

## *An Exegetical Charcuterie Board: My Journey with Inductive Bible Study*

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My first sense that the Bible plays an important part in the life of a Christian arose from watching my mom's daily devotional practice when I was young. Every morning, she would pull out her Good News Bible, *The Upper Room* devotional, and her prayer list. She would read the Scripture passage associated with the daily reading and then spend time praying for friends and family. She modeled for me the practice of spending time with God.

Although I had been raised in church and spent time in Sunday School hearing the stories of God's people in Scripture, when I was in high school, I reasoned that if I were a Christian, I should know more about what that means. It seemed only logical to read the Bible, so I opened the book to Genesis 1 and did my best to read a chapter a day. Some stories were very engaging, and some (like genealogies) were a struggle to finish. Yet even in the struggle I discovered fascinating principles embedded in the text. When Scripture described the construction of the Tabernacle (and later, the Temple) in tedious detail, I learned that the most precious materials were used for the Holy of Holies, which showed me the exquisite awe one experienced as one drew near to God. By the time I had made it through the Old Testament, the New Testament made much more sense to me. I could see how the OT sacrificial system, with its emphasis on atoning for sin, had been fulfilled in the death of Jesus. Terms like "the lamb of God" came into clearer focus.

When I went to college, I had no intent to study the Bible for a career. I was interested in journalism, and I assumed that newspaper reporting would lead me into a long and satisfying vocation.

I attended the University of Minnesota, but I realized that this secular school would challenge my faith commitment. I sought out Chris-

tian groups on campus and found a home in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. The discussions that took place at our meetings helped me to sort out and clarify my Christian beliefs. It was here that I first heard leaders really dig into passages on women in leadership, and the conversations about historical and literary contexts made sense to me.

Through InterVarsity I also went on a summer mission trip to Moscow—in 1991, when tensions in the Soviet Union were high. Our group returned home just three weeks before the coup attempt that brought tanks rumbling into Red Square, not far from the dormitory where we had been staying. The six-week mission trip helped me to see my own culture in a new light and made me more aware of God's love and great provision. This deepening sense of the grace of God played a part in my turning to seminary just a few years later.

When I graduated from college, I started out as a newspaper reporter in a small town in southern Minnesota. Although I enjoyed my job, I didn't feel completely fulfilled. As I thought about what was important to me, I realized that my faith topped the list. I took a job writing internal publications for a trade association in the Twin Cities so that I could attend Bethel Theological Seminary part-time. The first class I chose is often surprising to others: biblical Greek. I had been attending a large church where the pastor regularly explained Greek words as he preached. I was always fascinated by the nuance of meaning this brought to the text. This is why I jumped headfirst into biblical languages at seminary—and loved it! As I began my classes, I felt a deep peace that confirmed my call to seminary.

As a result, I soon became a full-time student. Although the seminary was Baptist, I discovered John Wesley during my Christian theology classes. The more I read about Wesleyan theology, the more I became convinced that God was calling me to Methodism. During this time, I also met my future husband, Lee, who was the son of a Methodist pastor. Lee was committed to remaining United Methodist. Our problem, however, was that Bethel Seminary had just been removed from the UMC's approved seminary list. We needed to transfer, and so we found ourselves at Asbury Theological Seminary, a school that Lee had always wanted to attend.

Although I had already completed many of my New Testament courses at Bethel, I was required to take an Inductive Bible Study course at Asbury. What a blessing this turned out to be! Like most of the students who took David Bauer's Matthew course, I too found my

head exploding as Dr. Bauer explained the structure of the genealogy in Matthew 1. The beauty of the form, with its tripartite focus on key movements in Israelite history (Abraham to David, David to the exile, and the exile to the Messiah) transformed this boring ancient list into a stylized theological commentary on the fulfilled plan of God. Even small turns of phrases within the genealogy pointed to God’s unusual plan—such as using women like Rahab and Ruth to fulfill the purposes of God. Let the one who has eyes to see, see!

I found the analysis of texts scintillating. Instead of describing what the text meant to me (which differed from reader to reader, a method that had always frustrated me), here was a more objective method of discovering meaning. I resonated with the idea that any author intends to communicate a particular meaning and does so in a way that is discernible to his or her audience in their immediate context. Our job as readers of an ancient text is not to *create* meaning, but to *discern* meaning. The text itself provides the clues to meaning; analysis of the text is key.

Yet I discovered that inductive biblical study was not only part science, but also part art. On the one hand, certain key words indicated clear structures—contrasts, causations, and the like. One could scientifically pick apart the evidence of the text. On the other hand, some relationships were implied, and there is an art to feeling out the argument of the text. Yet these implications are always bounded by the text itself. With this method, you could not make the text say whatever you wanted it to say. The text speaks, and we must listen.

