

**When the lines are blurred:
A gender-critical reading of the narratives of
John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17**

by

Nina Elisabeth Müller van Velden



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STELLENBOSCH
UNIVERSITY
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Supervisor: Prof Jeremy Punt

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

The presentation, interpretation, and appropriation of biblical narratives continue to fulfil a central role in theological discourses on gender and sexuality - both past and present. Christian faith communities and the individuals who make up such communities represent varied settings, and as such, also a wide range of theological positions on contemporary issues related to gender and sexuality. Often these positions are validated by “proving” said positions by means of particular interpretations of a single, or multiple, biblical narratives. Irrespective of whether these positions can be categorized as being theologically “more conservative” or “more progressive,” the majority of such positions are based on interpretations that present biblical narratives as timeless, objective entities, with universal relevance for all persons throughout the ages. Often times little or no attention is paid to the socio-cultural contexts of the biblical narratives, and more specifically, to the manner in which gender and sexuality was perceived and expressed within ancient settings. Moreover, little or no attention is paid to the contemporary settings from which these biblical narratives are interpreted and the role of the interpreter in the interpretation process; and even less attention is paid to the manner in which understandings of gender and sexuality dynamically continue to move and be reshaped. Rather, the impression is created that gender and sexuality has always been understood in the same way as does contemporary interpreters; thereby, biblical narratives merely become the vehicle for validating that which is already believed to hold “true” for the interpreter. These positions seldom allow for complexity or ambiguity; rather, the impression is created that either one interpretation or another has to be correct (and by proxy the other interpretation is then incorrect).

This research project seeks to move beyond hermeneutical frameworks that attempt to appropriate biblical narratives in such an either/or manner, particularly with regard to theological discourses on gender and sexuality. By reading the “feet and meal” narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 through a gender-critical lens and against their ancient Mediterranean socio-cultural background, within the broader framework of cultural studies and its emphasis on the influence of social location on biblical interpretation, I suggest that the interpretation of biblical narratives are perhaps rather suited to engage and encourage theological frameworks that can hold complexity - both/and positions - for theological discourses on gender and sexuality. The expectation of clear-cut “answers” for complex

questions is thereby challenged, and an alternative of (gendered) ambiguity - as seems to be presented in the characterization of these narratives - is suggested.

OPSOMMING

Die voorstelling, interpretasie, en toepassing van bybelse narratiewe vervul 'n voortgesette, sentrale rol in teologiese diskoerse rakende gender en seksualiteit in die verlede, sowel as in die hede. Die groot verskeidenheid kontekste waarbinne Christelike geloofsgemeenskappe uiting vind en die individue waaruit hierdie gemeenskappe bestaan, het 'n wye reeks teologiese posisies rakende hedendaagse kwessies verwant aan gender en seksualiteit tot gevolg. Hierdie posisies word dikwels gestaaf deur "bewyse" vir die betrokke posisies, aan die hand van bepaalde interpretasies van 'n enkele, of 'n versameling, bybelse narratiewe. Ongeag die kategorisering van hierdie posisies as teologies "meer behoudend" of "meer progressief," is die meerderheid van hierdie posisies gebaseer op interpretasies wat bybelse narratiewe as tydlose, objektiewe entiteite voorstel, met universele relevansie vir alle persone deur die eeue heen. Dikwels word baie min, indien enige aandag geskenk aan die sosio-kulturele kontekste van die bybelse narratiewe, en meer spesifiek nog, die wyse waarop gender en seksualiteit verstaan en uitgedruk is in antieke kontekste. Daar word tipies selde of geensins aandag geskenk aan die kontemporêre kontekste waarbinne hierdie bybelse narratiewe interpreteer word, of die rol van die interpreteerder in die interpretasie-proses nie; selfs nog minder aandag word geskenk aan die wyse waarop denke oor gender en seksualiteit op 'n dinamiese wyse voortdurend skuif en hervorm word. Die indruk word veel eerder geskep dat gender en seksualiteit nog altyd verstaan is op die wyse waarop kontemporêre interpreteerders dit verstaan. Gevolglik word bybelse narratiewe eenvoudig as medium ingespan vir die (her)bevestiging van dit wat alreeds as "waar" voorgestel word deur die interpreteerder. Hierdie posisies laat selde kompleksiteit of dubbelsinnigheid toe; die indruk word eerder geskep dat hetsy die een, of die ander interpretasie korrek moet wees (en gevolglik dan, dat die ander interpretasie inkorrek is).

Met hierdie navorsingsprojek word gepoog om verder te beweeg as hermeneutiese raamwerke wat bybelse narratiewe op hierdie "een of die ander" wyse inspan, in die besonder rakende teologiese diskoerse oor gender en seksualiteit. Die "voete en maaltye" verhale van Johannes 12:1-8 en 13:1-17 word deur 'n gender-kritiese lens gelees, teen die agtergrond van hul antieke Mediterreense sosio-kulturele konteks, binne die breër kontoere van kulturele studies en die gepaardgaande klem op die rol van sosiale ligging in bybelinterpretasie. Hiermee stel ek voor dat die interpretasie van bybelse narratiewe moontlik meer geskik is om teologiese raamwerke van kompleksiteit en "beide-en"

posisies aan te moedig en te onderhou. Gevolglik word die verwagting van klinkklare “antwoorde” vir vrae oor komplekse sake uitgedaag, en as alternatief word (gender) dubbelsinnigheid voorgestel - ‘n dubbelsinnigheid wat blyk om deur die karakterisering van hierdie verhale uitgebeeld te word.

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FOREWORD

This research project is presented in South African English and as such adheres to the spelling and grammatical conventions of South African English. Sources written in American English and quoted directly have been kept in their original form. In order to avoid the cumbersome use of “sic.” in such occurrences, this foreword serves as general statement pertaining to all such instances.

I have made use of the Greek text of the *Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* by Michael W. Holmes obtained via the Logos 6 Bible Software, throughout this research project.

1. BASIC ORIENTATION¹

1.1 Introduction and background

The landscape of gender and sexuality discourses² set in the context of the contemporary Christian faith is characterized by plurality and complexity.³ Push the button on any topic relating to the intersection of gender, sexuality, and theology, and a range of voices, opinions, and themes will inevitably be raised, discussed, and (most likely) debated. Amongst this landscape there is a set of interrelated themes which continue to receive a lot of attention (albeit often not by name, and for a variety of reasons), namely essentialism and complementarianism.

From a modernist point of view, gender is a set of inborn social traits that naturally accompany biological sex. Therefore, in modernist thought, gender is the universal and essential social correlative of binary biological differentiation (Tolbert 2000:99). Within such a framework, sex as category is applied as a type of classification that refers to the biological categories of male and female, ascribed to a person at birth and based on their external genitalia (Lemmer 2005:122). In the case of a person born with a penis and testes, they will be classified as “male”. In the case of a person born with labia and a vagina, they will be classified as “female”. Such classification typically does not involve any hormonal testing or internal examination, and is thus determined purely by visual observation of external physical appearance. However, increasingly over the past few decades, the awareness of social constructions pertaining to physiological aspects implies that sex cannot simplistically be read off genitalia.

From the point of view of such a type of biological classification, it typically follows that one’s sex naturally should lead and equate to a corresponding gender, namely male-man

¹ Sections of the material in this chapter has been used in an article titled “Questioning the “natural given”: Reading John 12:1-8 with a gender-critical lens” (forthcoming publication).

² Although the focus of this research project is specifically on gender, I do often use the phrase “gender and sexuality,” especially in reference to theological discourses. I regard human gender and sexuality to stand in a relation to one another, although by no means in the binary or simplistic manner typically argued for in many contexts. Furthermore, these two overlapping spheres of human existence and experience are typically discussed together in theological and faith contexts.

³ My use of the term discourse in this research project follows the meaning of the term as applied by Castelli (1991:53), in turn influenced by Foucault: “The term ‘discourse’ describes something greater than simple representation. It implies rhetoric cast in its broadest sense, of that which persuades and coerces, that which has a political motive - that is, a motive inscribed by power. Discourse is never innocent, it discloses the incapacity of any rhetoric to convey the truth...Discourse is an active constructor of ideology; it is through discourse that ideology makes its claims to truth. In this sense, discourse serves the social construction of power relations, and the matter of who speaks and who is silent takes on all the more importance.”

and female-woman. Generally speaking, gender refers to the social expression, interaction and demonstration of that which is deemed as either masculine or feminine by a specific social context or environment. Whereas sex indicates biological difference, gender identity is socially defined (Nolan Fewell 1993:242). The strong distinction made between the categories of sex versus gender has and continues to be contested, in light of the complexity and reflexivity of biological and cultural processes (West & Zimmermann 1987:126).

Within the Christian theological context, essentialism echoes modernist views of gender and sexuality from a particular perspective of God as the creator of humankind. As such, the view is that the entire humanity has purposefully been created by God in two distinct sexes, namely male and female - each with their own “essence” or inherent set of characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses (Thatcher 2011:20).

From such a position of essentialism, socialization processes are said to simply unlock the gendered potential of a person present since before their birth. Only one of two options is considered possible and appropriate, in correspondence to a person’s God-given sex. This relates to sex-role theory, which posits that people learn to behave in ways appropriate to their sex, primarily through the socialization processes undergone in childhood and modelled by adult role models of their own sex (Van Leeuwen 1993:226). Essentialist frameworks typically pay very little attention to the complex influence of a variety of factors on the shaping of our understandings of male and female, man and woman, or the immense contextual subjectivity of such categories. Rather, proponents of essentialism create the impression that the binary relations have existed since the beginning of time, and that the content of these categories are generic and universally applicable to all persons throughout history. Furthermore, the power invested in maintaining such binary categories are typically not questioned or critiqued.

Complementarianism is the theological view that male and female were not only created as essentially (and entirely) different from each other, but also that they were created specifically to complement one another. Male and female natures are said to be fixed and desires are intended for the opposite sex (Thatcher 2011:20). Furthermore, these opposites are deemed to need each other and cannot fully reach their potential on their own accord.

Accordingly, within such theological contexts of the Christian faith, essentialism and complementarianism upholds heterosexual marriage as the ideal relationship status for all people, as this is presented as the God-given and exclusive space within which men and women can flourish in their respective and uniquely different manners. Essentialist theological positions typically do not allow for same-sex desire, as this would go against the natural, God-given order of human nature (Thatcher 2011:20). This is not surprising; if it is argued that the binary opposites of male and female require one another to reach their full potential, then a member of the same sex and a relationship outside of the framework of a traditional, heterosexual marriage would consequently fall short of the supposed ideal that all persons should attain (or at least should strive to attain, if circumstances would not allow the actual fulfilment thereof).

