

## WHY NO LORD’S SUPPER AT THE LAST SUPPER? JOHN 6 AND 13

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### Introduction

Welcome to this shared reflection on the Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel. The particular focus of the reflection will be on a surprising feature of that Gospel: the absence of the Lord’s Supper. By the Lord’s Supper, we mean the special words and actions of Jesus over the bread and wine, on the night before his death. As often observed, John’s Gospel does have the *Last* Supper—even an extended version of it from Jn 13 to 17—but the *Lord’s* Supper is missing. Nevertheless, the theme of the Lord’s Supper is present in this Gospel but not where we would expect it. Even a cursory reading of Jn 6 tells the reader that the Eucharist is indeed an important part of the life of the community. However, the author substitutes the Lord’s Supper at the Last Supper with Washing of the Feet in chapter 13. The purpose of this paper is to explore why the writer has taken such a radical editorial option.

A few factual observations may help to get us started. In the New Testament, there are five accounts of the Last Supper, that is, one in each of the Gospels and one in 1 Corinthians. However, there are only four accounts of the Lord’s Supper, that is, one in each of the Synoptic Gospels and one in Paul. It is our wish to explore the reason for such an omission as an editorial strategy.

We hope to be able to show that the writer was facing particular challenges in his community, that these challenges are not unlike contemporary challenges in Eucharistic practice and that the teaching of the Gospel in this matter can speak to us today.

The sequence of the presentation will be as follows:

1. Presuppositions
2. John 6
3. John 13
4. What did it mean?

### 1. Presuppositions

Of necessity, the presuppositions can be presented only briefly. However, as it follows the general consensus of scholarship perhaps this will be sufficient.

The four Gospels accepted in the Church are best appreciated in the light of ancient literary categories. Our first category is biography. With some qualification, Gospels are biographies, but not biographies as we would imagine them. A modern biography would have among its aims the adequate use of sources, the establishment of chronology, an analysis of cause and effect and what we may call the psychological evolution of the subject. Ancient biographies were much freer in historical precision and rather more

concerned with the overall impression or *empitome* of the protagonist's life and teaching. Within the Gospels, there are actual *epitomes*, such as the Sermon on the Mount, but in a general way the Gospels all wish to convey the teaching and meaning of Jesus' life.

Belief in the resurrection affects the nature of the Gospels in two ways. Firstly, Easter faith was the motive behind the writing. *Because* the evangelists believed Jesus to be risen from the dead, they wrote the life of Jesus. Naturally, this conviction affected the way they looked on the events and teachings of Jesus and also on the content of the presentation. This is true of all the Gospels without exception, but especially true of the Fourth Gospel.

Finally, the Synoptic Gospels resemble each other in structure, content and characterisation. However, the Fourth Gospel is in a class of its own, precisely in terms of structure, content and characterisation. Briefly put, John is "different". Just how different we shall see in the course of the presentation. As a primary indication, let us just note at this stage that the Fourth Gospel was written about 95 to 100 AD. By contrast, the career of the great Paul was over and he himself was dead before the first Gospel came to be written. Mostly likely that first Gospel was Mark, written about 67 to 70 AD. Matthew and Luke are substantially "second editions" of Mark (especially Matthew) and would have appeared around the year 85 or so. It seems clear that the writer of the Fourth Gospel was familiar at least with the Synoptic *tradition* if not text.

In summary we may outline our information as follows:

Date?	Around 95 or 100 AD.
Place?	Probably originally Syria and then later Asia Minor.
Author?	An anonymous early Christian spiritual master
Structure?	Broadly into chs 1-12 and 13- 21. The cycle of feast is important.
Style?	One to one encounters; long speeches; very intratextual.
Purpose?	Christology; see John 20:31.

