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# The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics

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THE FOLLOWING paragraphs are intended not only as a valid exegesis of the dialogue between Jesus and Simon Peter during the foot washing (John 13:6-10) but also as an experiment in interpretation. This experiment, which will consist essentially in bringing a plurality of methods, both historical and non-historical, to bear upon the text, will begin with a brief statement of hermeneutical presuppositions which are drawn, primarily, from the work of H.-G. Gadamer and P. Ricoeur. In a second section these presuppositions will operate in the use of a variety of methods to interpret the Johannine text. In the final section the interpretive process will be analyzed in retrospect in order to throw some light on certain questions of hermeneutical theory.

## I. Hermeneutical Presuppositions

First, in the interpretation that follows, the text from John will be treated primarily as a *work* rather than as an *object*.<sup>1</sup> This implies that the text is viewed not primarily as something to be analyzed but as a human expression which functions as a mediation of meaning; that the purpose of studying the text is not to decompose it into its constituent elements in order to account for

<sup>1</sup> This distinction between "object" and "work" is fundamental to contemporary hermeneutical discussion. An object is a part of the natural world whereas a work is a human

its genesis but to appropriate the meaning of the text in its integrity; that the objective of interpretation is not empirically verifiable propositions about the historical-cultural references of the text, but the dialectical illumination of the meaning of the text and the self-understanding of the reader. In other words, the first presupposition is that, as a work, the text mediates a meaning which is not behind it, hidden in the shroud of the past when the text was composed, but ahead of it in the possibilities of human and Christian existence which it projects for the reader.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, it is presupposed that the text is semantically independent of its author.<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the text is not limited to what the author intended even though it was produced in function of such an intention. The text, in being exteriorized and established in independent existence by writing, open to anyone who can read, means whatever it actually means when validly interpreted, whether or not the author intended such a meaning.

Thirdly, because the text is a linguistic work rather than an object of nature, it is, by virtue of its linguisticity, polysemous.<sup>4</sup> The meaning of a work of language (as distinguished from scientific formulae) cannot be reduced to a single, univocal, empirically verifiable (i.e., literal) sense; rather, due to the polyvalence of words and the semantic richness of larger linguistic units, the work generates various valid interpretations in different readers.<sup>5</sup>

expression. Texts are, of course, both object and work from different points of view. However, it is primarily as works that texts are a subject of interpretation. For further discussion of this distinction and its implications for interpretation theory, see R. E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1969) 3-11.

<sup>2</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976) 87. See also the fascinating article of W. C. Smith ("The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible," *Religious Diversity* [New York: Harper and Row, 1976] 41-56) in which he contends that to treat the Bible as Scripture entails dealing with it more in terms of its effects than of what effected it.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of semantic independence of texts is often associated with structuralism for which the text is a closed system of signs whose structure is its meaning. See D. Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), esp. pp. 9-17. Structuralism, however, tends to regard the text as an absolute and thus to reduce it to an object. Ricoeur (*Interpretation Theory*, 25-44) distinguishes what he calls the "fallacy of the absolute text" from the concept of semantic autonomy which is the effect of inscription on discourse. Ricoeur makes it clear that semantic autonomy does not imply the "absolute text." Rather, it means that in written discourse the "author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide" in the way the speaker's intention and the meaning do in oral discourse. The result is that "what the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it" (pp. 29-30).

<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 31-32.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent expansion of this presupposition see P. Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973) 97-111.



Together, the second and third presuppositions imply that the original audience's understanding of the text is neither exhaustive of meaning nor absolutely normative for all further interpretation.

Fourthly, it is presupposed that the historical distance between the present interpreter and the text is not primarily an obstacle to understanding to be overcome by a self-translation of the interpreter into the world of the author but an advantage for understanding in that the tradition which is operative in the interpreter helps him or her to draw from the text richer meaning than was available to the original audience.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the original audience interprets a text within essentially the same historical horizon as the author. Subsequent readers interpret the text within a much wider horizon, one which results from the fusion of the horizon of the text and that of the later interpreter.<sup>7</sup>

A fifth presupposition has to do with the triple dialectic which structures discourse. As Ricoeur explains,<sup>8</sup> discourse is both *event* and *meaning* (the first dialectic). As language-event, as the saying of something, it passes away with the cessation of the speaking. But as meaning, as something said, it perdures. The meaning, in other words, has an ideal quality which transcends the event in which it was articulated. Now, meaning itself is dialectically structured (the second dialectic). The meaning of discourse is, from one point of view, the *speaker's meaning*, what the speaker intended to say. But, from another point of view, the meaning belongs to the *sentence itself*. It transcends the speaker; it outlasts its relationship to the speaker; it is no longer under the control of the speaker. What is said, is said. Finally, the meaning of the sentence (in its relative independence of the speaker) is also dialectically structured (the third dialectic) as a relationship between *sense* and *reference*.<sup>9</sup> The sense is internal to the sentence and is constituted by the relation of predicate to subject. A sentence such as "Bananas are blue" makes "sense." But the reference, i.e., the

<sup>6</sup> H.-G. Gadamer (*Truth and Method* [New York: Seabury, 1975] 267-74) explains fully this concept of "effective historical consciousness" (*wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstheit*). P. Ricoeur deals with this same phenomenon as "productive distanciation" ("The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," *Philosophy Today* 17 [1973] 129-41; *Interpretation Theory*, 43-44).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of "fusion of horizons" was developed by Gadamer (*Truth and Method*, 269-74) as an alternative to the notion, characteristic of nineteenth-century historical theory, that the interpreter can and must escape from his or her own historical horizon and enter that of the author. Gadamer maintains that this is neither possible nor desirable.

