

## *A Journey with Inductive Bible Study: From Ignorance to Practitioner*

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I was thirty-one years old when I was born again reading the Bible.<sup>1</sup> I did not grow up in a Christian home and my family hardly ever went to church. Somewhere, my sister has a picture of the two of us, dressed up in our finest and headed to an Easter Sunday Service. We were probably four and five years old at the time. That is the only extant evidence of ever having gone to church in my childhood. My father just didn't see the need for "religion" and he discouraged any thoughts my mother might have had of taking our family to church.

My father's approach to child-rearing was to live a morally-righteous life, according to his standards, absent of alcohol, smoking, and drugs, and to be helpful to others as long as it didn't inconvenience him too much. He also firmly believed in gaining as much information as possible in order to make the best decisions possible. He read voluminously and encouraged my sister and me to do the same, but the Bible was never a part of that and never factored into the decision-making of my parents or my sister and me.

With that kind of environment, I would set goals for myself and pour all that I had into reaching those goals, the attainment of which never did satisfy. I would create these goals and treat them as idols, producing worship in my approach to reaching them. I would pour everything into their attainment. My soul was always seeking satisfaction from these "idols" but never becoming satisfied, even through the brief attainment of the goals I had established and often reached. And once again, the Bible was completely out of the picture. This continued into my thirties.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my thanks to Dr. David R. Bauer and Dr. Fredrick J. Long, the editors of the *Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies*, brothers and friends of mine for more than a quarter of a century. Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to share my experiences and thoughts on IBS. It was fun to look back and think through what God has done, in no small part through you.

When I was born again in 1991, my paradigm for life itself changed completely, especially since it took place reading the Bible. Jodi and I had been married for two years and I was working as an applications engineer for a data-acquisition company. I was on a business trip to Albuquerque, NM, and reading a brand-new Bible I had bought during an early Christmas shopping trip Jodi and I had taken the previous weekend. It was an NIV *Life Application Bible*<sup>2</sup>, and, as it was my first time reading the Bible, and without any real background, I relied heavily upon the application notes to help me understand what was going on in the text.

I should mention that my choice to read the Bible sprung from my frustration of another goal attained but without satisfaction, and the quest for something that might help me make sense of it. I knew that many people found comfort in the Bible, including my sister who had become a Christian well over a decade earlier, and I thought I would read it to see what it had for me. As far as I was concerned, the Bible was simply a large book that contained some kind of spiritual guidance. But it carried no more authority or veracity with me than any other book. I was the one who determined what was true and what wasn't true for me. At that time my personal library consisted mainly of a number of sports books, a few business books, and of course my engineering texts, and I wanted to see what the Bible said about life.

Not knowing anything about the sixty-six books that comprise the Bible, or their canonical arrangement, and being an engineer with a very methodical mentality, I began reading in Genesis 1:1. When I reached Genesis 35:2 and the reference to “the foreign gods that are in your midst,” I stopped. I wasn't sure what the words “foreign gods” referred to, so I looked at the application note<sup>3</sup>. The comments not only explained the term, but also addressed my heart-condition, and the Lord used it to bring an absolute sense of conviction to me and, in an instant, I knew God was real. I knew the Bible was His word, and I knew that He had spoken to me and, somehow, would continue to do so in this book. In a flash, the glory of the Lord filled ... the hotel

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<sup>2</sup> *Life Application Bible*, NIV (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 72. The relevant portion of the application note reads as follows: “Jacob ordered his household to get rid of their gods. Unless we remove idols from our lives, they can ruin our faith. What idols do we have? An idol is anything we put before God. Idols don't have to be physical objects; they can be thoughts or desires.”

room. It was a tabernacle of sorts, and I became a “living” soul in that moment.

I called Jodi back in Champaign, IL, and told her we needed to go to church (I didn’t know what else to say) and she literally said, “Who is this?” I don’t remember what else I said in that conversation but she knew something radical had happened to me. Little did she know how drastically our lives would change, not only because of that moment at the Four Seasons in Albuquerque, but also through the years since that moment thirty years ago.

