A SERVICE OF SACRIFICAL LOVE
Footwashing (John 13:1-11)

Hugo Zorrilla

Few chapters of the Bible have had so many focuses, such varied interpretations and so many ecclesial practices as John 13, and in particular, John 13:1-11. Indeed, the gospel of John is not a biography of Jesus. It is a Christological understanding of the practices of Jesus. We recognize that every approach to the gospel text as a hermeneutical option lets us see that we are interpreting an interpretation. That is to say, the believing community subordinated the historical facts to the theological interpretation of Jesus, the Christ.

The literary and theological cohesion in the Fourth Gospel is found in the Christological understanding of the life and the practice of Jesus. Jesus is condemned and executed by those who did not receive him, and they were his own people. This line of Johannine interpretation is central and runs through the whole gospel. Parallel to this also is the command to Jesus’ disciples that they be obedient. This will take them in the same path as their Master. The practice and mission of Jesus is continued by the practice and mission of “his own” in the midst of a hostile and violent world. These thematic lines illuminate the understanding and the appropriation of our text.

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The General Context

John 13:1-11 lies within a larger context that has to do with Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem. He attended all the Jewish feasts during his ministry (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles and Dedication). This last feast will be the scene for Jesus again to show his love, even to death, for his own. It will also serve to separate the Jewish passover from the Christian passover. Also, with this text, the second part of the gospel begins. In this second part, other emphases are given. Jesus now dedicates Himself exclusively to his disciples (chaps. 13—21). Before, in the first part the love of the Father is revealed to the world (chaps. 1—12). But the world rejects his Son, and many of the disciples who followed Jesus deserted his ranks. The central theme in this first part is life given to the world. Jesus is life and he is the giver of life. Now, in this second part, Jesus gives his life as a demonstration of this sacrificial love. It is worthy to note that the theme of life begins to decrease in the gospel and the theme of love begins growing: in chapters 1-12 life appears 50 times and love only 6 times; while in chapters 13-21 life appears 6 times and love 31 times.

Since his “hour has come” Jesus dedicates himself to his disciples. In a farewell setting because he is going to the Father, Jesus seeks with his words and actions to commit his disciples to obedience in the midst of a repressed setting of a world which hates them to death. In other words, with the footwashing, the challenge for the disciples to follow in the steps of the Master begins. In effect, the Christological emphasis on obedience in 13:1-11 is expressed concretely in the missionary history of the disciples. For this, Jesus prays (17:18) and he commissions them again when he is glorified.

Another aspect that should be considered in Johannine theology is the characterizations of Judas and of Peter in their roles of desertion and denial in following Jesus. Here in chapter 13, in the context of the last supper of Jesus with his disciples, Judas and Peter appear in conflict with the demands of Jesus, powerless and incapable of assimilating the demands of following him. Likewise, they appear in chapter 6 after the “bread of life” discourse. Judas is chosen, along with Peter as one of the twelve, but is identified as “the devil” (6:70; cf. 13:2). It appears that, for the evangelist, in this last supper charged with profound feelings of farewell and of commitment, the role of Judas is more than scandalous: he is the traitor because he rejects the divine identity of Jesus as the Messiah. Of the eight times Judas is mentioned in this gospel, four are in connection with the last supper.

It is helpful to ask, How did the first readers of the gospel understand the words and expressions of Jesus in 13:1-11? Possibly this section of the
footwashing was always seen together with the last supper in a context of farewell. That is to say, if the evangelist implies the institution of the Lord's supper, then it is to be intimately related to the servile expressions of Jesus in the washing of the feet of his disciples. The synoptic gospels do not record this incident, just as John does not make the details of the last supper explicit. Luke 22:22-27, where Jesus presents himself as an example to give his life, is the closest to John's record; Mark 10:45 where his service is to give his life in ransom for many has a tone not unlike John's story.

The Literary Context

John 13:1-11 forms a stylistic and thematic part of the five chapters connected with the Passover of Jesus. These chapters, a discursive block, contain a clear Christological elaboration unique in the gospels. Their content serves not only as a farewell, but as a theological foundation for the new community of believers.

The larger literary framework (chaps. 13-17) shows a thematic unity in relation to the Passover of Jesus. He goes out of this world where He leaves his disciples and he returns to the Father. Jesus gives the glory of the Father to his disciples. In fact, it is here in the context of chaps. 13-17 that for the last time the theme of "the glory" appears (17:5, 22, 24). All this discursive section has the footwashing narrative as a vestibule to the passion of Jesus which begins in 18:1. Between the narrative passage of the footwashing (13:1ff.) and the delivery and death of Jesus (18:1ff.), there is a discursive body where "the hour" arrived for Jesus. Here his love for "his own", and the presence of the Father who had given him all things are prominent.

