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*Of Icons and IBS: Contextualizing the Inductive Bible Study Method Among Eastern Orthodox Background Believers*

**Abstract**

Curtis Elliott explores the application of Inductive Bible Study to an Eastern Orthodox context, where the Bible is approached more from a position of mystery and tradition. He presents a number of problems a typical Protestant approach of this method can cause, and proposes a postmodern narrative-weave approach to Bible study that could potentially alleviate some of these problems.

**Keywords:** Inductive Bible Study, Eastern Orthodox, Georgia, tradition, narrative weave

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## Introduction

This article seeks to address how Inductive Bible Study (IBS) was implemented within the country of Georgia among young adults who were primarily Eastern Orthodox in experience and orientation. My goal is to show how IBS functioned in ways that moved these young adults forward in their faith, but also left some challenges with regard to linking Scripture study meaningfully to their Orthodox background and experience. A proposal will be made to view the inductive approach to Bible study in a way that incorporates certain ‘envisioning’ features similar to the way icons are used in popular Orthodox worship.

## Context: Faith Tradition and Nationality

The confessional context of Eastern Orthodoxy in Georgia revolves around two realities that impinge upon the lives of average young people: the practices of religious tradition and the fusion of faith and national identity. Tradition, according to Orthodox faith is living and reflects the soul of the nation. Practice is the response and guarantor of living tradition. But while the importance of religious practices may vary from person to person, the Orthodox tradition wedded with a strong sense of national identity incorporates even non-practicing believers into its fold. For example, many of my friends practice Orthodox teachings in regard to prayer, church attendance, observing fast days, and spiritual direction and many do not. Both however claim to be equally Orthodox because they are equally Georgian. The results of blurring the lines between faith and national identity often but not always result in a religiously disguised nominalism and/or a religiously motivated nationalism. The point however, is that within popular Georgian Orthodoxy, whether one is an active or passive Orthodox believer, the power of religious tradition and national faith holds strong gravitational pull especially in relation to Protestant traditions.

## Inductive Bible Study (IBS) Among Orthodox Adherents

It is well known in Orthodox circles, especially in Georgia, that the Holy Scriptures and their interpretation are the privilege and calling of the priests and serve as the framework and inspiration of the liturgy.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Bible study in and of itself is neither expected nor required of the average layperson. Given that reality, I was surprised to be a part of a study in which those who attended ranged in the spectrum from nominal Orthodox to more devout. To my delight, I found that IBS was generally well received and demonstrated potential not only in renewing faith, but also in bridging confessional lines between Protestants and Orthodox.

This potential was linked primarily with the inductive process and its corresponding values of self-discovery and access to truth. To many, an

intentional reading of the Scriptures—IBS style—was a catalyst for deeper understanding and served to awaken interest in the biblical material. One example of this was when I took a young man named Alexander through a Mark manuscript study. It was amazing to see how his understanding of Jesus grew and his faith strengthened. But there was something missing that surfaced over the course of time. For Alexander and others who participated in IBS, the missing element was the sense of the transcendent mystery of faith that they encountered within Orthodox settings. Perhaps this was an ecclesiological problem and not a problem of IBS method per se. After all, the Orthodox churches were microcosms of heaven, prioritizing image and scent over text and interpretation, and our little Protestant church looked like a private non-decorated apartment and functioned like a club with office hours! But despite the ecclesiological discontinuity, there were other challenges that pointed to in my view, a fundamental need to appropriate IBS in ways that intentionally linked a person's faith tradition and life trajectory to the process of biblical discovery and interpretation.

### **Linking Faith Tradition and the Biblical Story**

Linking local stories with the biblical story must be valued if we as Christian workers desire young adults to engage deeply in the Word of God and adopt the inductive attitude. In a questionnaire that I sent out to experienced IBS teachers, all trained at Asbury Theological Seminary and all with significant cross-cultural experience, most respondents agreed that the difference between those who used IBS once and those who appropriated it as a method for continued use in their personal and ministry lives hinged on their experience of Christ through the study and their commitment to concrete application. To add to their observations, it is my contention that one's experience of Christ in IBS is contingent not only upon correct understanding of the truth, but in the way the truth is seen to have penetrated one's past, present and future i.e. one's local faith tradition and indeed one's whole life trajectory.

