

A Brief Discussion of Theory of Science and Biblical Studies

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In this paper I will discuss how my dissertation project is related to some aspects of theory of science that have been emphasized in the present introduction course. The proposed dissertation belongs to the field of Biblical studies, and its chief scientific problems are related to the interpretation of ancient texts, in particular the pericope of the Gospel of John 12:1-8 in the New Testament.¹ From the outset some ideas about how the passage might be interpreted were formulated. With Føllesdal, who claims that “there is no fundamental methodological difference between natural sciences and humanities,”² it would probably be correct to say that one or several hypotheses existed.

The Inductive Method

Even if hypotheses existed from the beginning of the research, the studies carried out in order to test these hypotheses can perhaps be characterized partly as an inductive process of gathering data in which correlations are sought. That generalizations supported (induced) by the data explain the data is the thought behind the inductive method. In the case of a literary text the gathering of data, it seems to me, consists of choosing the relevant data, i.e. the text version and comparative data such as other texts, and learning these texts. Generalizations induced from the text should, in my view, consist of descriptions of the meaning of the text, if the inductive method is to be considered applicable in this kind of investigation. Since more or less of the data, e.g. the contents of a text are not directly relevant to the focus of interest it would not be efficient to follow a purely inductive

¹ See the Appendix for the text.

² Føllesdal, "Hermeneutics and the Hypothetico-Deductive Method," 33, no. 3-4 (1979): 319.

process. In this dissertation the parts concerning Judas Iscariot and the question about the poor will probably not be of main concern.

To call the apprehended meaning of the text a generalization of the textual data seems a bit awkward to me, since the linguistic data points to something specific, i.e. the somewhat unique contextual meaning of this text resulting from a unique combination of linguistic elements. On the other hand the gathering of data – not just from within the pericope – results in knowledge of more general linguistic conventions, such as the most general meanings of the individual words in the text. The meaning of the text is based on the combination of the general and the specific. I think the inductive method needs, if possible, to be formulated in a way that is not tied to the notion of generalizations if it is to be applicable to inquiries of textual meaning. I also find it difficult to see how the notion of correlations could solve this problem since this concept also is based on generalization. Nevertheless to gather data in order to find the meaning of a text without, if possible, being guided by a hypothesis seems to be a fruitful way to find new hypotheses about textual meaning.

The Hypothetico-Deductive Method

The set of main hypotheses that are intended to be explored in this dissertation is about the meaning of the primary text. They can be formulated in the following general and concise way: The anointing of Jesus' feet described in John 12:1-8 is intended by the author to have Christological and soteriological significance, i.e. it tells that Jesus is the Messiah who carries several Old Testament offices and functions, and who saves through his own death. The anointing is also intended to have pneumatological and ecclesiological significance, i.e. it tells that the anointing implies that the Holy Spirit is upon Jesus, and also will be upon the believers in him.

Some of these hypotheses are dependent on some of the other ones while others need to be explored on their own. When Føllesdal's terminology is used these could be called a set of hypotheses, or a theory, that could be tested using the hypothetico-deductive method. The tests are carried out by way of deduction of consequences from the

hypotheses with help from other pieces of information and theories, i.e. premises. It must, according to Føllesdal, be explored (a) how well the hypothesis matches the mentioned data, (b) how well it matches unmentioned data, and (c) if there are other hypotheses and theories that match all the data just as well, but are simpler.³

When it comes to the study of literature the testing of a hypothesis is done “by checking how its consequences fit in with the various details in the text”⁴ such as rhyme, rhythm, and other kinds of literary devices. Checking how the hypothesis fit in with data not mentioned could be to explore how it fits with other passages in a text. In the case of the present study the hypotheses about the meaning of John 12:1-8 are tested within larger and larger literary units. First it is tested within the rest of the Gospel of John, secondly within the entire corpus of the Johannine literature, thirdly in relation to other relevant literature, such as the Old Testament, the rest of the New Testament, and other primarily ancient Jewish sources.