One of the effects of that event involves my awareness of the power of the Bible for God’s voice to speak to the human soul and transform it. My confidence in the Bible truly being God’s word was firmly established and has not wavered one bit since that moment. Thus is the impact of an experience of such magnitude. But after becoming a spiritual infant, popping out of the spiritual womb, as it were, I was famished and wanted nothing more than to feed on that word. I was hungry and wanted all I could get in the way of nourishment, and I knew the source of that food was primarily the Bible.

Being a new Christian and knowing that the Bible was a means of receiving life from God, as well as having an engineer’s mentality, I was determined to methodically read through the Bible, throwing myself into that endeavor. Upon my return from the business trip, Jodi and I agreed to read through the Bible together. We went to a Christian bookstore (back then, pre-internet, there were two or three Christian bookstores in Champaign-Urbana, and today they are all gone) and found *The One-Year Bible* that provided the reading plan and schedule.<sup>4</sup> However, due to my need for explanation, we actually read from the *Life Application Bible*, including all of the application notes and the profiles and all of the various features of it in our nightly reading. We read through the Bible together in 1992 and again in 1993.

At this point I was learning the content of the Bible but without concern for any structural elements within each book. I read the Bible as if it was a single book that could and should be interpreted across books, from subject to subject. For example, I thought that every Christian certainly knows that the Bible is the word of God, and when I read John 1:14 about “the word becoming flesh,” I understood it to mean that Jesus is the Bible in the flesh, plain and simple. Or, in Ezek

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<sup>4</sup> *The One Year Bible*, NIV (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1988).

3:17–21, a passage that grabbed me and would not let me go, I understood the call to be a watchman to be the responsibility of every Christian. I gave no thought to the context of the book of Ezekiel or his particular call, found in ch. 3. The Bible spoke to me, and therefore, I reasoned it must apply to every Christian, but especially me. I sincerely wanted to know what the Bible had to say (the content of it), but my hermeneutic was to interpret verses through prayer, other passages (without regard for the context of the individual books), and my own brief experience and intuition. I relied heavily on prayer through this process, which also included doing thematic studies and accessing chain-references from book-to-book.

While reading the Bible and growing in my knowledge of the content, Jodi and I sat under the gentle pastoral leadership of Tom Ryan at the Urbana Free Methodist Church.<sup>5</sup> Pastor Tom thought of himself more as a teacher than a preacher, and we were blessed to have him as our local shepherd. We grew and were regularly fed by Tom. But I was surprised that, within a few months, I seemed to have gained more biblical knowledge (again, content-wise) than most of the others in our Sunday School classes and other small group meetings, and I quickly grew dissatisfied with the several studies we were using in the various programs. I wanted to study the Bible, the books of the Bible, rather than contemporized thematic studies from a booklet, typically application-oriented, which was fairly common. I don't recall very many, if any, book-studies being offered at that time.

My greatest growth during this time actually came out of fellowship I had with a couple of other friends I had known long before becoming a Christian. The three of us had played on the same softball team for years and we became close on and off the field. Jeff Altmeyer, the short-stop on the team (I played second base), was my closest teammate, and Matt Mortenson, our left fielder, was my best friend. Jeff had come out of the Roman Catholic church and had been a Christian for a number of years, but I don't recall ever hearing about Jesus from him. Matt was born again about a year before I was, because of a Bible Jeff had given him. Once I was born again, we began meeting three or four times a week, just to share with one another what we had come across in our own reading, how the Lord was speaking to us, and to pray and

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<sup>5</sup> During our two-and-a-half year stay at that church, we were involved in a move from Urbana to Champaign. The church is known today as the Mattis Avenue Free Methodist Church.

encourage each other in Christ. There was no formal structure for our gatherings and they lasted only an hour or two each morning we would meet, but I grew by leaps and bounds.

Then, in 1994, while reading Ezek 3, God called me to study His word.<sup>6</sup> I had been wrestling with a sense that God was wanting me to be more than simply an engineer who was also a Christian. I sensed that he was going to call me into some kind of vocational ministry, but what and when? In April of 1994, the Lord very clearly called me to study the Bible, and the next few weeks I discerned that God was calling me to seminary.