Such an understanding of gender relations is deeply rooted in a very particular God-image. It simultaneously also shapes and strengthens a particular type of God-image. Within the theological framework of essentialism and complementarianism, Godself is typically represented as a male God of gendered order: He is both the creator and main representative of the order, as well as the gatekeeper of this order. The divisions and distinctions between male/female and man/woman are posited as necessary for all of creation to fulfil its God-given, gendered purpose in a harmonious manner. The binary opposites are marked by so-called corresponding masculine or feminine traits, which are intended to clearly indicate the differences between the two binary opposites.⁴

Unfortunately, this is seldom a case of simply celebrating the difference of equals; a prominent dominant and subordinate motif is cast and remains prevalent between male/female, man/woman, and masculine/feminine. Often the phrase “different, yet equal”

⁴ A best-selling popular Christian book by Helen Andelin entitled, “Fascinating Womanhood. How the Ideal Woman Awakens a Man’s Deepest Love and Tenderness,” has been edited and reprinted at least three times since it first appeared in 1965, of which 1992 saw the most recent edition. Amongst the qualities of femininity are listed a feminine appearance along with a feminine nature - “softness, gentleness, weakness, a spirit of sweet submission and a dependency on men for their care and protection. There must be no trace of masculine strength, aggressiveness, or competence” (1992:301). The nurturing role of women and their inherent ability to be better communicators and caregivers than men are given much prevalence, along with the “natural” subordinate role women are to fulfil in their relations to men. In turn, men are seen as the leaders, the decision-makers, the logical and physically stronger counterparts who “naturally” fulfil the role of domination. Up to today such oppressive “ideals” for relations between men and women are upheld in Christian contexts. In recent South African Christian contexts, self-proclaimed evangelists and preachers such as Angus Buchan (a potato farmer from Kwazulu-Natal and initiator of the Mighty Men movement) and Gretha Wiid (an affluent, white, Afrikaans woman who is sharing her teachings on sexuality and gender based on her own history of domestic abuse and divorce) enjoy much popularity, especially amongst affluent, white South African Christians. In my own context, the Dutch Reformed Church, so-called “biblical womanhood” is currently a very popular theme in women’s ministries; as is “biblical manhood” in men’s ministries. Most of the literature read and presented in these spaces, have been compiled by North American, evangelical, affluent, white women and men.

is used in this regard. History has shown, however, that this difference very seldom implies actual equality for all involved in any sphere of society. To the contrary, male-man-masculine is, even today, still viewed as the ideal, whilst female-woman-feminine is the less desired. According to Van Leeuwen (1993:228):

characteristics and activities ascribed to males have greater cultural and economic value than those ascribed to females. Those things associated with females are often devalued relative to those things associated with males. At a young age, children have learned these differences, they already know which sex has greater value.

Such discourses and positions create the impression that male and female, man and woman, and the corresponding masculinity and femininity, are always clearly distinguishable oppositional binaries, unable to relate outside the framework of complementing each other, and with no room for movement or variation between these two extremes. Furthermore, heteronormative⁵ and (predominantly white) privileged generalizations and stereotypes create the impression that such fixed categories and traits of sexual and gender identity are universally applicable to all persons in any given context, irrespective of physiology, anatomy, class, age, ethnicity, race, family, location, or any of the multiple other factors which create variety and differentiation between individuals.

In short, the development and maintenance of a binary gender system assumes clearly distinguishable twin tracks, along similar lines and with equality. However, the latter is not the case. So too, the notion that the one needs the other - complements each other and depends on the other - is like the division itself biased towards masculinity and heteronormativity. Thus, the binary gender system promotes and supports inequality and power structures where some are “more” and others “less”. This, in turn, poses the very real threat of abuse of power by the dominant superior - spiritually, emotionally, economically, and physically.

A blurring of these fixed, so-called “natural” categories and stereotypically ascribed gender traits are presented by the lived realities of, for example, LGBT* persons,⁶ working women,

⁵ Heteronormativity is the dominant belief system concerning sexuality that relies on fixed and binary genders and on the certainty that heterosexuality is the norm that occurs naturally (and apart from cultural influences). Accordingly, all other sexual relationships are deemed as culturally produced and unnatural, and are regulated and defined in relation to heterosexuality (Hornsby 2016b:84).

⁶ LGBT* collectively refers to those persons who identify themselves as belonging to sexual minority groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer. Recently asexual and pansexual has also been added to the meaning of this abbreviation, representing those persons who identify as asexual and

single mothers, older unmarried persons, heterosexual couples who choose not to have biological children, and gender-fluid or gender non-conforming behaviour of individuals or couples. Often, these persons and their representations are viewed as, at the very least, a pitiful deviant or a nuisance to be tolerated, but in extreme cases cited as the cause for the moral and ethical instability prevalent in societies.⁷

My interest in and motivation for this research project is rooted in my own discomfort with the above-mentioned exclusionary and limited theological discourses on gender and sexuality that appear to be very popular, as well as the subsequent teachings and practices; and very specifically, the manner in which literal and simplistic interpretations of particular biblical narratives are appropriated to justify such views in Christian theological contexts. I consider such types of theological discourses, and subsequent teachings and practices, to be harmful and inherently violent, as it perpetuates a system of power that draws divisive and abusive boundaries between persons and does not allow for diversity and expression of personhood in its multiple possibilities - individually, and collectively.

In light of this background introduction to this research project, I now turn to the research problem, followed by the research hypothesis.

pansexual. The term “queer persons” is often used collectively, not in a derogatory manner, but rather to refer to those persons who do not identify with a heterosexual identity.

⁷ Punt (2010:152) notes that the call for “traditional family values” is increasingly heard in religious (particularly Christian) circles, but also in society in general. Such calls are often based on the claims that the Bible, specifically then the New Testament texts, provide “normative and regulating principles or guidelines for determining the content and structure of traditional family values” (Punt 2010:152-153). The North American, conservative environment is saturated with so-called “family movements,” promoting traditional and patriarchal family values (amongst which traditional gender roles). The motivation for these movements are often stated as attempts to “regain” stability and moral order in society, thereby implying that persons who do not conform are, indeed, the cause for unethical behaviour and immorality in society. South Africa has not escaped the influence of such conservative, evangelical theology and similar messages and ideologies are promoted in certain theological circles in the South African society. One such example is an upcoming “Mighty Families” gathering planned for 16 to 18 March 2018 in Bloemfontein. According to the website, their vision is as follows: “It is a weekend gathering for the whole family, which sends a prophetic message to the country: We rebuild South Africa with strong families. It is a family festival in God’s presence where: we are strengthened by and anchored in the Word; we worship Jesus Christ in spirit and truth; children see an example of how we serve God together as families; people are set free by truth and drawn together by love; we see healing taking place before our eyes in our bodies, soul and spirit, and between racial groups, between churches, and between husband, wife and children. The Vision [sic.] also includes a continuation plan after the event to impact communities through *Bible-based family ministry* (own emphasis)” (Mighty Families, 2017).

1.2 Research problem

According to Van Leeuwen (1993:188), the sharing of sacred stories is one of the ways in which a community develops their identity symbolically. Sacred stories are those narratives which form part of the canon corpus of a specific religion, in this case with reference to the Christian faith tradition. These narratives carry weight in that they do not merely retell events, but that these retellings of events also carry a deeper meaning with regard to the relation between God and humankind. The major source of sacred stories in the Christian faith is the Bible. The sacred stories contained in the Bible are ascribed normative principles and moral imperatives by Christian faith communities. As such, these principles and imperatives should be embodied in actions by those who hold the narratives as sacred. The relations of story to imperative are diverse and numerous. In the Christian faith, these stories are shared primarily within the context of a societal institution, the church, which has been characterized by an immense role in the process of gendering throughout the ages. However, the patriarchal, androcentric and heteronormative context of the origin of biblical narratives and their subsequent repetitions has lent itself to a very particular understanding of gender and sexuality.

From a biblical hermeneutical perspective, the essentialist and complementarian position on sex and gender is often based on a literal and fundamentalist interpretation of two sets of texts: First, the sacred stories contained in the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2, and subsequent references thereof in the New Testament;⁸ and second, the household codes in New Testament writings.⁹ Furthermore, the narratives and code sets are approached as prescriptive ideals for contemporary readers, rather than descriptive expressions of the worldview of ancient societies. The focus of this research project is specifically on the role of biblical narrative literature in theological discourses pertaining to gender and sexuality.¹⁰

The limited (and limiting) ahistorical and prescriptive interpretations of two versions of the creation narrative fail in a number of ways: It does not take into account the immense gap between the context of the origin of the biblical narratives and contemporary contexts,

⁸ Genesis 1:27-28; Genesis 2:15-25 and Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9; 1 Corinthians 6:16b; Ephesians 5:31.

⁹ Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 5:21-6:9; 1 Timothy 2:8-15; 5:1-2; 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-3:8; 1 Peter 2:13-3:7

¹⁰ According to Van Leeuwen (1993:189) "(o)ne of the key stories told by faith communities is the story of how the world and humans came to be. Any story of origins gives humans a sense of place, personal identity, gender identity, relationship to God (or to the powers of the universe), relationship to each other, and purpose for human existence. As told within a community, stories of origins have often justified male dominance not only in more formal social relationships but also in more personal relationships. Moreover, these stories often privilege people of one color over those of another."

especially with regard to matters pertaining to gender and sexuality; it disregards the role of the social location of the interpreter in the process of interpretation; it limits itself to a very particular (heteronormative) understanding of gender and sexuality in contemporary contexts, which does not take cognisance of contributions from the social and medical sciences; it posits such an understanding as being universally applicable to all persons, ignoring any contextual realities; it engages very selectively with ultimately only one biblical narrative (albeit two versions) and subsequent (patriarchal and androcentric) interpretations in biblical writings, amidst a vast range of possible biblical narratives; and it casts the genre of narrative into a mould of unquestionable imperative.

Such limited interpretations and selection of narratives are subsequently conveniently made to serve the ideology of unequal power relations created and sustained by heteronormative, patriarchal and essentialist discourses in the Christian tradition. This, in turn, leads to the all too familiar and ongoing marginalization, exclusion, and abuse of persons who do not fit this narrow (and unrealistic) dichotomous mould of gender and sexuality.

A large number of theologians, especially within the sphere of feminist criticism, postcolonial criticism, queer criticism, masculinity studies, and/or biblical scholarship, have to this day made many efforts to challenge essentialist and complementarian theological discourses, the universalistic generalizations it imposes on men and women across the globe, as well as the dominant/subordinate binary motif that accompanies the male/female, man/woman, and masculine/feminine categories.

Historically, the feminist movement was very much based on essentialist understandings of gender. Attempts were made to level the playing field of the dichotomy, with the aim of opening up the space for women and men to express themselves in a more varied and egalitarian way within the still persistent and ever present essentialist binary categories of male and female. A general “we-consciousness” of women and an “essence of the feminine” were assumed mostly without question (Wacker 2006:639). Such frameworks were also present in and often determined hermeneutical or interpretative feminist frameworks with which the Bible was read.¹¹

¹¹ According to Nolan Fewell (1993:244), feminist criticism often placed women in opposition to men, while the being and interest of men still remained the unquestionable standard. By having such a particular focus on women as different from men, as has typically been done by feminist theologians, the patriarchal agenda of defining women as “other” is served very well. This reflects the concept of strategic essentialism as it

More recently, a critiquing of the binary system itself, as well as the universalistic and heteronormative basis it presupposes, has been brought to the fore. Here the voices of subsequent feminist, gender, queer, and postcolonial interpreters have and still are being uttered, each contributing with particular interests to the conversation. Within these groups there is also much diversity, plurality, and cross-influence, contesting any illusion of neatly contained homogenous perspectives that can be clearly distinguished from one another; or worst, a “one size fits all” take on biblical interpretation.

I consider the pursuit of such diverse interpretations of particularly biblical narrative material to be of great importance for the contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality.

First, such a pursuit encourages ongoing contributions to the growing body of biblical scholarly literature focused on exploring biblical narratives from various hermeneutical positions related to theology, gender, and sexuality. Thereby the scope of narratives to be considered in discourses on the relationship between biblical texts, gender, and sexuality can be enlarged. Such a larger scope of hermeneutically engaged narratives may (continue to) shed light on the complexity of gender and sexuality; a complexity already evident in biblical narratives themselves. Accordingly, a broader range of perspectives may inform contemporary theological discourses, and subsequent teachings and practices, relating to gender and sexuality within the Christian faith tradition. The practice of “proof texting”, namely selectively appropriating a single biblical text or narrative to motivate and validate a particular position, ignores the social location biblical texts and their history of origin, as well as the social location of the contemporary interpreter. Furthermore, it does not reckon with the complexity of the process of interpretation in itself. Hermeneutical engagements are required to overcome such theological frameworks.