Premises could be more general theories of literature and style, which also need to be tested. In this study some of the premises concern theories about the early Christian movement, the genre of the Gospel of John, the authorship of the Johannine literature, the grammar of Koine Greek, etc. It is important that these supporting hypotheses are explicitly formulated, even if they cannot all be tested in the same rigorous way as the main hypotheses. However since there are a wide range of partly competing theories about these issues I am obliged to evaluate such theories and chose the ones I find most compelling.

³ Ibid., 321-24.

⁴ Ibid., 327.

The Hermeneutic Method

Føllesdal argues that “the hermeneutic method is the hypothetico-deductive method applied to meaningful material,”⁵ and he refers to the “hermeneutical circle” as an interpretative process used also in natural sciences. When interpreting literary texts the interpretation of the parts of the text is influenced by the interpretation of the entire text, whose interpretation in turn is dependent on the interpretation of the parts.⁶

Føllesdal also claims that there are differences between the natural sciences and the humanities and social sciences. One such difference concerning the set of data studied is that nature is inexhaustible, while literary texts are finite, which implies that a scientific theory can be tested over and over again, while there usually cannot be found more data that can falsify one of two competing interpretations of a literary work. In such cases the criterion of simplicity of interpretation, i.e. for instance how much of the work they comprise or how specific they are, needs to be used in order to choose between interpretations. I also would hold that at least some scientific theories, like the laws of physics, often can be tested on new data sets, which is not the case with the interpretation of a literary text. Again a literary work is something more specific. When interpreting ancient texts however the set of data most often includes much more than the primary text itself.

Firstly, there might be different readings of a text if it exists in several manuscripts copied by hand which is the case with the New Testament writings. Secondly, there may be great amounts of contemporary and older, even later texts and artifacts, that might testify to linguistic, literary and cultural aspects that influence the meaning of the text. One of the most important questions is what comparative data that is relevant and what of the data

⁵ Ibid., 320.

⁶ Ibid., 332.

should be attached the greater importance to. The addition of relevant comparative data might in many cases, in this field, work to falsify one or another hypothesis.

Little describes an interpretative approach to social science which considers it to be radically unlike natural science. The approach emphasizes the particulars of different cultures and seems to be able to include also much of the humanities. According to this approach the goal of natural science is to give explanations, which involves objective descriptions of general causes of events. The goal of social science, on the other hand, is to reach understanding of meaningful social events and human practices, which involves the reconstruction of the meaning or significance of social practices and arrangements (texts), i.e. the interpretation of them. According to Little the hermeneutic approach described here tends to be highly descriptive and hardly explanatory. For Little causal and rational choice explanations are not congruent with the hermeneutic method.⁷

It seems to me that the approach mentioned by Little does not exclude the possibility to follow the hypothetico-deductive method if a hypothesis may consist of an interpretation or pre-understanding of a text. Føllesdal argues that both understanding and causal explanation work hypothetico-deductively.⁸ To try to give a causal or rational choice explanation to why the passage in the Gospel of John has the meaning it has is not of primary concern in this investigation. I will however return to this last issue under the heading *What? How? Why?*

The Abduction Method

If interpretations, i.e. descriptions of the meaning of a text, can be apprehended as explanations and if it is too difficult to test the hypotheses of textual meaning *inference to the best explanation* or abduction might be a fruitful method here, since it would provide a

⁷ Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Science* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 68, 85-86.

⁸ Føllesdal, "Hermeneutics and the Hypothetico-Deductive Method," 33, no. 3-4 (1979): 334.

framework for suggesting which interpretation of a text that is the best explanation or guess about its meaning.

Some would argue that there is a radical difference between understanding meaning and explaining for instance natural events, but I am not sure that the difference is that great. I also think that even if it may be difficult to prove the hypotheses of my dissertation, I think it would be inappropriate at this stage to claim that deduction will not work. Many hypotheses about the meaning can be tested against the data. I think it will be possible to show that the interpretation of the meaning I propose is not only sufficient to explain the details of the text, but also necessary. If that is correct the abduction method does not seem to be meaningful in this case. On the other if the results cannot be sufficiently proved my work might be best described by some variant of this method.