At the time, the only seminary that I knew anything about was Asbury Theological Seminary (ATS). Eventually, God called me to ATS, so Jodi and I quit our jobs, sold our house, and moved to Wilmore, KY to begin my education. While talking with the admissions counselor and my advisor, I decided on the non-parish track of the Master of Divinity program. I chose the MDiv degree, not because I felt a call to the pastorate, but because I wanted a three-year program rather than a two-year program. I wanted and felt I needed as much education as I could get, with the focus on the Bible.

A friend of mine, the only one I knew who had gone to Asbury, told me to take Dr. David Bauer for my first Inductive Bible Study (IBS) class (English Bible, as it used to be called) because of the rigorous method he taught. My friend's recommendation was not a slight toward any of the other fine IBS professors at Asbury, but having spent two years at ATS and having gotten a sense of the significance of IBS in preparation for any ministry, as well as the importance of that initial IBS course, he was simply emphasizing that the foundational course upon which the student's Bible study practice is built was crucial, and in his experience, Dr. Bauer's rigor was helpful. My friend was confident that it would best prepare me for everything to come.

When I matriculated at Asbury, I was already convinced of the authority of the Bible over the life of the believer, but it never occurred to me to approach it as a literary work. My overwhelming passion was to study the Bible, but I did not have the tools and this was my chance.

My first year at seminary set the direction of my life, though I did not know it when I registered. I loaded up, taking three semesters of Greek, two of Hebrew, and IBS with Dr. Bauer. I took other courses

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<sup>6</sup> The verse that called me to seminary was Ezek 3:1.

as well, but the biblical studies courses were the building blocks that I needed most, and they were life changing. The foundation was laid in that first year.

My second year I took Greek and Hebrew exegesis courses and IBS classes from Dr. Joseph Dongell and Dr. David Thompson, as well as more with Dr. Bauer. The IBS and language emphasis continued through my final year at Asbury, but each inductive course built on that first one which proved to be the key that unlocked a multi-layered contextual understanding of Scripture as a whole, one that continues to grow and develop.

The primary quality I recognized and admired in each of these teachers was a depth of understanding of the biblical text that transcended anything I had previously experienced. Prior to coming to Asbury, I had been a critical audience whenever I would hear a sermon or read a book or listen to Christian radio. I was always comparing and contrasting what I was receiving with what I read in the Bible, and I found in these professors an acuity and insight that came straight from the text. Their grasp of the text far surpassed that which I had encountered, and yet they were able to point out that the source of the insight had been there in the text all along. It is not what they brought to the text that provided the insight, but it came from their ability to discover relationships in the text which provided the depth of understanding of the text. These instructors taught me to approach and study the text carefully, contextually, and holistically. In other words, they taught me to study inductively, considering all relevant factors, and all without presuppositions (as much as possible).

As I learned this “new” approach, I began to see for myself connections within the text and relationships between passages in a way that allowed me to increasingly understand the functions of passages within books, and to see books as whole units. Through Asbury, specifically through the approach of inductive Bible study in combination with Greek and Hebrew, God was training me how to hear his voice more clearly in the written word, and it all began with that first IBS class in the spring of 1995 (little did I know that one day I would teach the languages and, especially, IBS).

One of my most lasting and recurring memories from that first class was the joy I felt in pouring myself into an assignment in Mathew EB (English Bible). We students would arrive in the classroom, walk



up to Dr. Bauer's desk at the front, and turn in our papers.<sup>7</sup> I would place mine on Dr. Bauer's desk, then take my seat with the other students, and Dr. Bauer would present his findings on the same passage.

His style of teaching was "method transparent," that is, he would teach method by taking us through the practice of the steps in the inductive approach, applying them to a specific passage. After spending hours and hours on the given assignment and submitting it, Dr. Bauer would blow us all away with his own work which was invariably light-years beyond ours. In fact, it was both the most discouraging and encouraging experience in seminary at one and the same time. It was discouraging in the sense that, following hours upon hours in my own devoted effort to extract as much as I could from my observations of a given passage, or my attempt to find illuminating evidence in order to draw even more insightful inferences to arrive at an answer to the question we were addressing (interpretation), my greatest efforts were shown to be pitifully puny in comparison (more like contrast) to the results of Dr. Bauer's work.

