

Teaching How to Fish

Everyone has a method for interpreting scripture. Whether aware of it or not, anyone who reads has a method—however simple or fundamental. It may simply be: “when I read, I have an understanding of the words, and that’s what they mean.” We may simply read and take at face value what we read, without reflecting on the method we use to determine what “face value” means. However, the process of reading is not as simple as it appears. This is why method is so crucial. We always have a method, but the question is: how effective is it for faithful interpretation? We need to become aware of our methods and be rigorous about them. This insight can be the beginning of one’s education and the start of thinking for one’s self. Certainly it is the onset of thinking critically.

Ordinarily we might have a decent chance of understanding a writing from our own culture or social location, although we know how fraught with perils even that is—especially, for example, in communication between men and women even from the same basic cultural and social location! The problem in my field is that reading the Bible is a cross-cultural experience of ancient Mediterranean societies. So, if I take the plain meaning of words, I will be taking their plain meaning from my culture rather than the biblical cultures. If I read the word “heart,” I will assume it has to do with feeling. But in the biblical world, the bowels are the locus of feeling, while the heart is the center of thinking and willing. When we hear the word “love,” we may think in terms of affection, whereas the biblical term might most often mean fidelity. If the word “guilt” occurs, we may psychologize this as guilt “feelings,” whereas the ancient cultures would have been referring to the external fact of guilt before the public (or God) or the law. The upshot is this: I need to become aware of my present method for interpreting and ask in what ways I might gain a more sophisticated method or set of methods in order to understanding more faithfully when I read the Bible. Once we see the text as “other,” then we need a method to interpret its meaning.

Too often in education we focus on *what* we think and not enough on *how* we think. We ask what we believe rather than how we have come to believe it. We talk about the meaning of what we read without being aware of how we came to determine that meaning. The challenge of education is to make us aware of our thinking process. I have a book entitled, *How to Think Like Leonardo*. The book identifies the creative processes that led Leonardo Da Vinci to be so inventive and innovative. In biblical studies, the challenge of education is to make us aware of our process of reading and ask *how to think like a skillful interpreter of biblical texts*. So, I say to students: look at what you are reading, and at the same time *look at yourself doing the reading!* *What* are you doing? And *how* are you doing it?

In general, we teachers do not do a very good job of teaching method. We tend to display the results of our scholarship without revealing how we got there—without laying bare the methods we use to determine the results of our thinking. I recall the lectures I attended at Oxford University. Professors Baker, Caird, and Ramsey, for example, lectured about the interpretations they arrived at, but they did not explain to us how they got to their conclusions. They might even have shared the evidence they found or the arguments in favor of a conclusion, but they did not describe the methods for getting the evidence and for adducing the arguments. They did not reveal the steps they went through from first picking up a text to their latest thoughts about it. We need a biblical CSI (crime scene investigation) to lay bare the steps from the gathering of evidence to the analyzing of evidence to the various conclusions we might (or might not) make based on the evidence.

I floundered with this at Oxford. The tutorials were meant to enable the student to discover and articulate a method for reading texts. We had tutorials each week. I would write an essay on a given subject, and the tutor would listen to the essay and then engage us in conversation. It was often excruciatingly painful for me. In retrospect, it must have been more painful for my tutor, George Caird! He must have often wondered how he could possibly find something to talk about over my thin essay for a whole hour. And of course, we had one other student in the tutorial with us, presumably for that student to learn by observation. In my mind, however, the other student was there to make sure my shame was public!

In preparation for my first tutorial, Caird gave us a list of eight subjects from which to choose. I chose “The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus”—with no idea of the magnitude or complexity of what I had chosen. Like a good American student, I immediately went to the library in search of secondary sources. Imagine my delight when I came across a new book by Norman Perrin, entitled “The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus.” I basically depended on Perrin for my essay—depended on a secondary source to tell me what to think. I basically reported Perrin’s results. When I had finished reading my essay in the tutorial, Dr. Caird said: “Mr. Rhoads . . . (sigh) . . . the essay was not on Norman Perrin’s book on the Kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus. It was on the kingdom of God *in the teaching of Jesus!*” He then slowly opened the Greek Testament in his hand and said, “Now, where do we begin!” In some sense, that was the beginning of my education.