As in the gospel of Matthew the teaching of Jesus is centered in the so called "Sermon on the Mount" (chaps. 5-7), so the gospel of John is centered in the so-called "Farewell Discourses" (chaps. 13-17). New Testament criticism recognizes that the Johannine material is organized into two categories: narration (signs) and discourses (dialogue). The signs serve to motivate the dialogue, the discussion or the conflict. The narrative as well as the discursive aspect seek to have the readers discover the revelation of the love of the Father and, through the Christological emphasis, the messianic identity of Jesus.

In chapters 13-17 we find a structure familiar within the gospel, not only as to type of material but as to the way in which the material is organized. There is a sign, expression or example in the supper; then the discursive material appears in the same unit of time and space. A change is signalled in 18:1: "having said these things. . .". Thus the gospel takes
us to the sign, par excellence, outside the city at Calvary. The material is framed in a temporal unit, “Before the Passover,” a time which was seen to have come as the fulfillment of his “hour” (“the Passover was near” 11:55; “six days before the Passover” 12:1), and in a spatial unit which is the place where they dined. Also the characters are identified as interlocutors of Jesus. They are “his own”, those whom the Father had given him, and whom Jesus himself had chosen (13:1; 15:16, 19; 17:6, 9, 11).

Chapters 13-17 have great theological importance since they shed light on the earlier chapters (1-12), and without them, the following chapters (18-21) would not be understood. Using literary analysis, it is noted that the material in chaps. 13-17 is organized between the narrative and the discursive, and that it is structured in a concentric, circular or chiasmic form as follows:

A. 13:1-30 An act of love with the disciples

B. 13:31-14:31 Desertion and discourses of comfort

C. 15:1-17 Unity and love with Christ in the persecution

D. 15:18-25 United to Jesus before the hatred of the world

C’. 15:26-16:4b United to Jesus in the persecution

B’. 16:4c-33 Discourses of comfort


Since the setting is the farewell, there is little narrative, but much discursive material. This way of organizing the material comes from the tradition of the farewells of the Old Testament. To this tradition belong the farewells of Isaac (Gen. 27), Jacob (Gen. 49), Moses (Deut. 31-33), Joshua (Josh. 24) and Samuel (1 Sam. 12). This form of expressing the history and the teaching of the biblical characters in their “last goodbye” continued as a legacy or a spiritual testament in the pseudepigraphic book “Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs”. The farewell of Paul to the brethren in Ephesus also follows this form (acts 20:17-38).

The structural elements of farewells in John 13-17 are identified as follows:

**Setting** - He who is leaving or will die calls his own so that they are together before the separation (13:4, 5; 17:9).

**Memory** - Experiences lived with the children or the disciples are remembered (13:33; 14:9, 25, 26; 15:14, 15).

**Exhortation** - The departing one calls for love and loyalty (13:14, 34, 35; 15:4, 5).

**Admonition** - Before the danger, now that they are alone an admonition is given ((16:1-4).

**Transfer** - Powers for the entrusted task are given (14:16-20; 16:7; 17:18).
Expectations - Expressions of hope in the promises of God are made (14:3; 15; 17:24).

A discrepancy is introduced in this farewell: the violent death of Jesus and the certainty of reuniting with his disciples. Perhaps because of this, the allegory of Jesus as the true vine is central in this farewell material. The disciples had to continue united to him, in the midst of a hostile world, if they were to bear fruit. To separate themselves from the Lord represented disloyalty, and placed into question their identity as the sons of God. The spiritual testament of Jesus is transmitted fundamentally so that his disciples fulfil the task of witnesses in the world. That is why he left them the commandment of love and the presence of the Spirit in the community.

John 15:18-25 is the center of the chiasm. As such it plays a basic role in the whole section; it also reflects the setting of the aggressions in which the Johannine community lived. Because of this, any interpretation that tends to separate the commitment to Jesus from the act of footwashing, jeopardizes a direct appropriation between the disciples, the immediate readers of the gospel and the future believers. The element of continuity between the hearers of the testament of Jesus and the readers of this testament is real and genuine through the Spirit sent, and because each one has been a witness and continues testifying of Jesus in the world (17:14-18).