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 8-23.

<sup>9</sup> This distinction was first explored by G. Frege in a now famous article, "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," which has been translated by M. Black ("On Sense and Reference," *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege* [ed. P. Geach and M. Black; Oxford: Blackwell, 1970] 56-78). Ricoeur develops this distinction in relation to literary texts (*Interpretation Theory*, 19-22).

relation of the sense to reality in which is located "discourse's claim to be true,"<sup>10</sup> is falsified in this case because bananas are not blue.

In biblical interpretation (or any interpretation of texts) we are concerned primarily with the meaning of the text itself, not with the author's meaning. And we are concerned with the sense of the text only because of our concern with its reference. This is an important difference between contemporary hermeneutics and traditional historical criticism. The latter assigned itself primarily (or even exclusively) the task of reconstructing the author's meaning precisely by deciphering the sense of the text within its own historical circumstances.<sup>11</sup> It left the question of reference, the religious truth claims of the text about God and humanity, to the theologian or the preacher. Contemporary hermeneutics assigns to the interpreter, as primary task, the understanding of the text precisely in its truth claims. The interpreter must engage those claims by uncovering the question to which the text constitutes an answer, and "dialoguing," from his or her own stance in history, with the text about the subject matter of the text.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the primary question posed to the interpreter by the episode of the foot washing in John is not whether Jesus actually washed his disciples' feet or actually spoke the following discourse, but rather what interpretation of life and relationships does it present, is that interpretation true, and if so what are the implications for the interpreter's own self-understanding.<sup>13</sup>

Lastly, it is presupposed that all literary texts are symbolic, i.e., they are linguistic entities which have both a primary, direct, and literal signification and a deeper, secondary signification which is attainable only in and through the primary signification. This means, in regard to the Gospel, that the text is the symbolic locus of the revelation of God in Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Interpretation of the symbolic always consists in bringing to explicit formulation some of the thought to which the symbol gives rise,<sup>15</sup> but no categorization can exhaust the semantic possibilities of the symbol.<sup>16</sup> While this is true of all literary texts

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> A very clear articulation of this understanding of the exegetical task can be found in the special issue of *JBL* 77 (1958) which was devoted to this question. The consensus of the authors, among whom were such notables as K. Stendahl, J. L. McKenzie, and W. A. Irwin, was that the task of the exegete was to reconstruct as accurately as possible the meaning the human author intended to convey to his original audience. This meaning was understood to be univocal and fixed for all time.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 325-41.

<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 92.

<sup>14</sup> P. Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," *The Conflict of Interpretations* (ed. D. Ihde; Evanston: Northwestern University, 1974) 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 47.



and therefore of the NT texts, it is especially true of the Fourth Gospel in which the evangelist explicitly assigns to his work the purpose of bringing his readers to salvific faith in Jesus through the presentation of "signs" (see John 20:30-31), i.e., perceptible works which symbolically reveal the glory of Jesus. Although some Johannine scholars limit the term *sēmeion* to the specifically miraculous works of Jesus, and therefore regard chaps. 13-20 as devoid of signs,<sup>17</sup> this limitation seems too mechanical. If the signs are what Jesus did to reveal his glory so that his disciples would believe in him (John 2:11), then surely his paschal mystery in which he is fully glorified (see John 17:1, 5) and his disciples come to believe and to know who he really is (17:7-8) must be included among the signs.<sup>18</sup> In what follows, the foot washing is regarded as a sign *par excellence*, i.e., a work of Jesus which reveals the meaning of salvation as the Fourth Gospel understands and presents it. The symbolic revelation of the act of the foot washing is re-symbolized in the text. In other words, the sign which was done for Jesus' first disciples is, by being written into the Gospel, made a sign for all who can read with understanding. This means that the foot washing is not an event which has a single, univocal meaning coterminous with the intention of the fourth evangelist and/or the understanding of his original audience, but that it is a symbol, endlessly giving rise to reflection, generating an ever deeper understanding of the salvation it symbolizes as the horizon of the text fuses with the various horizons of generations of readers.

