A Sacramental Reading of John 13:1-38

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Contemporary interpretations of the Fourth Gospel take a variety of positions on sacramental material in this Gospel. At one extreme, some scholars understand many of the events from the life of Jesus in the Gospel as deeply impregnated with a sacramental understanding of God's action in Jesus. Where sacramental teaching is possible, then we must take it for granted that the evangelist implies such. The opposite extreme claims that John has no interest in the idea of sacraments, and may well be "anti-sacramental." Scholars have suggested many nuances between the two extremes. The well-known discussion needs no further survey here.

1 Especially important is O. Cullmann, Early Christian Worship (SBT 10; London: SCM, 1953). I will use the expressions "the evangelist," "the fourth evangelist," and "John" to refer to the real author of the Gospel. The exact identity of the author(s) of the Gospel is not thereby indicated. While we cannot be certain of the gender of the author(s), I will use masculine pronouns out of respect for the tradition which began with John 21:24.


I have argued elsewhere that the Eucharist plays an important role in 6:51c-58 and 19:34. The section of the discourse on the bread of life (6:25-59) devoted to eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood (i.e., vv 51c-58) faces a problem which must have existed within the Johannine community. Throughout the discourse on the bread from heaven which would give life, Jesus has insisted: “Everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life. . . . He who believes has eternal life” (vv 40,46; see also vv 35-36). At the end of the century, the Johannine community can justifiably ask: where is this Son that we may see and believe? They are told, in the explicitly eucharistic teaching of vv 51c-58, that they are called to decision in the celebration of the Eucharist, as they eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man (esp. vv 53-54). It is in the broken body and the split blood of the eucharistic celebration that they shall “look on him whom they have pierced” (19:37).5

The same point is made as the evangelist tells of the blood and water flowing from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus (19:34). John certainly develops a theology of the cross as Jesus’ being lifted up and exalted (3:13-15; 8:28; 12:23,32-33), glorifying the Father (7:37-39; 12:28; 13:31-32, etc.). But where can the Johannine community (and the church of all those “who have not seen and yet believe” [20:29]) find and experience this revelation of God upon the cross? Again, the answer is found in the evangelist’s strong insistence upon the blood and water flowing from the side of the pierced Jesus “that you also may believe” (19:35). The community is linked with Calvary through the presence of the pierced one in their eucharistic celebrations.6

These two major eucharistic texts of the Fourth Gospel develop a theological and pastoral approach which understands eucharist as “presence." Such a theology addresses the needs of a community sensing their distance from the saving events of the life and death of Jesus. John indicates that “it

4 See F. J. Moloney, “When is John Talking about Sacraments?,” AusBR 30 (1982) 10-33. Fuller documentation and a discussion of the various scholarly positions can be found in this article.


is in the Sacraments of Baptism and eucharist that the Johannine Church can find the presence of the absent one.”

This message was addressed to a community wondering—at the end of the first century—where they might encounter the Christ, the Son of God, so that they might come to a deeper faith in him (see 20:31). John was offering a significant response to a troubled community.8 Does this understanding of Eucharist, so strongly concerned with a theology of “the presence of the absent one,” eliminate other early Christian understandings of the Eucharist?9

There is another passage in the Fourth Gospel, sometimes suggested as “sacramental,” which deserves our attention: the narratives of the footwashing and the gift of the morsel in John 13:1-38.10 After the solemn announcement that Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to return to the Father, is about to show his remarkable love for his own “unto the end” (13:1),11 a footwashing and a meal are reported. Several commentators claim that the footwashing has baptismal hints (see especially 13:6-11).12

Jesus’ final meal with his disciples (13:2, 4,12,21-30; 14:31) is eucharistic in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul (Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:26-29; Luke 22:15-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26). But the Fourth Gospel has no parallel to the table ritual reported by the earlier accounts. It is in a discourse beside the lake of Tiberias (6:1) that we find words which recall that tradition. He tells his disciples and “the Jews”: “The bread which I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world” (6:51).13 But are there eucharistic “hints” in the Johannine Last Supper?

7 Moloney, “When is John Talking about Sacraments?,” 25 (see pp. 23-25).


9 I am particularly interested in the important NT witness to the Eucharist as Jesus’ place of encounter with the broken. On this, see F. J. Moloney, “The Eucharist as Jesus’ Presence to the Broken,” Pacifica 2 (1989) 151-74.


11 The Greek expression eis telos has a double meaning. It means both that he loved his own till the end of his life (chronologically) and also that he loved them in a way that has no bounds (qualitatively).


13 It is widely accepted that this formula embodies part of the eucharistic words which would have been used at the celebrations of the Johannine community. On this, see Brown, John, 1. 284-85; J. Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus (London: SCM, 1966) 117-18.
John 13:1-38 and The Last Discourse

John 13:1-38 forms part of a larger literary unity, a so-called last discourse (13:1-17:26) which is marked by a number of well-known literary tensions. A scholar who has devoted great energy to the study of John 13:17, Fernando Segovia, has understandably written: “Nowadays hardly anyone would vigorously maintain that John 13:31-18:1 constitutes a literary unity as it stands.”

