Competent in the Basic Skills of Inductive Bible Study: A Case Study on the Use of Inductive Biblical Studies at Eastern Mennonite Seminary

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ABSTRACT: This essay offers a pedagogical case study of a wide range of inductively-based NT and/or thematically-focused biblical studies courses which I have taught at Eastern Mennonite Seminary throughout my tenure here: (1) "New Testament: Text in Context," the EMS NT introduction course; (2) NT book studies on Matthew, Luke/Acts, John, Romans, Corinthians, and Revelation; and (3) thematic biblical studies (OT/NT) on "Women and Men in Scripture and Church" and "Creation Care in Scripture and Church." The essay opens with discussion of the inductively-oriented pedagogical philosophy which undergirds these courses collectively. It then presents specific illustrative examples of the "inductive exercises" which constitute the central and daily class assignments or in-class activities within these courses and reflects on their pedagogical intentions. And it concludes with overarching reflections on questions of classroom effectiveness, best pedagogical practices, and the challenges/rewards of such inductively-based biblical studies courses.

1. Introduction: Inductive Method, Pedagogical Intention, and Basic Course Design

1.1 Introduction

It was bound to happen, my career-long engagement with Inductive Biblical Studies.[1] I had cut my own biblical studies "eye teeth" on inductive methodology in NT classes at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (now Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary), Elkhart, IN, in the mid-1970's. Dr. Howard Charles, clearly a student of Traina methodology (and very likely of Dr. Robert Traina himself), taught us well. Day by day Howard put us through our "inductive" paces, as he assigned us inductive questions which required us to scour the relevant NT texts in order to find the answers. It was a skill that I would

[1] The phrase "competent in the basic skills of inductive Bible study" shows up on each of my course syllabi as I reflect on the first of our fourfold set of common instructional rubrics at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, namely the goal of enabling students to become "Wise Interpreters."

never lose and a methodology that I would never abandon. And even as I gained significant narrative critical "lenses" throughout my doctoral studies (1979–1987) at Union Theological Seminary (now Union Presbyterian Seminary), Richmond, VA, it was always and above all those same "inductive" skills which provided me with the basic tool for engaging in narrative criticism.

So, when I began my own NT teaching career at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, VA, in 1984, it was inductive methodology that I employed—both instinctively and intentionally—as the primary *modus* for my classroom instruction. The practical reason for this was obvious. This was how I had learned to engage the biblical texts. This was the skill I brought with me into the biblical studies classroom. And this was, accordingly, my immediate and instinctive approach to classroom teaching.

But there was much more to this classroom *modus* than simple habit and sheer instinct. There was deep pedagogical intention as well. I realized from the beginning that what I wanted to do most of all within my NT courses was to equip my students for their own first-hand work *in* and *with* the NT texts. Far more than I wanted them *to read about* the NT writings, I wanted them above all *to dig into* these texts and *to make their own exegetical and theological discoveries*. And the best way I knew to accomplish this was to engage my students in their own hands-on inductive work with the NT text(s). So began my inductively-focused NT pedagogy. And some 33 years down the road I have never once looked back.

My standard course load throughout my tenure at EMS has included both the NT introduction course ("New Testament: Text in Context") and two cycles of NT book studies (Matthew, Luke/Acts, John; and Romans, Corinthians, Apocalyptic). In addition, I have co-taught or anchored several thematically-focused courses which range across the biblical canon ("Women and Men in Scripture and Church" and "Creation Care in Scripture and Church"). These are, collectively, the courses in which my use of inductive methodology comes into greatest prominence. And these are the courses on which I will reflect within the present essay.