## II. Interpretation of John 13:1-20

The particular focus of interest in this section is the meaning of the controversy between Jesus and Simon Peter about whether Jesus would wash Peter's feet (John 13:6-10). The context of the dialogue, which is essential for any adequate interpretation of it, is the entire scene of the foot washing, including the solemn introduction (13:1-3),<sup>19</sup> the account of the sign itself (13:4-11), and Jesus' discourse which follows (13:12-20).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For a summary, critical appraisal, and selected bibliography of scholarship concerning the signs in the Fourth Gospel, see R. E. Brown, "Appendix III: Signs and Works," *The Gospel According to John i-xii* (AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 524-32.

<sup>18</sup> I have attempted to substantiate this wider application of the concept of sign in the Fourth Gospel in "History and Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel," *L'Evangile de Jean: Sources, rédaction, théologie* (BETL 44; Gembloux: Duculot; Leuven: Leuven University, 1977) 371-76, and in "Symbolism and the Sacramental Principle in the Fourth Gospel," *Segni e sacramenti nel vangelo di Giovanni* (Studia anselmiana, 66; Rome: Anselmiana, 1977) 221-35.

<sup>19</sup> The distinction, which I think is correct, between v. 1 as an introduction to the entire second part of the Gospel (John 13-20) and vv. 2-3 as the introduction to the foot washing and the

As is indicated by the solemn introduction in vv. 1-3, this scene opens the second part of the Fourth Gospel, which has been called the "Book of Glory" or the account of the "Hour of Jesus." Jesus is presented as acting in full awareness of his origin and destination, i.e., of his identity and of his mission as agent of God's salvific will and work in the world (13:1, 3). The introduction, therefore, makes it clear that what follows is not simply a good example in humility but a prophetic action<sup>21</sup> which will reveal the true meaning of Jesus' loving his own unto the end (13:1) in fulfillment of his mission to bring to completion the salvific intention of God's boundless love for the world (cf. 3:16-17).

The evangelist's contemplative description of Jesus' elaborate, almost liturgical, preparation for his action of washing the disciples' feet (13:4-5) focuses the reader's attention on the essential characteristic of the sign. That which Jesus is about to do is an act of *serving*, of literally waiting upon his disciples. Many commentators have suggested, correctly in my opinion, that the foot washing in John is the analogue of the eucharistic institution narratives in the synoptic accounts of the supper,<sup>22</sup> i.e., it functions as the symbol and catechesis of Jesus' approaching death, his handing over of himself for and to his disciples. To characterize the passion and death as service is not peculiar to John. In the early Church one of the most significant interpretations of Jesus' persecution and death consisted in identifying him with the Isaian Suffering Servant of Yahweh (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-

following discourse (John 13:4-20), is not important for our purposes at this point. However, the interested reader can consult R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John xiii-xxi* (AB 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970) 563-64.

<sup>20</sup> I am not treating the discourse as a second, and substantially different, interpretation of the foot washing, as do a number of commentators, e.g., M.-E. Boismard ("Le lavement des pieds [Jn, xiii, 1-17]," *RB* 71 [1964] 5-24). The reasons for treating the passage, at least vv. 1-17, as a unity will become clear as the interpretation proceeds. For a summary of scholarly opinion on the unity of the passage, see Brown, *The Gospel* (AB 29A), 559-62.

<sup>21</sup> By "prophetic action" I mean an action which is presented as divinely inspired, revelatory in content, proleptic in structure, symbolic in form, and pedagogical in intent. I am not intending by this characterization to assert the historical facticity of the act but to call attention to its revelatory character.

<sup>22</sup> See Brown (*The Gospel* [AB 29A], 558-59) on the issue of the possible sacramental significance of the foot washing. For the purposes of the present discussion the more important issue is not whether the foot washing is *equivalent in content* to the institution narrative (i.e., whether it is eucharistic) but that it is *analogous in function* within the context of the narrative of the supper (i.e., both the action over the bread and wine and the foot washing serve as prophetic gestures revealing the true significance of the death of Jesus within the theological perspectives of the respective evangelists).



53:12).<sup>23</sup> In the foot washing Jesus is presented as servant and symbolically characterizes his impending suffering and death as a work of service.

(It is perhaps well to insist again at this point that we are attempting to interpret the *text*, to understand the meaning of the account given. We are not dealing with the question of the historical facticity of the foot washing [although this would be a valid and interesting question in another context and for other purposes].<sup>24</sup> Consequently, when we speak of what Jesus does, what Peter says, etc., we are using shorthand for "what the text presents the characters as saying and doing." Our interest is in the meaning of the text as a literary work, not in the factual accuracy of the text as historical document.)

The action which Jesus performs seems so simple, so inadequate as an expression of his salvific work, that it challenges the reader to search for its deeper significance.<sup>25</sup> That there is indeed more to this scene than is immediately evident is confirmed by Jesus' reply to Peter's scandalized query, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus replies, "What I am doing you do not know yet, but after these things [i.e., after the glorification] you will come to understand" (13:6-7).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The relevant synoptic material is summarized in D. M. Stanley, "Titles of Christ," *JBC* art. 78, §22-23. Acts 3:13; 4:27, 30 also testify to this early interpretation.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the historical and critical questions raised by the narrative, and appropriate references for further research, see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 435-37. I agree with Barrett's characterization of the account as a "symbolic narrative" which is best regarded as "a Johannine construction" (p. 436).

