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Understanding the Lord's Prayer from a Discourse Perspective

Introduction

At the centre of the Sermon on the Mount we find the most famous prayer of the New Testament, the Lord's Prayer. This paper argues that the Lord's Prayer is best understood from a discourse perspective. Rather than approaching the Sermon on the Mount from the traditional atomistic perspective of Form Criticism, where each text unit is thought to have had a separate existence and then been brought together to reflect the perspective of a "Matthean community," this paper argues that the Lord's Prayer is best understood when the Sermon on the Mount is perceived of as a coherent and structured unit whose totality interrelates with the each part of the Prayer.

On Method

Obviously texts cohere more or less. The Sermon on the Mount is presented as a unit of speech unit where its parts cohere and relate to each other. In this paper I claim to do a bottom-up analysis. However, even if I formally do a bottom up discourse analysis it is unavoidably so that I will — because of the knowledge that I already have — more or less consciously contextualize the object of my study on the basis of pre-conceived ideas, which means that to some extent a combined bottom-up / top-down analysis is unavoidable. We carry around a large set of schemata and when we encounter something we immediately try to fit it into one of those. It has been pointed out that top-down is the standard way to approach a text, since bottom-up is very time consuming, whereas top-down processing is a great time saver (Dooley and Levinsohn, 52). Top-down is probably built into our way of thinking, which means that we will try to make sense of what we encounter. We then bring with us expectation structures that (i) build on personal or collective experience (culture) (ii) the context of the situation / co-text (Dooley and Levinsohn, 52; Malinowsky, Brown & Yule). A bottom-up analysis in some sense then goes against the grain from an intuitive point of view. Adams and Collins argue that "top-down and bottom-up processing should be occurring … simultaneously. The data that are needed to instantiate or fill out the schemata become available through bottom-up processing; top-down processing facilitates their assimilation" (1979: 5).

Approaching the Lord's Prayer

As we approach this prayer we could speculate as to whether it was put in this context or if it was born in this context. Nevertheless, the fact is that the prayer *is* found in a certain context. Therefore it should be interpreted and understood as a part of that context. What would happen if we found the prayer in another context? Would it to some extent be understood differently? Undoubtedly so! The fact is that a version of the prayer is found in the gospel of Luke as well, though in a different but similar context. May then the same text mean different things in different contexts? Undoubtedly so! Most likely Jesus mentioned this prayer more than once. Considering its importance, it is likely that the disciples picked it up, starting to practice praying this prayer and/or according to this prayer.