If 13:1-17:26 as a whole presents literary problems for the interpreter, severe tensions are found within John 13:1-38 itself. There appears to be a double interpretation of the footwashing scene. The first of these, from vv 6-11, speaks of the disciples’ having a part in the death of Jesus, with possible baptismal contacts. This theme disappears in v 12. Vv 12-20 is a more exhortative passage written to encourage the imitation of Jesus. Because it is judged as “moralistic” in tone, it is often read as a later addition to what was originally a theological reflection on Jesus’ gift of himself to his disciples in love, and an invitation that the disciples join him in the loving gift of themselves. Possible baptismal hints are embedded in this view of “having part” with Jesus’ gift of himself.

It is widely accepted that vv 31-38 should be separated from the more narrative accounts of the footwashing and the gift of the morsel of vv 1-30. It seems clumsy of the evangelist to link Judas’ ominous departure from the upper room into the darkness (v 30) with Jesus’ exultant proclamation: “Now is the Son of Man glorified and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once” (vv 31-32).

The proclamation of the glorification of the Son of Man is judged to be the beginning of the discourse proper. Some scholars understand vv 31-38 as the original introduction to 13:31-14:31, the more primitive form of the discourse, while others see it as a solemn introductory summary to the whole of the discourse in its final form.

The tensions which appear in John 13:1-17:26 have led to the rediscovery of various “strata,” reflecting different stages in the Johannine community’s experience and reflection, embedded in the passage. John 13:1-17:26 is a final collection of many traditions which had been remembered and told in various times and situations throughout the life of the Johannine church.

I have no doubt that 13:1-17:26 had a long and complicated literary history, and that we can trace some of that history, reflecting the history of the community itself, through careful analysis. However, an author consciously took these various strata from the recorded memory of his community and deliberately laid them side by side to form 13:1-17:26 as we now have it. This process may have been repeated many times until the traditional canonical Gospel of John was eventually produced. Because of this process, the final product, even though it sometimes has untidy seams, is thoroughly “Johannine” in all its parts.

Does 13:1-38 offer any satisfaction from a literary and theological point of view? As R. Alan Culpepper has recently asked: “How does this text guide the reader in the construction of its meaning, and what responses does it elicit from the reader?”

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19 See, e.g., Brown, John. 2. 605-16.
20 See, e.g., Barrett, St John, 449-53.
21 This approach has been expertly and sensitively used in the major commentaries of Schnackenburg and Brown. It is the basis of Segovia’s work. See also J. Painter, “The Farewell Discourses and the History of Johannine Christianity,” NTS 27 (1980-81) 525-43.
22 The Gospel as a whole has a unified style and language. See Barrett, St John, 5-15. This is the result of continual reworking over the decades of the Johannine community’s telling and retelling of the story of Jesus.
23 Some scholars are still very critical of the present state of the Gospel. Commenting on John 13:21-30, E. Haenchen (John [Hermeneia; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 2. 112) writes: “One of the most remarkable scenes of the Fourth Gospel has been spoiled by a foolish redactor. One must ask the question: did the author lose control of his sources, or did he impose his own order on them? If the latter, then, as G. Genette has pointed out, reconstituting a text we judge as disarranged is “a most fragile explanation” (G. Genette, Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method [Ithaca: Cornell University, 1980] 144-45). See the whole of pp. 143-55.
24 R. Alan Culpepper, “The Johannine hypodeigma: A Reading of John 13:1-38” (a paper presented to the Gospel of John Seminar, the Society for New Testament Studies, Dublin, Ireland, July 25-28, 1989 [unpublished photocopy]) 1. For some useful remarks on the method used in the following study, see Edgar V. McNickle, Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 234-41 on “coherence as the key to reading.” See, especially, his remarks (pp. 259-41) which conclude: “The meaning of a text is inexhaustible because no context can provide all the keys to all of its possibilities” (p. 241).
The Narrative Design of John 13:1-38

Any attempt to discover how the text (13:1-38) guides the reader in the construction of its meaning must show the structure of the succession of events and actions described in the passage (plot), and to further ask why the evangelist told this particular story in this way (rhetoric). To both the plot and the rhetoric are the people involved in the action (characters).

1. The Structure of the Overall Plot

John 13:1 points the narrative in a new direction. Jesus is now alone with his disciples in the upper room, about to show the immensity of his love. But where does the unit end? Are we to consider only 13:1-30, or did the evangelist originally intend that vv 31-38 be read as belonging to the footwashing and the gift of the morsel?

The material in vv 31-38 is not only discourse. There is an important encounter between Simon Peter and Jesus in vv 36-38 where the future denials of Simon Peter are foretold. This passage closely matches the similar prophecies of the future betrayal of Judas in vv 10-11 and 21-22. An analysis of the plot, the rhetoric, and the characters of the narrative may show close thematic and literary relationships between the prophecies of the betrayal of Judas and the denials of Peter.