<sup>25</sup> It is particularly the American authors working in parable interpretation who have pointed out that the "presence of the extraordinary in the ordinary" is an important clue to the presence of the symbolic. See, e.g., M. A. Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 89-91; D. O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 105-6. P. Ricoeur, ("Biblical Hermeneutics: The Metaphorical Process," *Semeia* 4 [1975] 99-100) also discusses this point. Although these authors are speaking specifically of parables, I think that the extension of this insight to other symbolic narratives, such as the foot washing, is legitimate.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, (*The Gospel* [AB 29A], 559-60) calls attention to what seems to be a conflict or contradiction between v. 7, in which Jesus says the foot washing will not be understood until after the glorification on Calvary, and vv. 12, 17, which seem to indicate that it can be understood at the supper. I am inclined to think that even on the level of the narrative (not to mention the level of symbolic polyvalence) the tension is more apparent than real. In v. 7 Jesus says that what *he* is doing, i.e., the relation of his action at the supper to his death, cannot be understood until after the crucifixion. Nevertheless, the disciples can understand immediately what *Jesus explains to them* in vv. 13-15, viz., that his relation to them in the foot washing is the pattern of their relation to each other. Only after the glorification will they understand that the relationship between Jesus and themselves was literally service unto death.



The indication of the true meaning of Jesus' action is Peter's instinctive and profound scandal.<sup>27</sup> The Greek text, by the emphatic placement of the pronouns in v. 6b and the doubling of the emphatic negatives in v. 8, gives two important clues. First, Peter was not merely objecting to having his feet washed by another but specifically to the reversal of service roles between himself and Jesus: "Lord, do *you* wash *my* feet?" Secondly, his protest was not simply an embarrassed objection to Jesus' action but a categorical refusal to accept what this reversal of roles implied: "*By no means* will you wash my feet *ever*" (lit., "unto the age," meaning "unto eternity"). In some way, Peter grasped that complicity in this act involved acceptance of a radical reinterpretation of his own life-world, a genuine conversion of some kind which he was not prepared to undergo. Jesus confirms this by replying, "Unless I wash you, you have no heritage (or inheritance) with me" (13:8). As R. E. Brown points out, the "inheritance" (*meros*) in question is eternal life.<sup>28</sup> Now, Jesus, who would declare Peter "clean" (13:10) despite his foreknowledge of the latter's triple denial (see John 13:38), would certainly not declare him cut off from eternal life because he was unreceptive to an example of humility. Clearly, something much more serious was at stake.

A further indication of the true nature of Peter's refusal is perhaps supplied by an analogous scene from the synoptics (Mark 8:32-33 and its intensified par. in Matt 16:22-23). In the synoptic passage, Jesus has predicted his imminent death and Peter categorically rejects this interpretation of salvific messiahship, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Matt 16:22). Jesus does not treat this statement as we might expect, i.e., as the understandable shocked protest of a loyal companion frightened for his master's safety. Jesus answers harshly, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you judge not according to God but humanly" (Matt 16:23). Something very similar is going on in John 13. What sounds like a perfectly understandable expression of embarrassment or even humility is understood by Jesus as a fundamental rejection of the divinely chosen expression of the meaning of salvation. In both scenes Peter is presented as having taken a stance diametrically opposed to Jesus' salvific mission. In the synoptic scene Peter has done this by explicitly rejecting the passion. In the Johannine passage, Peter has taken his reprobate position by symbolically rejecting Jesus' salvific self-understanding expressed in service of his disciples.

<sup>27</sup> In discussing the interaction of Jesus and Simon Peter, we will be referring to the emotional quality of that interaction *as it is presented in the text*. This is not a matter of "psychologizing" in the sense of trying to divine the intrapersonal states of the historical characters. It is a matter of taking seriously the literary text, including the described and implied reactions of the characters in the narrative.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *The Gospel* (AB 29A), 565-66.

To understand this scene, therefore, we must come to grips with the enigma of *Jesus' service* in order to understand both why he presented his salvific work by means of this symbol and why Peter so vehemently rejected the reality thus symbolized. We will try to facilitate the process of understanding by examining reflectively the nature of service, not in terms of historical forms of service (such as foot washing) but in its inner structure and realization in human relationships.

Service is generally understood quite univocally as something which one person does for someone else, intending thereby the latter's good. In service the server lays aside, temporarily or even permanently, his or her own project, goal, good, or at least convenience for the sake of fostering the good of the other. The finality of the served is allowed, at least for the moment, to take priority over the finality of the server. In its most extreme form, therefore, it would consist in the server's laying down his or her life for the sake of the served. Now, in John's Gospel Jesus says that the new commandment, and the sign of authentic discipleship, viz., that we love one another as Jesus has loved us, has no more perfect form than the laying down of one's life for one's friends (John 13:34-35; 15:12-14). To lay down one's life is the ultimate preferring of another's good to one's own. Service, in other words, by its inmost structure, is capable of expressing ultimate love, and the love commanded by Jesus has the inner form of service. Every act of service, however ordinary, because it consists in preferring another to oneself, is essentially an act of self-gift and, therefore, an expression of love which, in principle, tends toward the total self-gift.