1.2 Book Studies

My first experience with designing inductively-focused courses was with NT book studies. And my standard *modus operandi* for these book studies has been to structure them predominantly around written study guides based on one or multiple inductive study questions focused on the text(s) at hand for any given session. The students, for their part, have the task of searching the text(s), identifying the relevant substance with which to respond to the inductive question(s), writing up their responses, and bringing their written work back to class. My role as classroom instructor, in turn, is to engage the inductive question(s), to invite the students' responses in oral fashion within the class discussion, to collect these responses visually on the chalkboard (sic!) at the front of the room, and to lead the students in corporate classroom reflection on the broader significance—historical, sociological, literary, theological, ethical, etc.—of the discoveries that we have made collectively.[2]

[2] This generic *modus operandi* does not fully represent the course design created for "Epistle to the Romans" and "Corinthian Epistles," both of which I structure partially as biblical simulations and for which I draw on the

1.3 New Testament Introduction

"New Testament: Text in Context," the NT introduction course, grew out of my prior teaching experiences on two fronts, (1) my book study courses and (2) my initial flagship course, "Reading the Biblical Text." In the book studies I worked, as noted above, with written study guides. In "Reading the Biblical Text" I first offered the students several weeks of introductory lectures on "Gospel as Story." Then I set the students loose on the Gospel of Matthew, segment by segment, from beginning to end. Their first task for any given class session was to read a segment of the Gospel and identify one narrative-critical question from that Matthean text. Their follow-up task was to go back to this Matthean text once again and to answer their own question on the basis of the evidence at hand. Accordingly, this entry-level course, similar to my book studies, was inductively focused.

So, when I designed "New Testament: Text in Context," I intentionally co-opted the inductive component from "Reading the Biblical Text" (which was then disappearing from the curriculum) for the newly-emerging NT introduction course.[3] And from my book study courses I co-opted the use of regular inductive study guides as a means to engage the NT texts one by one. By design "New Testament: Text in Context" is a course which begins with a shorter lecture unit on "context" and a lengthier and inductively-focused unit on "text." Within this major "text" unit the students and I engage the books of the NT in sequence, not only by way of assigned readings from the NT and the required NT introduction text, but most prominently by way of inductive exercises focused on the NT texts under discussion. Our class sessions, which inevitably begin with a lecture component on significant features of the NT writing in focus, always move on crucially to the specific inductive exercise drawn from that text, an exercise which the students have prepared in advance as their class assignment.

1.4 Thematic Biblical Studies.

The third classroom format which I engage for biblical studies courses, language classes aside, is one that I have developed for such courses as "Women and Men in Scripture and Church" and "Creation Care in Scripture and Church." These thematic courses range broadly over the biblical canon, Old and New Testament alike, and engage a wide selection of individual texts as these are relevant to the topic of a given class session.[4] These courses, structured around a sequence of specific topics, involve the students in what I designate as "in-class inductives." Here I hand out either (1) a sheet

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methodological resources of Reta Halteman Finger, *Roman House Churches for Today: A Practical Guide for Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) and Reta Halteman Finger and George D. McClain (*Creating a Scene in Corinth: A Simulation* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2013). These courses likewise include an inductive study component as well, however. For an illustrative example of a book study syllabus, see the "Gospel of Matthew" syllabus for Fall 2014 included in the SYLLABUS APPENDICES at the end of this book.

[3] This course and its Old Testament counterpart, "Old Testament: Text in Context," were brought into our curriculum as 3-hour courses to replace their 2-hour predecessors, "Old Testament Survey" and "New Testament Survey." For an illustrative example of the syllabus for "New Testament: Text in Context," see the Spring 2017 syllabus included in the SYLLABUS APPENDICES at the end of this book.

[4] For an illustrative example of such a syllabus, see the Fall 2017 syllabus for "Creation Care in Scripture and Church" included in the SYLLABUS APPENDICES at the end of this book.

listing chapter/verse (ch/v) references for a category of texts (stories of women in the NT, for example) and framing an inductive study question(s) by which to engage these texts or (2) a sheet or sheets on which I have printed out one or several biblical texts themselves, for which I then frame an inductive question verbally and/or on the chalkboard. With such "in-class inductives" I normally divide the class into groups of twos or threes, each of which works together on one portion of the collective task at hand before I call the class back together for group discussion.

But regardless of the course or the questions at hand, the chalkboard is, by the end of the class session, inevitably filled to overflowing with lists of this or that and often rendered virtually illegible by the addition of countless lines and circles that connect various bits and pieces of information to each other. Not infrequently students have stopped me at the end of the class period and before I take eraser in hand to erase the day's collection of inductively-gathered material, so that they can take a photo of the chalkboard on their cell phone. What ultimately happens with these photos I will never know. But, bottom line, I have long since concluded that NT students will carry far more with them from the classroom, if it is based on their own "case in point" inductive work within the NT than if it is based on lengthy and encyclopedic lectures from the front of the classroom, no matter how erudite. And based on the number of times former students have commented with appreciation on the "inductives" they have done for my classes, I am willing to trust my instinct on that question.

