

“He Loved Them *Eis Telos*”: The Foot-Washing in John – a Miniature Gospel*

1. Introduction

Martin Luther is said to have called John 3:16, with its proclamation of God’s life-giving love expressed in the gift of God’s Son, a “miniature gospel”.¹ The same name, so I contend, could be given to the passage where Jesus symbolically acts out this love, *eis telos* – fully, perfectly, to the very end – namely the foot-washing in John 13.

In this narrative, often considered to “stand in for” the institution of the Eucharist in the Synoptics,² the motivation for and significance of Jesus’ forthcoming death are expressed.³ However, as I hope to demonstrate, we also find recapitulated his entire life, from the beginning to the end, and therefore a succinct summary of Johannine theology.

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¹ Robert E. Van Voorst, *Commonly Misunderstood Verses of the Bible: What They Really Mean* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017), 108. A Google search for “Luther, John 3:16, Gospel in miniature” reveals that this saying is attributed to him by others as well, but I have not found any exact reference to any of Luther’s works.

² Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody: Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers LLC, 2003), 2:902; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, 3 vols., trans. David Smith and G. A. Kon (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1982), 3:46.

³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 2 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 2:568; Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A Reading of John’s Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), 231; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), 236; Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series 4, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J.

I will adopt a synchronic approach to the text, setting aside most historical questions. My intention is not to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the passage. Rather, through a mainly literary analysis, I will attempt to show how it might be read, not only as an interpretation of the Passion but, like the Prologue, as a condensed version of the entire Fourth Gospel both in terms of its structure and of its message.

2. Situation, delimitation and structure

The foot-washing is placed at the beginning of the second half of the Gospel, known as the Book of Glory.⁴ It thus serves as the entry point into the farewell discourse leading up to the Passion narrative.⁵ That 13:1 marks the beginning, both of the foot-washing and of the entire second half of the Gospel, seems to be beyond debate.⁶ Byrne, Schnackenburg and Witherington all treat 13:1–30 as one unit, although the first two allow for a break after 13:20.⁷ Brown delimits the foot-washing proper to 13:1–20 and sees 13:21–30 as dealing with the betrayer.⁸ Keener and Moloney both treat 13:1–38 as a unit with three subdivisions, but do not agree on the delimitation of these smaller units.⁹

(Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 375; Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1995), 237.

⁴ Brown, *The Gospel*, 1:cxviii–cxix.

⁵ Keener, *The Gospel*, 2:899.

⁶ Brown, *The Gospel* 2:545; Byrne, *Life*, 225–226; Keener, *The Gospel*, 2:899; Moloney, *The Gospel*, 371–372; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel*, 3:1, 6; Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 231, 235.

⁷ Byrne, *Life*, 226; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel*, 3:6; Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 234–235.

⁸ Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:545.

⁹ Keener, *The Gospel*, 2:899; Moloney, *The Gospel*, 370–371.

I will follow Brown and consider 13:20 the end of the pericope dealing with the foot-washing. This is also the delimitation used by Schneiders in her article “The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics”¹⁰ and by Mann and Zumstein in their respective articles on “Le lavement des pieds”.¹¹ It seems a reasonable option as there is a clear break in the text here, also noted by Schnackenburg and Byrne,¹² indicated by the “After saying this”¹³ (13:21). When Jesus starts speaking again, the focus is entirely on the imminent betrayal. As pointed out by Brown, “[t]here is nothing in what follows that is necessarily related to the footwashing or its interpretation(s).”¹⁴

As for the structure of the passage, commentaries are even less unanimous, to a large extent due, it seems, to differing delimitation and criteria. Brown works within a historical-critical context and divides the text according to supposed layers of redaction.¹⁵ Byrne, Moloney and Schnackenburg all propose the following division: 1–5, 6–11, 12–17, 18–20, largely based on the narrative flow and certain linguistic markers.¹⁶ Schneiders

¹⁰ Sandra Marie Schneiders, “The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (January 1981): 76-92, reprinted in *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985), <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/jst/134/>, accessed on December 4th 2022, 80.