Literary Analysis of John 13:1-11

The text under study begins with a very solemn introduction, one characterized by indifference toward the Jews of Jerusalem. This city is not mentioned after 12:12, something that is surprising, above all, considering the happenings of the final week. From this point on, everything is directed to the community of believers. Jesus dies crucified "near the city". He returns glorified to be in the midst of his own. The Jews remain in darkness associated with the hatred of the world.

At this last supper, with its expression of the Master’s sacrificial love, the figure of a traitor stands out prominently, especially so if one keeps in mind the loving manner in which Jesus washed the feet of all the disciples. The traitor appears in the story structure on a semantic level of enmity, hatred, delivery and homicide, and so on line opposite to love, service, friendship and loyalty to Jesus by his own. The act of Judas, coming out of the darknesses of night (13:30), precipitates death. Such an act disconnects him from the community of the faithful. The lineal form of the text can be diagrammed as follows:
The first understanding of the expression of Jesus, (vv. 6-10) as well as the second (vv. 12-20) are two readings of the same tradition:

- "you will understand later" v. 7
- "if I don’t wash you" v. 8
- "and you will be clean" v. 10
- "because he knows" v. 11

In verses 6-10 the emphasis on Jesus' action results in the cleansing or purification of the disciples, while in vv. 12-20 the emphasis is on the example of the humility and love of the Master. The most immediate context of the passage under study is chapter 13, whose contents can be textually organized in a circular or chiasmic form.

A. vv. 1-5 The expression of love in service
   B. vv. 6-11 The theme of cleansing
      C. vv. 12-17 The example of the Master
      D. vv. 18-20 The commitment to Jesus
C’. vv. 21-26 The example of the Master
B’. vv. 27-30 The theme of treason
A’. vv. 31-38 The expression of love in service

The center on which all the structure of the chiasm turns and is understood is precisely in vv. 18-20. Faithfulness to the Lord is shown in receiving those whom he has chosen, and those the Father has received. In the background of this missiological focus, the figures of Judas and Peter are reflected: it is very possible that Jesus is thinking not only of the disciples listening to his words, but also of the future readers who will receive the message that is sent.

Textual analysis of John 13:1-11

The material of John. 13:1-11 can be organized into four moments: 1) the introduction where the sacrificial love of Jesus for his own can be seen and where from the point of view of the confabulation against the Master Judas plays a central part (vv. 1-3); 2) the description of footwashing...
A SERVICE OF SACRIFICIAL LOVE

(vv.4-5); 3) the resistance of Peter and his lack of understanding this act of Jesus (6-10); and 4) the treacherous attitude of Judas (v. 11). We will examine each element separately.

**The hour of Jesus, vv. 1-3.**

The evangelist emphasizes the Christological plan that has been shown in the whole gospel. At the same time, with this introduction, that which has been the glory of God manifested to the world, is separated from the glory of God which will be revealed to his disciples.

Jesus knows that he will return to the Father and that he has put everything under his power. For this reason he performs this act of washing the disciples’ feet, even though there is a spirit of treason in the very center of the Upper Room.

A. Jesus knowing that his hour had come...  
B. Loving his own who were in the world...  
B'. During the last supper, as the devil prompted Judas...  
A'. Jesus knowing that the Father has given all...

A and A' are similar through their verbal structure, leaving B and B' in the center of the chiasm as sentences of participation which allude directly to the disciples. “Before the feast of the Passover” and “during the supper” are concrete temporal facts. Everything in the scenario of this supper will be very different and nontraditional. In fact, the footwashing is not before the meal as was customary, neither was it after. It came during the meal. While eating Jesus demonstrates a very radical service of sacrificial love.

With this so solemn introduction, Jesus appears as the owner of the situation; nothing takes him by surprise. He knows that “his hour has come”, which is finally fulfilled with his exclamation in 19:30 “It is finished!” From his first sign in Cana, he does not hasten the events toward his “hour” even though the authorities look for opportunities to end his life, cutting short his time (2:4; 4:21, 23; 7:6, 8, 33; 8:20; 12:23).

It is very clear that the temporal idea is intimately related to the idea of death that Jesus suffered at Calvary. For the evangelist, it is a return to where he had come from. It is an assent (anábasis), a being elevated because he had come down (katábasis). Now the evangelist uses two verbs of knowing: ginósko (to know, to find out, to experience v. 2) and oída (to understand, to recognize, to acknowledge v. 3). Every time the evangelist speaks of the familiarity of Jesus, or puts knowing Jesus on his lips, he uses the verb oída in different tenses and modes.