But it was also encouraging because he was demonstrating to us what was possible by applying the IBS method to the text and considering all relevant evidence. He repeatedly pointed out that, when we were out of time for the given study (and time always runs out in these assignments), there will always be more evidence to consider. That paradoxical contrast of feelings kept me moving forward, desirous of growing in IBS and applying it to the biblical text, and desperately wanting to narrow the qualitative gap between his work and mine. This was not a matter of pride, but a matter of calling, Christian calling. I felt compelled to improve in IBS because, somehow, I knew this would be the arena for the rest of my days. If I was to deal with the Bible at any level, I needed to give my maximum effort to improve my ability to understand it, and I knew that IBS was the point of access for that improvement.

I recall the first time I discovered the existence of Matthew 28:18, specifically in its relationship to 28:19–20. I was astonished. The Great Commission did not merely stand alone, as if it was given specifically for church bulletins and banners and mission statements. The Great Commission is actually the intended, imperatival effect of the authority

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<sup>7</sup> Electronic submission, in those days, was rare. I even hand-wrote every assignment. I still have them in a file cabinet. I am very old-school.

given to Jesus, all authority over all creation, and the implications of that reality are far-reaching in a way that the church simply doesn't explore or explain very well. How could the church overlook such a significant part of such a ubiquitous missional confession? The Great Commission is vital for the life and growth of the church, but this charge to disciples to make disciples needs to be understood within the context of the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, and not simply as an exhortation to be excised from its setting and separated from the various other aspects of the message of Matthew that are so valuable and essential, but too often disregarded. Books must be studied as whole books, and individual passages and verses need to be studied in the immediate context of those passages, but also, always, within the context of the specific book. This point continues to be reinforced and strengthened in me.

Another example I came across of the value of the IBS method came through a simple study of 1 John, and it occurred by means of the transformative nature of IBS. For those of us who embrace and practice the inductive study approach, we find that our powers of observation and consideration of contextual elements improves over time and applies to all matters of life, not just the study of the Bible. But they do apply to the study of the Bible, for certain, and such is the case for me in 1 John.

Within the last five to ten years, I have come to see this book with new eyes due to a particular structural relationship that I see at work in the book. I believe it is arranged by means of summarization in the tri-fold declaration of what “we know”, found at the end of the book (5:18–20). This affirmation of what “we know,” the content of which is provided in 1:1–5:17, is brought to a climax with the assertion: This one (Jesus) is the true God and eternal life (5:20b). The final verse then reveals the main point of the entire sermon: Children, keep yourselves from idols (5:21)! That is the main point of the entire book, from the exhortation to “walk in the light” (1:7) and to “walk as Jesus did” (2:6), to laying down our lives for one another because Jesus did so for us (3:16), and to keep his commands (5:3). This Jesus, whom the author/preacher and others (“we”) have physically experienced with the senses (1:1), is the manifestation of the life which is eternal, the result of which is to keep away from anything or anyone else opposed to this confession of Jesus because it is idolatry. Jesus, this life we have actually, palpably experienced, is the true God. This is the point the author



has been explaining in detail throughout the book. It is not just a collection of aphorisms, but a consistent exhortation to stay focused on the reality of Jesus and reject any temptation to stray from following Christ, because that is idolatry.

My experience, beginning with that first IBS class and continuing throughout the years, has been one of realizing that the student continues to grow in familiarity with and understanding of IBS as he or she practices the application of it to the text. The more time one spends observing the text, the greater the ability to see, consider, test, and receive insight from those observations. Clearly, this kind of approach requires time and effort in order to reach ever-increasing depth of a given text (and always with still more hidden treasure remaining when we're out of time), but I, personally, have found no greater investment of personal resources than this approach to biblical study. It causes growth, not only in the understanding of a given text, but of the Bible as a whole, and of my relationship with the Lord.

There is one other significant aspect which I need to note, and it comes directly from my call to seminary back in 1994. The use of the languages, Hebrew and Greek, are invaluable to include in IBS. Although many schools that teach an inductive method of Bible study, like Asbury and Wesley Biblical Seminary, where I teach, used to call these courses "English Bible," the use of the original languages to the inductive study can always take the study to another level. I have experienced this personally, both in my own personal study and in my years of teaching IBS. In my application of the languages to my studies, I have discovered my students observing the difference it makes in observations, the questions that arise from the observations, and the interpretation of the passages as those questions are then answered in the text. The knowledge of the languages, when properly applied to IBS, provides greater depth in virtually every case.