2. Chapter and Verse: "Case in Point" Examples of Inductive Methodology in My Classroom

2.1 Introduction

If there is one instructor-comment that students in my classes see more frequently than any other on their written work, it is surely the penciled question in the margin, "ch/v?" meaning "chapter/verse?" My inductive approach to biblical studies is one in which the only way to "build the argument" or "make the case" is to provide chapter/verse references for the reader, so that they can see that I have a solid basis for my conclusions. So now, I also need to offer my own metaphorical "chapter and verse" to "make [my own] case." Here are illustrative examples of my inductive assignments along with brief pointers to their pedagogical goals.

2.2 Concerning Historical and/or Sociological Questions

As I begin the semester in Pauline book studies, I regularly assign an overall search of Romans or 1 Corinthians for the "Paul's-Eye View of Jewish History." My goal with this type of assignment is to provide the students with an overall perspective on the letter in focus and to invite them to reflect both historically on the Jewish history which undergirds Paul's letter and also theologically on the manner in which Paul makes use of Jewish history as he proclaims the gospel. The "Paul's-Eye" exercise for "Epistle to the Romans" reads as follows:

> Step One: Skim Romans 1:1–11:36 very carefully and make note of the world of Jewish history (names of people, special events, etc.) and Jewish faith and practices (Jewish beliefs and/or religious practices) to which Paul makes reference. (There is very little "evidence" in 12:1-16:27 except for 15:8, "the promises given to the patriarchs.") You may want to take notes on what you are finding as you go along. And as you do, cite chapter/verse references along with the items you are finding.
>
> Step Two: Now gather your findings into a (vertical) "time line" of Jewish faith and history. Where possible, connect Old Testament chapter/verse references to your Romans chapter/verse references, so that you can link Paul's references to the Old Testament accounts in which these stories are found. A Study Bible will give you significant assistance with this task.
>
> Step Three: Now step back and reflect briefly (several paragraphs or a page) in a written essay on what you have encountered. This is the Jewish background that Paul brings to his letter to the Roman house churches. How does Paul's Jewish background and history shape Paul's message to the Roman believers, Jewish and Gentile alike? You might ask yourself the following sorts of questions:
>
> > What kind of significance do the historical figures and religious practices in Jewish history have for Paul?
> >
> > How (or why) does Paul use these historical figures and religious practices to communicate the "gospel"?
> >
> > What appear to be the key issues that Paul is dealing with in his letter to the Roman believers?

The inductive exercise for the Philemon/Philippians/Galatians session in "New Testament: Text in Context" focuses on the biography and personal characteristics of the Apostle Paul as reflected in these three undisputed Pauline letters. The goal here is to engage students not only with the historical/sociological/religious background of the Apostle Paul but also with the multiple and varied "faces" of Paul as he presents himself in life and via letter to the churches he has founded. My favorite question for classroom reflection following our inductive work is essentially the following: "How much has Paul changed in character from "before Damascus" to "after Damascus" and how much has he stayed the same? What does this suggest to us about the ways and purposes of God?" The inductive exercise itself reads as follows:

> On the basis of the texts of Philemon, Philippians, and Galatians draw up a biographical/character sketch of the Apostle Paul. Who is he and what has made him this way? You may write your inductive up as an essay; or you may write it up in the form of lists of characteristics grouped under major headings. (NOTE: Some of this evidence will be "what Paul says" in so many words; some of it will be "what you think about

> Paul" on the basis of the letters he writes.) The following sorts of questions may help you to focus on your task:
>
> What do we learn from these texts about Paul's family, social, and religious background?
>
> What do we learn from these texts about Paul's personal characteristics?
>
> What do we learn from these texts about Paul's gifts/skills as a church leader?
>
> What do we learn from these texts about Paul's challenges as a church leader?
>
> Make your lists or your discussion as specific as you can; use specific language from the text and cite chapter/verse references where possible.