Second, such a pursuit exposes the vested interests and violent power structures of simplistic, universalistic binary understandings of gender and sexuality. Tolbert (2000a:104) notes that sex and sexuality should not be seen as eternal products of nature or God’s decree, but rather as historically specific, politically informed discursive representations of the material body. According to Schüssler Fiorenza (2000:98), gender

relates to gender, where it is precisely the supposed inherent difference between male and female that is used as argument against oppression and patriarchy. Thus the binary is never resolved; rather, it is enforced and in itself used as a discursive tool. Abraham (2009:156-161) offers a compelling discussion on the manner in which strategic essentialism can serve nationalist discourse, emphasizing the political agenda that is either subtly or explicitly involved in upholding essentialism - particularly within religious settings.

is one of several systems of domination in society. Therefore, she is of the opinion that it is necessary to conceptualize the formation of gender in terms of power relations. Woodward and Woodward (2009:103-105) are of the opinion that feminists have made considerable progress in deconstructing the so-called equality/difference binary in very productive ways. One alternative to having to choose between either difference or equality has been the deconstruction of the division and exploration of the cost of the maintenance of such a binary in society. I contend that such deconstruction continues to be necessary; additionally, also then the creation of alternatives to such a division.

The proposed participation in the expansion of the scope of critically engaged biblical narratives need not only be more and varied engagements with those narratives in which gender and sexuality are explicitly stated, but rather a scope that normalizes the presence of dynamics related to gender and sexuality in all narratives; given that gender and sexuality are implicitly part of all human characterization in biblical narratives, as much as it is implicitly a part of the interpreter who engages the narratives.

In this regard the narratives found in the Gospels can become valuable conversation partners in providing an alternative to conforming, simplistic, and oppressive systems and practices of biblical interpretation. As a starting-point, there are indeed biblical narratives in which Jesus of Nazareth is portrayed as a character who challenged societal prescriptions and expectations regarding gender and sexuality against the backdrop of the first century Mediterranean context (either explicitly or subtly). At the same time, though, it might be found that the character of Jesus appears to be more complex than simply being the liberating male character for which contemporary gender egalitarian readers of the Gospels hope. Rather, the portrayal of Jesus himself in a number of these narratives are ambiguous - at times affirming the same societal prescriptions and expectations which are challenged in other moments. As such, a gender ambiguous portrayal of the character of Jesus can be recognized.

An egalitarian perspective with regard to gender, sexuality, and biblical narratives risks the same temptation as literalist, essentialist, and complementarian perspectives; to merely opt yet again for a proof text approach, which ignores the narrative elements and portrayals that might contradict an egalitarian Jesus, as measured against the socio-cultural context of the narrative. As such, the risk is to use the same type of hermeneutic than is criticized, but simply arriving at a different answer.

In my opinion, contemporary biblical hermeneutics is in need of reading lenses for biblical narratives that can embrace precisely the unsettling, non-clear cut gendered portrayals of characters, rather than finding the “ultimate text” to “prove” a particular position. A movement away from the search for simplistic and supposedly objective meanings “in” narratives (from whichever position such an objective meaning is searched for) to a greater awareness of the role of the various contexts of biblical narratives and their interpretation, is required. In this sense, biblical narratives can be approached as invitations to engage with complexity, specifically as it relates to gender and sexuality (past, present and future).

1.3 Research hypothesis

As a New Testament scholar, I am of the opinion that the narratives on offer in the gospels of the New Testament carry the potential to be sites for life-giving engagements on contemporary issues of gender and sexuality, precisely because of the variety of expressions of and engagements with themes pertaining to gender and sexuality in the New Testament. Biblical narratives, to my mind, much rather echo the complexity of gender and sexuality, than provide easy, simplistic blueprint rules and answers. Furthermore, such reflections in biblical narratives may encourage contemporary biblical readers not to fear such complexity, but rather to critically engage it from the position of their own complex contexts.

However, in order for such life-giving potential to be realised amidst complexity, critical, and scholarly engagement with the various worlds of the text need to take place - the worlds behind, within, and in front of the text - and more so, a responsible and respectful dialogue between these worlds needs to be explored. Thereby contemporary readers of biblical narratives can be guided in the interpretation of the narratives, as well as the relation to and application thereof in their own contexts, embracing complexities of gender and sexuality rather than shying away from or actively opposing it.

The discussions on the relationship between sex and gender are an important part of such a type of hermeneutical engagement with biblical texts. Here it is particularly the broader variety of understandings of gender, amongst which gender constructivism, that can be helpful.

Gender constructivism stands at the opposite end of a continuum with essentialism. It is a view that is increasingly gaining recognition (Johnson 2006:91). This view acknowledges the complex and different ways in which men and women relate to each other, in light of the influence of social and cultural conditions and contexts. Constructivism contends that no aspect of gender is fixed - rather, everything about it is constructed. Such theories assume that relations of gender are neither revealed by God nor read off nature. Instead, they assume that relations of gender are rather historical constructions, which are continuously being produced by societies and social groups (Thatcher 2011:20).¹²

Numerous groups of interpreters within the broader field of gender studies in biblical scholarship have incorporated such constructivist views in their hermeneutical frameworks, in varying degrees. I am, however, of the opinion that there still remains a lot to be done, especially within the context of South Africa with the large influence of essentialist and complementarian theological views in local Christian faith communities, and the interpretation of the Bible in particular.¹³

What are required, in addition to the interpretation of a larger scope of biblical narratives in the gender and sexuality discourses, are perhaps more deliberate attempts within biblical hermeneutics to highlight specifically the socially constructed nature of gender, both past and present, thereby questioning the popular “natural-given” binary system of male-man-masculine and female-woman-feminine. As such, contemporary readers and audiences might (at the very least) have greater awareness of the fallacy of an ahistorical, timeless two-sex gendered system that seemingly had divine origins during creation, with the purpose of directing human relations throughout all ages - and the harm such a fallacy has and still does cause.¹⁴

¹² The challenge that can rightly be posed to proponents of gender constructivism is the manner in which sex and gender are often presented as such completely different categories, that yet another binary opposition of either/or in the form of nature versus nurture is created - as if there is no link between these two at all. In my opinion, it is, however, important that the link acknowledged should be one of reciprocal influence (i.e. sex influences gender *and* gender influences sex), rather than giving hierarchical preference to the influence of sex on gender (as has generally been the case) (Woodward & Woodward 2009:143).

¹³ The patriarchal and heterosexist structure of the South African society finds expression in extremely violent ways towards especially women and members of the queer community - both in word and deed. The official statistics available on instances of sexual abuse, domestic violence, rape, and so-called “corrective rape” (already shockingly high) are but the tip of the iceberg, as most victims and survivors are unwilling to report in fear of further abuse and victimization.

¹⁴ Such an awareness of the socially constructed nature of gender need not imply a position that states that biology plays no role in the manner in which gender and sexual identities are expressed, but rather create awareness of the manner in which both bodies and gendered behaviour are culturally shaped.

A rather recent reading strategy for such a purpose in view of theological discourses on gender and sexuality is gender-critical readings of biblical narratives. This strategy offers the opportunity to engage critically with sacred stories and the way in which gender is embodied and expressed in social settings, within the boundaries of that narrative. Here the critical questions do probe the manner in which gender prescriptions, expectations and standards within the given social setting of the narrative and against the socio-cultural background within which it originated, is conformed to, challenged, actively opposed, and even transgressed. In short, the focus is on the literary construction of gender and gender relations in the narratives under consideration.

Gender-critical biblical readings ask: In what ways are the binary categories of male-man-masculine and female-woman-feminine, as measured against the socio-cultural setting serving as its background, affirmed and/or confused? What does the narrative offer readers, especially then in contemporary settings, for reflecting on gender relations and processes of gendering? Thus, both ancient, as well as contemporary contexts of gender and sexuality inform such readings and need to be taken seriously, attempting to question so-called “timeless truths”, which operate in isolation from historical contexts - of the past and the present.

Although related to feminist- and queer-critical reading strategies, as well as masculinity studies in the sense that gender and sexuality concerns are central, a gender-critical reading has a specific focus against the backdrop of notions such as essentialism, constructivism, and complementarianism, enquiry into the sex-gender relationship, and the discourses of power involved in sex-gender relations; thus, it is an ideological critical reading strategy focused on the manner in which gender and sexuality has been constructed and finds expression in relations within a specific biblical narrative or set of narratives.¹⁵

In terms of options for a broader range of biblical narratives in the discourses on gender and sexuality, the Gospel of John offers an interesting array. Numerous biblical scholars, feminist and otherwise, have picked up on the prominence of female characters in the Gospel over the last quarter century or more. Queer biblical scholars have picked up on the potential of queering and querying specific Johannine narratives. Postcolonial feminist scholars have explored the intersections of gender and class, within the framework of

¹⁵ Gender criticism will be discussed in more detail in section 1.4.2.

empire, in the Gospel of John.¹⁶ For gender-critical readings, the Johannine Gospel also offers a number of options.

Two narratives, identified for such a purpose in this research project, are the so-called “feet and meal stories” found in John 12 and 13: Mary anointing Jesus’ feet (John 12:1-8) and Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-17) - immense symbolic actions both set in the narrative context of meals (Koester 2003:127). These two narratives, placed on either side of Jesus’ entry of Jerusalem (John 12:9-19), share the striking characteristic of giving a lot of prominence to less attractive or appealing body parts, in the intimate and personal space of meal-sharing with Jesus as protagonist. This takes place, furthermore, amidst prominent symbolic actions bearing much weight in the run-up to the crucifixion of Jesus as put forth in the Gospel of John.¹⁷

Particularly interesting, though, is the narrative portrayal of and interaction between the persons involved in these two narratives, specifically in light of their gendered personhood.

John 12:1-8 narrates the events of the anointing and drying of the feet of Jesus as performed by Mary, in the presence of (at least) the recently resurrected Lazarus, the hospitable Martha, and the disciples. Judas is depicted as the one who objects strongly to Mary’s actions, and whom Jesus rebukes in turn with a statement hinting at his impending departure in the near future.

Through a gender-critical lens, one also has here a narrative in which an unmarried woman is using her bare hands and uncovered hair to perform a symbolically laden act, in the setting of a meal, with a copious amount of oil - without any apparent resistance from Jesus, a male guest and rabbi. This is performed in a public setting. Furthermore, Jesus appears to defend this unusual behaviour by a woman in his response to Judas.

¹⁶ Examples of these various types of readings will be discussed in Chapter 2.

¹⁷ According to Du Toit (1990:10), one of the key characteristics of the Gospel of John is its use of symbols, “to bridge the gulf of understanding between spiritual truths and the everyday world.” The best-known symbols in the Fourth Gospel are light, water and bread. Precisely because of this symbolic nature of the Gospel, misunderstanding and irony are important components present in the narrative style. For Koester (2003:4) symbols in Johannine terms span the chasm between that which is “from above” and that which is “from below”, without collapsing the distinction between the two. Symbols can take on the form of an image, an action, or a person, and is something that is understood to have transcendent significance. Smalley (1978:192) states that the narrative of the Fourth Gospel always operates on two levels at once, a deliberate ambivalence between earthly and heavenly, in time and in eternity. Movement between the two takes place easily and at times even seamlessly. Johnson (1999:521) notes that there is a tension between community, symbolic world, and the interpretation of Jesus in the writings of the Johannine tradition – as is the case in all the New Testament writings.

Shortly thereafter, in John 13:1-17, the washing of the feet of the disciples takes place in yet another dinner setting. Without a word, Jesus gets up during the meal, removes his outer cloak, thereby physically takes on the appearance of a male slave and washes and dries the feet of the disciples. Upon Peter's strong reaction Jesus explains the motive of these actions. Thereafter Jesus returns to his place and proceeds to teach his disciples to act accordingly; as servants towards one another (cf. Koester 2003:130-134; Groenewald 1980:288-296; Brown 1970:548-572).