Jesus shows how much he loved his disciples: “until the end”. This is a prepositional phrase that can be understood quantitively, “until the
final instant”, or qualitatively, “to the extreme” or “completely”. Now, how did he show this love to his own? Three answers can be given: 1) in the footwashing; 2) in death at Calvary; and 3) in both signs as expressions of the same Christological revelation. This love is expressed before and after the supper and thus 13:1 remains in the center. In the same way Jesus’ action of “taking off his outer clothing” and of “putting it on again” has its parallel in 10:17 and in 15:13 as a direct reference to the death of Jesus in his hour. He gives his life and he takes it again. This parallelism can be diagramed as follows:

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<td>Love giving his life</td>
<td>Life in obedience</td>
<td>I give it</td>
<td>He laid aside</td>
<td>I take it and taking</td>
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**The sign of Jesus (vv. 4,5).**

The previous verses serve as a preamble to the expression of Jesus. Also, they are worded in such a way that they justify and take steps toward the action. They are temporal, causal and modal explanations and they join v. 1 with v. 2:

JESUS KNOWS

- that his hour had come...
- that he had loved his own...
- that the Father gave him all things...
- that he had come from the Father...

In relation to his messianic task

In relation to his messianic origin

There is a drastic change in the wording of verses 4 and 5, with the verbs in the historic present. This love of Jesus is expressed concretely in the very specific actions in the Upper Room. It is so much so that there are eight verbs in these two brief verses. It is a compressed description of the activity of Jesus utilizing verbs.

The sacrificial love of Jesus is a permanent service which makes history in the open wound of his side (19:34) from where blood and water issued. It is surprising to see how the evangelist describes Jesus’ actions in detail. Jesus wrapped the towel of serves around his waist, but the narrator never indicates that he removed it to put on his outer garments and return to the table again (vv. 4-5). For the evangelist, the action by the Master of being a servant is important and therefore he insists that Jesus wraps the towel around himself (v. 4) and that he washes the feet of the disciples. In a reiterative way the evangelist explains that the towel “was wrapped around him” (v. 5).
The rejection of Jesus (vv 6-10).

It is very probable that Jesus began to wash the disciples' feet without any special order. Peter manifests a lack of understanding. He protests and rejects the role that Jesus plays here. Peter calls Jesus Lord, but objects to the lordship of Jesus in the action of washing, and to the person of the Master himself: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Since this is a technical wording of John, the dialogue shows the lack of understanding, and at the same time indicates the new teaching of Jesus which brings about the revelation of his messianic identity.

For Jesus there is a "now" and a "later". This temporal tension is seen in the gospel where the identity and the words of Jesus are not understood. In fact, the final wording of the gospel is given in the "later" time of the Johannine community. Jesus' declarations will be written from the historic memory or from recall (2:22; 7:39; 12:16). Others also, like Peter (13:8-10; 21:15) do not readily apprehend what Jesus tells them: Nathanael (1:48-51), Nicodemus (3:3-5), Martha (11:20-27), and Thomas (20:26-29).

The expression "not have a part with Jesus" has been understood in different ways. It may be the Holy Spirit, the resurrection, the missionary task, or sacrificial love. All those interpretations have in common an inescapable commitment of the disciple to follow the Master, even if it cost him his life. In the background of this very point the figure of Judas continues projecting itself (v.8).

From the dialogue, two levels of understanding emerge: one is what the interlocutor understands, and another is what Jesus explains. In the dialogues there is a hermeneutical intention or movement of Jesus. From the material, literal and particular plane Jesus moves to the figurative, spiritual and general plane.

This sign of Jesus ends with a general principle where the term "cleanse" (katarós) is used with a meaning beyond the physical and literal level. Jesus makes them understand that this cleansing distinguishes Peter from the world. There remains only one who is not clean because he has opted for treason.

This gospel is interested in restoring Peter after his resistance and his denial. For this reason it is important in chapter 21 to clarify that part of the ministerial recuperation of Peter is the prophecy that the apostle himself will be dressed as a faithful servant of his Lord (21:18), and that his death will be a glorification as was Jesus' death (21:19). Thus to be dressed carries meaning of death or glorification (12:33 = 21:19).
Judas (v. 11)

The first interpretation ends with a reference to the traitor, which is made more explicit in the second interpretation of this act of Jesus. Jesus does not discriminate against his enemy, but he lets him participate in the footwashing and in the moistened bread.

In the gospel the traitor is always presented as a participant: "he who was going to betray" (6:64; 13:11; 18:2, 5), but here he is identified in a nominal way: "not all" (13:10, 18), "one of you" (13:21), "one to whom" (13:26). From the subtle the narrator goes to the obvious, from the indirect to the direct, from the vague to the specific. Judas now is not of the community. He has no part with Jesus because he opted for the world and he did not understand that the love of the Master went so far as to give his life for his friends.