Even in the tutorial context, however, Caird did not lay out any methods for me. I was basically left to discover a method on my own. Each week, I would do my interpretation of a text and read my essay, and he would tell me, in so many words, that “You haven’t got it.” Finally, in the third term, after about 15 tutorial essays, I had a breakthrough. I was doing an essay on the “son of man” in Ezekiel. I must have read Ezekiel through thirty times trying to figure out various things it meant and various ways it worked. I wrote up my findings and went to my tutorial. When I had read the essay, Caird said (in typical British fashion), “Mr. Rhoads, that’s not bad for a first attempt.” It was the first affirming word I had heard in 8 months of tutorials—and it was enough. I was hooked. I had figured something out for myself with the beginnings of a method, and I loved it. By the time I finished at Oxford, a year and a half later, I was confident I could read any text and get something fresh out of it—or at least I could discover many of the insights I would subsequently read in secondary sources. I had a methodical set of questions that seemed to proliferate as I asked them of the text, and I was off and running.

This is like the old saw: Give a hungry person a fish and they will get hungry again. Teach someone how to fish and they can feed themselves the rest of their lives. What happens when that analogy is applied to learning? Provide someone with the knowledge, and they will not learn on their own. They will always have to go to an expert to learn. They will be dependent upon the teacher, dependent on secondary sources. However, if you teach students *how* to learn with a method, they will be able to learn on their own. They will become independent learners. In this way, the teacher makes herself no longer necessary for that student. Like a good parent or counselor or mentor to an apprentice, the teacher’s role is to make herself or himself dispensable. There is exhilaration for the student that comes in being creative and capable of independence. And there is a confidence that comes from knowing what methodological steps to take to get fresh insights that are faithful interpretations. I myself am addicted to this kind of learning—and I teach basically in order to support my habit! At the same time, I try to foster that experience in my students.

I became acutely aware of method in teaching years ago when my daughter Tania was in third grade. She was learning to do double- and triple-digit multiplication tables, like 254 X 87. She just could not come out with the right answers. Tania was a bright girl, and the teacher was frustrated. So her teacher gave her more and more problems to work in the hopes that Tania would finally get it. But she did not improve. There was some flaw in her method! I was puzzled also, because she knew her multiplications tables well. And we reviewed them often. So what was the problem? Finally, one day I said: “Tania, I want you to work several of these problems out loud. Just speak out loud everything you are thinking while you are doing the problems, and I will just observe and listen.” By the second problem, I knew exactly what was wrong. While she had her multiplication tables down cold, she did not know her addition facts! So when she came to the part of the problem at the bottom where she added, she counted on her fingers or just guessed. She failed adequately to add in her head 9 and 6 or 7 and 8 or whatever it might be. So, immediately, I went back to reviewing and practicing her addition tables with her. Voilá, the problem was solved!

It then occurred to me that I could do the same thing with college students. So, I invited a few students at Carthage College who seemed interested in going beyond the basics in biblical studies to form a kind of “center for advanced learning.” It was all voluntary, and I only engaged a few students in the process. I had been teaching them in my classes how to do a narrative interpretation of a short biblical passage. So in order to advance their learning, I set up a tutorial in which I gave them a passage, and each one interpreted it out loud step by step as I listened and watched what they did. It was amazing how clearly I could see how much they had learned but also the steps they missed—where they did not stay long enough with initial questions, where they misinterpreted words, how they overlooked key facets of the text, failed to see the thematic significance of crucial details, how they ignored crucial questions, and so on. This was eye-opening to me. As a result, not only was I able to teach these students concretely how to improve their method so that they would come out with more faithful interpretations, I also learned for myself how better to teach the material with large groups in the classroom—so that students could become more careful interpreters and so that they could avoid numerous pitfalls.