One of the features of our passage is the regular appearance of a typically Johannine expression: “Amen, amen I say to you” (see vv 16,20,21,38). This expression is found only in the Fourth Gospel, where it appears 24 times. It appears in 13:1-38 more times (four uses) than in any other chapter of the whole Gospel, and it appears only three times in the rest of the last discourse (14:12; 16:20,23).

The fact that the second reference to the betrayal of Judas (v 21) opens with this Johannine expression, while the prophecy of the denials of Peter closes with it (v 38), indicates a deliberately arranged literary unit. The use of the Johannine expression “amen, amen I say to you” at the beginning and the end of the prophecies of betrayal and denial reported in vv 21-38 keeps the narrative together.

vv 31-38 closely associated with 13:1-30, rather than with the rest of the discourse in chaps. 14-17. The theme of the failure of both Judas and Peter plays no further role in the discourse proper. It does not reappear until the Passion Narrative (18:1-11,15-18,25-27, etc.).

The evangelist’s typical use of the double “amen” serves as a first indication of the particular rhetoric—the basic structure of the material—of this part of his narrative. He has deliberately positioned his double “amen” sayings to create the following carefully structured “plot”:

1. Vv 1-17: This section is formed by the narrative of the footwashing and the discussions which surround that narrative. The section features evangelist’s comments (see v 2), dialogue between Jesus and Peter (vv 6-9), and Jesus’ words on Judas (vv 10-11) along with the failure and ignorance of the disciples. The section concludes with the double “amen” in vv 16-17.
2. Vv 18-20: Here we have only words of Jesus, directed to the disciples. They form the literary “center” of the evangelist’s structure. The section concludes with the double “amen” in v 20.
3. Vv 21-38: Returning to the same form as vv 1-17 we again have narrative and dialogue. The narrative carries the theme of Jesus’ gift of the morsel. The context of betrayal and denial intensifies (vv 21-30,36-38). The section both opens and closes with a double “amen” in vv 21 and 38.

There is a slight difficulty with this structure as the double “amen” does not come at the end of vv 1-17. It appears in v 16, opening two statements from Jesus, one about the relationship between servant and master (v 16) and another about knowing and doing (v 17). Some further explanation is needed.

The author introduces the narrative with vv 1-5. There he lays upon the themes of (a) Jesus and “his own,” (b) his “knowing,” and (c) his “doing”:

“When Jesus knew that his hour had come . . . having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end . . . . Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands . . . rose from the supper, laid aside his garments, and girted himself with a towel.”

Jesus’ “knowing” that his hour had come and that the Father had given all things into his hands led to an active “doing”; he loves his disciples and washes their feet. Thus, the very first statement of the chapter shows the reader that the “knowing” and “doing” of Jesus touches the life of the disciples. The narrative of Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples and his calling...
them, to have part with him follows. At the close of the section, after the solemn introduction of the double “amen,” Jesus tells the disciples that, in their relationship to him as his servants and sent ones (v 16), they are called to repeat exactly what “the master” has done:

If you know THESE THINGS
blessed are you
if you do THESE THINGS (v 17). 30

The first section of Jesus’ encounter with his disciples in the upper room (vv 1-17) is both an indication of the total gift of Jesus for “his own,” through the footwashing, and a call upon them to be so caught up in the new “knowledge” which has been given to them through this gesture of love that they will “do” this in their own lives (see esp. v 15). 31 Culpepper’s question—“What responses does it (the text) elicit from the reader”—is being answered. 32

Although the central issue for the story-teller is Jesus’ self-gift in love and service for his disciples consummated on the cross (19:30), the sacrament of Baptism is also there as a subtheme, sweeping the disciples up into the same self-giving life and death as their master. The close association between Jesus’ instruction to Peter about having part with him and the privileges of those who have bathed, and thus have no further need of washing, in vv 9-10, show that the Johannine community’s practice and understanding of Baptism is close at hand. 33

There is sufficient evidence in other parts of the Gospel that the author and his community practiced Baptism (at least 3:5 and 19:34). 34 The words of Jesus addressed to Peter, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me” (v 8: echeis meros met’ emou), would have recalled that practice to the reader. The baptismal practice of the community provides the background, not the foreground, for the narrative. The author is not concerned with the rite, but with the relationship which Baptism has with the death of Jesus (Rom 6:3). To “have part with Jesus” through washing also means to be part of the act of self-giving love which Jesus revealed in his death. 35 This is the example which he gives his disciples. Their having part with him (through Baptism) challenges them to do as he has done for them: to love unto death (see v 15).

The verb “to know” appears again in v 18: “I know whom I have chosen.” However, another theme is mentioned here which was not found anywhere in vv 1-17. It is not only Jesus’ knowledge which is stressed, but also the fact that he has “chosen” his disciples. This theme is taken further in v 20: “He who receives anyone whom I send receives me.” The “chosen ones” are further described as “anyone whom I send.” The closely linked themes of being chosen and being sent mark the beginning and the end of vv 18-20. 36 The themes of choosing and sending, surrounding Jesus’ statement in v 19 of how and when the disciples will come to understand who he is (“then you will know that I am he”) form a unit, rounded off by the double “amen.”