However, when we attempt to verify this transcendental or ideal concept in our real experience of giving and receiving service, it becomes abundantly evident that service as pure gift of self for another's good rarely, if ever, is realized in fact. A phenomenology of service as it occurs in our everyday experience reveals at least three different models of serving. The analysis and comparison of these models can provide a key to an understanding of the meaning of Peter's refusal of Jesus' service that will, perhaps, be more adequate to the extraordinary elements in the narrative than traditional historical exegesis provides.

In the first model service denotes what one person (the server) must do for another (the served) because of some right or power which the latter is understood to possess. The server may be bound for any number of reasons, such as being a child in relation to parents, a slave in relation to an owner, a woman in a patriarchal society in relation to men, a subject in relation to a ruler, a poor person in relation to the rich, and so on. But whatever the situational reason, service in every such case arises from a fundamental condition of inequality between the two persons and the service rendered expresses and reinforces that condition of inequality. In other words, service



in this model is a basic element in a structure of domination, however benevolently exercised. It expresses not the free preference of another's good to one's own but the subordination of one person to another. Such subordination can, without doubt, be incorporated into one's participation in the paschal mystery of Christ (cf. Eph 5:21-6:9). But the fact is that the structure of domination tends of its own weight to become exploitative and oppressive because the service is demanded as the right of the superior and must be rendered as the unavoidable duty of the inferior. Only a supreme inner freedom, such as Jesus exhibited before Pilate (John 19:10-11), can enable a person to surmount such domination and infuse into the structure of oppression the reality of genuine service, namely, freely chosen preference of the other's (the oppressor's) good.

In the second existential model service denotes what the server does freely for the served because of some need perceived in the latter which the former has the power to meet. This is the service that the mother renders to her child, the professional to the lay person or client, the rich to the poor, the strong to the weak. At first sight, such service seems to realize the ideal, viz., the unforced seeking of another's good. But a deep flaw resides in the heart of this situation. The basis of the service is still inequality. The server is perceived by him or herself and by the served as acting, however generously, out of genuine superiority to the other and the service situation lasts only as long as the server remains superior. This is why such seemingly altruistic situations have such an inveterate tendency to corruption. The mother turns her child into the answer to her own need to be needed, or to own and dominate another, or even to recover an un-lived aspect of her own life; the teacher makes his or her students into trophies, sycophants, or academic pawns; the doctor mystifies patients in order to feed his or her own self-importance; the priest turns "his people" into substitute children or needy "sheep" over whom to exercise parental or pastoral power.<sup>29</sup> The dynamism at work in this second model is more subtle than in cases of outright domination (and, needless to say, not all such cases of service yield to the flaw in the situation) but it is no less distant from the ideal of service. The server seeks his or her own good by "detouring" through the good of the other. One reason people so often reject or rebel against the insistent "service" of parents, teachers, clergy, and professionals (sometimes using payment to neutralize the dependence incurred) is because they instinctively recognize such service as a subtle but powerful form of domination. They see clearly enough, even if they cannot articulate it, that the server intends to maintain the situation of inequality, not to liberate the served. The

<sup>29</sup> An interesting, basically Jungian, interpretation of service as a subtle exercise of power with a profound tendency to become domination is A. Gugenbühl-Craig's work (*Power in the Helping Professions* [ed. J. Hillman; Dallas: Spring, 1971]).

service rendered is a statement to both parties of the superiority of the server and the dependence of the served.

The third model is operative in the only situation in which service, of necessity, escapes this fundamental perversion, namely, friendship. Friendship is the one human relationship based on equality. If it does not begin between equals it quickly abolishes whatever inequality it discovers or renders the inequality irrelevant within the structure of the relationship.<sup>30</sup> In perfect friendship, which is indeed rare, the good of each is truly the other's good and so, in seeking the good of the friend, one's own good is achieved. But this self-fulfillment involves no subversive seeking of self; it is simply the by-product of the friend's happiness. This is why service rendered between friends is never exacted and creates no debts, demands no return but evokes reciprocity, and never degenerates into covert exploitation. Domination is totally foreign to friendship because domination arises from, expresses, and reinforces inequality. Service between friends, in other words, realizes the pure ideal with which we began this reflection.