¹¹ Frédéric Manns, “Le lavement des pieds: Essai sur la structure et la signification de Jean 13,” *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 55, n. 3 (1981): 149–169, <https://doi.org/10.3406/rscir.1981.2915>; Jean Zumstein, “Le lavement des pieds (Jean 13,1–20): Un exemple de la conception johannique du pouvoir,” *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 132, no. 4 (2000): 345–360, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44358148>.

¹² Byrne, *Life*, 234; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel*, 3:27–28.

¹³ All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

¹⁴ Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:573, note xiii 21.

¹⁵ Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:599–562.

¹⁶ Byrne, *Life*, 228–234; Moloney, *The Gospel*, 372; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel*, 3:15–27.

simplifies and has 1–3, 4–11, 12–20.¹⁷ Keener,¹⁸ Manns¹⁹ and Zumstein²⁰ have 1–3, 4–5, 6–11, 12–20, which gives the following concentric structure:²¹

A 1–3: Jesus’ knowledge of where he has come from and where he is going frames the statement in v. 2 about Judas’ betrayal

B 4–5: The act of washing

C 6–11: The dialogue with Simon Peter who misunderstands, the word about having a share with Jesus and again mention of the betrayer.

B’ 12–15: Explanation of the washing

A’ 16–20: Words about the disciples being sent as Jesus was sent, both introduced by “Very truly, I tell you” frame a prediction about Judas’ betrayal

A slightly modified version, based on linguistic markers and thematic links, is a concentric structure of three units each made up of a smaller concentric structure framing a statement about the betrayer. I have not found support for this proposal elsewhere, but it strikes me as interesting and helpful for our purpose, and it seems to me that it is justifiable. Like Byrne commenting on the Prologue, I make no claim to uncover authorial

¹⁷ Schneiders, “The Foot Washing,” 80.

¹⁸ Keener, *The Gospel*, 2:899–914.

¹⁹ Manns, “Le lavement,” 151–156.

²⁰ Zumstein, “Le lavement,” 349–352.

²¹ On the significance of inclusion and chiasmic structures in the style of the Fourth Evangelist, see Brown, *The Gospel*, 1:CXXXV–CXXXVI; and John Breck, “Chiasmus as a Key to Biblical Interpretation,” in John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 89–104.

intention, but propose this structure as a means of facilitating interpretation.²² It can be laid out as follows:

A: 1–3 Jesus' mission	a: 1 Jesus knew (<i>eidôs</i>) that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.	
	b: 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.	
	a': 3 Jesus, knowing (<i>eidôs</i>) that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God	
	B: 4–15 The act with explanation	c: 4–10 The act of washing "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand (<i>gnôse</i>)."
		b': 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'
		c': 12–15 The explanation of the act "Do you know (<i>ginôskete</i>) what I have done to you?"
A': 16–20 The mission of the disciples	d: 16–17 "Very truly, I tell you, (<i>amên, amên legô humin</i>) servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."	
	b'': 18 "I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me."	
	d': 19–20 "Very truly, I tell you, (<i>amên, amên legô humin</i>) whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."	

²² Byrne, *Life*, 22.

The first unit A focusses on Jesus being sent from the Father and returning to him. This theme, as well as the references to Jesus' knowledge makes a and a' form an inclusion. The last unit A' focusses on the sending of the disciples as Jesus was sent, thus forming an inclusion with A. Here the "Very truly", marks the beginning (d) and end (d'). The central unit B focusses on the act of washing and its significance, i.e. its importance and its meaning. Its inner inclusion (c – c') is marked by the recurring mention of foot-washing (*niptein tous podas*) and the verb know/understand (*gnôsé/ginôskete*).

This reflects the structure of the Gospel as a whole. It begins with the sending of the Word into the world, passes via his ministry of signs and discourses (act and explanation) culminating in the Passion, and ends with the sending of the disciples. The emphasis on the betrayal in each of the three units links in with the theme of rejection running through the entire narrative.

3. A Miniature Gospel

The proposed structure already reveals how John 13:1–20 reflects its larger context. In the following, I will explore this in more depth under three headings: vocabulary, movement and themes.