In the context of Georgia this implies that IBS facilitators must be intentional and committed to linking the IBS method with Orthodoxy's religious traditions in meaningful ways and with a spirit of openness to learn. This means among other things, our willingness to acknowledge the power of tradition and the broad influence of Orthodox spirituality over the society as a whole. IBS, to be effective among even nominal Orthodox adherents, must be willing to touch upon these sacred social imaginations allowing Scripture interpretation and application to engage tradition, mystery and the visual to both confirm and critique, renew and rebuild.

## Adapting IBS to a Postmodern Audience

Curtis Chang, a long time IBS practitioner with Intervarsity, developed one of the ways in which IBS has been adapted to honor a unique audience. In an unpublished paper entitled, “Narrative Weave: A Model of Group Bible Study for Postmoderns”, Chang addresses what he sees as some shortcomings of the IBS model.<sup>2</sup> Two points are worthy of note about his critique: First, there is the problem of identification with the characters in the story. The challenge here is what typically happens in the application stage of the study. Chang’s main concern is that we uncritically assume that students *automatically identify* with a character in a Biblical story, say for example the leper that Jesus heals. He says we “suddenly end our study with questions like “Where is Jesus touching you?” “What do you mean ‘Where is Jesus touching me?’ they question inside, “Jesus isn’t touching me, all we’ve been talking about is how he is touching the leper.” Chang claims this is neither natural nor automatic to a postmodern generation. He says we end up “assuming what we actually need to be cultivating: the realization that their stories are inextricably wound up with the story attested to on the pages.”<sup>3</sup>

Chang points to another challenge with the OIA method, this time having to do with the linear procedure of the study itself. For Chang, a disjunctive move happens when the application stage is thrust on the audience or tagged on at the end. He says, “we ask them to spend much of the study observing the Gospel story, and then suddenly ask them at the end in the application stage, “So, how are you like the leper?” In effect says Chang, we are asking students to “go backward in narrative flow” and asks, “Who wants to participate in a story that is essentially over already?”<sup>4</sup>

These challenges as I understand them are essentially a problem with envisioning; that is, envisioning a connection to a biblical character, and envisioning a connection to all the past and present ways God deals with people where they are. Chang then advocates for what he calls a narrative weave, an attempt to allow students to participate in the text organically and dialectically. He seeks to allow them to enter an envisioning process early on in the narrative by establishing an identification and personal association with the event, setting, character or response, all the while allowing the “gravitational pull” of the story to provide boundaries in the associations. He seems to honor what Bauer and Traina refer to as the “transjective” relationship<sup>5</sup> between the reader and the text when he states, “Since we don’t want to take students all the way through the story before they participate in it, we must exercise leadership. We guide the identification so that it moves towards the reader’s own pre-condition, but is also influenced by the gravitational pull of how the story will unfold — both in terms of the characters’ encounter with Jesus and how we hope the reader will [unfold] as well.”<sup>6</sup>

Returning to the Georgian context, the Eastern Orthodox tradition provides its own gravitational pull within which inductive bible study takes place. The power of this tradition (story) that fuses nationalism and faith, word and symbol, and historical tradition and present experience should not be underestimated. Linking both IBS method and the Orthodox tradition in an organic way—similar to Chang’s approach above—acknowledges both the powerful influence of an existing tradition or community as well as the ability of the Scripture to create an alternative vision of that community and tradition.

### **A Mutually Beneficial Relationship? IBS and Eastern Orthodoxy (from a Protestant’s point of view)**

So how are we to best utilize and understand IBS in an Orthodox setting? It seems to me that there can exist the potential of a mutually enriching relationship. Orthodox spirituality, with its emphasis on mystery, spiritual direction and tradition may end up inspiring the process of IBS toward a more personal and corporate spiritual encounter with Jesus Christ. For students like Alexander and others who long for the mystery of transcendence, IBS does not have to be a rigid linear system that tags the application stage on at the end after much time and energy in observation. Rather, through adapting IBS methodology in creative ways such as the narrative weave approach above, IBS becomes a strategy for a transformational encounter—where personal histories, living traditions, and transcendent mystery are both honored and altered.