The double “amen” both opens and closes vv 21-38. The section is also framed with Jesus’ prophecies concerning the failure of members of his innermost circle of friends, the disciples with whom he is sharing his table: Judas (vv 21-30) and Peter (vv 36-38). Intertwined through the passage dealing with the betrayal of Judas is the theme of the gift of the morsel. On receiving the morsel, Judas leaves the upper room, and the passion is set in motion.

This is the significance of the introduction to Jesus’ exultation in v 31a: “When he had gone out . . .” The action of Judas is crucial to John’s understanding of the glorification of Jesus through the cross. If the cross of Jesus

30 The Greek original is beautifully balanced:
   ei TAUTA oidate
   makarioi esti
   ean poiête AÚTA.

31 Culpepper (“The Johannine hypodeigma . . .” 14-15) has pointed out that the Johannine hapax legomenon “hypodeigma,” found in v 15, “occurs in the Septuagint in well-known passages that exhort the faithful to an exemplary death” (p. 14). He cites LXX 2 Mac 6:28,31; 4 Mac 17:22-23; Sirach 44:16. The whole of vv 6-17 is about Jesus’ exemplary death: “Jesus’ death . . . as it is here interpreted through the footwashing, is the norm of life and conduct for the believing community.”

32 See above, n. 24.

33 The “except for his feet” of v 10 was added by later copyists to solve the problem of further forgiveness of sin after Baptism. For details, see Moloney, The Johannine Son of Man, 192-93.

34 On this, see Moloney, “When is John Talking about Sacraments?,” 19-25, and the literature discussed there.

35 See Barrett, St John, 441. See also the eloquent discussion of G. H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1953) 401-2. Following Culpepper’s suggestion (see above, n. 31), I would claim that the whole of vv 6-17 deals with Jesus’ death as hypodeigma and the disciples’ being called to “have part” in this death. The “having part,” however, is not only ethical (Culpepper, “The Johannine hypodeigma . . .” 15-16); it is also sacramental.

36 It could be claimed that there is a possible inclusion between the reference to Judas in vv 10d-11 and the chosen who raised his heel against Jesus in v 18. As well as the structural use of the double “amen” which suggests that vv 18-20 forms the center of the passage, much depends upon the relationship between the pantión hymnòn and the tinás of v 18ab. In my interpretation Jesus’ words “I know whom I have chosen” refer to the disciples at the table who are involved in the raising of the heel. Jesus may not be referring to all of them (pantión hymnòn) but he is referring to some (tinás) whom he has chosen. The singular of v 18d is determined by the use of the OT quotation.
is his exaltation and the place where he glorifies God, then the exit of Judas to betray Jesus unto death leads logically to vv 31-32. One should not make a major break in the narrative between Judas’ exit into the night in v 30 and the words of Jesus in vv 31-32. The reference to Judas in v 31a (hōte oun exēlthen) is there because the evangelist wants the reader to link the two.

Jesus’ triumphant proclamation of his own glorification and the glorification of God belongs to what has gone before. Precisely because he shows forth the glory of God in his gift of himself on the cross, the gift of the new commandment now follows logically. He can now command that his disciples love one another as he has loved them (vv 34-35). The cross is still the paradigm.37

John 13:1-38 has an interplay between “characters” in a narrative. There are dialogues paired with sections without such dialogues. Following the interaction between the characters it is possible to present the two flanking narratives of the footwashing and the gift of the morsel as follows:

1. The footwashing in the context of ignorance and betrayal
   1. The love of Jesus for his own to its perfection (v 1)
   2. The betrayal (v 2)
   3. The gift of example (vv 12-17)

II. The gift of the morsel in the context of ignorance, betrayal, and denial
   1. Jesus troubled in spirit and his witness (v 21a)
   2. The betrayal (vv 21b-25)
   3. The gift of love (vv 31-38)

The narratives of vv 1-17 and 21-38 thus stress the love, knowledge, and action of Jesus as he gives himself in love to his disciples in the midst of their failure: ignorance, betrayal, and denial.38 The centerpiece of the narrative, vv 18-20, is made up entirely of the reported direct speech of Jesus. His words again highlight the themes of his knowledge of his own, the traitor, and the choosing and sending of the disciples.

37 As the “gift” of the hypostōma of Jesus’ death was at the heart of vv 1-17, so the “gift” of the commandment to love unto death, as Jesus has loved, is at the heart of vv 21-38.

38 The use of oudeis in v 28 indicates that not even the Beloved Disciple, who is en ἔτοι κολόπη του Ιησοῦ (v 23), knows why he said this to him. It is sometimes claimed that Jesus tells the Beloved Disciple the identity of the betrayer in v 26a. This is not the case. He is told of the gift of the morsel.