As I was finishing my degree at Asbury in the spring of 1997, the Lord called me to Christian radio where I served at a ministry in southern Minnesota and northern Iowa. I was able to expose the staff and listeners to the basics of IBS through a staff Bible study of John which quickly became an on-air program: "The Tuesday Bible Study." This aired for four years and it was a staple in our weekly on-air lineup. The listeners were able to join the very staff they heard on-the-air every day, but rather than introducing songs or reporting news or talking with

them one-on-one,<sup>8</sup> all of us were gathered around a table with microphones in the middle of a round table, and we opened up and studied the Gospel of John together. We worked through passages inductively, making observations, considering structural elements of passages, and drawing inferences from connections. We were able to provide some very tentative interpretations of various passages, but always with the understanding that more evidence was left in the text to consider and study at a later time. It was a wonderful time each week and the listeners got to follow along. I was blessed to facilitate the study, making sure that we stayed on point and that no one carried presuppositions into the text. This exposure, I am sure, helped many to rethink how they could and should study the Bible.

My training in IBS really did shape every aspect of the ministry of which I was a part for that season, especially the on-air elements. But in 2005, the Lord called Jodi and me back to Wilmore to work on a doctorate in New Testament under Dr. Bauer. The subject was the book of Hebrews and the methodology applied was IBS-oriented.

I had taken Hebrews EB (IBS) when I was an MDiv student, but I put that work aside and began fresh, reading through the text repeatedly, determined to see how the text was arranged structurally. I was committed to following the evidence of the text wherever it led, and eventually the thesis developed into a study of the central theological motif of the book. What began as a desire to discover the anthropology of Hebrews, led to the discovery that Hebrews' anthropology is directly related to the Christology of the book, which is initially broached in the first verse-and-a-half.<sup>9</sup> This area had not been developed by scholars in any significant or sustained way prior to the study, and the method that uncovered it came straight out of my time in IBS. It was an amazing journey that turned into a thesis I successfully defended in May of 2012.

Following the defense, which required very few corrections or revisions (I remember completing them on the flight back from London,

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<sup>8</sup> A foundational principle for radio, especially music radio, involves talking with the listener as if it is just the two of you sitting together and talking as friends, one on one, as opposed to speaking to a large crowd at one time. This promotes intimacy with the listeners individually.

<sup>9</sup> My thesis argues for “sonship” as the central theological motif, arising from the contrast in Heb 1:1–2a and the emphasis of the author on how God has spoken to us eschatologically ἐν υἱῷ.

the place of my defense), I began applying for a teaching position. The ideal position would be one where I could teach IBS and Greek (and possibly Hebrew), but that idea seemed quite distant at times.

I taught as an adjunct for four schools over the next two years until one of them, Wesley Biblical Seminary, called for applications for full-time professor of Biblical Studies. The current professor at that time, Dr. Gareth Lee Cockerill, was transitioning to Academic Dean as he was preparing for retirement, and the one hired would take on Dr. Cockerill's teaching load which involved teaching Inductive Bible Study and Greek, with the potential to also teach Hebrew. It was exactly what I had hoped to find, and if somehow I was chosen, I would be working with someone I admired. I had come to know Dr. Cockerill through various Hebrews meetings over the years and he urged me to apply.<sup>10</sup> After interviewing with several people at WBS, I was hired and began teaching full-time in the fall of 2014.

Never having taught full-time before, I quickly discovered how little I knew about teaching and, more to the point, learning. I needed to remember that learning IBS is a process that requires a shift in thinking and intentionality on the part of the student. Nearly every student of IBS must be committed to changing his or her approach to the Bible. Most students come into a first-semester IBS class carrying all previous knowledge and presuppositions into the text, as I did in the beginning of my first IBS class. But the student quickly learns that the emphasis in an inductive approach is to read the text free of presuppositions (as much as possible) and try to grasp how the author has arranged the material to deliver the message he or she intended. In other words, IBS students must learn to read the text according to how the text was intended to be read by the original recipients.