3.1 Vocabulary

It has been noted that the Johannine vocabulary is very poor, in the sense that it is not very varied.²³ On the level of meaning, however, it is very rich. The fact that many of the same words are used throughout the entire text in one way makes vocabulary less useful

²³ Ignace De la Potterie, *La vérité dans saint Jean*, 2 vols. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977), 1:2.

for establishing connections between passages, because almost anything can be connected to almost everything else. On the other hand, when there are words or clusters of words found only in a few places, this becomes all the more striking.

One such verbal link noted by many are the verbs “take off” (*tithêsin*) and “put on” (*lambanein*), used in 13:4 and 12 of Jesus’ robe. The same verbs are used in chapter 10 about the laying down and taking up again of his life.²⁴ This is significant because it relates the act of washing to Jesus’ death and resurrection.²⁵ Another connection between chapters 10 and 13 is *hoi idioi* (*tous idious*), “his own” (13:1) whom Jesus loved, echoing the *ta idia/ema*, the “his/my own” of the good shepherd (10:4.14),²⁶ for whom he lays down his life.

The last example also provides a link to the Prologue. This is noted by several scholars, although most of them argue that *hoi idioi* in 13:1 has a different meaning than in 1:11.²⁷ There it refers to the Jewish people, who rejected him, here to his chosen disciples. Yet, even if it does refer to different groups, it seems to me that there is an advantage to reading the *hoi idioi* of 13:1 with the *hoi idioi* of 1:11 in mind. The presence of a traitor among them in 13:1 is significant. Jesus loved “his own” *eis telos* and expressed this symbolically through washing their feet, including, presumably, the feet of Judas.²⁸ If one allows a reference to the “his own” of the Prologue, this suggests that these too are embraced by the love of Jesus. Thus none of his followers, called to follow

²⁴ Moloney, *The Gospel*, 378; Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:551.

²⁵ Keener, *The Gospel*, 2:908; Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:551.

²⁶ Moloney, *The Gospel*, 373; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel*, 3:16.

²⁷ Byrne, *Life*, 28–29, 225; Moloney, *The Gospel*, 373; Schnackenburg, *The Gospel*, 3:15.

²⁸ Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 236.

his example, should permit themselves to act with anything less than love in their regard. This strikes me as important when working with a structure where the rejection-motif is so present, being aware of how it has been used to justify anti-Semitism through the centuries.²⁹

The *hoi idioi* taken together with the emphasis on Jesus' coming from God and his divine status, expressed by other recurring words in both 3:1–3 and 1:1–18 (*theos*, *patêr* (*pros ton theon/patêra*), *kosmos*, *panta di'autou egeneto/panta edôken autô ho patêr eis tas keiras*), links the beginning of the foot-washing with the beginning of the Gospel. Further, a verbal connection can be established between its ending and the Gospel's, in a way that makes even more sense if one assumes that it originally ended with chapter 20.³⁰

The clause “that you may believe that (*hina [...] pisteusête hoti*) I am he (*egô eimi*)” (13:19) is reminiscent of the Evangelist's stated purpose for writing in 20:31: “that you may come to believe that (*hina pisteuête hoti*) Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God”. Here too, it follows a macarism.³¹ Little has been made of this in commentaries, but given that these are the only two places in John where a macarism is found,³² I believe it merits

²⁹ Byrne, *Life*, 15; Moloney, *The Gospel*, 9–11; Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 11.

³⁰ Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:1057; Byrne, *Life*, 340. Against this, see Breck, “John 21: Epilogue or Conclusion,” in Breck, *Scripture*, 105–124.

³¹ “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (13:17). Cf. 20:29: “Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’”

³² Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:553.

attention.³³ There is also the mention of mission, expressed by the words *pempein* and *apostolos/apostellein*, in both 13:16.20 and 20:21. Thus, the vocabulary of the opening and closing of the foot-washing mirrors the vocabulary of John 1:1–18 and 20:19–31, and there are verbal links in the middle part to the rest of the Gospel, which become even clearer if we look at the movement in the passage.