This process of observing the student use a method to interpret put me in touch with ways I was succeeding and ways I was clearly failing in my teaching. To be honest, I was not sure I really wanted to know how I was failing. I sometimes think we teachers do not really want to know what our students have really learned or failed to learn. I find it rather blissful at times to go on thinking that what I have taught the students, they have not only understood but they also actually buy it, will remember it, and plan to use it! We reassure ourselves that “Surely we have taught our subject well—so therefore the students should know it!” If they do not, well then it must be their fault. I have no desire to take away from students their responsibility for learning; and yet I also do not want to minimize my responsibility. After all, learning is not unilateral; it is relational. We do not teach subjects, we teach people. So unless we somehow find a way to see not only *what* students have learned but also *how* they have learned it, we remain rather ignorant of the effectiveness of our teaching. After I began to make the interpreting process more intentional, it made all the difference. Eventually, the students could watch *themselves* interpret. They could monitor for themselves the steps they were taking and discern the flaws in their process.

It is not that we teachers do not introduce students to methods in New Testament courses. There are many books just on the different methods that are used to interpret the New Testament. However, especially in survey courses, we briefly survey the methods and then go on, book by

book, to explain what they mean—without connecting the methods to the results of our understanding of the meaning of these books! We can show students how scholars have done it, but we do not give the students a chance to practice it. Seldom do the students get a chance to learn a method well enough to employ it themselves in the process of trying to figure out what a text might possibly have meant in its original context. The result is that we still leave the student either reading naively or needing to depend on secondary sources for the meaning of a text. Often our survey courses and upper class electives make use of so many secondary sources that the biblical writings do not any longer even serve as the main text for the course! How can we linger with a biblical text long enough to figure it out together from start to finish right there in class?

At LSTC, we used to have a course that actually did this. There are methods courses in many fields, and so we had one. We taught a course called “New Testament Interpretation.” It was a methods course that focused on the ways we go about constructing potential meanings of a text in its first century context. Ironically, all the students assumed from the title that we were going to interpret the New Testament for them by telling them what it meant. They were disappointed in the class. Not only that, the students tended to equate “interpretation” with “appropriation.” That is, they thought that by “interpreting” what the New Testament meant, we would be determining the proper “appropriation” of a text for today. This expectation by-passes method altogether and reads the New Testament as a document addressed directly to (all) contemporary times and situations. So we changed the name of the course to “New Testament Methods of Interpretation.” This worked much better.

To be honest, the task of teaching method in biblical studies is enormous these days. When I went to seminary in the mid-60s, there were basically four methods:

- Text criticism (to determine the original text from many copies).
- Source criticism (developed to identify where the Gospel writers got their information).
- Form criticism (meant to ascertain what the oral tradition was like before the Gospel writers got hold of it)—
- Redaction criticism (designed to figure out what the Gospel writers added to the tradition),

At that time, all these methods were in the service of (re-)constructing either the historical Jesus or the history of the early church.

In the last three decades, there has been an explosion of methods. Last time I taught a methods class, the number of methods I had to teach was up to nineteen! In the field of New Testament, the more recent methods include:

- Narrative criticism (to analyze the literary dynamics of the Gospels and Acts); reader-response criticism (to assess the impact of narrative on an audience).
- Social science criticism (to employ cultural anthropology in interpreting the New Testament).
- Rhetorical analysis (to analyze the considerable influence of classical rhetoric on the New Testament).
- Linguistic/discourse criticism (to understand the dynamics of biblical Greek).
- Orality criticism (to interrogate Early Christianity as an oral culture).
- Performance criticism (to assess the meaning and rhetoric of New Testament as oral literature).

Any one of these could completely occupy a researcher or a class. These days, it is common, and almost necessary, not only to specialize in one writing of the New Testament but

also to specialize in only one method. Add to the methods listed above such recent offerings as postmodern interpretation and deconstruction. And these need to be supplemented by liberation methods designed to grasp the power dynamics of the writings and of their interpreters: feminist criticism; liberation criticism; intercultural criticism; and postcolonial criticism.