Ethics and Theology

In this section I discuss two topics that I thought more or less were missing in the course. Returning to the hermeneutic circle, according to Gadamer, the reader approaches a text with an expectation of its meaning that needs to be corrected if that is demanded by the text. The way to an understanding of a text is an iterative process in which constantly revised drafts of the meaning are made. If a reader is to understand a text he or she must be prepared to let it speak to him or her, that is, differently from what the reader expects. The reader needs to realize his/her prejudice in order that the divergent meaning shall be clear, and that the, in the matter grounded, truth of the text will be able to contrast the pre-meaning of the reader.⁹

I think the approach of Gadamer could highlight the importance of humbleness in the interpretation process. There needs to be a willingness to change one's opinion of the

⁹ Gadamer, "Om förståelsens cirkel," in *Filosofin genom tiderna: texter. Efter 1950* (eds. Marc-Wogau, et al.; Stockholm: Thales, 2000), 102, 105-6.

meaning of a text, something that might imply loss of pride.¹⁰ I am convinced that humans are moral beings and that there is always an element of morality involved in interpretation. The honesty of the interpreter is usually necessary for true interpretations.

Gadamer also wants to add the anticipation of completeness (“Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit”) to the understanding of the hermeneutic circle. He claims that a reader anticipates that a text comprises a complete unit of meaning, since only such texts can be understood. Also the reader anticipates the meaning of the text to be completely true. It is, according to Gadamer, only when the attempt to regard the message as true fails that the reader regards it as the meaning of someone else than himself. If Gadamer is right about that the anticipation of completeness is an integral part of interpretation of texts some issues of existential importance can be raised. Researchers in general anticipate that they will get some kind of meaningful result. In my opinion they assume in general that nature and also human life (even literary texts) are full of meanings, structures, patterns and principles. Such assumptions are great motivators for research, and reasonable if an intelligent Creator is responsible for the design of the world. To me it seems that a theistic perspective is a more fruitful point of departure for research than an atheistic.

The Notion of Meaning

The false pre-understanding of the historically other needs to be corrected but there is also historical continuity which is likely to be necessary for understanding. My understanding of anointing in general comes not least from my own sensory impressions, i.e. experiences of physical anointing in the world. If someone has never smelled perfume or seen the pouring out of viscous oil or felt grease on the hands, that person would have a limited

¹⁰ This is however another kind of willingness than the willingness to adapt one’s views to agree with the meaning of the text.

understanding also of ancient anointing. This discussion brings us to a question of vital importance to the investigation discussed, namely the meaning of “meaning.”

Hacking who is more interested in realism than rationality advocates that reference and extension is what is constant about meaning from generation to generation.¹¹ “The extension of a term is the set of things that it is true of.”¹² At least this holds for natural kind terms. If anointing was a natural kind the extension of the term anointing would be the set of all past, present and future anointings. Since it seems to be a cultural kind the issue becomes more complex and it becomes crucial to stress also the intension or sense of the term, i.e. the conventional notions connected to the word. These are seldom completely constant through history, why the notion of semantic change is needed. In my dissertation I have planned to make use of the notion of sense or concept, but I wonder in what way I might profit from potentially historically stable information – perhaps the extension of anointing.

What? How? Why?

Føllesdal considers texts to be “meaningful material,” i.e. material that expresses the beliefs and/or values of an agent.¹³ The view I subscribe to is that meaning of a text is strongly related to the intention of its author.¹⁴ In relation to intentionality I will shortly discuss what kind of question I try to answer in this dissertation – what, how or why? The aspects that will be given some space of *why* the author wrote about the anointing of Jesus in Bethany are those directly related to the literature of the author. The question of why the

¹¹ Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 79-80.

¹² *Ibid.*, 80.

¹³ Føllesdal, "Hermeneutics and the Hypothetico-Deductive Method," 33, no. 3-4 (1979): 320.

¹⁴ This view is partly motivated from an analogy with everyday human communication. It is, as I see it, a moral obligation to try to understand what message other persons want to convey to me. Caution however is needed since it is not certain that a speaker or writer succeeds in formulating his or her intention. Also it is possible that an author incorporates information in a text without being completely aware of it.

author intended such a meaning as the one he meant the anointing of Jesus to have is probably related to the author's own statement in John 20:31 about at least much of the contents of the Gospel "these [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." Further explanations to the action of the author will not be given much space.