2.3 Concerning Questions Concerning Rhetoric

On occasion I engage students with inductive exercises focused on rhetorical features and/or the rhetorical force of the text in question. One such assignment concerns the rhetorical questions which provide the diatribe format of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The goal of this inductive exercise for "New Testament: Text in Context" is first to identify this prominent rhetorical feature of Paul's letter to the Roman house churches and then to use the findings as a tool for assessing Paul's overall message to the Roman believers. The inductive exercise reads as follows:

> Walk through the text of Romans and make a list of the rhetorical questions that Paul addresses to his listeners/readers. (Cite the questions verbatim or summarize their substance, using as much of the specific language of the text as feasible. Indicate chapter/verse. If certain questions come in a cluster, keep them together.) These questions create the "diatribe" format of Paul's letter to the Romans; and they should give you a good idea what this letter is about. DO NOT list the answers to these questions—if you do, you will end up reproducing the bulk of the text of Romans!
>
> Now reflect on the overall impact of these rhetorical questions:
>
> What do they tell you about the "argument" of the letter to the Romans?
>
> Which of the two major interpretations represented in [the NT intro text] does this "evidence" best support?
>
> Why do you think so?

I pose a very different rhetorically-focused question as we study Ephesians in "New Testament: Text in Context." Here the assignment is to create a "visual layout" of Ephesians 5:21–6:9, the so-called "household code," and then to reflect on the message which it conveys through its form with its specific content and within its context. My goal with this inductive exercise is first to engage the students with the actual substance and the evident structure of this "household code" and then to

invite them to reflect on the communication of this text within its historical/social/religious context. The inductive exercise reads as follows:

> Create a visual layout for the household code found in Ephesians 5:21–6:9. A visual layout is a method of putting all the words of a passage into a visual (poetic) format which highlights/uncovers the structure of the passage. Basic rules for a visual layout are the following:
>
> 1) All the words of the text have to appear in the same order on the page as they do in the biblical text. In other words, the idea is NOT to "rearrange" the words of the text in any way.
> 2) The visual layout needs to indicate where a sense unit begins and ends. One of the most important things about a visual layout is having a strong reason for where (with which words) each line begins and where (with which words) each line ends. As much as possible, work with entire phrases or clauses rather than smaller groupings of words. Do not break up phrases (for example: in the house).
> 3) What you are looking for in a visual layout is the element of sequence and/or parallelism. Use indentation to indicate parallel elements of a text; and move the indentations from left to right to indicate subsections or dependent sections that fit under a heading of some type. In order to identify structural elements of the text, look for similar sentence structures, repeated vocabulary, repeated ideas of one sort or another, lists of any kind, contrasts between two things, etc. Be on the lookout for clauses which serve as headings to what follows or conclusions to what has gone before.
>
> With your visual layout in hand, now consider and respond to the following in essay format:
>
> What does this household code communicate in its present shape, with its present content, and in its present context?
>
> Is this reflective of the status quo, or is it a radical directive?
>
> Why do you think so?

2.4 Concerning Comparison/Contrast Questions

One obvious and frequently fruitful way to engage students inductively lies in the task of comparing and/or contrasting literary texts with each other and reflecting on the findings. An inductive exercise for "Gospel of John" focuses on the similarities and differences between the Johannine call accounts and their Synoptic counterparts and invites the students to reflect on the literary/theological significance of these call accounts within their respective Gospel narratives. The goal of this exercise is to highlight the striking differences and yet the visible correspondences between these call accounts and to reflect on the historical origins of these texts and their literary and/or theological function within their respective Gospels. The inductive exercise reads as follows:

> Compare/contrast the call accounts of John 1:19–51 with the Synoptic call accounts as found in Mark 1:16–20 and Matt 4:18–22. Cite ch/v references as appropriate.

a) What are the primary similarities in these accounts?
b) What are the primary differences?
c) What do you see as the primary thrust or focus of the Synoptic call accounts?
   - Reflect on the key details, the shape and length of the story, etc.
   - What function do these accounts serve in their respective stories?

d) What do you see as the primary thrust of the Johannine call account(s)?
   - Reflect on the common roles played by John the Baptist, Andrew, and Philip and the complementary roles played by Simon and Nathaniel.
   - What significance does this account/do these accounts have in terms of John's own message to his readers?