## John 6

John 6 is a discreet unit within the Fourth Gospel (this can be shown by the various techniques of "delimitation"). Both the time (Passover) and the location (the other side of the sea of Galilee) indicate unit of narrative. It is made up of a traditional chain or *catena* of stories, rooted most likely in the Synoptic tradition. Each of these traditional scenes receives a distinctively Johannine "make-over", giving the stories a particular theological direction. The long discourse, a feature typical of the Johannine Jesus, has been shown to be an early Christian homily in distinctive rabbinic style. For example, the use of a single text in two parts (Ps 78:24—referring to the events of Exod 16:4–36—to structure the homily itself in two parts and the use of a subsidiary citation from another part of the bible (Is 54:13) are all typical of rabbinic homilies of the period. The Johannine reception of the traditional sequence of stories respects the original Christological focus while affirming the layer of Eucharistic reference.

Before exploring the decisive prominence given to Christology, we may note that the text as whole is imbued with the vocabulary and language of the Lord's Supper and the Eucharist, even if these are not the primary focus. A list of words will support what is meant:

Passover 6:4	To eat (ii) 6:13
Bread / Loaves 6:5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 23, 26, 31–35, 41, 48, 50–51, 58	To give 6:27, 31–34, 37, 39, 51–52, 65
To eat (i) 6:5, 23, 26, 31, 49–53, 58	To murmur 6:41, 43, 61
Fish 6:9, 11	Flesh 6:51–56, 63
Take 6:7, 11	Blood 6:53–56
Give thanks 6:11, 23	To drink (i) 6:53–54, 56
Distribute 6:11	To eat (iii) 6:54, 56–58
Recline 6:11	Food 6:27, 55
Fragments 6:12, 13	Drink (ii) 6:55
	Betray 6:64, 71

It seems clear to me and to many that this vocabulary conclusively shows that the Johannine community *did* practice the Eucharist and that at some level the Eucharist is very much in view.

It is also noticeable that this series of stories follows closely a chain or *catena* taken from the Gospel of Mark. A glance at the evidence may help.

	John	Mark
Multiplication for 5000	6:1-15	6:30-34
Walking on the sea	6:16-24	6:45-54
<i>Skip to what follows in Mark after the second multiplication</i>		
Request for a sign	6:25-34	8:11-13
Remarks on bread	6:35-59	8:14-21
Faith of Peter	6:60-69	8:27-30
Passion theme, betrayal	6:70-71	8:31-33

In itself, this sequence is already focused on the identity of Jesus and comes to a climax in the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi.

When we look at the special vocabulary of the Johannine version of the chain a similar attention to Christology emerges:

The Sign of the Bread	6:1-15	“This is the prophet” / King
Walking on the Water	6:16-25	“It is I”
Seeking	6:25-34	“Son of Man”
Discourse Part I	6:35-47	“I am the bread of life”
		<i>Is not this Joseph’s son?</i>
Discourse Part II	6:48-58	“I am the bread of life, come down from heaven”
		<i>How can we eat this man’s flesh</i>
Dialogue	6:59-71	Holy one of God

Finally, we notice that in this whole chapter, “believing” is a really important verb, always focused on Jesus himself. This evidence is strengthened by the intense use of the first person singular pronoun.

Believe John 6:29–30, 35–36, 40, 47, 64, 69

Person Pronoun 1st person: x40

John	494		
	1	20	8 54
	2	4	9 7
	3	3	10 37
	4	13	11 10
	5	30	12 26
	<b>6</b>	<b>40</b>	13 23
	7	20	14 52
			15 41
			16 26
			17 39
			18 18
			19 6
			20 16
			21 9

As you can see from the lists, the use of the first person singular pronoun is somewhat increased in Jn 6 in comparison with the chapters before and after. Finally, the climax of the chapter concerns the person of Jesus, but in Passover, even in Last Supper “mode”.

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him. (John 6:66–71)

The verb “to come down” is used especially in this chapter to refer to the person of Jesus as we can see from this earlier citation:

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. (John 3:13)

It is instructive to note that the rare theological use of the word “flesh” in the Fourth Gospel (John 1:13–14; 3:6; 6:51–56, 63; 8:15; 17:2) indicates that it is the incarnation, the becoming and being human of Jesus is what is intended. This means that, even in the verses read in the church tradition to refer to Eucharistic presence, the original reference had been to the person of Jesus, under the aspect of his humanity and mortality. The very word we might expect in reference to the Eucharist, “body”, *is* found in this Gospel but always in reference to the body of Jesus, both dead and risen (John 2:21; 19:31, 38, 40; 20:12). In any case, in Aramaic “body” means the whole person.