Another factor that complicates the teaching of method is that these methods are inter-related. That fact became apparent when I taught the course mentioned above entitled “New Testament Methods of Interpretation.” This course took one short book of the Bible from the latter part of the New Testament as a case study for the application of methods, say the Letter of James or I Peter. The methods logically followed a certain sequence. First, we had to see how scholars established a probable original text (textual criticism). Then we needed to reconstruct the context and audience (historical criticism). This led to the interpretation of the meaning (genre criticism, form criticism, narrative criticism, the use of cultural anthropology, and inter-textual analysis). Then we wanted to look at the impact on first century hearers (rhetorical criticism). Finally, we wanted to look at how interpreters from diverse social locations interpreted and evaluated the text (liberation criticism, feminist criticism, environmental criticism, and so on). The students wrote several papers on methods of their choice. Because the biblical writing was short and because they went over it many times with different questions based on recently formulated methods, there was a wonderful sense of discovery among the students.

This is the delicious part about new methods. They produce new interpretations. Actually, most innovations in biblical studies come from the introduction of new methods. To be sure, some developments come from new discoveries—such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hamadi texts, and the excavation of archaeological sites. Some innovations come from reading the New Testament writings in light of already-known ancient texts or events not previously connected to them—such as the works of the Stoics or the writings of Flavius Josephus or the events surrounding the Roman-Judean War of 66-70 C. E.

However, most breakthroughs in biblical studies come from addressing new methods—that is, from addressing *new questions* to the same texts. The new methods in biblical studies are usually adopted from methods developed in secular disciplines in the study of secular subjects and then adapted to biblical materials—such as narratology, cultural anthropology, postcolonial analysis. The new methods do not usually produce new information. Rather, they enable us to look for features of ancient texts and past events that have not been explored before. They offer angles of vision not previously employed.

Take narrative criticism, for example. Until the late nineteen-seventies, we did not appreciate the narrative qualities and features of the Gospels. Then a group in the Markan Seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature began to apply methods to the Gospels drawn from secular literary methods to investigate plot, characters, settings, norms of judgment, ideal author and reader, and literary rhetoric. Before that, scholars had been occupied with peeling away the layers of tradition and redaction to get behind the Gospel traditions in order to reconstruct the historical Jesus, the history of the Gospel community, and the way the author put it together. By contrast, narrative analysis looked at the whole text as it stands before us and asked after its literary impact on an audience. This had not been done before, and it opened up a whole new arena of interpretation.

For another example, rhetorical criticism, introduced to biblical studies in the eighties, led us to look for the first time at the ways in which the New Testament writings reflected characteristics of ancient rhetorical theory and practice. We now analyze New Testament letters

as rhetorical speeches. We discern the issue at stake, the species of rhetoric involved, the order of the arguments, the uses of ethos, pathos and logos as means of persuasion, the tropes and figures of speech, as well as the style—all means to help us understand how a letter might have had certain impacts on ancient hearers. As a further example, postcolonial criticism is bringing to light the political relationship between the early Christian communities and the Roman Empire in ways never before explored. These and other methods have opened up new vistas in the dynamics and meaning of the biblical writings.

None of these new methods provides “new” information. Rather, they teach us how to explore the texts before us in new ways, how to notice what has been neglected, how to correlate and organize the material differently, and (re-)construct historical events/dynamics we have not addressed before. All of these methods can be translated into a set of questions to be posed and steps to be taken as a basis for teaching them to students. Of course, methods are more intuitive and complex than I am presenting them here. But for the purposes of launching students and introducing them to the importance and possibilities of methods, the idea of developing a methodological model to apply to the text is extremely helpful. Why give students a text without a focus and a method to proceed? In the book I wrote with Joanna Dewey and Don Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, we decided to include appendices with sets of methods—exercises and questions—about how to interrogate a Gospel from a narrative point of view. These exercises represent the basic methodological steps of interpreting Mark as a whole and of unpacking an episode within the Gospel. They were developed with students as a way to enable them to do their own independent analysis of this and other Gospels.