Structurally and thematically the passage unfolds around v 19:

v 18: I am not speaking to you all.
I know whom I have chosen.

v 20: Amen, amen I say to you,
he who receives anyone whom
I sent receives me,
and he who receives me
receives him who sent me.

v 19 I tell you this now before
it takes place that you
may believe when it does
take place that I AM HE.

Forming a central statement between the narratives of the footwashing and the gift of the morsel, John reports Jesus’ choosing and sending his disciples (vv 18-20). Although brief, the central statement is a recognition of Jesus’ choosing and sending disciples who share the table with him, yet raise their heel against him (v 18b). Read within the whole chapter, Jesus tells disciples who will betray him, that he is telling them these things before they happen, so that when the denials, betrayals, and the death of Jesus have been perpetrated by the very ones whom Jesus has chosen and sent, then they will come to belief in Jesus as “I am he.” John 2:22 and 12:16 show that such was the case for the Johannine community.39


Our analysis of the narrative technique used by the fourth evangelist can now be summarized. The account of the footwashing (vv 1-17) is marked by Jesus’ knowledge of his own—knowledge even of the betrayer—and his love for them. He washes their feet and leaves them the gift of his example: “that you should do as I have done for you” (v 15). The account of the gift of the morsel (vv 21-38) repeats the structure and the themes of the footwashing. He knows his disciples. Not only does he know of his betrayer; he also knows of the future denials of Peter. In the midst of these themes of ignorance, betrayal, and denial, Jesus gives the new commandment of love: “that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (v 34).

Between these two parallel passages words of Jesus are reported (vv 18-20). He tells his failing disciples that his loving them in the midst of their

ignorance, betrayal, and denial will reveal him as ego eimi. The structure of the passage can be presented as a chiasm:

13:1-5
Perfected love
linked to betrayal  A

13:1-38
The Exit of Judas
A1 The Gift of love
The Denials of Peter

13:6-11
What Jesus does
(the footwashing)
Ignorance of Peter  B
The knowledge of Jesus
About the traitor

13:12-17
Amen, amen
Blessedness  C

13:21-26a
Amen, amen
Betrayal  C1

D
13:18-20
The knowledge of Jesus
about his chosen ones
(including the betrayer)
Amen, amen
Mission
EGO EIMI

The evangelist has used the various elements which form a narrative—plot, characters, and rhetoric—to tell a story of the footwashing and the gift of the morsel as an introduction to both the last discourse and the Passion of Jesus.

God’s Love Is Made Known

What responses does John 13:1-38 elicit from the reader? We read of the ignorance, betrayal, and denial of Jesus by the disciples with whom he shares his table. Similar attention is given to Jesus’ commitment to these same disciples, “his own,” loving them until death (13:1), washing their feet (vv 4-11) and sharing bread, even with his betrayer (vv 21-30). The center of the narrative (vv 18-20) is crucial for its overall message.

Here we find the careful presentation of a fundamental Johannine concept. Jesus knows whom he has chosen. These very ones, whose feet he has washed (vv 1-17) and who have received the morsel (vv 21-38), will turn against him (see v 18). These are the ones he has chosen. However, the cruel reality of their turning against him (vv 2-3, 10-11, 21-30, 36-38), their lifting their heel against their host (v 18b), alters nothing. In fact, he will send them forth as his representatives and as the representatives of his Father (vv 18a, 20). It is in the acceptance of these failed, yet loved, disciples that one will receive both Jesus and the Father (v 20).40

It is Jesus’ choosing and sending ignorant and failing disciples, dramatically portrayed in the abject failure of both Judas and Peter, that Jesus’ uniqueness and oneness with God can be seen. His love for his failing disciples is, above all, the final proof for his claim to be the one who makes God known (17:2-3). He does not reveal the love of God through any acclaim gained by a human success story. He reveals the love of God by loving unto death those intimate friends and associates who have betrayed and denied him. This is the message which the Johannine Jesus leaves his disciples, as they gather at his table on the night before he died. It is in these very events, when these things “take place,” that the disciples may come to know and believe that Jesus can claim “I AM HE.” They will have indeed been loved “to the end” (13:1) by one whom they have betrayed and denied. Little wonder that the final triumphant words of the Johannine Jesus on the cross are: “My task has been brought to its perfection” (19:30: tetelestai). He has accomplished the task which the Father gave him to do (4:34; 17:4).

This is a remarkable understanding of God, of Jesus, and of his self-giving love for his disciples. Jesus loves his own so much that he chooses them (v 18a) and sends them out as his very own presence (v 20). Yet these loved ones are responsible for his death on a cross (v 18b). It is precisely in his unconditional gift of himself to people who do not love him that Jesus reveals who he is and what he is doing. He reveals a God who loves (3:16) and who is love (1 John 4:8, 16), but the quality of that love is incomprehensible when measured by human criteria and the limited human experience of love. Revealed here is God’s love, which transcends and challenges all human criteria and human experience.41

On the cross love is revealed. Gazing upon the very one whom they have pierced (see 19:37), disciples will come to understand how much God loves

40 J. S. Staley (The Print’s First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel [SBLDS 82; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988] 107-11) uses rhetorical criticism to show that the disciples’ failure and ignorance in 13:1-30 “victimizes” the implied reader. He (she) is stung into recognizing that his (her) own knowledge is not superior to that of the disciples. I suspect the relationship between the implied author and the implied reader of the Fourth Gospel is more honest. There is an unacceptable hint of an unreliable narrator through the whole of Staley’s study.