Finally, we notice that in the Fourth Gospel, there is a marked presence of initial misunderstandings as the characters in the stories move towards insight. Because of the extra knowledge of the reader regarding the true meaning of these stories, misunderstanding gains a level of irony as we watch protagonists struggle to rise above some crass material grasp of what is being said. The most obvious examples are Nicodemus (entering the mother’s womb again) and the Samaritan Woman (give me this water). In our text, there is a crass misunderstanding also in relation to the flesh as true food. The Jews take it literally and therefore they misunderstand it to mean material meat. But, as always in the Fourth Gospel, the real meaning takes us directly to the person of Jesus not to his literal flesh. In this Gospel, in any case, he does not give himself in bread and wine. The only “giving” is through the lifting up on the cross. We may have a double reference here: the challenge from outsiders *against* Christian faith *at the time of writing* is really against the incarnation (flesh) and against the death of Jesus as salvation (flesh again). This means that

the dispute during the discourse is primarily not about the Eucharist—although couched in Eucharistic language—but primarily about the Jesus, his humanity and his death. Not untypically, the writer is working on two levels.

This leaves us with a question: given that the Johannine community definitely celebrated the Eucharist, and given that there is a pronounced underlay of Eucharistic vocabulary here, what was going on in the Johannine community to necessitate the powerful refocus on Christology, on the person of Jesus? Were there some attending the Lord's Supper who had an inadequate or impoverished understanding of Jesus, perhaps a failure to appreciate what had happened in the death of Jesus, with the result that their understanding of and participation in the Eucharist was in turn impaired? We shall return to this question at the end.

### 3. John 13

We can present the material on John 13 in somewhat schematic form. The story of the washing of the feet is found only in John's Gospel. As often in this Gospel, there is a Synoptic tradition which lies behind John's version.

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22:24–27)

Secondly, the story falls into a recognisable category from prophetic writings and from the ministry of Jesus, that of "prophetic action". Across the Hebrew Bible but especially in the prophetic books, we find "prophetic gestures". These are mini dramas, which vividly illustrated the message of a particular prophet. There are many examples:

Hosea marries a prostitute - Hosea 1-3  
 Isaiah gives symbolic names to his children - Is 7:3; 8:14  
 Jeremiah: the almond tree and the pot - Jer 1:11-14  
 Jeremiah: the waistcloth hidden by the Euphrates Jer 13:1-11  
 Jeremiah: the potter - Jer 18:1-12  
 Jeremiah: the jug - Jer 19  
 Jeremiah: the figs - Jer 24  
 Jeremiah: the yoke - Jer 27-28  
 Jeremiah: buying the field - Jer 32  
 Ezekiel makes a model of Jerusalem - Ezek 4:1-3  
 Ezekiel: the rationed food - Ezek 4:9-19  
 Ezekiel: the hair - Ezek 5  
 Ezekiel with the exile's baggage - Ezek 12:1-16  
 Ezekiel's "non-bereavement" - Ezek 24:15-27

These acted parables amount to a teaching technique, a kind of early use of PowerPoint, if you like. Jesus himself used prophetic gestures in a notable way. Outstanding examples would be the call of the twelve, the entry into Jerusalem, Jesus' prophetic action in the Temple and the cursing of the fig tree. More frequent prophetic gestures are the healings,

the exorcisms and what is called “open table fellowship”. All of these were intended to make tangible the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and God’s indiscriminate love. In particular, the open table-fellowship forms an essential background for the core message of Jesus’ ministry and was itself a prophetic gesture with special layers of meaning.

While not perhaps as historical as these other prophetic gestures of Jesus, the washing of the feet is at least a literary prophetic gesture, if we may be allowed the category. Or perhaps, the reception of the story has attained other levels of meaning in John’s Gospel.