The main question I try to answer is *what* meaning of the anointing the author intended.¹⁵ The *why*-question can only be answered after the *what*-question has been answered. The question of *how* the author intended a certain meaning of the anointing of Jesus is also of great interest. To understand the literary strategies of the author is in a great deal to understand how the author incorporated his message into the text. From this it follows that the *how*-question probably in principle needs to be answered first of all. To answer this question it needs to be asked for instance whether the author used allusions to Old Testament texts and ambiguous statements. If it can be showed that these were common literary strategies of the author, the probability that he used them in John 12:3 respectively 12:7 increases.

¹⁵ If the text describes a historical event this meaning might be the same as the meaning of the actual anointing.

Literature

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Appendix

The Greek eclectic text of Nestle-Aland ed. 27 and the Swedish text of Bibel 2000 of the Gospel of John 12:1-8 follow below. Verse numbers are included. The key verses of the investigation are in italics in the Swedish text.

Ὁ οὖν Ἰησοῦς πρὸ ἕξ ἡμερῶν τοῦ πάσχα ἦλθεν εἰς Βηθανίαν, ὅπου ἦν Λάζαρος, ὃν ἤγειρεν ἐκ νεκρῶν Ἰησοῦς. ² ἐποίησαν οὖν αὐτῷ δεῖπνον ἐκεῖ, καὶ ἡ Μάρθα διηκόνει, ὁ δὲ Λάζαρος εἷς ἦν ἐκ τῶν ἀνακειμένων σὺν αὐτῷ. ³ ἡ οὖν Μαριάμ λαβοῦσα λίτραν μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτίμου ἤλειπεν τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ ἐξέμαξεν ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ· ἡ δὲ οἰκία ἐπληρώθη ἐκ τῆς ὀσμῆς τοῦ μύρου. ⁴ λέγει δὲ Ἰούδας ὁ Ἰσκαριώτης [ἐκ] εἷς τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ, ὁ μέλλων αὐτὸν παραδιδόναι, ⁵ Διὰ τί τοῦτο τὸ μύρον οὐκ ἐπράθη τριακοσίων δηναρίων καὶ ἐδόθη πτωχοῖς; ⁶ εἶπεν δὲ τοῦτο οὐχ ὅτι περὶ τῶν πτωχῶν ἔμελεν αὐτῷ ἀλλ' ὅτι κλέπτῃς ἦν καὶ τὸ γλωσσόκομον ἔχων τὰ βαλλόμενα ἐβάσταζεν. ⁷ εἶπεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Ἄφες αὐτήν, ἵνα εἰς τὴν ἡμέραν τοῦ ἐνταφιασμοῦ μου τηρήσῃ αὐτό· ⁸ τοὺς πτωχοὺς γὰρ πάντοτε ἔχετε μεθ' ἑαυτῶν, ἐμὲ δὲ οὐ πάντοτε ἔχετε.

Sex dagar före påsken kom Jesus till Betania, där Lasaros bodde, han som Jesus hade uppväckt från de döda. ² Man ordnade där en måltid för honom; Marta passade upp, och Lasaros var en av dem som låg till bords med honom. ³ *Maria tog då en hel flaska dyrbar äkta nardusbalsam och smorde Jesu fötter och torkade dem sedan med sitt hår, och huset fylldes av doften från denna balsam.* ⁴ Men Judas Iskariot, en av lärjungarna, den som skulle förråda honom, sade: ⁵ "Varför sålde man inte oljan för trehundra denarer och gav till de fattiga?" ⁶ Detta sade han inte för att han brydde sig om de fattiga utan för att han var en tjuv; han hade hand om kassan och tog av det som lades dit. ⁷ *Men Jesus sade: "Låt henne vara, hon har sparat sin balsam till min begravningsdag."* ⁸ De fattiga har ni alltid bland er, men mig har ni inte alltid."