It is now easier to see why the Johannine Jesus commands not love of enemies but love unto death of one's friends (15:13). It may be heroic to die for another, but it is only genuine service if the other is truly another self, a friend, for in this case the gift of one's life is experienced as an enrichment rather than as an impoverishment of oneself. To die that a friend might live is to live in a transcendent way. Therefore, John describes God's salvific intention not in terms of sacrifice or retribution but in terms of self-gift: God so loved the world as to give God's only Son to save us (3:16). Jesus, acting out of that salvific mission, so loved his own in the world that he laid down his life for them (10:17-18; 13:1). Jesus' self-gift was not, in John's perspective, the master's redemption of unworthy slaves, but an act of friendship: "No longer do I call you servants . . . you I have called friends" (15:15).

Let us return now to the scene of the foot washing. Jesus symbolizes his impending death, his love of his disciples unto the end, by an act of menial service. He did not choose an act of service proceeding from his real and

<sup>30</sup> The Christian ideal of perfect friendship, perhaps most beautifully expounded by the early medieval monk, Aelred of Rievaulx (*Spiritual Friendship* [Washington, DC: Cistercian, 1974]), is succinctly summarized by Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II. 26, 4) who says that perfect friendship is distinguished from imperfect by the disinterested desire for the good of the friend which is the basis of the former. This ideal can be traced back through Augustine into classical antiquity (see the summary in M. A. McNamara, *Friends and Friendship for Saint Augustine* [Staten Island: Alba, 1964] 21-23), where its most famous expositor was Cicero in his *De Amicitia* following Theophrastus' *Peri philias*. The use of the theme of friendship in the Fourth Gospel is unique in the NT and merits further study. It seems to me at least possible that John has made theological use of the classical concept in developing his unique presentation of love as the heart of the Christian experience.



acknowledged superiority to them as teacher and Lord. Such an act would have expressed the inequality between himself and his disciples, their inferiority to him. Instead, Jesus acted to abolish the inequality between them, deliberately reversing their social positions and roles. To wash another's feet was something which even slaves could not be required to do, but which disciples might do out of reverence for their master.<sup>31</sup> But any act of service is permissible and freeing among friends. By washing his disciples' feet Jesus overcame by love the inequality which existed by nature between himself and those whom he had chosen as friends. He established an intimacy with them that superseded his superiority and signalled their access to everything which he had received from his Father (15:15), even to the glory which he had been given as Son (17:22).

Peter's adamant resistance to what Jesus was doing can be seen now in a very different light. As in the presentation of Peter's rejection of the passion in the synoptics, so here, Peter understands more than he articulates. At some level, the narrative suggests, Peter realizes that Jesus, by transcending the inequality between himself and his disciples and inaugurating between them the relationship of friendship, is subverting in principle all structures of domination, and therefore the basis for Peter's own exercise of power and authority. The desire for first place has no function in friendship. The desire of the disciples (and others) to dominate one another and establish their superiority over others was frequently the object of Jesus' instruction and reproach in the synoptic Gospels (Matt 20:20-28 and par.; Matt 23:1-12; Mark 9:38-41 and par.; Mark 10:33-37 and par.; Luke 18:14; 22:24-27). There can be little doubt that this subject was a recurrent theme in the teaching of the historical Jesus. The foot washing is John's dramatic interpretation of this theme. In the Johannine perspective what definitively distinguishes the community which Jesus calls into existence from the power structures so universal in human society is the love of friendship expressing itself in joyful mutual service for which rank is irrelevant. By the foot washing Jesus has transcended and transformed the only ontologically based inequality among human beings, that between himself and us. Peter's refusal of Jesus' act of service was equivalent, then, to a rejection of the death of Jesus, understood as the laying down of his life for those he loved, and implying a radically new order of human relationships.

It is now possible to take a renewed look at the discourse of Jesus which follows the foot washing (13:12-20). It no longer appears as a simple "doublet" of the first scene, a moralizing interpretation presenting Jesus' prophetic action as an example of humility. Jesus indicates that his action is mysterious

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *The Gospel* (AB 29A), 564.

and requires reflection, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" (13:12).<sup>32</sup> In helping them to understand Jesus calls attention immediately to the very aspect of his act which had scandalized Peter, the transcending of the inequality between himself and them through loving service: "You call me teacher and Lord, and you are right. That is what I am" (13:13). The superiorities and inferiorities of nature and grace are neither denied nor cloaked. They are simply transcended by friendship, rendered irrelevant and inoperative as the basis of their relationship. The principle of relationship between Jesus and his disciples is the love of friendship which transforms what would have been a humiliating self-degradation if performed under the formality of superiority and inferiority into an act of service, a revelation of self-giving love. Jesus goes on to say, not that the disciples should wash the feet of their inferiors as an act of self-humiliation (for that is not what Jesus had done for them). Rather, they should "wash one another's feet" (13:14). They should live out among themselves the love of friendship, with its delight in mutual service that knows no order of importance, which Jesus has inaugurated.

### III. Conclusions on Hermeneutical Theory

We are now in a position to interrogate the process of interpretation just completed in order to draw some conclusions about the methodology used. Of primary interest is the question of how this type of interpretation differs from traditional historical-critical exegesis and what effects flow from this difference.