In "New Testament: Text in Context Online" I raise a "comparison/contrast" question concerning the divergences between the ecclesiology portrayed within the Pastorals and that portrayed within 1 Cor 12 and 14. The goal of this exercise is to identify the significantly differing visions of "church" reflected within these two texts, to reflect on these visions theologically, and to consider the history and development of the Jesus movement which leads from the 1 Corinthians ecclesiology to the Pastorals ecclesiology. The inductive exercise reads as follows:

> Read (1) 1 Corinthians 12:1–31 / 14:1–40 and (2) 1 Timothy 1:1–6:21. Then reflect on their respective "ecclesiologies," or in other words, their respective understandings of the church, its structure, and how it functions. Cite the language of the text where helpful and identify ch/v references where possible. You might use the first two broad questions as guidelines for your reflections and the following narrower questions as means to answer the broad ones:
>
> What is the theological vision of the church in this writing?
>
> What *is* it? What is its *purpose*? What does it *do*?
>
> How is the church structured in order to be who it is and do what it does?
>
> How does the worship and/or the work of the church get done and by whom?
>
> How are the tasks of the church assigned and by whom?
>
> What "structure" or "organization" is visible in these churches?
>
> What differences and/or similarities are visible between these two "ecclesiologies"?
>
> How do you compare or contrast what you have found in 1 Corinthians and in 1 Timothy?
>
> What are the differences and/or the similarities between these two visions of church?
>
> Reflect on the movement of the early church from the ecclesiology visible in 1 Corinthians to that visible in 1 Timothy and on what we can learn from their experience. The following questions might give you help in focusing your reflections:

How and/or why has the early church "progressed" from the ecclesiology of 1 Corinthians to that of 1 Timothy?

How do you evaluate this "progression"?

What, if anything, might be helpful or unhelpful in this "progression"?

What, if anything, might be inevitable about this shift?

2.5 Concerning Narrative Critical Questions

Since three of my six book studies are Gospels courses and since the Gospels are a significant component of "New Testament: Text in Context," many of my inductive exercises are narrative-critical in character. These questions typically focus on such narrative elements as character, plot, and theme. The goal of these questions is to assist students in understanding the overall character and communication of the narrative in question. Illustrative examples include the following:

Character Study from "Gospel of John"

Read John 12:1–8, John 12:20–50, and John 13:1–38 and respond to the following. Cite chapter/verse references as appropriate.

Who is the Mary whom we encounter here (12:1–8)?

What sort of character does she appear to be, judging from the details that John offers?

What does she appear to intend with her action in anointing the feet of Jesus?

What do Jesus's words add to the portrait of Mary?

How does John's juxtaposition of Mary and Judas add to her portrait?

How does John invite us (as the readers of the Gospel) to respond to Mary?

[NOTE: Similar questions on Peter, Judas, and Jesus follow this one on the study guide.]

Thematic Study from "Gospel of Matthew"

Read Matthew 2:1–23, focusing on the major characters (the magi, Herod, Joseph, the child), and write an essay on the theme of "Power" as viewed from Matthew's perspective. Make your reflections as specific as you can. Cite the language of the text and/or ch/v references where appropriate. You may use the following questions to assist you in your reflections:

Who has "power" in this story? Think broadly and inclusively.

What kind of "power" do they have? Where does it come from?

What do people do with this "power"?

Who is "powerless" in this story? Think broadly and inclusively.

In what ways are they "powerless"?

What can they not achieve because of their "powerlessness"?

What are the surprises in the way this story unfolds?

Who ultimately "wins" in this story? Who ultimately "loses" in this story?

What do you think Matthew wants to tell us about "power" by telling this story?

What is the "Good News" of this terrifying story?

Plot Study from "Luke/Acts"

Read Luke 9:51–19:28. With this large text as your backdrop, respond to the following: What is the significance of Jerusalem for Luke's Gospel up to 19:28?