From a gender-critical perspective, the male rabbi (and presumably the host of the meal) wordlessly interrupts an intimate social gathering to take on the role of a male servant (in appearance and in deed), and commands those who are served by him to do the same towards one another once He has left them. Here the movement of Jesus from the position of male master to male servant and back to male master is worth noting; the boundaries aimed at clearly distinguishable class differentiation and issues related to honour and shame were deeply interwoven with one's gender performance and subsequent social standing.

Bartchy (2008:163) states that the world of and surrounding the New Testament was no different from ours in terms of the existence of distinct ideas of what types of behaviour is expected of males and females. Ancient sources offer many such examples and it can rightly be stated that, within the ancient worldview, everything was gender-divided. Against the ancient setting of a hierarchical and patriarchal context with strong societal divisions along the lines of male and female, the corresponding gendered maintenance and defence of honour and shame, and the constantly required performativity of gender for keeping these categories and divisions in place, these narratives appear to blur the lines between male and female, man and woman, masculine and feminine traits.¹⁸

In these narratives, the character of Jesus did not only seemingly permit and defend gender transgressive behaviour, as measured against strictly prescribed gender roles, but He himself was also the protagonist of such transgressive behaviour. However, at the same time, there appears to be congruency on his part of precisely such strictly prescribed gender roles. In the process, the interrelated categories and dynamics of gender, class,

¹⁸ The themes of honour and shame, its relation to gender and sexuality, and gender performativity as required within the first century Mediterranean context, receive attention from scholars such as Malina (2001:27-56); Malina & Neyrey (1991:25-66); Plevnik (1993:106-115); and Moxnes (2007:155-170).

power, and even religion are brought to the fore, yet with no clear-cut or one-sided perspective being offered.

Placed at a narrative turning-point in the larger narrative and plot of the Gospel of John, these narratives evoke curiosity and particular questions of interest from a gender-critical perspective.

Might it be that the Johannine Jesus creates the possibilities for gender ambiguous behaviour from a constructivist perspective, which in turn exposes the vulnerability and instability of societies built on essentialist and complementarian perspectives of sex and gender roles? Is a challenge perhaps posed by the characterization of these narratives, against the sustenance of unequal and abusive power relations and exclusion of persons? Could it be that male and female bodies in these narratives - that which are supposed to be the impetus for establishing rigid boundaries and a gendered societal order of dichotomy - become vehicles of blurring the strict boundaries of precisely such an oppressive order in these narratives? Could contemporary Christian readers be invited to reimagine and question the manner in which sexual and gender categorization and exclusion takes place in society, in light of what Jesus allows and propagates at two key moments of his ministry in the Gospel of John? Might it be that these sacred stories highlight the complexity of sexuality and gender, opposing the need to oversimplify and typecast persons based on their sex and gender?

Bearing such themes and questions in mind, this study accordingly sets out to investigate the possibilities that the narratives of John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17 might offer towards more inclusive, egalitarian, and constructivist discourses on sexuality and gender, as opposed to prevailing oversimplified, essentialist, and complementarian discourses, which are said to be “biblically validated.” These narratives will be investigated by means of a gender-critical hermeneutical framework for questioning essentialist, complementarian, and literalist theological discourses on gender and sexuality - a framework which engages contemporary insights on gender and sexuality, specifically the constructivist perspective, in dialogue with ancient understandings of gender and sexuality, and which leaves room for complexity and spectrums, rather than aiming for simplicity and binary positions.

In short, the hypothesis of this research project is that gender-critical readings concerned with discourse and power, of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17, can contribute to life-giving and dignified theological discourses on gender and sexuality, which

serve to include and embrace all people as equals without compromising the complex nature of gender and sexuality, both past and present.

1.4 Methodology and hermeneutical approach

The proposed study of the biblical texts of John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17 will be done by means of the methodology of narrative criticism, appropriated through a gender-critical lens, and set within the broader hermeneutical framework of cultural studies. These three approaches will be applied in a blended and integrated way, doing justice to the perspectives and approaches of each, while exploring their intersections with regard to the two Johannine texts, as well as the topic under consideration.¹⁹

The choice for such a blended and integrated methodology, is due to: The type of literature under consideration, namely Johannine narratives; the particular interest for reading these narratives, namely gender relations and gender constructions in the narratives; and the conviction that contemporary interpretations of these narratives are embedded in particular understandings and frameworks of gender and sexuality that are shaped by numerous factors.

Here follows an overview of each of the three approaches, as it relates to this research project.

1.4.1 Narrative criticism

Narrative criticism is a type of literary critical approach within the sphere of biblical interpretation. Generally speaking, it is focused on the narrative biblical texts and the interpreter attempts to read these stories with insights drawn from the secular field of modern literary criticism. The goal of narrative criticism is to determine the effects that the stories are expected to have on their audience. This approach was first appropriated by Old Testament scholars, and New Testament critics followed shortly after (Moloney

¹⁹ My Masters' thesis completed in 2014 and titled "Crucifixion of masculinity: A gender-critical (re)reading of the narrative of the cross as portrayed in the Gospel of Luke," was also based on a dialogical methodological approach (Müller van Velden 2014). In said research project I attempted to dialogue the methodologies of narrative criticism, social-scientific perspectives, and queer criticism as applied to Luke 23:26-56. I consider such dialogical methodological approaches to biblical narratives of importance, in order to pay sufficient attention to the three worlds involved in the reading of biblical texts: the world in the text, the world behind the text, and the world in front of the text. Such dialogical methodological approaches, to my mind, are in line with embracing the complexity of biblical hermeneutics at large.

2003:31). In New Testament studies this approach is usually applied to the literature of the four Gospels and the Book of Acts (Powell 2010:240).

In narrative criticism, the presentation and development of the narrative is taken seriously. The present form and existing text of a narrative is considered complete in meaning in terms of its own story world (Gunn 1993:171). Literary concerns (rather than historical concerns) fulfil a central role in its interpretation (Struthers Malbon 2008:80). Although still undergoing development as a method, some of the widely-accepted elements of narrative criticism include an implied author (not necessarily the same as the actual author), implied readers (again, not necessarily the same as the actual readers), narrators (the storytellers in the narrative) and a normative process of reading. Such a normative process of reading assumes that narratives are read sequentially and completely; that readers know certain things relating to the socio-cultural world represented in the narrative; and an unspoken agreement between the implied reader and the implied author as to enter into the world of the story (Powell 2010:241-245). This is not to say that the world behind the text (the main focus of historical critical methods) is completely lost from view. The focus is rather on the world in the text, and narrative criticism attempts to show how the story has been signed and told in order to influence the world in front of the text (Moloney 2003:31).

Alan Culpepper can rightly be regarded as the forerunner of narrative-critical readings of the Gospel of John. His work, "Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel," was published in 1983. In the introduction, he goes to great lengths to argue that the literary-critical work he presents is distinct from historical-critical scholarship; yet "there needs to be dialogue between the two so that each may be informed by the other" (Culpepper 1983:5). He describes this work as an effort to contribute to said dialogue by studying the narrative elements of the Fourth Gospel (e.g. narrative time, plot, characters, implicit commentary, the implied reader), while interacting occasionally with the then current Johannine research (Culpepper 1983:5). As noted by Conway (2008b:78-81), the reaction from historical-critics to Culpepper's "Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel" was initially characterized by little dialogue and many objections to the methodology. What is worth noting, however, is that his publication was the start of ongoing development and expansion of literary criticism in its examination of the Fourth Gospel. Such literary criticism now includes a wide range of theoretical spectrum such as narratology, feminist theory, rhetorical criticism, communications theory, reader-response criticism, gender theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory, and cultural studies. Many of the more recent approaches indeed do

show a concern for the past, yet in ways that differ significantly from narrative criticism in its initial application.

Appropriating narrative criticism as methodology for close readings of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17, means for this research project that the narratives can be analysed in their narrative character and as narrative wholes, as presented in their final form. The main focus will be on characterization of Jesus of Nazareth as he is presented in these narratives, particularly as he relates to and engages with the other characters in the two narratives.

As a contemporary reader, I as the researcher choose to acquaint myself with the socio-cultural world represented in the narratives, as to engage with the narratives in a responsible manner. However, this is to be done with the aim of understanding the narrative better given the enormous contextual gap between the setting of the narratives and my own setting, rather than to deduce any historical evidence regarding the events described in the narratives.

1.4.2 Gender criticism

In broad terms, gender criticism refers to the range of approaches that engage critically with matters pertaining to gender and sexuality, of which the most familiar are feminist, womanist, and queer criticism, as well as masculinity studies.²⁰

More specifically, it refers to a hermeneutical approach that interrogates the male/female and masculine/feminine binary, and the type of power relations invested in such a binary. Although not used for the sake of a specific group and their political agenda, it is by no means an attempt to remain neutral; much rather, it is an approach which aims at critiquing and questioning polarization, dualism, complementarity, essentialism, and even social constructivism, as it relates to gender and sexuality.

In view of biblical narratives, Guest (2012:17) quotes the questions posed by Ken Stone to illustrate the agenda for application of gender criticism within biblical studies:

²⁰ Guest offers a helpful overview of gender criticism, specifically as it relates to feminist and queer interpretation in biblical studies, in the publication "Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies" (2012). He notes the influence of the movement from Women's Studies to Gender Studies outside of theology, which has in turn found expression in biblical studies in the form of a movement from feminist and queer criticism towards gender criticism in recent years.

What norms or conventions of gender seem to be presupposed by this text? How might attention to the interdisciplinary study of gender allow readers of the Bible to tease out such presuppositions? How are assumptions about gender used in the structure of a particular plot, or manipulated for purposes of characterization? How is gender symbolism related to other types of symbolism in the text? How does the manipulation of gender assumptions in a text relate to other textual dynamics, including not only literary but also theological and ideological dynamics?

Further questions include probing to what measure characters embody cultural gender norms successfully or not, and which characters embody them in unexpected ways; enquiring whether the casting of a character's success or failure at embodying gender norms is the result of a particular strategy to present that character in either a positive or negative light; judging whether the text itself is always successful at manipulating gender assumptions; considering whether biblical texts, like persons, at times fail to "cite" gender conventions in the expected ways or according to dominant norms; and finally, asking how attention of biblical scholars to these and other questions contribute to our understanding of both gender and the Bible (Guest 2012:17).

My own use of gender criticism in this research project is that of a gender-critical lens that will accompany the narrative-critical methodology, thereby teasing answers to the types of questions posed by Stone. As much as this research project is not in the first instance a historical study, but rather a study of the representation of characters within particular narratives, such representations are presented within particular ancient socio-cultural settings. In order to pick up on the clues and cues related to gender and sexuality, at least some knowledge of the socio-cultural world represented in the narratives is required.

1.4.3 Cultural studies

An engagement with the selected biblical narratives within the broader context of contemporary discourses on gender and sexuality, specifically essentialism and complementarianism, can benefit from placing the research project within the broader hermeneutical approach of cultural studies. According to Segovia (1995:7), cultural studies takes seriously the fact that it is real readers that lie behind all models of interpretation and available reading strategies, all recreations of meaning from texts, and all reconstructions of history. All these models, strategies, recreations, and reconstructions are regarded as constructs on the part of flesh-and-blood readers. All

readers are regarded as positioned and engaged in their various own respective social locations.

Within biblical criticism, cultural studies seek to integrate the historical, formalist and socio-cultural questions and concerns with the situated and interested reader and interpreter at its core. As an ideological mode of discourse, its central focus is on contextualization and perspective, social location and agenda, and accordingly, the political character of all composition and texts, as well as reading and interpretation (Segovia 1995:7-8).²¹ Therefore, within the cultural studies model, texts are approached as constructs; meaning does not reside in the author of the text or the world behind the text, or in the text as such, but rather in the encounter or interchange between text and a real reader or readers. Rather, “(m)eaning emerges, therefore, as the result of an encounter between a socially and historically conditioned text and a socially and historically conditioned reader” (Segovia 1995:8). Such meaning is no timeless, universal truth to be sought, attained or exposed; rather, it is a constructed in the process of engagement and therefore always linked to the locations of the reader and the text. Simultaneously, cultural appropriations constantly reinvent the Bible, which in turn continuously necessitates new appropriations for interpreting biblical texts (Exum & Moore 1998:35).