As I was learning the IBS method, I simultaneously was discovering a call to teaching. I had worked as an adjunct instructor at the college across the street; my journalism degree had allowed me to teach a couple of sections of Advanced English Composition. At the seminary I worked as a grader for my Philosophy of Religion professor, Dr. Jerry Walls. Both experiences led me to consider teaching as a career. I weighed my options and decided to pursue a degree in New Testament Studies at the University of Durham (now Durham University) in Durham, England. My husband and I packed up our belongings and took our 7-month-old son to Durham, where we lived for four years as I considered the implications of Paul’s one-God language in 1 Cor 8:4–6, Gal 3:20, and Rom 3:30. Learning to look closely at the text during seminary helped me deeply analyze these texts as I pursued my PhD.

After four years in England, I received a job offer to teach New Testament at Malone University in Canton, Ohio. Lee and I again packed up the family (which now included our daughter, who was born during the second year of my doctoral studies) and moved back to the United States. It took another two and a half years to finish the PhD. as I juggled the demands of small children and a new teaching load.

As a new assistant professor, I had to figure out *what* to teach my students. Each semester I usually taught two sections of introduction to the New Testament, plus two sections of various upper-level courses. The challenge in introductory NT courses was to give a broad survey of the content of the New Testament to both those who had never cracked open a Bible as well as those who had grown up in the church and attended Christian schools. The latter group quickly learned they didn't know Scripture as well as they thought they did. I confess I did not offer much in the way of IBS instruction in the intro classes in these early years. Biblical illiteracy has become so rampant—even in church students—that the remedial task of simply understanding the basic story of Scripture and the importance of historical context became the primary goal.

In my upper-level courses, however, I had more time to dig into the biblical text. Whether teaching an entire semester on Romans or Acts or the Synoptic Gospels, I now had a greater opportunity to help students chew on the wording of the text and consider the ramifications. The difficulty, however, was that my department did not have one standard method of exegetical instruction for its Bible professors. As a result, I started each of my upper-level Bible classes with a few days of overview on how to identify structural relationships and consider their significance. The first assignment for my students was to write a book survey on the biblical book we were studying. They would have another two to three assignments during the term in which they would analyze specific passages.

I felt like I was offering my students an exegetical charcuterie board. Perhaps I watch too many cooking shows, but the metaphor seems apt. With a charcuterie board, the chef places a variety of bite sized meats, cheeses, appetizers, breads, and crackers on a wooden board for guests to sample. It provides a taste of different foods and allows the guest to explore dining possibilities. In an undergraduate context which does not require a single exegetical method to be taught across the board, I cannot assume that students who have taken other Bible classes are coming into my course prepared to use

the inductive method. The concise instruction I give on identifying structural relationships provides a sample of how to build a rich meal from the text. The tasting is intended to whet the exegetical appetite of those who plan to engage in a more rigorous study of Scripture in seminary and in their ministries.

After 16 years teaching at Malone, I made the move to Asbury University, where I have taught for three years. Like Malone, Asbury's Christian Studies & Philosophy department does not require all Bible instructors to teach a particular exegetical approach to the text. But the move gave me the opportunity to reconsider how I teach my courses. My NT introduction courses, like those at Malone, include both non-churched and churched students. I now am more intentional in both my assignments and my instruction to introduce freshmen to the concepts of inductive biblical studies. For many of my students—those who are not majoring in Bible, theology, or ministry—this may be the only New Testament course they ever take.

They may never be exposed to a more in-depth exploration of methods of interpreting the biblical text. But whether a student is an equine major, a media communications major, or a math major, I want to expose them to the delicacies of the exegetical charcuterie board. For each book of the New Testament we study, I place relevant texts on the PowerPoints and ask students, “What do you see in this passage?” I encourage them to find repeated language, contrasts, causal connections, and other structures, as well as to ask questions of the text. We consider together how the literary and historical contexts shed light on the author's language. My hope is to awaken students' curiosity about the text. When they begin to understand the message of the text better as a result of making detailed observations, they are more likely to continue this process in their own personal studies long after they finish the course.

One of the courses I have been privileged to teach to ministry majors at both universities is an introductory preaching course. I am unable to spend the entirety of the course teaching exegetical techniques, but we spend significant time on the topic. You simply can't be a good preacher if you don't interpret the text well. When students preach, I weigh their sermon grade more heavily on exegesis than on presentation (although both clearly are important for an effective sermon). In this course we also look closely at how to apply the text. Thus, evaluation and appropriation are key components. Students often struggle in

their sermons to give specific examples of how to appropriate the text into our current context. In our classroom conversations we help one another consider possible ways to do this effectively.

