



AN OVERVIEW OF

The Inductive Bible Study Process

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In many “traditional” classroom settings, whether in the church or in a seminary setting, students sit in a Bible study feverishly take notes as the instructor lectures. Other than students reading the text and offering a few passing insights, the weight of the preparation lays on the shoulders of the instructor. He or she then brings his or her work into the classroom for students to glean from the teacher’s learning and knowledge. Furthermore, the teacher is often also heavily dependent upon the insights of others, whether from previous Bible studies, from commentaries, or from various other sources. An inductive approach to Bible study, however, is somewhat different, in that it requires that the students themselves invest their mind, spirit, and heart into the study process. Also, it begins by first inviting the text of God’s Word (rather than a teacher) to “speak” to us, and only after hearing the Word, to turn to the insights of others.

Inductive Bible study is not, however, simply a matter of sitting around in a circle, reading the text, and then asking each person what the text meant to them. Inductive study requires a process of investigation that leads the reader intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually into the text. It is a systematic process that requires disciplined study of the text of Scripture. Without the proper process, the results will be flawed.

The Inductive approach begins with several presuppositions:

- 1.) God provided His Word in written form so that it could be read.
- 2.) Since God intended for His Word to be read, we can assume He wanted it to be understood by the reader.
- 3.) Just as God used the Holy Spirit to move upon men in penning His Word (inspiration – 2 Pet 1:21), God will move through His Holy Spirit to teach us His Word (illumination – Luke 12:12).
- 4.) The interpretation of a passage does not have an isolated “secret” meaning (2 Pet 1:20), but has application to all believers in all ages. A text has one interpretation (what God intended to say), but many applications (how it applies to each believer’s life).

The Inductive method begins before even reading the Scriptures. It is important to begin the process by gaining some insight into the historical context of the text, which is to say, what was going on in the world of the author and of the church when the text was written. Some of this is revealed within the text, but a good prelude to reading the text is to do some basic research with respect to authorship, date, and history of the text. This type of information can be found in the introduction of a good commentary, in a Study Bible the introduction to a book, or in a New Testament introduction or survey book.

The Inductive Study Method

The following is an abbreviated introduction to the Inductive process. There are several good books on the subject of the Inductive study method, including *How to Study Your Bible*, by Kay Arthur (1994), and a good complementary text to Arthur's book is *The New Inductive Study Bible*, published by Harvest House (2000). Arthur summarizes the inductive method with three words: Observation, Interpretation, and Application.

Observation

One of the keys to the inductive method is to begin by observing what the text itself says. We bring to the text our own thoughts and we can unintentionally read into the text what we think the text says without allowing the text to speak for itself. We bring to the text all the books we've read, all the preachers and teachers we've heard, all the audio files we've listened to, and all the television and videos we've watched. The first step in the in the process is simple observation. It is one thing to have someone tell you what *they* saw, and another to observe it for *yourself*.

This does not mean that we don't need Bible teachers, because to say that we don't is to suggest that God made a mistake when He gave teachers to the church (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4). However, the best teachers will be equipping the students with more than facts; the best teachers will also be equipping students with a process by which they can also become teachers of the Word.

Perhaps one of the best teachers to ever have lived (outside of an exclusively Christian context) was Socrates. Anyone who has ever read his dialogue, as recorded by

his disciple Plato, will see that the strength of the Socratic Method was not his lectures, but his questions. As a teacher Socrates knew which questions to ask. His questions led his students into discovery. The *Socratic Method* requires a guide, someone who knows the right questions to ask, and the goal of the teacher from this perspective, is to help the student learn the right questions to ask.

Jesus knew the power of this method of teaching. Four times in the Gospels when asked a question Jesus responded, “I will ask you . . .” and then Jesus answered their question with a question. Why did He do this? He did it so that the person could discover the answer to their own questions for themselves. Jesus’ genius was in knowing what question to ask in response to their questions.

The question, then, that we ask in the act of observation is what does the passage say (Arthur, 1994)? This seems easy enough, but how many times have you read a text and then five minutes later forgotten what the text said? To really understand what a text says requires practice and a process of observation.