Segovia (1995:27) remarks that cultural criticism (which for him includes sociological, social-world, and social-scientific criticism) places emphasis “on the text as a product and reflection of its context or world, with specific social and cultural codes inscribed, and hence as a means for reconstructing the sociocultural situation presupposed, reflected, and addressed”. However, its analysis still remains limited, due to the little attention paid to the role of readers, and the relationship between context and interpretation. He considers cultural studies to be a development in biblical criticism that takes seriously the flesh-and-blood reader who is “always positioned and interested; socially and historically conditioned and unable to transcend such conditions” (1995:28-29).

According to Segovia (2000:46-47), the role given to the reader is undoubtedly the characteristic that differentiates cultural studies from other competing paradigms in contemporary biblical criticism. This central role of the reader requires critical analysis of the following elements: First, reading strategies; second, real readers (those who lie

²¹ Exum & Moore (1998:33-34) mention the work of scholars such as Mieke Bal, Alice Bach, Fernando Segovia, Itumeleng Mosala, George Aichele, Roland Boer, Tina Pippin, as well as their own work as contributing in meaningful to biblical studies from the position of cultural studies.

behind, opt for, construct, and apply such strategies); and third, all readers and readings, in and outside of the academy, highly informed and not - as the traditional distinction between high and low is collapsed within the contours of cultural studies.

For Punt (2012:35), there are three basic dimensions of cultural studies in biblical hermeneutics that could be considered: First, the text is regarded as a socially and culturally conditioned “other”; second, the reader is equally regarded as a socially and culturally conditioned “other” in relation to the text and other readers; and third, the interaction between the text and the reader is no neutral encounter, but is filtered through (the world of) the reader. The interaction between a reader and the text is as much a construction as it is an engagement. As such, a critical position should be appropriated in the engagement with the text - critical towards the text, critical towards the self, and critical towards the process of interpretation. None of these elements are stable, unmovable entities.

Given that this research project engages particular narrative texts against the background of and from the perspective of contemporary interpretation, in turn influenced by contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality which have been constructed in a specific manner, the framework of cultural studies is a helpful guide. It is an attempt to move beyond merely engaging the texts with an awareness of a narrative world that reflects a socio-cultural context vastly different from our own; rather, it is a deliberate choice for an awareness of the relative and contextual nature of all interpretative processes.

1.5 Delimitation, demarcation, and scope

As noted above, the focus of this study will be a gender-critical reading of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17, within the broader hermeneutical framework of cultural studies. In light thereof, the research project will be limited as follows:

The methodology of *narrative criticism* implies that these pericopes will be approached as narratives, from the position of an implied reader. It is not in the first instance the historical accuracy, theological meaning or rhetorical effect (past or present) that will be investigated, but rather the meaning of the pericopes as they are presented in a narrative form.

The application of a *gender-critical lens* - with a particular interest to interrogate the masculine/feminine divide upon which the essentialist debate is construed - requires that the readings of the narratives will be informed by the socio-cultural background of the narratives themselves (in as well as behind the pericopes), specifically as it relates to gender and sexuality. At the same time, contemporary discourses on gender and sexuality shapes the entire purpose of this research project, and very particularly locates me as researcher in this process; one who is specifically interested in the manner in which discourse on gender and sexuality is shaped in conversation with interpretations of biblical narratives, and vice versa. Therefore, *cultural studies* serve as broad hermeneutical framework for this project.

A specific choice has been made for the narratives as they are presented in the *Gospel of John*. This follows from the interest shown historically by biblical interpreters in the manner in which gender is portrayed in this gospel. Furthermore, the Johannine Gospel is characterized by the prevalence of symbolism and its multiple layers of meaning, making for an interesting choice if the complexity of gender, sexuality, and biblical narratives are at the fore. However, cognisance is taken of the fact that similar versions of these two narratives (some to a lesser and other to a greater degree) also appear in the Synoptic Gospels.

A choice has been made for *two specific narratives, namely John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17*. The reason for these two specific narratives is due to the literary connection between these two narratives, within the broader plot of the narrative of the Gospel of John. Such a connection is picked up by numerous commentators and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. I will argue that this literary connection could also be interpreted through the lens of gender criticism, particularly then in view of the relation between the characters of Jesus and Mary, further strengthening the perceived gender ambiguous nature of the narratives.

Furthermore, it may be useful to comment on the *specific choices for the start and end of each the two narratives under discussion*. Such choices on the level of the micro structure usually reflect particular theological positions, and in turn again shape particular theological positions. I am well aware that my own choice is one of the numerous levels of subjectivity that I as an interpreter of these narratives bring to the table.

Although some commentators (cf. Adeyemo 2006:1277; Kanagaraj 2013:123-125; and Carson 1991:425-431) prefer to read 12:1-11 as a whole, Moloney (1996:178) notes that an important framing of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is missed in such cases, namely passages referring to Lazarus.²² Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:204) are of the opinion that the anointing story in 12:1-8 is bracketed by two notices (11:55-57 and 12:9-11) of activities amongst the hostile Jews - activities that were set in motion due to the fact that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead.²³ I concur with dealing with the pericope as a narrative unit from verses 1 to 8.

Concerning John 13:1-17, I acknowledge that numerous commentators (cf. Beasley-Murray 1987:230; Bruner 2012:748; O'Day 2015:613; Adeyemo 2006:1281; Kanagaraj 2013:134) prefer to consider 13:1-20 (some even until verse 30) to be a narrative whole, with the further division of 3:1-11 and 3:12-20. O'Day (2015:613), for example, considers 13:12, 13:21, and 13:31 as explicit links between the units contained in 13:1-38, thereby distinguishing four sections as interlocking pieces that depict the events at the farewell meal. For her, the recurring themes in these units are discipleship, and the tension between Jesus' self-giving love and the betrayal and rejection of that gift by those who are loved by Jesus. Other commentators, however, such as Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:218), provide an alternative division for 13:1-38 as follows: Jesus washes the feet of his core group and urges imitation (13:1-17); forthcoming proof for Jesus being "I am" (13:18-30); Jesus knows of his betrayal and urges mutual love (13:31-38). They base their division on the repeated word of honour that punctuate the ends of the three pieces that make up the segment (i.e. 13:16, 20, 21, 38). Brant (2011:200) distinguishes between the foot washing (13:1-17); Jesus's prediction of Judas' betrayal (13:18-30); and Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial (13:36-38). I concur with dealing with the pericope as a narrative unit from verses 1 to 17.

1.6 Structure of research project

This research project has been structured as follows:

²² Moloney (1996:178-179) suggests the following division of John 12:9-19: (a) 12:9-11: Jesus and Lazarus – The Jews' decision to eliminate Jesus and Lazarus; (b) 12:12-16: The entry into Jerusalem; and (c) 12:17-19: Jesus and Lazarus - Jesus attracts crowds because of Lazarus.

²³ For Malina & Rohrbaugh (1998:204) this bracketing suggests two simultaneous actions taking place. At the time during which the Jews were looking for Jesus and eventually found him, Jesus was at a meal.

Chapter 1 provides a basic orientation to the project, including the background, research problem, research hypothesis, methodology and hermeneutical approach, delimitation, demarcation, and scope, an overview of the structure of the research project, and a conclusion describing the aim and possible value of this research project to the field of (South African) biblical studies.

Chapter 2 serves as the literature review of this research project and sets out to map the landscape of already existing studies pertaining to gender and the Gospel of John. The 1979 version of Raymond Brown's article, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel," (Brown 1979:183-198) will be used as a starting point for this literature review, considering the foundational role this article has fulfilled in consequent theological reflection on gender and the Gospel of John.

Chapter 3 explores the general markers of ancient understandings of gender and sexuality at the start of the Common Era, specifically then also as it relates to the world behind the narratives of the Gospel of John. The socio-cultural context of the ancient Mediterranean world will be outlined, with a particular focus on the manner in which gender was perceived and performed. Consequently, the cultural script of honour and shame is applied to focus the discussion. Furthermore, the more particular socio-historical context of the Fourth Gospel will be discussed briefly. As such, a more specific picture of the world behind the narratives of the Gospel of John is sketched - in as far as this can be estimated for the Fourth Gospel. These general and more specific comments provide the backdrop for the readings of the specific pericopes to be studied in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

In *Chapter 4* and *Chapter 5*, narrative-critical readings of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 respectively, are done through the lens of gender criticism. As such, the narratives will be read closely within the contours of narrative criticism, but picking up on the explicit and subtle clues in the narratives as they relate to ancient Mediterranean understandings of gender and sexuality. Such readings are informed by the broader socio-cultural context of the narratives, as described in Chapter 3, as well as the particular elements in the narratives as noted by the commentators whom I will be engaging.

Chapter 6 brings together the observations that have been made by means of the gender-critical readings of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 in Chapters 4 and 5. Here, the overarching themes and patterns of gender representations and gender relations of the two narratives are discussed in detail. Thereafter the potential effect of these themes and patterns are

explored: First, in terms of the narratives themselves; and second, in terms of readers located in contemporary settings. This chapter continues by suggesting that such potential effect of these biblical narratives could contribute to a type of biblical hermeneutics that embrace the complexity of biblical interpretation for theological discourses on gender and sexuality. As such, this chapter is the dialogue between ancient and contemporary settings.

Chapter 7 serves as the conclusion of this research project. The focus will be on the possible implications of this research project: The questions it raises, as well as some practical suggestions that can be made in light of the findings; its shortcomings; and possible further research on the topic.

1.7 Concluding remarks

My aim - as a South African New Testament scholar - is to make a thorough, biblical hermeneutical contribution to much needed egalitarian and inclusive theological discourses with regard to sexuality, gender, and theology. Hereby I hope to offer a theological alternative to persistent and exclusionary essentialist, complementarian, heteronormative, and patriarchal discourses which still, to a large extent, enjoy much prevalence in contemporary Christian faith settings. These discourses deny the complexity (and thereby the creativity) of gender and sexuality as part of human experience.

Although these types of discourses have, indeed, been the prevailing discourses during the history of biblical interpretation (in both academic and non-academic settings), I am convinced that alternative hermeneutical frameworks do exist and need not be merely fringe alternatives used by a radical few. Rather, as the myth of historical objectivity and so-called inherent “meanings of biblical texts” continue to be rightly discredited, the need for alternative readings of biblical narratives, in particular, keeps on growing. This is more than simply “locating” a reader and allowing for various interpretative possibilities. It asks for more persistent and clear voices, which are critical of inconsistent and irresponsible interpretative possibilities; providing clear reasons why this is the case, and integrating such criticism as to continue encouraging engagement with biblical narratives rather than discouraging further exploration.

The urge to simplify rather than find a place amidst complexity, also in biblical hermeneutics, is to my mind a means to deprive faith communities of all sorts from meaningful and life-giving reflective practices. Human gender and sexuality has never been simple and easy to address; it follows that, engaging with biblical narratives as gendered, sexual beings may also not be simple and easy.

2. GENDER AND THE NARRATIVES OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: AN OVERVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Venturing into the field of gender and the narratives of the Gospels, a reasonable (and perhaps rather obvious) starting point would be that of feminist biblical studies on the selected narratives. After all, such studies have gender at the centre of their agenda, specifically then the way in which men and women relate to one another and the world, within the broader frameworks and characteristics of communities and societies represented in biblical narratives, the traditions of interpretation, as well as contemporary contexts of biblical engagement.¹

According to D'Angelo (1999:129), feminist investigation of the Gospels in general have posed a wide variety of questions to the texts at hand - questions which, depending on one's approach, could produce very different answers about the same texts. Such questions include whether the gospel authors had a positive or negative view of women; whether the messages the gospel authors convey are inclusive or exclusive; whether these authors challenge or accommodate established gender roles in their writings; which of the gospels can be considered the most or least inclusive, and the most or least patriarchal; and whether any of these writings could have been authored by a woman or women.