3.2 Movement

Not only does the foot-washing mirror the larger Gospel on the level of vocabulary. On a second level, it mirrors it in its very movement. Brown remarks that “[t]he career of the Johannine Jesus has been compared to the arc of a pendulum, swinging from on high to a low point and then rising to the highs again” and signals how the Prologue exemplifies this pattern.³⁴ He continues:

The same pendulum arc is found in the Gospel proper. The Son is the one who has come down from heaven (iii 13), but he is rejected by many who prefer darkness to the light (iii 19); and his career reaches its nadir when he is rejected by his own people. [...] The Book of Signs described this

³³ Further connections could be established between 13:1–20 and 20:19–31: the setting and the people present (Jesus and the disciples alone at a time indicated with reference to a feast), Peter’s reluctance to accept and Thomas’ reluctance to believe, the language of mission and the word *kathôds*. Byrne, *Life*, 338 also notes similarities between the two scenes, but on a different basis than mine.

³⁴ Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:541.

first half of the arc of the pendulum, namely, the downswing; the Book of Glory is the description of the upswing.”³⁵

The movement in 13:1–20 is the same, both physically – Jesus stoops down to wash the disciples’ feet and rises again – and on the level of the text. It goes from saying that Jesus is about to go to the Father and ends with the statement that those who receive one sent by him, receive the one who sent him, i.e. the Father. So the pericope too goes from the Father back to the Father (13:1.20). The central section, which mirrors the sign–discourse pattern, deals with Jesus humbling himself, assuming the task of a slave. At the heart of each section, there is mention of that nadir which is the betrayal.

Schneiders interestingly remarks that nowhere in the Fourth Gospel is the crucifixion presented in terms of humiliation. Rather it is consistently seen as Jesus’ glorification.³⁶ The low point of the Gospel, as expressed by Brown, is not the crucifixion. It is the rejection of Jesus by his people.³⁷ The structure of 13:1–20 proposed above is harmonious with this in that its low point, if imagined as Brown’s pendulum arc, is not the foot-washing itself but Jesus’ knowledge that among those he serves in self-giving love there is a betrayer (13:11), one who remains untouched by the love shown.³⁸

³⁵ Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:541.

³⁶ Schneiders, “The Foot Washing,” 90.

³⁷ Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:541.

³⁸ Byrne, *Life*, 232. Reinhartz, *Befriending*, 63 points out how Judas in a way stands as a representative of the Jews who reject Jesus, a fact even emphasised by the phonetic similarity in Greek between his name, *Ioudas*, and the noun *Ioudaios*.

Less is made of the abasement than of the love motivating it (13:1) and the benefit for the receiver: having a share with/in Jesus (13:8).³⁹ It is indeed an act of humility, in stark contrast to the divine provenance of Jesus insisted on in vv. 1 and 3, and Peter's reaction testifies to this (13:6.8). The foot-washing, like the crucifixion, is a scandal – God's Messiah performing an act of service unworthy of a Jewish slave and dying a death unworthy of a Roman citizen⁴⁰ – but a scandal to be overcome. The real tragedy is “that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light” (3:19).

3.3 Themes

If the foot-washing reflects the larger Gospel in its structure, it is not surprising that within it we find rehearsed some of the main themes of Johannine theology.⁴¹ An in-depth exploration of these would take me beyond the limits of this essay, so I will simply indicate the presence of certain key motifs central to the construction of this pericope.

³⁹ The word *meros* can also be translated as “heritage”. This could be read in the sense of the Pauline “being baptized into Christ” (Romans 6:3), but in a Johannine context also related to the Prologue's ideas of receiving from the fulness of the Word incarnate and becoming children of God, and thus co-heirs with the Son (another notion taken up by Paul in Romans 8). See Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 236, 242–243.

⁴⁰ Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:564; M. Tullius Cicero, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, literally translated by C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903), <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0018:text=Ver.:actio=2:book=5:section=170>, accessed on January 5th 2023.

⁴¹ For an overview of Johannine themes, see Keener, *The Gospel*, 1:233–330; Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 235–236.