41 S. Schneiders (“The Footwashing [John 13:1-20]: An Experiment in Hermeneutics,” CBJ 43 [1981] 76-92, esp. pp. 84-86) presents three models of service. She claims that Jesus’ washing his disciples’ feet is a model of service between friends. I am suggesting that there is a further quality of love shown here: a love unto death of friends who have betrayed and denied the one who loves still.
Augustine asks how immediately after the reception of the Eucharist (v 26), Satan enters into Judas (v 27). It is this juxtaposition of Jesus’ gift of himself and the presence of the archetypal thief which has led interpreters to question the eucharistic nature of the meal.46

The Johannine portrait of Judas is even more severe than that of the Synoptics. As soon as he appears in the narrative (6:70-71), the reader meets Jesus’ description of him: “one of you is a devil” (v 70), and then reads the author’s comment: “He spoke of Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him” (v 71). The reader’s next encounter with Judas strengthens the negative portrait. Judas is annoyed at the lavish anointing of 12:1-3 (see vv 4-5). His annoyance is explained by a comment from the author: “This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief” (12:6). As the meal reported in 13:1-38 opens, the author again comments: “the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him” (13:2). Armed with this knowledge, the reader arrives at the point in the narrative where Jesus gives him the morsel (13:26). Little wonder that traditional Christianity has difficulty in accepting that the morsel be understood as eucharistic. Is it possible that the author of the Fourth Gospel could have presented Judas as the evil disciple, and yet still understand the morsel given to him in 13:26 as eucharistic?

The Johannine argument which we have been pursuing throughout this study may guide us here.47 The whole of 13:1-28 is a carefully presented account which proclaims that Jesus is glorified (vv 31-32), that he shines forth as the revelation of God (ego eimi) in his unconditional love for ignorant disciples who betray and deny him (vv 18-20). No narrative could portray such incredible love better than a story telling that Jesus of Nazareth, on the night before he died, gave the eucharistic morsel to Judas. It is not as if Judas is yet another example of a failing disciple. He is the evil disciple, the betrayer (6:71; 12:4; 13:2), the thief (12:6), the one touched by the devil (6:70; 13:2). Yet the morsel is given to Judas.

However effective such a psychological argument may be, it is not sufficient to establish the eucharistic nature of the narrative of the gift of the morsel, particularly in the light of the horror that such a suggestion might

42 See, among many works written on the use of “I am he” in the Fourth Gospel, P. B. Harner, The “I am” of the Fourth Gospel (FBRS 26; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), and the summary of Brown, John, 2, 533-38.

43 Culpepper (“The Johannine hypodeigma...”) develops the thesis “that the theme of knowledge and ignorance is central to the narrative strategy of John 13.” I agree; however, these themes serve to throw into relief the central message of the narrative: love.

44 I have no intention of questioning the value of the scholarship which attempts to rediscover the various “strata” which stand behind the last discourse. However, many scholars simply ignore the importance of the structure and message of the text as we now have it. It is interesting to find that Haenchen (John, 2, 109-10) regards vv 18-20 (central in my structure) as “a later addition...a redactional insertion” (p. 109), and that v 20 “does not belong to this context at all” (p. 110). Even if that is so, why was it inserted, and what does it mean in the text as we now have it? On this, see above, n. 23. For Haenchen’s final overview of the significance of 13:1-30, see pp. 110-14, where the love theme is rightly stressed, but the role of the chosen but failing disciples is completely missed.


46 For a presentation of the discussion, see M.-J. Lagrange, Evangile selon Saint Jean (EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 1927) 362-63. Most modern scholars regard the use of the morsel either as a method of eliminating Judas from the upper room (e.g., Schnackenburg, St John, 3, 30) or as an indication that here Judas chooses Satan rather than Jesus (e.g., Brown, John, 2, 578).

47 It is because the full implications of the Johannine argument of the revelation of Jesus’ love for his failing disciples eis telos have not been given full weight that scholars shy clear of the eucharistic interpretation of the passage. Those who have seen it as eucharistic (e.g., A. Loisy and W. Bauer) use 1 Cor 11:29 to claim that Satan enters Judas because he takes the eucharistic morsel without discerning. They miss the point entirely. For the discussion, see Brown, John, 2, 575 and Lagrange, Saint Jean, 362-63.
create. One needs more evidence in the detail of the text itself which would indicate that the evangelist wanted the readers to understand this part of his narrative as a reference to the Eucharist. Subtle though the fourth evangelist may be, he would have made his point more clearly if he intended his readers to see a eucharistic subtheme in vv 21-30.