It might rightly be stated that the very different answers to these types of questions are precisely that which keep rigorous conversations going - about the Gospels collectively, but also specifically about the Gospel of John. These conversations, of course, take place much broader than only within the sphere of feminist biblical studies; as such, biblical scholarship on the whole can hardly be considered a boring endeavour!

After many decades of biblical scholarship, it is considered rather self-explanatory that the Fourth Gospel has and still is a fruitful source for discussions on gender - specifically as to the role of female characters in the narrative. Initially a topic worthy of an "appendix" in Raymond Brown's "Community of the Beloved Disciple" (1979:183-198) at the end of

¹ For a concise, yet helpful overview of the place of feminist scholarship within biblical scholarship, and particularly the ongoing need of feminist biblical scholarship, see Jacobs 2001:81-94. According to Scholz (2014:247-248), gender and sexual violence against women and girls across the globe is one of the key issues that feminist biblical studies should continue to address - particularly then to continue developing an understanding of religious texts and traditions as contributing factors to gender and sexual violence in the world today.

1970's, for many contemporary interpreters the role of women in the Johannine movement stands at the heart of the text of this gospel and in all likelihood, even the community behind it (Levine 2003a:1). In general, impressions are that this gospel appears to be at the very least the version of the gospel narrative that is most sympathetic to women (Levine 2003b:1), if not the one that makes the most effort to portray women in a positive light.

This is interesting, considering that it is not the gospel writing that contains the largest quantity of material on women, as perhaps might have been expected. Seim (1994:3) notes that in comparison to the other New Testament writings, the gospel of Luke statistically contains more material about women.²

Levine (2003a:1) illustrates such positive impressions of the Fourth Gospel by means of the following narrative examples: Jesus' mother prompts the first of his signs, at the wedding in Cana; the Samaritan woman is the first person to evangelize to an entire town; the woman caught in adultery leads to compassionate reaction from Jesus; Martha confesses profoundly her faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God; Mary anoints Jesus' feet in anticipation of his burial; and Mary Magdalene is the first person to see the resurrected Jesus, and becomes the "apostle to the apostles" by announcing this good news to men. Moreover, the gospel contains numerous birthing images - among which an insistence for rebirth from above, and the flowing of blood and water from Jesus' dying body.

However, not all studies have echoed the positive take on female characters in the Gospel of John. In recent times, criticism on such a positive view of the portrayals has been offered, leading to an interesting spectrum of interpretations and understandings of the Gospel of John and gender. Levine (2003a:1-2) poses the following critical questions:

Is Jesus' mother the ideal intercessor who prompts her son's changing of water to wine, or is she a nagging mother who hinders his messianic task? Is the Samaritan woman a righteous descendant of Lady Wisdom, or is she a sexual sinner? Does the adulterous woman achieve her own integrity, or is she merely a tool utilized first by the Pharisees and then by Jesus to make their points?

² "As many as forty-two passages in Luke are concerned with women or with female motifs. Most of these come in the specifically Lukan material. Three of the examples are common to all the evangelists, nine to the three synoptics, five to Matthew and Luke, and two to Luke and Mark. This means that twenty-three are specifically Lukan, and most of these occur in a context peculiar to Luke. Within the material peculiar to Luke, three-eighths of the total number of persons mentioned is women, while they comprise two-fifths of all named persons" (Seim 1994:3).

She notes that such varied conclusions drawn from the Johannine texts should not come as a surprise. The Gospel of John is, indeed, a complicated narrative of which the meaning is often determined both by means of and despite its unstable variables (Levine 2003a:2).

Such criticism and questions are located within the broader developments that have taken place within studies of the Gospel of John and gender over the past few decades.³ Conway (2015:69)⁴ distinguishes three waves of interest. In her opinion, the first wave focused on women in the Gospel, motivated by an interest in the role of women in the contemporary church. These studies drew the conclusion that the Fourth Gospel supported women's leadership in the church. The second wave of interest in gender analysis came about with the focus on literary elements in studies of the gospels. Here, the emphasis was on the literary function of male and female characters, as presented in the Johannine narrative. The third and most recent wave has brought the study of masculinity to the table, adding yet another dimension of gender analysis to the study of the Gospel of John (of which her own scholarship on the topic forms part).

To such recent interests I would add the greater diversity of feminist perspectives, with the increasing role that the awareness of social location fulfils in biblical interpretation;⁵ the perspectives of queer biblical interpreters, who question and provide alternatives for heteronormative interpretations of biblical narratives; as well as critical masculinity studies, from which perspective interpreters critically engage the constructions and representations of hegemonic masculinity in biblical texts, and its rhetorical effect in the past and at present.

Thus, in two ways the interpretative possibilities related to gender and the Gospel of John has broadened: First, the focus of the object of study (initially only women characters, but

³ These developments in Johannine scholarship are, in turn, influenced by the developments within feminist and gender studies as a whole. The developments of the latter will be addressed in Chapter 6 of this research project.

⁴ Colleen Conway completed her PhD dissertation on the topic of gender and characterization in the Gospel of John (Conway 1999). Subsequent publications have focused, amongst others, on research on masculinity in the Gospel of John and the Gospels in general. Given this focus in her work - both in terms of the Gospel of John as well as the gender dynamics in the characterization thereof - I consider her scholarship to be very useful for this specific research project and in particular also for the purposes of this chapter.

⁵ Thereby universalizing tendencies, which ignore other layers of oppression experienced by women, are challenged: racism, regionalism, classism, casteism, colourism, colonialism, ageism, religion, etc. Such movements within feminism include womanist, *mujerista*, Asian, Asian American, and Latino engagements. In addition, postmodern feminism, postcolonial feminism, and Indian feminism suggest the contextualization of feminism that characterizes the influence of third-wave feminism on biblical scholarship (Nelavala 2014:253).

recently male *and* female characters - both individually and in relation to one another); second, the agendas represented by the scholars engaged in this field of biblical study (initially very much a feminist project, but recently including also gender critical readings, masculinity studies, queer interpretations, and postcolonial feminist interpretations).

As a phenomenon, as a researcher I find such development of interests and the increasing range of opinions particularly intriguing, as it hints precisely at the role of location and context of an interpreter and interpretative communities in discourses on gender, sexuality, and biblical narratives; the dynamic nature of narratives; and the creativity possible in the process of interpretation of biblical narratives. What might be deemed as the positive, liberating message of the narrative by one is not necessarily positive and liberating for another. As Levine states, “(w)hether the text offers good news depends inevitably on the presuppositions and interpretations of the reader; what for some readers is John’s liberating word functions for others as constraining directive” (2003a:1). Historical and cultural shifts in faith communities and societies at large are echoed in interpretative possibilities; exemplified by the diversity and ranging opinions on these narratives themselves. Furthermore, the politics of interpretation (namely who is interpreting for what reason) also has an enormous influence, even if not explicitly recognized by an interpreter as such.

This chapter aims to provide, in broad strokes, an overview of the main strands of research done on gender and the Gospel of John, in order to plot the present research project as it relates to the preceding and current scholarship. As this research project has a specific focus on the sphere of narrative approaches to the Gospel of John in view of gender representations, I will narrow the overview down to such interests as it relates to the available literature.

The overview takes as starting-point the above-mentioned “appendix” by Raymond Brown, according to many commentators the first New Testament scholar to pick up deliberately on the theme of gender and the Gospel of John as a whole (2.2). This is followed by an overview of related “equality” interpretations of female characters and their presence in the Gospel of John (2.3). Then, the other side of the coin is offered by providing some examples of literature that challenge such type of interpretations, either in part or completely (2.4). Thereafter, the lens is broadened as to regard perspectives of scholars from the positions of critical masculinity studies, queer readings, and postcolonial feminist readings (2.5).

Finally, I will plot the place of this research project (2.6) - a gender-critical reading of two particular Johannine narratives – within this body of existing research.

2.2 Contemporary debates as point of departure

Since the late 1970's, there has been “an ever-increasing flow of materials produced dealing with all manner of issues related to women in the ancient world generally and their role in biblical literature particularly” (Scott 1992:30). At least two main factors have contributed to this phenomenon; the debate concerning ordination of women to the ministry and priesthood, and the increased activity of feminist writers in general (Scott 1992:30).

Initially, it was the role of women in the Pauline churches and texts that received most attention, usually with a view to address the role of women in the contemporary church. During this time, the majority of these studies were conducted by men. Shortly thereafter, studies on women in the New Testament started focusing on Jesus' attitude toward women, as well as the role of women in the Gospel accounts. Besides a shift in the body of literature being studied, the focus of the discourses also changed: From an initial need to justify change within church leadership structures, towards a rediscovery of the role of women in the earliest Christian communities - especially then based on the research in the Gospels (Scott 1992:30-31).

Some of the most comprehensive work done in such rediscovery and towards a methodology for the discovery of traditions concerning the women of the early church, has been undertaken by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Her work on the Gospels focuses specifically on the communities of the Gospels of Mark and John, and she finds that the Gospel authors represent an ethos of Christian discipleship that differs vastly from that presented by the writers encouraging patriarchal submission (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:316).

Turning to the Gospel of John, a first prominent voice with the focus on women in the Fourth Gospel was that of Raymond Brown. Initially intended as a contribution to the discussion of the ministry of women in the Roman Catholic Church, “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel” (Appendix II) was originally published in 1975 as an article in *Theological Studies* 36. According to Brown, the Johannine attitude toward women was quite different from that demonstrated in other first-century Christian communities -

therefore he chose to include this study as part of the picture of “the community of the Beloved Disciple,” as described in his 1979 publication. For Brown, the Fourth Gospel gives women a unique place, which reflects the theology and values of the Johannine community (Brown 1979:183).

Given the purpose of his focus on the topic, Brown mentions the several ways of approaching biblical evidence pertinent to the (then) “contemporary debate about the role of women in the Church and about the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood” (Brown 1979:183).

A first possible approach is a general discussion of first-century ecclesiology, both in itself and in its hermeneutical implications for the present (Brown 1979:183). For many Catholics, following the teachings of the Council of Trent, the institution of the priesthood can be derived from the Last Supper. However, Brown poses a critical question in this regard: “How does one read the NT [sic.] evidence about the foundation of the church and the institution of the sacraments, and to what extent is that evidence culturally conditioned?” In other words, does the New Testament provide us with a “blueprint ecclesiology” in which virtually no changes can be made, or is this a matter of dealing with a cultural phenomenon that can be changed (Brown 1979:183-184)?

A second possible approach is a discussion of the explicit texts that refer respectively to the equality and the subordination of women in society and cult - for Brown not a particularly useful approach, “since for every text pointing in one direction there is usually a countertext [sic.]” (Brown 1979:185).

Brown states that he prefers a third approach; to consider the general picture of women in one New Testament work, namely the Fourth Gospel, and in one New Testament community, namely the Johannine community (1979:185). He motivates this choice as by arguing that the Fourth Gospel places much emphasis on the disciple and never uses the term “apostle” in the technical sense. He interprets this as a reminder by the evangelist towards the believer that the primary task is to follow Jesus, not to have a special ecclesial position of some sorts. For him, the Fourth Gospel is aimed at ensuring that the radical Christian values are not lost in the structuring of the church. He suggests that such an observation should be appropriated to guide the debates on the role of women (Brown 1979:186).

Thus, he draws his conclusions by making use of an approach that moves away from an ahistorical “copy and paste” from past to present ecclesiological contexts, or isolated “text proofing” for the sake of debating a point, but rather attempts to consider a body of biblical literature holistically and as a reflection of “the history, the theology, and the values of the Johannine community” (Brown 1979:183), for the purpose of contemporary discussions.