The crucial difference lies in the role assigned to what has been called "appropriation,"<sup>33</sup> "application,"<sup>34</sup> or simply the discerning of the meaning of the text for the contemporary reader. In traditional exegesis appropriation is usually regarded as a secondary, detachable, and optional procedure to be carried out after the scientific work of historical-critical exegesis has provided the objective content of the passage.<sup>35</sup> The appropriation or application need not be done by the exegete who analyzed the passage because the objective results of the exegesis are considered to constitute a body of univocal information which can be used in various circumstances to ground various applications for contemporary Christians.<sup>36</sup> In other words, appropriation or appli-

<sup>32</sup> See n. 26 above.

<sup>33</sup> This is Ricoeur's term for the process of making the distance between the world of the text and that of the reader productive (*Interpretation Theory*, 89-95).

<sup>34</sup> This is Gadamer's term for what he considers to constitute, with understanding and explanation, the hermeneutical process (*Truth and Method*, 274-78).

<sup>35</sup> This position is expounded quite clearly by K. Stendahl in his now famous article, "Contemporary Biblical Theology," *IDB* 1 [1962] 418-32.

<sup>36</sup> This particular attitude implies in a striking way one of the main differences between an exegesis which treats the text as an object to be analyzed and a hermeneutics which treats the text



cation is not integral to the interpretive process. The meaning of the text can be ascertained in isolation from the issue of the present reader's transformation.

In the hermeneutical process carried out above the discerning of the meaning of the text for the contemporary reader operated as an integral part of the exegesis itself.<sup>37</sup> It should be noted (because there can be a tendency among historical exegetes to overlook the fact) that *any* attempt at interpretation is a quest for meaning and meaning is always meaning *for someone*. Meaning does not exist in the abstract nor is it "in the text" as if the latter were some kind of semantic container.<sup>38</sup> It is just that, in traditional exegesis, the quest for meaning which is operative in the interpretive process is the search for what the text meant *for the original audience*. The assumption is that this is the primary, objective, and normative meaning since it is supposed to correspond to what the author intended the text to mean and this is considered to be the only "literal" meaning. Therefore, meaning for subsequent audiences, including the present one, is secondary, derived, and valid or well-founded to the extent that it coincides with the "original" or "literal" meaning.

By contrast, in the interpretation of the foot washing offered above, the semantic independence of the text in respect to the author's intention was assumed. Therefore, the quest for meaning that was operative was the effort to discern the contemporary meaning of the text, i.e., the meaning *for the interpreter*. This led to a different process of interpretation involving a different use of the traditional tools of exegesis in combination with some less traditional methods.

### *The Different Process*

The starting point of the interpretation was a certain pre-understanding which led to an educated guess about the meaning of the text and a subsequent effort to validate the guess.<sup>39</sup> The pre-understanding involved the assumption that Jesus, in this passage, was performing a revelatory sign in the solemn setting of "the hour" and, therefore, that the meaning of the passage would be related to the central preoccupations of the Fourth Gospel. The guess, based on familiarity with the well-known technique of misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel, was that Peter's reaction was the indicator of the revelatory

as a work to be understood. The former regards the results of exegesis as acquired, scientifically substantiated data. Application, in this case, is the use of such data. Both Ricoeur (*Interpretation Theory*, 94) and Gadamer (*Truth and Method*, 278) insist that hermeneutics is not a taking possession of the text by the reader but a submission of the reader to the text. As is well known, this is the position adopted by the New Hermeneutics also.

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 274.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 1-23.

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur (*Interpretation Theory*, 74-79) describes the process of guessing and validation of the guess as integral to the dialectic of explanation and understanding.

content. Peter is presented as scandalized by what Jesus was doing; Jesus is intransigent in requiring Peter to overcome the scandal. The guiding question then became: what was Jesus really doing which caused this acute confrontation? What is the meaning of Jesus' action which presents the disciple with an ultimate choice between Jesus' world and that of the sinner?

If one contents oneself with an impersonal and objective reading of the text in its historical context the answer appears simple enough: Jesus did an act of humble service, a symbolic presentation of his coming humiliation on the cross. This first meaning, complete in itself, is then "doubled" by a second, moral meaning: since Jesus humbled himself his disciples should willingly do the same.<sup>40</sup>

However, the pre-understanding raises several problems regarding this seemingly obvious interpretation. First, in John's Gospel Jesus' passion is never presented as a humiliation or *kenōsis*, but as his definitive personal glorification and the full revelation of his glory to his disciples. Why then would he choose, as the symbolization of his glorification, an act of self-humiliation? Secondly, why would the Johannine Jesus give a moral lesson on humility in this solemn context? Mutual love, not humility, is the new commandment according to the Fourth Gospel (13:34-35). Finally, would a gratuitous act of self-humiliation actually constitute a good example of the kind of humility Christians are called upon by Jesus to practice? These problems confirmed a suspicion, born of the relative irrelevance of the traditional interpretation, that whatever this passage might have to say about freely chosen self-humiliation, its real point lies elsewhere.