In v 18 the evangelist cites LXX Ps 41:10b: “He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.” The LXX translation of the first part of the psalm (“He who ate my bread”) reads: ὁ ἐσθιόν ἄρτους μου. However, John has not used ἐσθιέν. He acknowledges that the passage comes from Scripture, but renders the text as: ὁ τρώγετε μου οὖν ἄρτον. The evangelist uses the verb τρώγετε.

There appears to have been a deliberate replacement of the usual, more “proper” word for “eating” (ἐσθιέν) which is found in the LXX psalm. The verb which has been used to replace it (τρώγετε) is a less delicate term. It means “to munch,” or “to crunch with the teeth.” John has used the same forceful and very physical verb for “eating” on three other occasions. There he used it to indicate that he was referring to physical eating, in the eucharistic passage of 6:51c-58:49

6:54: He who eats (ὁ τρώγον) my flesh and drinks my blood
6:56: He who eats (ὁ τρώγον) my flesh and drinks my blood
6:57: He who eats (ὁ τρώγον) me will live because of me

The fourth evangelist has deliberately changed the verb in his citation of the Greek of the psalm to link the gift of the morsel in 13:26, already prophesied by Jesus’ use of Scripture in v 18, with the most explicit eucharistic material in the Gospel: 6:51c-58.

The use of Ps 41:10 may have been a part of the early church’s traditional explanation of what happened at the Last Supper. Mark 14:18 makes reference to it: “One of you will betray me, one who is eating (ὁ ἐσθιόν) with me.” Mark uses the more “correct” verb for eating at table. Although he does not quote the psalm, the same tradition could be behind Luke’s

words of Jesus at the Last Supper: “Behold the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table” (Luke 22:21). The fourth evangelist has deliberately refashioned this OT passage, used by the early church in close association with the Supper narrative. He has thus linked his gift of the morsel to Judas with the Last Supper in the tradition, as evidenced by the use of Ps 41:10 by Mark and possibly by Luke.

John has developed the use of an OT passage from the tradition and he has rewritten it, using the verb τρώγετε. The morsel is thus linked with the flesh and blood of the Son of Man referred to in the clearest eucharistic material in the Gospel: the discourse by the lake of Tiberias (John 6:51c-58). These eucharistic hints would not be missed by John’s audience.

A textual difficulty in v 26b can now be resolved. The RSV reads: “So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.” However, many ancient manuscripts read: “So when he had dipped the morsel, he took it and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.” The inclusion of the reference to Jesus’ taking the morsel (καὶ λαμβάνει) would recall Jesus’ deliberate action of taking bread in the bread miracles in all four Gospels (Mark 6:41; 8:6; Matt 14:19; 15:36; Luke 9:16; John 6:11). All these passages are eucharistic.50 The same expression is found in the Synoptic and Pauline reports of the Last Supper (Mark 14:22; Matt 26:26; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:23).

Given the eucharistic hints involved in his use of the verb τρώγετε in the quotation from Psalm 41 in v 18, I would further argue that the evangelist originally wrote that Jesus “takes” the morsel before giving it to Judas.51 This expression should not be eliminated from the text as evidence of a scribal accommodation to other eucharistic passages.52 It should be included because 13:26b is a eucharistic text. Although John is not depending upon the synoptic tradition here, he deliberately links the gift of the morsel with eucharistic traditions which the Johannine community held in common with the early church.53

48 There has been some discussion on the significance of the two verbs in the late Greek of the NT. See C. Spieq, “Trōgein: Est-il synonyme de phagein et d’estheïne dans le Nouveau Testament?,” NTS 26 (1979-1980) 414-19. After a survey which shows a blurring of the distinctions between the verbs, Spieq is still able to conclude: “Jamais, jusqu’à saint Jean, trōgein n’a été utilisé dans un texte religieux. L’Évangéliste emploie pour insister sur le réalisme dans la manucipation, tout en indiquant qu’il ne s’agit pas d’une impossible ‘anthropophagie’” (p. 419).
49 There has been much discussion for and against the eucharistic nature of John 6. But even those who would prefer to argue that the Fourth Gospel is a purely “word” Gospel, without reference to the sacraments, find it impossible to explain away the clearly eucharistic themes of 6:51c-58. As such, they would generally relegate this passage to the hand of a later redactor. For a full discussion with bibliographical references, see Moloney, The Johannine Son of Man, 87-107.
50 As well as the commentators, see J.-M. van Cangh, La Multiplication des Pains et L'Eucharistie (LD 86; Paris: Cerf, 1975); B. van Iersel, “Die Wunderbare Speisung und das Abendmahl in den Synoptischen Tradition (Mk VI 35-44 par., LUXX 1-20 par.),” NT 7 (1964) 167-94.
51 The editors of UBSGNT thought that it should be included. See also Schnackenburg, St John, 3.30.
52 As many commentators would claim: see, e.g., Barrett, St John, 447; Brown, John, 2. 575; Haenchen, John, 2. 113; Lindars, John, 459. The difficulties which the gift of the morsel created for the scribes can be sensed in the confusion of the eucharistic tradition for the whole of this verse, not only for the inclusion of the kai lambanei. For details, see B. M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (London/New York: UBS, 1971) 241.
53 The Greek word used for “morsel” (ἐσθιόν) could refer to a morsel of either bread or meat. I am taking it for granted that bread is referred to here. See, however, Lagrange, Saint Jean, 362, who argues that it was meat.
We can now claim that there are sufficient indications in the text itself to argue that a subtheme to the meal, the gift of the morsel and of the new commandment in vv 21-38, is eucharistic, just as a subtheme to the footwashing and the gift of example in vv 1-17 was baptismal. The whole of 13:1-38 indicates that Jesus shows the quality of his love—a love which makes God known—by choosing, forming, sending out, and nourishing his disciples of all times, catching them up in the rhythm of his own self-giving life and death.54 Within the context of a meal which is indicated as eucharistic, Jesus gives the morsel to the most despised “character” in the Gospel’s narrative: Judas!