The Process of Observation

1. Read the text in a translation that you understand. If you grew up with the King James Version and find it easy to understand, then use that. If, however, you find the Elizabethan English of the King James Version difficult to understand, try a more modern translation. A translation is different from a paraphrase. A paraphrase is usually based on a translation and is sometimes a little loose with respect to accurately translating from the original languages. A translation is based upon a scholarly interpretation of the manuscripts from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Another good approach to reading a text is to use a parallel Bible, which places two or more translations of the same passage next to each other. By comparing different translations, you may gain a better perspective on the meaning of a text.
2. Read the text again. Take the time to read the biblical text several times over the course of the week. I often take a few verses and write print them out on a sheet of paper to read over and over as I listen to what God is saying to me by His Spirit through His Word. As we read, it is important to remember that the Bible was not originally written in chapters and verses. This was done in the 1551 by Robert Estienne (Stephanus; 1503-1559). Therefore, these divisions,

while helpful for finding a text, are not necessarily to be regarded as Divinely inspired. There are places where the best division with respect to textual continuity, is not at the end of a chapter, but at the end of a paragraph. Most modern translations are divided by paragraphs, but even those that are not will sometimes indicate the paragraph division by use of the paragraph symbol (¶).

3. When reading the text, one should note the repetition of words or phrases. This repetition is often a grammatical way of drawing the reader's attention to a particular point or emphasis in the text. For example, in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, the word "repent" occurs seven times. This is obviously an important point. Also, the number "seven" occurs 54 times in the Book of Revelation. This fact should cause one to pause and ask, "Why is this number so significant? What does it symbolize?" and so on.
4. Observe who is speaking. When reading a text (for example in Revelation), it is very important to recognize who is speaking to whom. Sometimes it is an angel speaking, sometimes it is John, and sometimes it is someone in the vision, but the person speaking can be an important consideration when trying to understand what the meaning of the statement is.¹
5. Observe who the audience is. Once you know who is speaking, ask who is being spoken to. Is the message restrictive to one person or one group for a particular time, or does the text speak through the ages with authority to all men? We might ask, "Is he talking to me?" For example, when Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," this was said to those standing and listening, but it is also spoken to every believer. However, when Jesus said, "Go into Jerusalem and where you will find a colt, loose him and bring him to me," that was a specific word to specific people for a specific purpose.

¹ In the New Testament, Red Letter edition Bibles try to identify when Jesus is speaking. Be aware, however, that the Bible was not written with "red letters" and the decision about when Jesus speaking or the author of a book is speaking is sometimes up to interpretation. Further, red letters have given rise to some who see a Bible within a Bible. They call themselves "Red Letter Christians" and they attempt to marginalize the rest of Scripture, especially Paul's epistles. In reality most of Paul's epistles were written before the Gospels, and are as inspired as any other part of Scripture.

6. Ask why something is said, or written. For example, why does the angel in Revelation instruct to John to, “Come up here”? Is that significant? Why were the seven letters written to the seven churches? Ask the “why” questions.
7. Ask where the events take place. Do the events take place on earth, in heaven, beneath the earth, or some other place? Where are the events taking place? Are they in Rome, in Jerusalem, Ephesians, etc.
8. Ask when the events take place? Are they happening in the historical context of the writer? Is he referring to past events? Are the events to take place at a time in the future of the writer? Have the events taken place yet, or are they still for a time beyond our time?
9. Write down what you observe. It is good to chart your observations. Ask the questions and find your answers, not from someone else’s writings, but by your own God given powers of observation and the Spirit’s illumination.

Interpretation

After reading a text and asking the right questions, it is important to move toward interpreting what you’ve read.

1. Note the context of the text with respect to surrounding text, the book you are studying, and the rest of Scripture. There is no text without context. Just as it is impossible to take a single sentence, or even a paragraph, out of a great novel and understand it without more of the literary context provided by the novel, it is equally impossible to strip verses from their context and string them together in some fashion to prove a point. Known as “proof-texting,” this is often done to formulate errant doctrines and to underwrite personal views while ignoring the context of the text itself. A single verse may be rich in meaning and may be of devotional value, but a single verse does little by way of discovering the full intent of what God intended to communicate.
2. Know what type of text you are studying. It is important to know whether your text is written in Hebrew poetic form, in narrative, in parable, or, as in our case in apocalyptic form. How we interpret a text is affected by the type of literature we are dealing with. In poetic literature the words themselves become symbolic and paint a verbal picture for the reader. In Hebrew poetry in particular, the lines of the poetry do not rhyme, but are reinforced by parallel lines which may reinforce the first thought, repeat the preceding line, contrast the line, and so on. In narrative, we have fairly straightforward story telling intended to convey

historical truths. In apocalyptic literature we find symbolism, imagery, and a strong eschatological [end time] content.