Attention was then concentrated on the precise nature of Peter's refusal as indicated by the structure of his sentences in the Greek text. Peter did not object because Jesus' act was self-humiliating but because the superior was serving the inferior, thereby creating a confusion in the accepted social order that Peter could not handle. This reversal was proposed as the locus of the meaning of the text.

What followed, therefore, was not an examination of menial service in the historical-cultural context of first-century Palestine but an existential reflection on the phenomenon of service as it functions in the structures of human relationships as such, regardless of time or place. Such reflection revealed that the contrast between Jesus' understanding of his action and Peter's was really a contrast between service in its ideal form as an expression of love, and service in its corrupted form as an expression of domination. Jesus, as is clear from the final discourses' teaching on love of friends unto death, was proposing his action as an example of the former; Peter's refusal

<sup>40</sup> See n. 20 above.



suggests that he understood it in terms of the latter. In the context of service as domination, Jesus' action was inappropriate to a scandalous degree. In the context of friendship it was an act of love. Because of the human situation in which we find ourselves, Jesus' action was subversive of the sinful structures in which not only Peter, but all of us, have a vested interest. This deep contrast in understanding and commitment was suggested as being more than sufficient to explain both Peter's refusal and Jesus' ultimatum as well as establishing the meaning of the text for the contemporary reader.

The conclusions followed directly, viz., that at least one meaning of the foot washing for contemporary disciples lies not in an understanding of Christian ministry in terms of self-humiliation or individual acts of menial service but as a participation in Jesus' work of transforming the sinful structures of domination operative in human society according to the model of friendship expressing itself in joyful mutual service unto death. The validity of the interpretation is thought to lie in the fact that it does justice to the text as it stands, accords well with Johannine theology, and is significant in itself for the contemporary reader.

It should now be clear how the principal difference between traditional exegesis and the interpretation suggested, viz., the integration of the appropriation process into the exegesis itself, actually functioned. In order to "make sense" of the dialogue between Jesus and Simon Peter the content of the text was placed in the context of a phenomenology of service within the structure of human relationships. The essential context for understanding the text was *contemporary experience*, not the historical-cultural situation of first-century Palestine. The latter was integrated into the interpretation as a subordinate methodological consideration where necessary. In short, the text was seen to make sense by making sense of the experience of the interpreter, not by transporting the "de-historicized" reader into the world which produced the text.

### *The Different Use of Traditional Methods*

A subordinate question, which might further clarify the method used, concerns the way in which techniques of historical-critical exegesis were used. Obviously they retain an important place in this type of interpretation, but they do not dictate the questions which guide the hermeneutical process nor do they limit, *a priori*, the type of material which can be considered relevant for understanding.<sup>41</sup> They are used to clarify the original work, i.e., the text, as

<sup>41</sup> A fundamental insight underlying the interdisciplinary challenge to historical-critical exegesis considered as an exhaustive methodology is that *method determines object*. It not only determines which aspects of a reality are to be considered and how they are to be treated but it also declares irrelevant any elements which do not answer the questions which the method raises. This

good lighting or art history might be used to clarify a painting. It is important to know, e.g., whether Peter said, "Lord, *you* shall never wash *my* feet" or simply "I'll never allow my feet to be washed." It makes a difference whether washing the feet of table guests was a cherished privilege of an oriental host or a task too menial to be required of a slave. In other words, philological and historical criticism helps clarify the first level of significance of the textual elements, especially when these elements are ambiguous because of historical, cultural, or linguistic remoteness.

In a similar way, comparison of Peter's behavior in this scene with synoptic material which seems to be analogous helped to indicate the direction of inquiry into the meaning of his objection and Jesus' reply, while knowledge of the Johannine theological perspective and Johannine literary techniques helped indicate the insufficiency of certain seemingly obvious interpretations.

The techniques of historical-critical exegesis are called into play not to determine methodologically the object of interpretation as the intention of the author, but to clarify whatever in the text is unclear because of historical distance. Historical methodology, as well as form and redaction criticism, are necessary because the text is an historical artifact and is about historical events recorded by a writer according to his own purposes and for his audience. But historical-critical methodology is neither the primary nor a sufficient methodology because the meaning of the text is not in the past to be recovered but in the present to be discovered.

point has been made from a theological perspective by P. Stuhlmacher in *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation: Towards a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); from a fundamentalist perspective by G. Maier in *The End of the Historical Critical Method* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977); from a psychological-sociological point of view by W. Wink in *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973). It is also fundamental to the contributions of structuralism (see D. Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis?*, esp. p. 9-20) and of literary criticism. Among the representatives of the latter who have taken a special and theoretical interest in biblical interpretation is A. N. Wilder, particularly in his *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (rev. ed.; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1971).

The increasing seriousness of attention to the challenge being addressed to the biblical establishment was signalled by the presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association by G. T. Montague ("Hermeneutics and the Teaching of Scripture," *CBQ* 41 [1979] 1-17).