Now, in most of my classes (as well as in most of my writing), I combine the study of a given text with the study of certain methods that correlate well with the type or genre of text under consideration—narrative, history, letter, apocalypse and so on. This correlation of text and method has been most prominent in my upper level electives and the doctoral seminars: “The Rhetoric of Galatians,” “Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of John,” “Mark and Cultural Anthropology,” “The Quest for the Historical Jesus,” “Discourse Analysis of Philippians,” and so on. In each case, I have taught the method and then engaged the class in applying it to the text in question as a case study. The students are responsible for showing that they understand the method, that they know how to use it, and that it will result in a cogent outcome of interpretation or historical reconstruction. What good does it do simply to ask a student to interpret a text? When we give students a text to study and interpret, why not clarify what the goal is and offer a set of methodological guidelines to proceed? The challenge is how to work the teaching of methodology into a survey course.

The fun part of all this is that the discovery of newness from a method in the classroom replicates the historical development of this method among biblical scholars. Just as our scholarly use of some new method opened vistas of interpretation for us scholars, so now the students awaken to ways of studying the Bible that are wholly new to them. Even more delightful is when students are engaging a method that is also relatively new to the scholarly world and has never been applied to the text they are studying. In this case, they are on the cutting edge of biblical scholarship—not just in doctoral courses but also in seminary classes. I have seen absolutely innovative interpretations of texts in a ten-page paper for a class—simply because what the student was doing was something entirely fresh. What a thrill it is to share my assessment of that with the student!

Two caveats about method. First, as I have said, method is much more complex and malleable than I have depicted it here. A method is not a cookie cutter. The idea is not to get a

model or a set of questions that will basically determine what one will find. Rather, the questions are designed to explore and try things out. They are meant to open up the text to new ways of seeing. They serve as what we call a “heuristic device”—that is, an approach that helps one tentatively and helpfully to see things one might not otherwise have seen. As such, the questions need to be changed and the method itself adjusted and modified to adapt to the text as one goes along. In this way, the method is less like a straightjacket and more like jazz improvisation in which one uses imagination and freedom to explore the text. Trial and error and intuition become as important as logic and rigor.

Second, method is never neutral. Just as readers and interpreters are always biased and interested in terms of what they look for, in terms of how limited they are in perspective, and in terms of how their social location and values shape their way of seeing, so methods are also not somehow disinterested approaches to a text. Methods bear assumptions and implications, strengths and limitations, which shape what practitioners of those particular methods look for and how they “see.” For example, narrative criticism looks for the unity in a text. As a result, narrative critics tend to find connections and coherences in the discourse of a narrative and in the dynamics of its narrative world. The problem is that they may find coherences that are not really there. By contrast, deconstruction criticism appreciates the fact that texts, like life, are rife with gaps and fissures, breaks and inconsistencies, contradictions and paradoxes, suppressed ideas and suppressed voices. Both approaches are important to complement and correct each other in the analysis of a text. Like people, methods have power dynamics. They may have an impact on life for good or for ill. They may reinforce the status quo or they may work liberation of the oppressed. We cannot be naïve about our methods. We must use them with full awareness of their dynamics.

In the whole process of teaching methods in the classroom, the relationship between teacher and students is distinctive. The teacher functions mostly as a coach or a mentor. The student is like an athlete or an apprentice. The student is in the game, doing the work. The teacher models the method, teaches origins, theory, and practices of the method, gives students an opportunity to apply the method, gives feedback to the students’ efforts, then has the students advance in their use of the method in the interpretation of a text, and then gives final feedback. Through a process of modeling and then giving feedback to student practice, the teacher weans the students from dependence on the instructor so that they know “how to fish.” Now, on their own, they can use the same method to interpret other texts beyond the classroom. When it works, there is a sense that the student is launched and that the educational part of their learning is complete!