3. Remember that God is not a man that He should lie (Num. 23:19). This assures us that God will never contradict Himself. If we think we see a contradiction, the fault is in our interpretation and not in God's revelation. If one text appears to contradict another text, we should compare and study both in their contexts. Compare scripture with scripture, and then, if we still cannot come to a resolution we should not allow our confidence in Scripture to be shaken, but simply hold it in mental reserve, because as we continue to study Scripture we may come to a better resolution, or we may have to conclude that like the Apostle Paul, we all "see through a glass darkly" and do not have enough insight at this point to understand.
4. Try to arrive at the author's meaning with respect to his audience. When Paul said, "Slaves obey your masters," Paul was not espousing a doctrine of slavery as a legitimate means by which to treat fellow humans. Paul was addressing Christian men who lived in a culture that enforced the practice of slavery. Paul's intent was for slaves to become witnesses of Christ even in the unfair and often brutal conditions of slavery. This requires some understanding of the culture of the writer and the audience, which is why spending time with an introduction to the book prior to reading the text is helpful.
5. Review the important words and use appropriate tools to gain deeper insight. If a word like "repent" is important to the understanding of the text, then it is important that we understand the meaning of the word. It should be noted, however, that merely looking in an English dictionary is not sufficient. The Old Testament was penned in Hebrew and Aramaic, and the New Testament was penned in Greek. Therefore, it is helpful to use tools, which will help you discover the meaning of the original language behind the English text. One does not have to take Hebrew and Greek to engage this process. Take the word "repent" for an example: With a *Strong's Concordance* one can simply look up the word, find the verse being studied that uses the word repent, and then look for the *Strong's* number for this word. Next, go to the Hebrew or Greek dictionary in the back of *Strong's* and look up the number. In our case the *Strong's* number for "repent" in Revelation 2:5 is 3340. By going to the Greek dictionary and looking up this number we find the word *metanoeo*, which means, "to think differently or afterwards, i.e. reconsider (morally, feel

compunction).” *Strong’s* also tells us that in the King James Version of the Bible this particular word is only translated into the English word “repent.”

6. After having done all of the above, one then checks his or her interpretation with other commentaries. The Bible student needs to do his work first. She or he needs to have asked the questions and made his or her own discoveries. One needs to go down into the mine and dig out his or her own nugget before comparing it with others. Still, it is important to check one’s conclusions with those of others. God created His church for community and stated that “no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20), which means, among other things, that if we think we’ve discovered something that no one else in two-thousand years of Bible study has ever discovered, there is the very real possibility that we may have missed something and we need to go back and look at the text again in light of what others have observed.

Application

After having done all of the above, the question remains: What is God saying to me in through His Word about me in my life? God said of His Word in Isaiah 55:11 (NKJV)

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 we are given the purpose of Scripture, with respect to what God wants to do in our lives. Paul writes

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Based upon Paul’s word to Timothy above, what does God intend for Scripture to do? Let’s practice a little inductive methodology right now. What does God intend for Scripture to do?

1. “Doctrine”—NT:1319 *didaskalia* (did-as-kal-ee'-ah); instruction (the function or the information):KJV-doctrine, learning, teaching.

2. “Reproof”—NT:1648a *elegmos* (el-eng-mos’); conviction (of a sinner), punishment, refutation of error, reproof. Found only in 2 Timothy 3:16.
3. “Correction”—NT:1882 *epanorthosis* (ep-an-or'-tho-sis); a straightening up again, i.e. (figuratively) rectification (reformation): KJV, correction.
4. “Instruction”—NT:3809 *paideia* (pahee-di'-ah); tutorage, i.e. education or training; by implication, disciplinary correction. “in righteousness”—NT:1343 *dikaiosune* (dik-ah-yos-oo'-nay); equity (of character or act); specially (Christian) justification:
5. “That the man of God may be . . .”
 - a. “Complete”—NT:739 *artios* (ar'-tee-os); fresh, i.e. (by implication) complete: (up to date)
 - b. “Thoroughly equipped”—NT:1822 *exartizo* (ex-ar-tid'-zo); to finish out (time); figuratively, to equip fully (a teacher) KJV-accomplish, thoroughly furnish. “for every good work.”

It is clear, then, that God has a purpose for Scripture. God intends for our study to be more than merely reading for pleasure. Instead, it is reading for a purpose, that is, God’s purpose for our lives. Application is process of finding that purpose and then living out that purpose in our walk and our talk. It is to affect the way we live. The Scriptures inspect us, to direct us, and correct us. The process is never complete with the correct interpretation. The process must progress to our application. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart use the word “hermeneutics” to identify this final process. They call it “the contemporary relevance of the text” (2003, p. 29).

Conclusion

This has been a brief overview of the inductive method of Bible study. Again, for more on this subject see Kay Arthur’s book, *How to Study Your Bible, The New Inductive Study Bible*, or Fee and Stuart’s *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth*, published by Zondervan.

After this introduction read the text of Revelation from a Bible that does not have notes. Read it from start to finish, reading only as an overview and for the purpose of context, so that when reading or studying each chapter there will be a sense of context.