As John wrote his Gospel at the end of the first century, he was well aware that disciples always have and always will display ignorance, fail Jesus and deny him, and that some may even betray him in an outrageous and public way. But this is precisely the point of his understanding of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus’ never-failing love for such disciples, a love which even reached out to the archetype of the evil disciple, that he shows that he is the unique revelation of God among us. The text calls for the reader’s response to this God through a commitment to a similar quality of love (vv 15-17,34-35).

It has long been suspected that the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist may be hidden beneath the narrative of John 13. I am suggesting that behind the story of the footwashing (vv 1-17) there is the call to disciples to recognize that their Baptism summons them to the ways of their Master (v 16). The “story” of Jesus’ self-giving for them, acted out in the footwashing, calls them to recognize that they have been called “to have part” in Jesus (v 8), to be swept up into the same rhythm of self-giving love: “I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (v 15). This is what is meant by: “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (v 17).

Matching the footwashing (vv 17-1), the evangelist has told the story of the gift of the morsel (vv 21-38). The themes of betrayal and denial become more explicit (vv 21-22,27-30,36-38). “And it was night” (v 30). Yet, because of the fourth evangelist’s remarkable understanding of God as a Father who loves the world so much that he gave his only Son for its life (3:16-17), Judas’ departure into the night to betray Jesus cannot lead to darkness. It is the beginnings of a process which will eventually lead to Jesus’ enthronement on the cross (18:33,36-37; 19:3,5,12-16,19,15-27,38-42). It is as the crucified that Jesus is king, and it is as lifted up upon the cross (3:14; 8:28; 12:32-33) that he both achieves the greatest moment in his presence among us (4:34; 17:4; 19:30) and reveals the glory of God (8:28; 12:28; 13:31-32).55

Because this is the case, the sharing of the table and the gift of the morsel shed light in the darkness. Like the footwashing, they look to Jesus’ total gift of himself in love to “his own” on the cross for its meaning. His loving self-gift leads easily into a commandment which is a further “gift”: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (v 34). How are these Christians, at the end of the first century, to know and experience the way in which Jesus has loved them? Wherein do they find the model which stands at the basis of the new commandment (see also 15:12,17)?

As they celebrate the presence of their absent Lord in the Eucharist (6:51c-58; 19:34), they are to recall that night on which he gave the morsel unconditionally to the one who failed him most (Judas). The Johannine community at the Eucharist came to know and experience the remarkable love which Jesus had shown them. The new commandment of love (vv 34-35) summons them to exercise their discipleship, in the midst of their difficulties and failure, making that love known. “By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v 35).

Concluding

Eucharist is not the main feature of John 13. Like the baptismal hint in vv 1-17, the eucharistic practice of the community forms the background, not the foreground to the narrative of vv 21-38. The story of the gift of the eucharistic morsel is not important in itself; it forms part of a portrait of the Johannine Jesus who summoned the church to a new quality of love (vv 13-17,34-35). He was able to do this because he gave himself in love to disciples who did not love him in the same way. He gave himself even to Judas.

Léon-Dufour has recently stressed that the eucharistic traditions of the earliest church have been transmitted in two forms: the cultic form and the testamentary form.56 In his analysis of the Johannine material, he writes that chaps. 13–16 avoid the “cultic” form, but contain an important eucharistic witness in the “testamentary” form: “The love Christians have for one another is the real symbol of Christ’s presence in this world.”57

54 Jesus’ death is not only a hypodeigma calling for an ethic of love unto death. It is that, but it is also “present” to the community in its celebration of Baptism and Eucharist. See above, nn. 31 and 35.
55 As McKnight (Post-Modern Use of the Bible, 200) has remarked: “Narrative addressed to the people of God does not merely recount what happened in the lives of their ancestors. There is not simply a historical and an exegetical ‘telling’ on the part of the narrator; there is also a dramatic ‘showing’.”
56 On this, see the recent synthesis of I. de la Potterie, The Hour of Jesus: The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus according to John (London: SPCK, 1989).
58 Ibid., 252. See pp. 249-52 for his remarks on John 13–16.