To accomplish this transformation, students must learn to identify the central concern of the given book (called identifying the General Materials in *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics*, by David Bauer and Robert Traina<sup>11</sup>) at the outset, the

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Cockerill had been chosen to write the successor to the commentary on Hebrews by F. F. Bruce in the New International Commentary on the New Testament series: Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). This volume was widely lauded in the academy from its release, and is one of the best commentaries on Hebrews currently available.

<sup>11</sup> David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 83–87. As

structure of the book-as-a-whole and parts of the book-as-wholes, as well as the structural relationships that control the book and major portions of the book. All of these structural elements involve observing and determining how the author has arranged the book and parts of the book in relationship to other parts of the book. These elements are often overlooked or undervalued regarding their importance to properly comprehending the author's message in the book.

There is another critical element that is essential to proper understanding of a text and avoiding misinterpretation: the identification of the literary genre of a given text. Far too many students attempt to interpret apocalyptic texts as they would prose narrative or discourse, and at the seminary level, those students go on to preach to and teach others who will follow the same pattern. The student has to know what kind of literature he or she is reading so as not to misinterpret the text and mislead others. Understanding the type of literature is imperative to knowing how to interpret the given text.

I had to be reminded of the importance of these aspects of observation and how challenging they are to beginning IBS students, as I began my teaching ministry. The challenge can and does become so difficult that sometimes it requires multiple assignments or even multiple semesters for students to really grasp and understand them. Until they come to the point of comprehension, some students will try to execute the steps but not know why or what they are actually trying to learn about the passage and how it fits into incisive observation and interpretation. I have learned to slow down and listen to students, and to meet with them to try to help them learn the method.

Looking back, I am infinitely blessed to have lived the second half of my life, to this point, as a Christian. I lived in the dark, apart from God and being completely ignorant of His kingdom for thirty-one years, and when I was born again by reading the Bible, I was made aware of the access we have to the thoughts and the presence of God in the pages of Scripture. He confronted me in my sin and revealed himself to me at, seemingly, one and the same moment. From that point, I knew He was present in the Bible. I just didn't know how to study it. I simply knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my days on this earth coming to know Him better.

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an aside, when this book first came out, I felt as if I was sitting in Dr. Bauer's class once again as he painstakingly, meticulously worked through the various steps and aspects of the IBS method.

When I was called to seminary two-and-a-half years later, specifically to study the Bible, it was God's providential hand that led me to Asbury, and in particular to Dr. Bauer.<sup>12</sup> I was taught well by Dr. Bauer, along with Dr. Dongell<sup>13</sup> and Dr. Thompson, and for that I am forever grateful.<sup>14</sup> They prepared me for my doctoral work, which then equipped me for following in their footsteps in preparing the next generation of IBS students.

I also wish to express my appreciation to Wesley Biblical Seminary in Jackson, MS, for enabling me to utilize my gifts and God's calling to teach IBS and Greek to students hungry for greater intimacy with the Lord in His word. I am so grateful to teach in these biblical studies areas at a place that proclaims the authority of the Bible and call to holiness without hesitation and with boldness. Glory to God in the highest!

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the greatest providential blessing I have received is to have been led to and placed at the feet of Dr. David Bauer. His acumen in the field of Biblical Studies is unsurpassed, in my opinion, and his openness to and kindness toward all of his students is more than extraordinary, it is truly exemplary. I am grateful for the opportunity to walk with him as he has guided me in so many ways.

<sup>13</sup> I want to thank Joe (as he told me to call him, going back to my MDiv days) who gave me an opportunity to be a grader for three semesters of my MDiv work. My appreciation for him continues to increase through the years.

<sup>14</sup> I also wish to express my gratitude to the Greek and Hebrew teaching fellow who taught me the languages, Brian Russell, now Dr. Brian Russell, Associate Provost and Dean of the School of Ministry at the Orlando Campus of ATS. We had many discussions and shared a meal or two during those formative years. He and Dr. Bauer were the first to suggest that I consider doctoral work and, again, I am grateful for his investment in me.