Inductive Bible Study also has the potential of offering a critique to established ways of thinking in an Orthodox context by addressing the powers that are at work in all human visions of life and experience.<sup>7</sup> In the Orthodox East, the blurring and blending of faith and national identity and the corresponding church and state relationship, has often meant that the church is too close to the state to be of significant critique in the case of abuses of power or morality. The inductive approach to bible study it seems to me, seeks to develop within the reader a “hermeneutic of submission” to the biblical vision of an alternative reality.<sup>8</sup> Submitting to this alternative vision will inevitably critique the ways in which any believer or church body, may have capitulated to earthly concerns and values and simultaneously brings fresh renewal, obedience, and faithfulness to the Gospel.

### **Of Icons and IBS**

The icon in popular Orthodoxy pulls together many of the main concerns of Orthodox theology in that it points to an ontological bridge between the material and the spiritual.<sup>9</sup> The icon also happens to be one of the major ways in which Orthodox believers seek to encounter the transcendence of God in worship. Given this reality, how can IBS, with at times an exclusive interest in technique toward the written Word, meaningfully engage these

realities? Or alternatively, how can more mechanical versions of IBS implementation engage the mystery of faith and the transcendence of God? I have found Kevin Vanhoozer's comparison of the biblical text with a verbal icon to be a helpful way to discuss IBS within an Eastern Orthodox context.<sup>10</sup>

St. John of Damascus is well known to have distinguished between worship that one directs to God alone, and reverence, which one may give to persons or objects. This reverence is directed not to the icon as an object, but rather to that which the icon represents or attests. Vanhoozer says, "The icon is a witness to transcendence from transcendence."<sup>11</sup> Vanhoozer believes that this is precisely the same process we go through when we interpret scripture. He says,

(T)he task of interpretation is to get beyond oneself by attending to the form of a literary act in order to encounter an embodied intention. Interpretation is the attempt to bear true witness to what another has said or done. Similarly, the posture demanded by the icon (and the text) is that of "watchful calm". One cannot wrest its meaning from it; one does not master an icon or a text so much as attend, and pay attention to it.<sup>12</sup>

I believe that IBS, with its emphasis upon 'submission' to the text can pave the way to see the interpretive process as a "window" to the face of Christ. To quote Jean Luc Marion, "the body of the text does not belong to the text, but to the One who is embodied in it."<sup>13</sup> The extent to which IBS facilitators keep this goal in mind, they avoid making the text a verbal idol and succeed in allowing its iconic face to show forth.

In the same way that the inductive method is not an end in itself, the icon points beyond the facial lines, paint, wood and glass, to the mystery of transcendence and the meaning embedded in the picture. The iconic gaze, like the inductive approach is a "method" used in worship that serves to point beyond itself. Let us then treat these methods not as objects of worship, but objects of reverence for the ways in which they elicit an encounter with the living God.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Aleksandr Shmeman, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963) 195.

<sup>2</sup> Chang critiques what he calls the OIA model—Observation, Interpretation, Application—in many respects a simplified version of the IBS model) Found at <http://www.intervarsity.org/mx/item/4015/>.

<sup>3</sup> Chang, *Narrative Weave*, p.2

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.2

<sup>5</sup> David R. Bauer, and Robert A. Traina. *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011) 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> Chang, *Narrative Weave*, p.3

<sup>7</sup> For a good discussion on how local tradition, Christian missionary presence, and Bible Study interact to produce interesting dynamics see Leslie Newbigin's *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids (Mich.): W. B. Eerdmans, 1995.), 146-150.

<sup>8</sup> Bauer and Traina state that the Bible presents an "alternative interpretation of one's experience of the world and one's life within the world." This alternative vision of the Bible is one that "in profound ways finally challenges generally accepted human ideologies and values." In *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids (Mich.): Baker Academic, 2011), 285, FN #9.

<sup>9</sup> See Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz. *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 45-48.

<sup>10</sup> See Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1998), 459-461.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 460.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 460.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Vanhoozer *Is There a Meaning* p. 461.

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