According to Brown, he applies this approach by describing all the narratives in the Gospel which deal with women under the heading “Various Women of the Gospel.” His discussion covers the narratives of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4), Martha’s confession of Jesus as “Son of God” during Jesus’ visit to Mary, Martha and Lazarus (John 11), and Jesus’ first appearance to a woman, namely Mary Magdalene (John 20). He excludes the narratives of the adulteress in John 7:53:8:11,⁶ as well as Mary’s anointing of Jesus (John 12:3-7) (Brown 1979:186-192). Brown does include a particular focus on the mother of Jesus (1979:192-198).⁷

He emphasises, in general, the manner in which female characters fulfil roles typically ascribed to the male disciples and their prominence in key moments of Jesus’ ministry. Accordingly, he draws the conclusion of an idyllic Johannine community; a community in which women and men were already, to a large extent, on an equal level. Brown goes as far as to interpret this as a community where the Pauline ideal of Galatians 3:28, a dream that was not fully realized in the Pauline communities, was actually attained (Brown 1979:198).

Thus, for Brown it was evident that the Fourth Gospel itself already provides clues as to the role of women in faith communities - past and present. He views the prominence and portrayals of female characters, Jesus’ interaction with them, and their role in the Johannine faith community as positive. For him, this testifies to a central role fulfilled by women in the Johannine community and to women’s social equality with men (Reinhartz 2003b:15). Such perspectives have served as a helpful basis for contemporary discussions on the role of women in the church, specifically within the Catholic tradition.

⁶ Brown considers this narrative to be a later and non-Johannine insertion into the Gospel, thereby aligning himself with the view followed by a large majority of contemporary New Testament scholars. Toensing (2003a:159), however, notes in this regard that earliest manuscript attestation in a canonical gospel (Codex Bezae) is from the fourth or fifth century, where the pericope is found after John 7:52. According to her, this location is also the best-attested placement of the pericope in manuscript tradition and therefore also in modern translations.

⁷ With regards to Mary, the mother of Jesus, Brown (1979:192-198) discusses the role of Mary during the wedding at Cana (John 2), as well as at the foot of the cross (John 19), especially then in relation to the Beloved Disciple.

Whether in agreement with Brown's conclusions or not, his approach is helpful in that it takes seriously narrative episodes as a whole (albeit then incomplete, as was noted by Conway), as well as the historical setting it represents. As a researcher within the field of New Testament narratives and gender, I find such an "embedded" point of departure to be particularly helpful in discourses on gender and biblical texts - in opposition to a "text proof", ahistorical approach, which up to this day still persists in more conservative, literalist circles of interpretation. However, I do consider his judgement of the Johannine community as overly optimistic, considering the socio-cultural world of the Greco-Roman context of the first century CE - particularly its hierarchical gendered ordering.⁸

2.3 Following in the footsteps of the "firsts": Equality interpretations of female characters in the Gospel of John

In a conclusory chapter for the publication "Women in the New Testament," Thurston (1998:157) makes the short but certain statement: "In the Gospel of John women are presented as full dialogue partners with Jesus, faithful disciples, and models of Christian behaviour." Conway notes that the majority of work subsequent to that of Brown reads the Johannine women as equal to male disciples, and/or as representatives of women in a historical Johannine community (2003b:79-80).⁹ She posits that the scholars who have followed in his footsteps have called attention to what is now rather obvious, namely the distinct presentation of women characters by the fourth evangelist (2003b:79-80).

In her published dissertation, Conway (1999:18-36) provides a helpful overview of prominent scholars who have engaged research on women in the Fourth Gospel. In her opinion, some of the first scholars to follow in the footsteps of Brown, towards an interpretation of equality of women in the Gospel of John, were Eugene Stockton, Sandra Schneiders, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza - notably (and not surprisingly) all situated

⁸ Martin (2012:35) notes that objections to the term "Greco-Roman," as is typically used in studies on Christianity and Judaism in the ancient Mediterranean are often uttered by classicists. The reason is that ancient Greece and Rome are often studied as distinct entities in classical studies, with a more particular focus on the respective languages, social institutions, and cultures. The term "Greco-Roman" may create the impression of minimizing significant differences between Greek and Roman. I concur with Martin in considering it a useful term to refer to the socio-cultural context of the first century for the purpose of discussing New Testament texts, and will appropriate it as such in this research project. Thereby I do not ignore the differences between the Greek and Roman contexts, but rather focus on the integrated and complex embodiment of these contexts under particularly the rule of the Roman Empire from the first century CE onwards.

⁹ For Conway, such subsequent works include the following: Schneiders (1982:35-45); Nortjea (1986:21-28); Rena (1986:131-147); Seim (1987:56-73); Thiessen (1990:53-64); and De Boer (1992:208-230).

within the context of the Catholic tradition (Conway 1999:20-24).¹⁰ She chooses to focus on these scholars' work, precisely because they have called attention to the role of women in general in John's Gospel - in comparison to many earlier studies that discussed aspects of individual women characters. Conway (1999:24) argues that the importance of female characters in the Gospel as women began to emerge when they were looked at together. For Conway, the kind of work done by Brown, Stockton, Schneiders, and Schüssler Fiorenza are limited in several respects: Firstly, there is a less smooth transition from the Gospel narrative to the historical community than is being assumed by the scholars (texts might be realistic reflections of a particular community, but there is no certainty about that); secondly, the thematic importance of women for the Gospel is not taken up (given the large emphasis on the irrelevance of the gender of characters) (Conway 1999:25-26).

As an example of these scholars, Schüssler Fiorenza does a close examination of the type of language used to describe the women in the Gospel of John (1983:323-333). Her conclusion is that the representation of female characters not only reflects women's participation in the community, but also assigns formal leadership roles (e.g. deacon and apostle), to women in the Johannine community. For Schüssler Fiorenza, the Gospel of John offers more than just "proof" for the manner in which women are to be allowed to express discipleship; rather, the women of the Fourth Gospel are "paradigms of women's apostolic discipleship ... not just to be imitated by women but by all those who belong to Jesus' 'very own' familial community" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:333). She defines the Johannine community as an "alternative" community, characterized by relationships of equality (Conway 1999:25). She also notes that the individual women in the Gospel are placed at crucial and prominent points in the development of the plot (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:326).

Related, but with a different angle, is the work of Mary Rose D'Angelo (1999:129-149), who investigates the role of women in house churches and as charismatic prophets. In her view, gender was not an issue in the conflict between the Johannine group and the Jewish community. However, there was considerable tension within the Johannine community itself over the role of women. She notes that the Gospel of John does indeed offer powerful pictures of women, but that this did not exclude conflict over communal roles. Examples she cites are the non-appearance of Mary Magdalene in John 21 with Peter and the beloved disciple, and the exclusion of Mary as either a visionary or as a

¹⁰ She discusses the following works of each: Stockton (1979:132-144); Schneiders (1982:35-45); and Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:323-334).

disciple in Jesus' appearance to his disciples in John 21:14. According to D'Angelo, this verse may be a reflection of less participation by women in leadership in the community during its later years, or even a desire to restrict the participation of women - either on the part of the author of the appendix, or its audience (1999:137).

She further notes that the female person of Wisdom disappears entirely behind the male dyad of father and son, as the masculine personification of the Word pre-empts her. So too, the powerful figures of women in the gospel are presented in erotic and familial categories. Ascetic and spiritualist tendencies to liberate women from these categories only seem to limit them as actors in the world (D'Angelo 1999:137).¹¹

According to Adele Reinhartz (2003b:15), the studies of women in the Gospel of John done by the scholars Schneiders, Schüssler Fiorenza, and D'Angelo, along with that of Brown, share a specific assumption, namely that the text weaves two stories together, presented as one: On the one hand, the story of Jesus in early first-century Palestine; on the other hand, the history and experience of the Johannine community in late first-century Asia Minor. Although she cautions against an approach which implies that historical facts can simplistically be "read off" the narratives contained in the Gospel of John, she does propose a form of "historical imagination" in which the narratives can be related to history, in one form or the other (2003b:14-18).

Diane Jacobs-Malina goes as far as to argue that the Gospel of John as a whole contains a demise of the patriarchal perception, in view of its relationship to the tradition that was received by the Johannine author. Accordingly, she believes the Johannine gospel "discarded each plank in the ordering of the patriarchal cosmos" (Jacobs-Malina 1993:77). For her, the Gospel of John inverts hierarchies, bridges disparity, joins separation, elevates submission, and presents flesh as bearing the weight of the glory of God (Jacobs-Malina 1993:75-77).

Similar to Brown, Robert Kysar includes an appendix titled "The Women of the Gospel of John" in his publication titled "John - The Maverick Gospel" (1993). He argues that the Gospel of John has a purposeful presentation of women as models of faith. He motivates such a position by considering the place of women in the structure of the whole of the

¹¹ Scott (2003:1161) comments that it is not possible to make a direct equivalence in incarnational terms between the male Jesus and the female image of God's presence (Sophia) in the world. By choosing Logos, a well-established yet masculine-gendered synonym for Sophia, the connection with the tradition is made firmly whilst simultaneously affirming the limitations of the incarnation.

Gospel, and by taking a closer look at the female characters who encounter Jesus (1993:147). In his opinion, the author of the Fourth Gospel presents the female characters of the drama in “all the crucial places”. The female characters he discusses, are the mother of Jesus (2:1-11, the beginning of Jesus’ ministry); the Samaritan woman (chapter 4, shortly thereafter); Martha and Mary (chapters 11 and 12, the grand turning point of the story); the women at the foot of the cross (19:25, a presence highlighted by the absence of all but one of the presumably male followers, namely the beloved disciple); and finally, Mary Magdalene (chapter 20, the first to discover the empty tomb and meet the risen Christ) (Kysar 1993:148).

Kysar draws two drastically different conclusions based on the perceived prominence of women in the Gospel of John: First, that the author of the Fourth Gospel feels it is necessary to reaffirm the place and role of women in the ministry of Jesus, because the faith community of the time runs the danger of forgetting this. This is done not in a manner that posits gender inclusiveness as the central message, but Christ. Second, that the faith community out of which the author of the Fourth Gospel writes is one in which the equality of the place and role of women and men is taken for granted - the author thus knows no other way of telling the Jesus story than in the context of the equality of women and men in Christ (1993:152-153).

Conway (1999:27-28) considers the conclusions drawn by Kysar as very similar to those of Schüssler Fiorenza. Kysar, as well as Schüssler Fiorenza, addresses the issue of patriarchal language and the dominant male image for God presented in the Gospel of John. For him, the imaging of God as Father subverts the authority of males, as God is the only father and the one who claims absolute obedience from all persons (Conway 1999:28). Conway notes that such an understanding of God in a position of sole patriarchal authority necessarily improve conditions for women and children. She does, however, give credit to the fact that Kysar notes the use of patriarchal language to be examined along with the function of women in the text (Conway 1999:28).

The distinct presentation of women characters in the Gospel of John is a position that continues to be echoed in (feminist) biblical scholarship of the twenty-first century. Kamila Blessing’s contribution on the Gospel of John in the “IVP Women’s Bible Commentary” (2002:584-605) includes a section titled “John and Women”. She concurs with the view that special roles are given to women in the Fourth Gospel. She further notes that modern readers should not underestimate the traditional roles of women seen in the Gospel of

John and in ancient Jewish society, specifically regarding motherhood and in the home. She makes it clear that the Johannine community does not bestow upon women an exchange of good with bad, but rather one type of honour given along with another (2002:587).

