

DOI: 10.7252/JOURNAL.02.2014F.10

MY JOURNEY WITH INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

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It is both a pleasure and a privilege to contribute this autobiographical account of my experience with inductive Bible study. I hope this short description will illumine some of the facets of the history of the inductive Bible study movement and will provide insight into certain aspects of the inductive study of the Bible.

I consider myself fortunate to have been born into a devout Christian home. My mother's family had been active in the Free Methodist Church for several generations. And the local Free Methodist Church in which I was raised was a nurturing, caring congregation that sought to embody the gospel. The Scriptures played a central role in every aspect of the church's life and ministry, from children's Sunday School classes to midweek prayer meeting, to Sunday morning and evening services, to Bible quizzing where young people memorized whole books of the Bible. All preaching and teaching was centered on the Bible. I witnessed firsthand the power of God's Word to transform lives, to shape individuals into the kinds of people I respected and wished to emulate, and to create a community that had a kind of transcendent attractiveness. Of course the church was far from perfect. But quite early I discerned that these people had something special, that they exhibited a difference from most other people and groups I encountered. I had to think that this distinction was due to the influence of the Word of God.

I was especially enthralled by the power of the preached Word. One of my earliest memories is that of sitting in church, with my head resting on my father's chest, listening to the preaching of S. B. Sams and caught up in the sensation that what I was hearing were not just words, but rather that something was *happening*, that people were being changed deep within. I knew this powerful activity was occurring, because I recognized that it was occurring within me.

My early experience within the church taught me not only the power of the Bible and its message, but also the proper way to read the Bible, in other words, method. Now I remember no explicit instruction in Bible study method. But method was taught implicitly through practice.

In both preaching and teaching an attempt was made to treat individual books and passages, and to deal with them by careful attention to the wording and development of individual passages within the context of biblical books. Sunday School classes and midweek Bible study lessons were typically not topical, but focused upon biblical books. Even as a child I reflected on these practices and thereby came to develop a hermeneutic, although at that early stage of my life I would not have been able to articulate it.

I pause here just long enough to point out the tremendous, but often neglected, power of early experiences in the development of a love for the Bible, a sense of its power, and an internalization of the principles of its interpretation. Children are more observant and perceptive than we often realize. And at least in my experience I find that my childhood has profoundly affected the direction of my life and thought.

I realize now the indirect role of the inductive Bible study movement in my experience with the Bible in the local church. The Biblical Seminary in New York, which was the center of the inductive Bible study movement, had as early as the 1930s become the institution of preference for Free Methodist ministers who sought theological seminary education.¹ Although my pastors had not attended The Biblical Seminary, they did receive their training at Free Methodist colleges where graduates from The Biblical Seminary served.

When at the age of sixteen I came to believe that God was calling me to Christian ministry, I was convinced that my primary responsibility was to prepare as best as possible for competent and effective pastoral ministry. My theology of ministry, which was still developing and was certainly unarticulated, was bibliocentric; by that I mean that it seemed obvious and inarguable that the Bible must be at the center of all ministry, that ministry, and particularly pastoral ministry, was a ministry of the Word. It occurred to me, even at that young age, that the only thing that set the ministry apart from all other professions is the Word of God.

Therefore, as I thoroughly and prayerfully considered which Christian college to enter, I gave primary attention to the shape of biblical instruction as was presented in the various college catalogues. I was unimpressed with those programs that seemed to deal with the

1. This preference for The Biblical Seminary in New York for ministerial preparation within the Free Methodist Church continued until 1946, when the Free Methodist Church established the John Wesley Seminary Foundation at Asbury Theological Seminary. From that point many Free Methodists attended Asbury Seminary, where they had exposure to the inductive approach from professors such as George Allen Turner and Robert Traina, as discussed below.

Bible topically, offering such courses as “Love in the New Testament” (a course title I still remember after more than 40 years). I had come to believe that the Bible was not a flat book that existed to present broad ideas, but was rather a collection of originally independent books, each of which having its own message to present, bound together into a canonical whole.

Thus, I was drawn to the biblical curriculum at Spring Arbor College (now Spring Arbor University), which offered a book-oriented approach. The catalogue presented courses centered on individual biblical books, or collections of books (e.g., the Pauline epistles), and described these courses as focusing upon the study of the biblical text itself so as to grasp the message of these books.