We have already noted the themes of descent–ascent⁴² and of Jesus’ foreknowledge⁴³ and therefore free choice of the Passion (13:1–3). The theme of agency can be traced, especially as transferred from Jesus as the Father’s agent to the disciples as Jesus’ and thus ultimately also the Father’s, agents (13:1–3.14–15.16.20).⁴⁴ The theme of misunderstanding⁴⁵ is very clearly present in the dialogue with Peter (13:6–10), along with the theme of rejection⁴⁶ expressed by Judas’ betrayal (13:2.11.18). The act itself unites the themes of water, symbolic action and possible sacramental allusions (13:5.8),⁴⁷ and finally, the theme of receiving Jesus and believing in him is touched on (13:19–20).⁴⁸

Much like the Prologue heralds the main themes of the Gospel,⁴⁹ 13:1–20 also introduces several themes that will be important in what follows. Firstly, the theme of Jesus’ departure and the betrayal, which along with the mention of Passover and “the hour” (13:1) point to the Passion.⁵⁰ Secondly, Jesus’ love for his disciples and their call

⁴² Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 236.

⁴³ Byrne, *Life*, 232; Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 236.

⁴⁴ Peder Borgen, “God’s Agent in the Fourth Gospel,” in *The Interpretation of John*, ed. John Ashton, Issues in Religion and Theology 9 (London: SPCK/Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1986), 71; Keener, *The Gospel*, 1:310–316, 2:914; Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 236; Witherington, *John’s Wisdom*, 237.

⁴⁵ Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 236.

⁴⁶ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 402.

⁴⁷ Brown, *The Gospel*, 2:563; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 401–402; Keener, *The Gospel*, 2:902; Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 164; Witherington, *John’s Gospel*, 236–237, 242.

⁴⁸ Byrne, *Life*, 355; Dodd, *Interpretation*, 179–186.

⁴⁹ Byrne, *Life*, 21.

⁵⁰ Keener, *The Gospel*, 2:914; Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 235.

to mutual love, expressed in loving self-gift, following his command and example (13:1.14–15).⁵¹ Thirdly, the theme of mission (13:16.20), coming to the fore at the very end.⁵² Thus, one might say that the scene functions as a sort of prologue to the Book of Glory, even if it is more connected to what follows than 1:1–18 is to the rest of chapter 1. At least it is, as Keener writes, a “narrative introduction for the final discourse, part of the lengthy prolegomena to the Passion narrative.”⁵³

4. Conclusion

The pericope on the foot-washing has rightly been read above all in relation to the Passion narrative. At the same time, as I have attempted to show, it reflects the structure and movement of the entire Fourth Gospel and sums up its central themes. The whole trajectory of Jesus’ incarnation and glorification can be traced. Like in the Gospel at large, we meet one person who rejects Jesus (Judas) and one who welcomes him, but only after initial resistance and misunderstanding (Peter). Here too, a future yet to come is announced, where those who welcome Jesus are invited to become like him.

One might ask, is anything gained by this for the interpretation of the foot-washing? I would suggest that by emphasising the intimate relationship of this pericope with the rest of the Gospel, its typical Johannine features are highlighted. Just as, for John, the crucifixion represents glorification, the lesson of the foot-washing becomes not a moralistic injunction to self-abasement but an invitation to welcome the gift brought by Jesus and enter into the same movement of love. Having a share with Jesus means not

⁵¹ Köstenberger, *A Theology*, 236.

⁵² Witherington, *John’s Gospel*, 237.

⁵³ Keener, *The Gospel*, 2:899.

only sharing in his divine sonship, but also being part of his mission, as the connection to the sending at the end of the Gospel implies.

We have also noted in passing that reading the rest of the Gospel in light of this pericope serves among other things as a reminder that just as Jesus' act of love was extended even to Judas, so it also encompasses all those who reject him in course of the story. The central place of the betrayal-theme only brings out even more the unconditional nature of this love. Indeed, seeing the foot-washing as a summary of the Gospel, reinforces the thought that, amidst all the polemics and dramatic events, self-giving love is the core of its message.

Being both a proleptic interpretation of the Passion and a miniature version of Jesus' ministry of signs and discourses, the foot-washing connects these two aspects and underlines their basic unity. This safeguards against a one-sided theology placing excessive emphasis on either one to the detriment of the other. The signs of the Book of Signs and the ultimate signs of the Passion and Resurrection have the same purpose as the symbolic act of washing: To reveal the length, or rather, the depth to which God is willing to go in God's saving love – *eis telos*, to the end – and to give life, eternal life, a share with Jesus as a child of God, to all who welcome this truth and come to believe in it.