In my own preaching I have found that the inductive method helps me to mine the richness of the biblical passage. I spend extensive time in inductive study so that I can better understand the nuances of the text. The trick when preaching, of course, is to translate the hard academic work into lay language. If I start rambling about the interchange of comparison and contrast in the beginning of Luke's gospel, I'm going to lose my audience! But if I describe how Luke intentionally shifts between the miracle of John the Baptist's birth story and the miracle of Jesus's birth story, I am inviting the audience to explore with me the ways in which Luke repeatedly points out the greater miracle of Jesus, even as both stories fulfill God's plan from long ago.

Unfortunately, many preachers do not take the time to dig deeply into the biblical passage or to explain their discoveries to their congregations. Instead, they offer a surface-level description of the text that does not reveal the richness of the biblical message. Often pastors refer to Scripture only briefly and then give a topical sermon based on a single word in the passage. But this approach does not help our congregations to understand the depth and beauty of the message of the text. Worse, it models a disregard for Scripture, painting the passage as merely a springboard for the preacher's own ideas. Rather, our job as preachers is to help people understand the Word of God and its context more fully. God has given us Scripture so that we can see how God has been faithful to Israel in the past, redeemed believers through Christ, and given the Spirit to the church to live faithfully until Christ's return. The better that we understand and enter into this story, the more fully we will be empowered to worship the Triune God revealed in Scripture.

As I evaluate how to improve my use of inductive biblical studies in the undergraduate classroom, several challenges perennially appear. One of the most common is the need for students to lay aside their presuppositions and really look at the text. Too often in the observation stage students read into the passage what they already know from other books of the Bible. For example, when analyzing a passage in the Gospel of Mark, students import theology found in the Gospel of Matthew, not considering that Matthew was written after Mark and drew from Mark's own theology (while at the same



time reshaping it). If we want to hear Mark’s voice, we need to look at Mark’s wording and not the wording of later authors.

Another common presupposition is the reading of Trinitarian theology into the passage. Rather than asking how the author describes each person of the Trinity, students tend to lump these ideas together in a manner that borders on modalism. It can be threatening to students to set aside their theological assumptions before looking at a text, but it is important to help students realize that later theological formulations arise from the text itself—church theology was not created in a vacuum! We should not be afraid of what the text reveals. We need to allow the text to speak for itself. The way that John talks about Jesus or the Spirit will have different nuances than the way that Paul speaks about Jesus or the Spirit. But the beautiful diversity within Scripture cannot be seen as easily if we start our exploration by overlaying Trinitarian formulas upon the passage in question.

Presuppositions also can lead to the Mandela effect—a term coined to describe the phenomenon of a large group of people “remembering” false information about an event. For example, most people remember the famous line from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* as, “Luke, I am your father!” when the actual line is, “No, I am your father.” Similar mistakes occur when students learn inductive Bible study. Bible stories that students have always loved sometimes take a turn in a different direction when they look closely at the text. The story of Samson and Delilah, for example, presents Samson in a much more negative light than is often taught in church. Students come out of Sunday School excited about the strong hero Samson, but then they use IBS and look carefully at the text. They discover that the repetition of “see” and “eyes” at key points in Judges 13–16 emphasizes the destructive nature of Samson’s desires. By the end of the story, the instrumentation in 16:28 shows the purpose of blind Samson’s plea to God to destroy the Philistine building: it’s not to honor God, but for his own selfish reasons: “so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes.” Even within the book of Judges as a whole, major sections start with this “sight” theme: “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” The recurring theme underscores the author’s argument that the Israelites need a king to show them the ways of the Lord. The final verse of the book confirms this: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

Another challenge for students lies in the time-consuming nature of the IBS method. When students have a heavy workload in other classes, and social-media culture has shortened their attention spans, it can be difficult to focus on a single passage for any length of time. One practice I use to help students see the benefit of such sustained investigation is group exegetical work. Before class begins, I write a passage on the whiteboard. Then I bring to class a variety of colored dry-erase markers. As students identify recurrences, I circle each related term in the same color, and then use a different color for the next recurrence identified. For other relationships, I underline key phrases and draw arrows to other connections later in the passage. By the time students have identified the majority of structures in the text, the board is filled with multicolored geometric patterns that highlight key connections. Not only have we discussed as a class the potential implications of these structures, but the visual array helps to convince students of the payoff from spending significant time analyzing a text.

Overall, the inductive Bible study method continues to strengthen and enliven my understanding of Scripture. Although my undergraduate teaching context does not allow me to serve a seven-course inductive Bible study meal, the exegetical charcuterie board allows me to offer my students a sampling of the delicacies of the method. My hope is that students who participate will acquire a craving for more.



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