When I matriculated at Spring Arbor, I realized that its biblical curriculum was the brainchild of Dr. W. Ralph Thompson, the primary professor in biblical studies. Dr. Thompson was a graduate of The Biblical Seminary in New York, where he had studied under Professor Robert Traina, among others. He had also taken classes under Dr. Howard Tillman Kuist at Winona Lake School of Theology, in Winona Lake, Indiana, where Kuist had sometimes taught summer-school classes during his tenure at Princeton Theological Seminary. Thompson revered Kuist as a Christian gentleman and a teacher. Thompson loved to tell the story of his experience in Kuist’s class on Jeremiah. It seems that at the end of one day of instruction, the students were so overwhelmed by the power of the message of Jeremiah that all of them were unable to move from their seats for a half hour after the class ended.

But Thompson was clearly more influenced by Traina, especially in terms of method. Thompson would describe Traina’s rigorous academic standards. Thompson, who was himself a highly accomplished scholar who held several graduate degrees, confessed that he was never so stretched academically as he had been in Traina’s classes. Indeed, I was first introduced to Traina’s *Methodical Bible Study* in Thompson’s upper-level classes.²

Yet, Thompson understood that he was teaching undergraduate students. His classes were challenging, but did not approach the level of rigor that I was to experience when I myself studied under Traina at Asbury Seminary. Although Thompson would present his understanding of the breakdown and dynamic movements of the biblical book we were studying, to the best of my memory he never required us to do anything

like a structural analysis of a biblical book for ourselves. Indeed, I believe we were never assigned the structural analysis of a passage. Assignments consisted of our answering questions posed by Thompson (he would write them on the board at the beginning of a class session), with the firm insistence that we were to answer these questions of the basis of our own study of the text, without consulting commentaries, although he would occasionally direct us to articles in Bible dictionaries or the like for historical background. I can still recall how difficult it was for me as an eighteen-year old college freshman to derive interpretation from the direct study of the text, without the help of commentaries. I remember at times being sorely tempted as I studied late into the night at the library to pull down a commentary just to get me started or to provide some guidance or confidence. I am happy to report that I never succumbed to such temptations.

To be fair, Thompson would often give us some direction in answering these interpretive questions. For example, sometimes the questions would include references to other passages in the book that might be especially helpful for the interpretation of our paragraph or verse. But for the most part, Thompson taught by modeling. In an interactive fashion constantly engaging the students, Thompson would demonstrate how the use of structure, immediate and broader-book context, as well as relevant scriptural and historical background, would provide the answers to the assigned questions. Thompson was a low-key, soft-spoken man; but his classes were electrifying in creating excitement over what we were discovering in the Bible.

Although Thompson never asked us to break down a passage into its units and sub-units or to identify “structural relationships” such as contrast or causation, by the time I was a senior, having taken several classes under Thompson, I was thinking structurally. I was using contrasts and causal connections and movements from general to particulars to interpret passages. Thompson employed a largely indirect method for teaching method. And in my case at least it succeeded.

I later came to realize that in employing his own interpretive questions as the substance of assignments, Thompson was following the typical practice of most professors at The Biblical Seminary. Robert Traina was unusual, and indeed unique, among the faculty at that institution in requiring students to analyze the text for themselves with a view toward generating their own questions. Thompson’s questions arose out of his own study of the text and thus represented his own observations and interpretations. I later realized that this process necessarily involved an implicit deductive element: Our conclusions were influenced and

2. Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study: A New Approach to Hermeneutics* (New York: Ganis & Harris, 1952).

perhaps sometimes directed by the questions that were assigned or by the way in which those questions were framed. Yet I still consider this approach—I'll call it the "indirect" approach—to teaching the inductive interpretive method highly effective at the undergraduate level.

I arrived as a student at Asbury Theological Seminary fully anticipating a vocation in pastoral ministry. But being all the more confident in the centrality of the Bible for ministry, and now enthusiastic for its interpretation thanks to the stimulation of W. Ralph Thompson, I decided to focus on biblical studies. I had taken essentially a minor in New Testament Greek at Spring Arbor (taught also by W. Ralph Thompson) and was anxious to make use of the biblical languages to a degree that was not expected in most Bible classes at Spring Arbor. I was thus inclined toward "exegesis" classes; and in fact, I did find the exegesis classes at Asbury to be engaging and instructive.

