhere in Scripture? One way to learn our own biases lies in reading Scripture with people from other cultural backgrounds or theological traditions. The differences that emerge will likely result from our varied interpretive frameworks.

Second, if we cannot remove ourselves from the interpretive process (and we cannot), then we must pay greater attention to the shape of the commitments we bring when we engage Scripture. In other words, *we must be formed* as responsible, reliable readers of biblical texts. This is a large, complex discussion that can only be addressed separately. But the point remains: *few issues may be more significant than how we are formed as interpreters*. Well-honed biases, habits, and dispositions that direct us well position us to hear God speak through the text. If we once learned the interpretive frameworks that we use to understand Scripture, we can also further shape, relearn, or acquire new frameworks altogether.

Third, and here is where IBS comes in, one necessary check on our interpretive impulses lies in a text-centered approach to reading Scripture. A well-practiced inductive approach ties us to the text and will not let us go. We must deal with the evidence in the text in a thorough, holistic manner. In doing so we resist the tendency to simply find what we are already comfortable in finding in Scripture. For this reason, I regard the ability to use inductive approaches to Scripture as a critical element in the formation of a biblical interpreter.

If I have come to see IBS much more in *formational* terms over the years, I have also framed what we talk about as the “appropriation” of Scripture within a more *missional* perspective. I realize “missional” is a current buzzword of which people may be tired, but I have no investment in this specific term. I do believe, however, that it points to something fundamentally biblical—that Scripture as a whole tells the story of God’s purposes for creation that are carried out through people called to be God’s own.

My frustrations with typical approaches to what we usually call “application” are two. For one, they tend to be individualistic when Scripture more often addresses the community of God’s people. And I also find too many formulations of this task too undirected or open ended. They ask, “What is God saying to me?” But they offer no fuller biblical guidance toward God’s concern for what God might saying.

Within a missional framework, Scripture is understood to equip God's people to participate in God's mission (or purposes). A missional hermeneutic asks questions like: What does this passage tell us about God and God's mission? How does this passage equip us to participate in what is doing by God's invitation and enabling? In other words, Scripture is heard first as an address to God's people. Only then do we have some direction for what to listen for as we engage the text, direction that is consonant with the grain of the Bible as a whole.

One advantage within a missional approach for appropriating Scripture lies in its understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation. Traditionally, the work of the Spirit was understood solely in informational terms. The Spirit inspired the biblical writers to communicate certain ideas. The Spirit now inspires us to understand those same ideas.

Within a missional approach, a fundamental component of biblical interpretation lies in how we embody what we find in Scripture. In other words, our responses to what we learn themselves constitute interpretations. Thus, given the purposes of Scripture (i.e., to understand God and God's mission, and to become equipped to participate in that mission by God's enabling), interpretation must consist of more than just getting the right information. It necessitates embodied responses. But if the Spirit empowers our participation in God's mission, we can expect to see the power of the Holy Spirit at work among us *and through us* as we prayerfully attempt to follow God faithfully in God's mission.

A missional approach to appropriation not only offers guidance for the task, it also expands how we understand the work of the Holy Spirit the process. I must add, however, that appropriation itself builds upon careful, deliberate engagement with the biblical text.

Conclusion

When I first enrolled at Asbury Theological Seminary in the mid-1980's, little did I know the transformative effect that experience would have upon my life and ministry through the decades to follow. That impact has been felt primarily through the tools and sensitivities I acquired for reading Scripture under the tutelage of Drs. Robert Traina and David Thompson. The words that I (and others who teach using IBS approaches) have heard repeatedly from students over the years apply equally to my own life, "IBS taught me to slow down and listen to Scripture carefully."