In the third place, the vocabulary of the story is intriguing. We notice the following:

Rose	13 times, almost always in reference to the resurrection of Jesus.
Took off	18 times, usually in reference to Jesus’ laying down his life.
Wrapped	3 times, but the links are fascinating
Water	21 times, but the contexts are also illuminating
Washing	13 times.
Wipe	3 times only.
Feet	14 times
“Never”	12 (lit. “into eternity” with a special meaning).

Bringing these various strands together, we may summarise as follows. The Washing of the Feet is a prophetic gesture in literary form, inspired by the Synoptic tradition. It is not simply an *exemplum* of service, leading to a primarily *moral* teaching. As a prophetic gesture at the Last Supper, indeed as a prophetic gesture replacing the Lord’s Supper, its function is identical to that of the words and actions over the bread and wine: the washing of feet interprets the death of Jesus as an act of loving service. The need to insist on this is best felt by remembering the shock of the crucifixion and the immense difficulty this was for Jews at the time. This means, for example, that the dialogue with Peter is not really about the washing of the feet, taken literally. On the level of Johannine spirituality, it is really about being able to accept that God-in-Jesus loved humanity to such an extraordinary level that God lovingly served humanity by means of his death on the cross. Hence the conversation with Peter:

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” (John 13:6–10)

In Johannine tradition, understanding later always means in the light of Jesus’ death and resurrection. After all, what is there not to understand about having your feet washed? In John’s hands, it means something else altogether.

Finally, the *moral* consequences of being served by Jesus are brought out in the conversation that follows. While this dimension is not primary, it is also not at all to be ignored.

We ended our previous all too brief investigation with a question for reflection and we do the same here. What was going on in the Johannine community so that the author felt compelled to eliminate the traditional account of the Lord’s Supper and replace it by the

Washing of the Feet? Were there some members attending the Eucharist with an impoverished understanding of the meaning of the death of Jesus and without an adequate grasp of the practical consequences for believers?

#### **4. What did it mean?**

It looks as if the writer of the Fourth Gospel wished to identify and challenge some issues in his community at the time of writing.

At a primary level, the writer focuses on Christology, on Jesus himself. This is very clear in chapter 6, where all the scenes end with a Christological teaching. It may very well be that some in the Johannine community simply did not have that level of faith in Jesus, which the writer regarded as essential for an authentic participation in the Eucharist. Given the emphasis on misunderstanding the use of “flesh” and “blood”, which in the context cannot be taken literally, it may be that these same people had not yet grasped not only *who* is Jesus but also *what* had taken place in his death and resurrection. Thus, the writer is challenging people to deeper their Christology and soteriology precisely in order to taken part more adequately in the Lord’s Supper.

Something similar may be said of chapter 13. This time the focus is squarely on salvation. The cross was an act of loving service of humanity by God in Jesus. This apparently simple, even traditional sentence was incredible to many at the time and perhaps also today. It puts before us—in Pauline terms—the scandal of the cross, literally the stumbling block of the crucifixion. Perhaps the writer was facing even another challenge? It may very well be that some or many in the Johannine community were taking part in the Eucharist but that it having no effect on their practical lives. These two issues are really one. *If* you understood the cross as service and truly allowed yourself to be so served by God, *then* your life too would become one of service.

#### **Conclusion for today**

As we reflect Eucharistic practice today, we may ask ourselves if the same issues which faced the Fourth Evangelist are not also issues today?

Do some take part in the Eucharist, without a mature faith in Jesus?

Do some take part in the Eucharist, with an impaired understanding of salvation?

Do some take part in the Eucharist in such a way that it has virtually no effect in their lives?

It is probably the case that these issues are still very much with us. We make a mistake if we think that our starting point should be a renewed understanding of the Eucharist. No doubt this is essential. However, the real starting point has to be a renewed programme of evangelisation so that more and more people are aware of who is it we celebrate in the Lord’s supper and what difference it ought to make. It may well be that the radical editorial decisions of the Fourth Gospel are still of immense pastoral use today.