A Theological Analysis of John 13:1-11

What is the meaning of this passage? What demands does the footwashing incident make on the Church today? Whatever the hermeneutical focus, or the method used in exegesis, it is necessary to attend to the fundamental theme in the Fourth Gospel: the demonstration that Jesus is the Christ, the Lamb of God who does the works of the Father. This footwashing cannot be separated from the Christological emphasis with which the gospel seeks to decipher the divine identity and filiation of Jesus. Also, this act of service of Jesus cannot be separated from the whole sacrificial context which brought him to death. To limit all this activity to only a liturgical act or a symbolic expression betrays the whole argument of the gospel, namely the sent one who sends his own in love to a world who hates them.

This text has had many interpretations throughout history, such as: sign of humility (Chrysostom), symbol of preparation for the preaching of the gospel (Origen), expression of purification (Bultmann, Boismard, Wilkenhauser), a teaching about the death of Jesus (Hoskyns, Robinson, Barrett), baptismal teaching (Cyrille, Corell, Cullmann), penitence (Augustine), or the eucharist (Bauer, Goguel). In all this interpretations a profound Christological challenge emerges which the evangelist synthesizes with the intention of Jesus: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (13:15). The whole text under study is connected with the mission of Jesus. He knows what he is doing. He gives his life and he takes it again. No one takes it from him. He does so of his own free will in love and in obedience. For this reason the Father loves him.

The power and the mandate that Jesus gives to his followers is for them to show the love of servants in the world. Footwashing serves the
gospel as hermeneutical criterion and Christological space to discover, on
the one hand, the messianic identity of Jesus and, on the other hand, to
show the disciples the commitment of obedience in the task as witnesses
in the world. Or, here are seen more clearly two elements bound in the same
task: the Christological and the missiological. In both cases a sacrificial
love is demanded. Thus, “to have a part with Jesus” is also to participate
in the way to Calvary, it is to “wet your feet”. Or, it is to form a part with
those crucified in our history today.

What does this text tell us today? What demands does it make on us
for our discipleship? Whatever the biblical-theological approach might be
to footwashing, we must acknowledge that as believers we have aban­
donned the practice of this example of Jesus. In a seminary class two years
ago I asked the twenty-one students how many had participated in or
celebrated a footwashing service in their churches. Only three replied
affirmatively. This year I asked the same question to forty hispanic pastors
and leaders in California. Not one had celebrated or had even had a similar
experience in their ministry.

This example of Jesus is not only a commitment to his task, but a
challenge within the believing community. It must be remembered that
footwashing gave a sense of solidarity in the devotion of the believers in
a communitary context. This devotion can only be understood through the
key of surrender in sacrificial love. As Jesus was sent by the Father, so he
sends those the Father has given him.

The communitary practice of footwashing is the most genuine expres­
sion of solidarity in service, which demonstrates what coming to, receiv­
ing, or believing in Jesus as the Son of God signifies. In other words, it is
to participate with him in the challenge of the cross. Jesus created his
community around a table and he commits it to a sacrificial life with its feet
in the water. Today we have to “get our feet wet” if we want to follow the
way of the cross.

ENDNOTES

1 Enric Cortés presents an exhaustive study of structures in the farewell discourses in his
work Los discursos de adiós de Gn 49 a Jn 13-17 (Barcelona: Herder, 1976).

2 Mlakuzhyil, George, The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel
(Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1987), 221ff; Maloney, F. J. “A Sacramental

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**GETTING OUR FEET WET: A Response**

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Zorrilla begins his paper by asserting that “the literary and theological cohesion in the Fourth Gospel is found in the Christological understanding of the life and the practice of Jesus.” Thus, his exploration of the theological content is conducted primarily in terms of literary analysis. Zorrilla identifies an overarching chiasmic form in chapters 13-17, the center of which is a unity with Jesus “before the hatred of the world” in chapter 15. He sees broad parallels between references to Jesus’ death in chapters 10, 13, and 15. He highlights the familiar Johannine structure of a sign or action followed by discursive material, as well as the structural elements of the traditional farewell form which are present in chapters 13-17. Chapter 13 itself is identified as another chiasm, the center of which is the commitment to Jesus (vv. 18-20). One section is described as having a lineal form (13:1-20). The introduction (13:1-3) contains yet another chiasm, this time centered in what are identified as “sentences of partici-

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