But W. Ralph Thompson had made me excited about sitting under Dr. Traina; and I anticipated doing so, even though as an undergraduate I had found *Methodical Bible Study* to be a bit dry and pedantic. My enthusiasm was also somewhat dampened by the fact that the inductive Bible study classes Dr. Traina taught were named "English Bible" courses; I wanted to work seriously with the original languages.

My first class with Dr. Traina was the Pentateuch. (Because of my extensive work with W. Ralph Thompson Dr. Traina allowed me to waive the class on Mark's Gospel, which was the first-level inductive Bible study class, and to take a course that was considered upper-level; I later took Mark with Dr. Traina.) I was utterly amazed. I had never experienced such exceptional teaching. Every aspect of the course—both inside and outside the classroom—was meticulously planned, one might say almost choreographed. And yet the class felt free and fresh; Dr. Traina had built spontaneity into it. Dr. Traina's classroom presence was daunting; and yet he exuded a humility before the biblical text and a reverence for the Bible and a profound love of God. His demands were very high; and yet he was sensitive to the level at which most students were working.

Dr. Traina's insights into the biblical text were nothing short of brilliant (and I use that word intentionally and advisedly); but he was careful to demonstrate exactly how he had reached his conclusions so that over time we would begin to think in the same way. I was mesmerized by just how articulate he was, choosing just the most precise, helpful, and clear terms, and explaining difficult concepts with a breathless simplicity. He was a master of the chalkboard (overhead projectors were just coming into use), working with it almost as an artist, but always in the service of communicating to visual learners. It became clear to me

the very first day that "English Bible" did not mean "dumbed down." Far from it. Indeed, Dr. Traina used Hebrew, and in New Testament courses Greek, with great facility; and he made it clear that he expected those of us with knowledge of the original languages to make use of them. And, incidentally, by connecting his classroom presentations with *Methodical Bible Study*, Dr. Traina demonstrated the helpfulness of that classic volume in inductive Bible study.

Four things especially stand out to me as significant "takeaways" from Dr. Traina's classes. First, Dr. Traina developed the connections between traditional inductive Bible study emphases, e.g., literary/structural analysis of whole books and individual passages, and mainstream exegesis, including critical methods such as form criticism and redaction criticism. He actually presented a holistic approach, according to which various standard exegetical practices and critical methods were included within a broad framework of inductive Bible study. Second, Dr. Traina emphasized the use of the Bible for theology. He was insightful in drawing out the theological message of individual passages and exploring how the theology of a passage or book contributed to the theology of the entire Bible. And in the process he related these biblical insights to the theological tradition of the Church. Dr. Traina knew the theologies of Barth or Brunner as well as those who taught systematic or historical theology. Third, Dr. Traina emphasized that the "supreme authority of the Bible," as he liked to call it, was not reducible to certain creedal statements, but must necessarily be expressed in practice. More specifically, he insisted that the chief challenge to the Bible's authority in the Church is our constant tendency to read our own ideas into the text, a practice made all the more insidious because we are typically unaware that we are doing so. Thus, a corollary of the authority of the Bible is an "inductive attitude," i.e., a commitment to identify our presuppositions and submit them to the evidence in and surrounding the biblical text, so that the message of the text itself, construed according to relevant evidence, becomes the final determination of our thinking, and especially of our theology. Traina insisted, too, that the inductive attitude must be expressed through an inductive process that is careful to identify evidence and draw conclusions from evidence in a fair, impartial, and accurate manner. And fourth, I learned from Dr. Traina the importance of inferential reasoning in the inductive process. Often he would lay out his own inductive logic: "Whereas..., and whereas..., therefore..." And he loved to involve students in the same process within class interaction and thereby to lead students to see that some of their interpretations derived from unexamined and questionable assumptions or from poor

logic in moving from evidence to inferences.

While a student at Asbury had the privilege of taking English Bible/inductive Bible study classes also from Dr. David Thompson. And I found that he brought his own impressive background and gifts, which complemented the teaching of Dr. Traina.

As I proceeded through the coursework of my Master of Divinity program at Asbury, I gained two clarifications regarding my ministerial calling. For one thing, I increasingly sensed that God was calling me to theological education rather than to pastoral ministry. I actually began to develop this sense as I was completing my undergraduate program at Spring Arbor. But the issue came to a head during my first year at Asbury Seminary. This shift of ministerial focus was difficult for me; for I loathed the prospect of forsaking pastoral ministry. In order to come to grips with this possible vocational shift, I took a year out of seminary to serve under pastoral appointment. During that year I made peace with the idea of serving as a professor in theological education.