Use the following references to Jerusalem as the basis for your reflections: 2:22, 25, 38, 41, 43, 45; 4:9; 9:31, 51, 53; 13:22, 33, 34; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11, 28.

a) What positive reality does Jerusalem symbolize initially within the Gospel of Luke? Why does Jerusalem occupy such prominence within Luke's overall narrative? *Check the language/structure/communication of the texts from 2:22–4:9 for help here.*
b) What negative significance does Jerusalem acquire as the narrative progresses? Why must Jesus go to Jerusalem and what significance does this journey have within the narrative? What does all this say about Jesus? What does it say about Jesus's opponents? *Check the language/structure/communication of the texts from 9:51–19:28 for help here.*
c) How does Luke correlate the two-handed (positive, negative) symbolism of Jerusalem within his narrative? What significance does the Jerusalem motif have for Luke's overall story?

3. What Works and What Doesn't: Brief Reflections on Learnings and Best Practices

3.1 Introduction—The Importance of Good Questions

One thing I have learned above all else in the course of working with inductive methodology in my NT classes: Writing good questions is both the single most important and the single most difficult task I face pedagogically. Finding that crucial question which opens up a text or set of texts to the students and provides them with opportunity for genuine and significant discoveries requires from me the very best energies and skills that I have to offer. Not all questions are equally productive or fruitful for classroom discussion. And not all approaches to engaging a specific text work equally well to anchor a class session. I learn day by day, class session at a time, what works and what doesn't. And my learnings shape both my classroom procedures and the inductive exercises that undergird them. Here I offer a few broad and basic reflections on what I find to be "best pedagogical practices" vis-à-vis the creation of fruitful inductive questions as well as the format of fruitful inductively-focused class sessions.

3.2 Number and Scope of Questions.

When I look back at my inductive study sheets from early in my teaching career, I am often chagrined to discover how many small and/or major questions I would include on any given study guide. My instinct now tells me that such a plethora of questions could only have discouraged even the most energetic and committed students. The longer I have worked at the task of inductive-question writing, the more deeply I am committed to the discipline of finding a single, overarching question (or at the most one such "large" question and one additional "smaller" question) with which to engage my students for any given class session. This discipline forces me always to be thinking in terms of the "big picture" and how the text as a whole "functions" within its literary context. And this discipline gives the students, for their part, the freedom to pursue one "central" question per class session, a far more viable strategy than splitting their time and energies over a wide range of separate questions.

3.3 *Single Major Question and Multiple Sub-Questions*

As one can see from the illustrative examples above, my clear instinct for inductive-question writing is to name a major question (the significance of "Jerusalem" for Luke's Gospel, for example) and then to provide a lengthy list of secondary questions by which the students might approach that overarching question in focus. I frequently attach the "caveat" that these sub-questions are not necessarily intended for answering one after the other in mechanical fashion but rather for assisting the students in opening up the large central question and working with it.

3.4 *Engaging the Students in "So What?" Reflection*

As I see it, the single and signal value of drawing students into inductive work with the biblical text(s) is to provide the class collectively with "evidence" that opens out into wider reflection and wider class discussion on any of a range of levels: historical, sociological, literary/narrative, theological, ecclesiological, ethical, etc. I am never finished with an inductive exercise until I have framed those larger "so what?" questions that engage the students in serious reflection both about the text they are studying and about the world in which they themselves live. And I am never happier in the classroom than when I can point to a well-filled chalk board reflecting the fruits of my students' inductive labors and ask them by whatever words, "What do you see here? What is this text about? And what is the overall significance of what we have found?"

3.5 *Inviting Students to Teach Each Other*

It took me years to observe the obvious, but I have long since learned that a crucial pedagogical practice for my inductively-focused classrooms is to engage the students in teaching each other in pairs or threes before we participate in collective class discussion. The reasons for this are basic and truly obvious. Perhaps the single most "obvious" piece of this pedagogical wisdom is that it puts all of the students on notice that they need to be well-prepared for class. It likewise ensures that all students, no matter how introverted or extroverted, have both opportunity and necessity to engage

in direct discussion with their peers in a non-threatening context. And in courses or on occasions where I have groups of students working on different questions, it gives the students solid access to discussion on the question that was not their own assignment.

3.6 And One Thing More

Inductive Biblical Studies is undeniably hard work and serious business. It is both exegetically challenging and theologically crucial on all fronts. But it is also the most fascinating task I might ever think to engage and the most fun I could ever imagine having in the classroom. Hands down. Thanks, Howard!