Related to this sense of calling to theological education was a profound commitment to promote inductive Bible study in both the academy and in the Church. I actually considered this focus on the inductive approach to biblical study to be my more specific calling. I was impressed with its potential. At the same time, I was aware that it was not taught broadly, at least in the effective ways in which I had encountered it. Thus, I was convinced that the Church needed this type of instruction. And I believed that the Lord had placed this passion within my heart.

In my final year as a student at Asbury Seminary, I served as a grading assistant for Dr. Traina, while also being a half-time teaching fellow in New Testament Greek. I was responsible for grading approximately half of all assignments in Dr. Traina's Mark classes. This experience increased my understanding of inductive Bible study and provided significant insight into the teaching of this subject.

At about this time the seminary was attempting to find a successor to Dr. George Allen Turner, who had taught English Bible/inductive Bible study at Asbury since 1945. Dr. Turner was a graduate of The Biblical Seminary in New York, where he had studied under Wilbert Webster White and Howard Tillman Kuist, and had earned his Ph.D. in biblical studies from Harvard University.³ He had played a critical role in establishing inductive Bible study as central to the

3. Dr. Turner related to me that he heard Dr. W. W. White deliver a series of lectures at Greenville College while Turner was a student at Greenville, and White encouraged him to apply to The Biblical Seminary in New York.

biblical curriculum at Asbury Seminary. Because he had the reputation of being less methodologically rigorous than Dr. Traina, or at least less methodologically explicit, I never registered for one of his courses.⁴ Nevertheless, when the seminary was searching for a successor to Dr. Turner, I was told that, if I pursued my doctoral studies immediately, the seminary would not look aggressively for someone else. No promises were made, of course. But these conversations confirmed my sense of calling to theological education and specifically to the teaching of inductive biblical study.

After teaching part-time for a year at Ashland Theological Seminary, including an inductive biblical studies class on the Gospel of John, I matriculated as a Ph.D. student at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. I was attracted to Union Seminary in part because of its historic connection to inductive Bible study. Howard Tillman Kuist had been called to Union Seminary from the faculty of The Biblical Seminary in New York in 1938 (because of his broad reputation as a stellar teacher), and taught there until he accepted a professorship at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1943. And Donald G. Miller came from The Biblical Seminary to Union in 1943 in order to assume the position vacated by Dr. Kuist.⁵ So inductive Bible study had been taught at Union from 1938 until 1963, when Miller departed to become president of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Although inductive Bible study was no longer part of Union's curriculum, the seminary continued to bear the imprint of Kuist and Miller. Dr. James Luther Mays and Dr. Patrick D. Miller, both world-recognized professors of Old Testament, had been students of Donald G. Miller and were very much influenced by Miller's inductive approach.⁶ I could discern this influence through their emphasis upon the theological meaning of the final form of the text and their concern to interpret passages with special attention to the role these passages played within the biblical book and to the structural dynamics of the passages themselves.

I was also attracted to Union because of the work of Dr. Jack Dean Kingsbury, a New Testament professor at Union with a global reputation

4. An example of Dr. Turner's instruction can be found in his book, *Portals to Books of the Bible* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury Seminary Press, 1972).

5. I count myself fortunate to have known Dr. Donald Miller, since I have gained much insight from him about exegesis, hermeneutics, and theology, as well as the history of the inductive Bible study movement.

6. I know this is the case, because I have had extended conversations with both of them regarding the inductive Bible study movement.

as an authority on the synoptic Gospels. I became interested in studying under Kingsbury while studying at Asbury, when I had encountered Kingsbury's writings and found an immediate methodological affinity with him. Although not a product of the inductive Bible study movement, Dr. Kingsbury had, through a process of reflecting deeply on the interpretive demands of New Testament texts, arrived at a hermeneutic that was remarkably similar to the inductive approach. Later, after reading *Methodical Bible Study*, Kingsbury would describe Traina as one of the most brilliant exegetical thinkers he had encountered.

Dr. Kingsbury had written briefly on the structure of Matthew's Gospel,⁷ and persuaded me to center my dissertation on the structure of the Gospel of Matthew. In a truly inductive fashion, I tried to identify structural programs and categories other than those I had learned at Asbury for my examination of the structure of Matthew. I did not want simply and uncritically to adopt an understanding of structure that I had inherited. But I found no other treatment of structure that approached the hermeneutical integrity or the exegetical effectiveness of the structural analysis that belonged to inductive biblical study as I had learned it. I thus applied the structural insights of inductive Bible study to Matthew's Gospel. The dissertation was accepted with no substantial revisions required; and I later published a slightly modified version with Sheffield Academic Press under the title: *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: a Study in Literary Design*.⁸

As I was about to begin writing my dissertation, I was hired as Assistant Professor of Inductive Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, over a year before I actually started to teach. I have served on the faculty of Asbury Seminary since 1984, teaching across the canon in both Old Testament and New Testament inductive Bible study classes. I have no words to describe the thrill of teaching the Scriptures by employing an approach that allows the Bible to speak on its own terms; nor are there words to express the pleasure of witnessing the enthusiasm of students who have discovered how this inductive approach can open up the Scriptures in new and tremendously exciting ways.

But beyond classroom instruction part of my sense of calling to inductive Bible study has been to help make the inductive approach known

7. Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

8. David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplemental Series* 31, *Bible and Literature Series* 15 (Sheffield: Almond, 1988).

within the academic biblical guild. I hope that my dissertation and my other academic publications have assisted in the accomplishment of this goal. People often, and perhaps even typically, associate inductive Bible study with non-specialist lay reading of the Bible. They fail to realize that inductive Bible study emerged from the work of William Rainey Harper, a Yale Professor of Old Testament and the founding president of the University of Chicago and his associate and student Wilbert Webster White, a Yale-trained Semitist and Old Testament scholar, and the founder of a significant theological seminary, The Biblical Seminary in New York.⁹ Nor do they realize that inductive Bible study has been taught at such prestigious institutions as Princeton Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, and Fuller Theological Seminary. Inductive Bible study continues to have a significant contribution to make to the academy. And generations of students, both from Asbury and elsewhere, testify to its value in professional ministry, pointing to its importance in seminary curricula.

It was from a desire to promote inductive Bible study in the academy and the seminary classroom that I collaborated with Dr. Traina in the book, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics*.¹⁰ Dr. Traina had actually planned for years to produce a sequel to *Methodical Bible Study*, and graciously asked me to share the effort. In this book we related inductive Bible study to major current hermeneutical issues, which we presented especially in the first section, entitled "Theoretical Foundations." The remainder of the book develops these theoretical commitments through a recommended process of study, ranging from observation through interpretation to evaluation/appropriation and correlation. Dr. Traina and I incorporated insights into methodology that we gained from a combined sixty years of seminary classroom instruction and reflection on matters pertaining to hermeneutics.

The inauguration of this very publication, the *Journal of Inductive Biblical Study*, represents an additional attempt to demonstrate the

9. For the work of Wilbert Webster White (and William Rainey Harper) and the founding of The Biblical Seminary in New York see Charles R. Eberhardt, *The Bible in the Making of Ministers: The Scriptural Basis of Theological Education; The Lifework of Wilbert Webster White* (New York: Association Press, 1949); and David R. Bauer, "Inductive Bible Study: History, Character, and Prospects in a Global Environment," *The Asbury Journal* 68/1: 6-35.

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

contribution of the inductive approach to biblical scholarship. This journal was actually the brainchild of my colleague (and one of my most gifted former students), Dr. Fredrick Long, who graciously allowed me to serve as a founding co-editor.

In order to make inductive Bible study available to the broader Church, Dr. Traina and I developed a website that deals with various aspects of inductive Bible study. This website offers historical description, archival material, video and audio presentations from Dr. Traina (including complete class presentations, together with overheads, of every course Dr. Traina taught at Asbury), along with expository sermons. Plans exist to regularly upload inductive studies of biblical books, passages, and themes. This website has been adopted by the Seedbed Ministries of Asbury Theological Seminary and is available at www.inductivebiblestudy.seedbed.com.

It is my conviction that inductive Bible study has a most vital role to play in the Church, in ministerial preparation, and in the academy. It is therefore critically important for the practitioners of inductive Bible study to continue to think rigorously about the instruction, methodology, and hermeneutics that have been associated with the inductive approach and to do all necessary to ensure that the inductive approach has a significant place at the table of biblical scholarship. It is to fulfil this vision that I have given my professional life.