Blessing argues that Jesus takes on, “in deeply symbolic fashion,” the roles of birthing mother and midwife in the Gospel of John. She mentions the example of Jesus calling Lazarus out of the grave. She relates this command to the formula employed by a midwife to bring to fruition a difficult birth. In John 11:43 a man is consequently born from above and from below (namely by divine power and from the grave). Given the importance of John’s theme of new birth, she considers the inclusion of such an image of great significance. For her, there can be given no greater affirmation of womanhood than for Jesus to take on a role that, socio-culturally speaking, was strictly the role of women (Blessing 2002:588).

The revised and updated version of the “Women’s Bible Commentary,” contains commentary on the Gospel of John by Gail O’Day. In the introduction to the Gospel of John, O’Day (2012:519) makes the claim that the women characters in the Fourth Gospel play significant roles that are unparalleled in the other canonical gospels. She argues that the Gospel of John narrates a world of faith that would not exist without the participation of women, thereby denouncing any impression that men alone represent witness and discipleship in the Fourth Gospel.

Ruth Habermann concurs in her contribution on the Gospel of John in “Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” offering the view that the Gospel of John offers women the potential of calling forth and retrieving women’s long forgotten past realities. Furthermore, women can receive a counter-force to the “rituals of capitalism,” thereby breaking the “spell” of deeply internalized fear and doubt (Habermann 2012:662). Habermann argues that Johannine congregations were places for women and that love and mutuality were lived counterstrategies in these spaces (2012:664-676).

As a very recent example outside the sphere of feminist biblical scholarship, David Svård (2015:265) follows a similar line of thought by stating that the Johannine description of women is one where they are portrayed as having important spiritual insights and tasks. He cites as examples the Samaritan woman (John 4:28-42) (fruit-bearing testimony about Jesus in her own city); Mary Magdalene (John 20:16-18) (sent to the disciple “brothers”

after seeing the risen Jesus); Martha (John 11:27; cf. 20:31) (delivering the most insightful description of Jesus' messianic identity) and Mary (12:1-8) (the anointing act as an anointing of the tabernacle of Jesus' body).

In my own opinion, such a dialogue between the world in the text (literary dimension) and the world behind the text (historical dimension) - as hinted at by many of these scholars - is a step towards an integrated hermeneutical framework which is necessary for the discussion of gender and biblical narratives within contemporary settings. In this sense, it is a movement away from merely focusing on female characters within narratives, in an isolated sense, but rather invites the interpreter to take cognisance of the socio-historical dimensions embedded in the narrative - and the manner in which narratives affirm and/or challenge these dimensions - even if one can only rely on the clues provided in the narrative itself. However, even with such attempts, the influence of the world in front of the text, namely the influence of the theological positions of the interpreters, are very evident.

By far and large, these types of equality perspectives on women in the Gospel of John require of the interpreter to diminish and/or erase the distinction between men and women - understandably so, given the purpose of the arguments which were largely directed at the cause of equality of men and women in the setting of the contemporary church. Far too often the so-called inherent "difference" between men and women (an essentialist position I myself as a researcher is extremely critical of) has been and still is used to exclude women from positions of leadership, ordination and equal status in church settings.

However, the question remains: Is it really helpful - even from a "purely" literary perspective of characterization - to be of the opinion that the categories of men and women are merely "indistinguishable" in the Gospel of John? Can the notion that men and women as categorically distinct groups be maintained, and moreover, the elimination of social boundaries in this regard? Does the Fourth Gospel text really permit such an approach? Is such an elimination of gender difference helpful for current discourses on gender, sexuality and biblical narratives? What are the implications of such a position of presumed equality, which deems gender (and sex) irrelevant, when engaging with biblical texts which are entrenched in gender-defined settings - pertaining to the worlds in, behind

and in front of the narratives? Is it not perhaps here a matter of the theological paradigms brought to the texts, which are overpowering the exegesis?¹²

2.4 Criticism on “equality” portrayals

Within the larger conversation on the role of gender in the Gospel of John, Scott (1992:34-35) is of the opinion that gender was very much on the first century agenda. Even if one engages with biblical narratives with the aim of promoting an agenda of equality of women, the reality is that one engages narratives embedded in and composed against the backdrop of a world in which gender was not ignorable; rather, it informed every aspect of personal and social interaction and existence.

At the same time, there is yet to be a period in history where gender and sexuality has not played a part in the interpretation of biblical narratives, influencing individuals and interpretative communities on both explicit and implicit levels. That was precisely the reason why biblical scholars such as Brown, Schneiders and Schüssler Florenza initially grappled with the manner in which women characters are presented in the Gospel of John.

In my opinion, it is much more helpful to pick up on the clues in, behind, and in front of the narratives, in order to engage processes of meaning making in biblical narratives as it relates to gender and sexuality; this as an alternative to (attempt at) eliminating gender difference and gender boundaries, as a number of scholars have done in their quest for arguing for “equality” portrayals of women in the Gospel of John.

Such developments in terms of focusing on gendered clues have also taken place within the sphere of biblical scholarship with the focus on gender and the Gospel of John. Along with such developments, the spectrum of views on the portrayals of characters in the Gospel has increased quite noticeably. Whereas the initial majority of scholars working on the gendered portrayals in the Gospel of John were very positive about the role of female characters and the theological consequences of inclusivity in view of this role, voices

¹² Ruth Edwards is very critical of ideological critical interpretations such as feminist criticism in general, but specifically also amongst the scholars critical of interpretations aimed at drawing inferences about the proper roles for men and women in ministry from their portrayals in the Gospels. Although she does provide a short overview on the women characters in the Gospel of John in “Discovering John” (2003:106-110), she regards interpretations with such an agenda as a dangerous methodological exercise, seeing as this was not the purpose of these writings. She is of the opinion that “John depicts women as sharing the faith, as seeing the risen Christ, and as devoted and theologically perceptive. But he should not be taken as offering specific support to the *ordination* of either women or men, since he does not think in these terms...” (Edwards 2003:111-112).

critical of such a position have increasingly also been heard. A few such examples are briefly discussed to illustrate this development.

Although O'Day's contributions to the "Women's Bible Commentary" (as discussed in 2.3) may have appeared uncritical of the gendered tensions in the Gospel of John, she does provide a more balanced remark elsewhere. She still argues that the Gospel of John contains more female characters in pivotal and active roles in relationship to Jesus than any other Gospel. However, she also posits that the dominant language for God in the Fourth Gospel is "Father," and that this raises questions about the intersection of patriarchy, androcentrism, and theology - in a manner that no other New Testament document appears to do. Subsequently, for her, a feminist interpreter of the Gospel of John is drawn in two seemingly contradictory directions: The Gospel gives positive value to women and contains the non-gendered image of "the Word" for shaping its Christology; yet it also gives the ultimate positive value to the images of God and Jesus as inescapably male - they are the "Father" and the "Son". As such, readers of the Gospel of John need to recognize the inescapable gendered language and imagery contained in this writing, as numerous feminist critics point out (O'Day 1999:80).

One of the areas of interest within the scope of such a more critical type of biblical scholarship on John and gender has focused on the portrayal of Wisdom, and the manner in which the characterization of Jesus is related to it. The work of scholars interested in the relation between Jesus, gender and wisdom are wide-ranging (Conway 1999:152-153): From positive interpretations by those who consider Jesus to be portrayed in a feminine light, providing alternative visions to a male God, and even a gender blending in the Johannine Jesus with a positive application of female wisdom characteristics to the male Jesus (e.g. Engelsman 1979:1999; Johnson 1992:172; and Scott 1992:174), to the less positive interpretations according to which the feminine aspect of God has been minimalized and even silenced, being absorbed by the maleness and masculinity of a male Jesus (e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:153; McKinlay 1996:206; and Willett 1992:147-148).

Such a range of perspectives on the portrayal of wisdom, the character of Jesus, and Johannine Christology, finds its place within the broadened spectrum of perspectives that now also characterize the manner in which the portrayal of female characters in the Gospel of John are perceived. Whereas earlier research, to a very large extent, took its clues from positive interpretations of gender, specifically female characters, there are now

varying degrees of positivity (and negativity) amongst interpreters, as to the representations on the table. Such variety highlights the complexity of engaging biblical narratives, particularly from the perspective of gender and sexuality.

Two recent collections that demonstrate precisely the manner in which scholarship on gender and the Gospel of John has evolved over the past few decades, are Volume I and Volume II of “A Feminist Companion to John,” edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (both published in 2003).

The first volume contains eight essays with a common denominator of exploring the text via a dialectic approach. Levine (2003a:2) considers this to be a very appropriate approach for a gospel that in part uses long discourses to develop Christological thinking, and more generally uses the conversations between characters for such development. For her, the starting point is to recognize the presence of women and female imagery in the Gospel. The next steps are to then interrogate its implications. The male and female authors of this volume “open new readings and cast substantial doubt on received interpretations; they adapt older methods for feminist purposes and develop new approaches to address new questions” (Levine 2003a:14). In this manner, the essays place characters and texts in conversation with each other and with the readers of these essays. However, the essays in themselves reveal the reality that “communication is never transparent, gender configurations intrude, words and images offer multiple meanings, and the task of the interpreter remains challenging (Levine 2003b:2).

The second volume explores even more aspects of the Gospel of John through new exegetical and hermeneutical programs. These essays can be divided in three groups: First, those who opt for a broad-based approach, seeking to locate the cumulative effect of all the Johannine stories concerning women. These studies offer general suggestions concerning both the evangelist’s view of gender and the role of women in the Johannine community. A second group focuses on Christological language and theological categories in search of an alternative to androcentrism and exclusivism often associated with the Gospel of John. A third group highlights specific scenes (for example the crucifixion and the appearance to Mary Magdalene in the garden). They then interrogate the function of female imagery in these scenes, the implications of some particularly troublesome verses, and the cultural appropriations of the narratives. As with the first volume, the goal is not consensus between the contributors; and it comes as no surprise that, indeed, no consensus is reached (Levine 2003b:2).

As one of the prominent recent critical voices within discourses on gender and the Gospel of John, Conway posits in her essay in Volume II that the so-called “equality” readings of the presentation in women in the Fourth Gospel, as described above (in 2.2 and 2.3), have led to scholars frequently downplaying the significance of gender (2003b:80), in spite of recognizing the uniqueness of the presentation of women in the Gospel of John. With such a large emphasis on discipleship,¹³ the difference between men and women in the gospel is denied and the relevance of gender representation is mostly set aside.

Conway, however, is of the opinion that there is much to suggest that gender identity does play an important role in shaping meaning in the Gospel of John (2003b:80).¹⁴ Based on the contrasting portrayals of four female and male characters in the Gospel, respectively, she goes on to argue that equality is not necessarily the most helpful way of perceiving the role played by gender identity. The fact that male and female contrasts can be identified, amidst the absence of a blatant male/female dualism, is an indication that gender presentation in the Johannine narrative may be just as complex and multi-faceted as in life (2003b:81).

Conway posits that the gender categories of the Gospel of John stand for different ideological interests, depending on the level (heavenly or earthly) at which they are operating (2003b:81). At the earthly level, gender representations in the Gospel of John might imply a critique of and challenge to traditional institutional authorities - seemingly positive, however, the presupposition behind such an implied critique is that women stand outside the bounds of the recognized structures of authority; critique is only possible because of exclusionary realities (2003b:99-100).

At the heavenly level, there seems to be much rather a reinscription of a “familiar gender myth - that of the universal male subject” - than subversion thereof (Conway 2003b:100). Even though the outcomes of women’s interactions with Jesus and the nature of his

¹³ De Boer (1992:230-231) concludes his study of Johannine women by arguing that the only interest in the Fourth Gospel in the gender of female characters, is for the purpose of persuading male and female readers that the “sexual aspect” does not really matter much, if at all, for discipleship and the tasks it entails.

¹⁴ Conway cites as examples the following (2003b:80-81): the disciples’ unvoiced question in John 4:27; Jesus’ repeated use of the direct address “woman” in his encounters with female characters, including his own mother (2:4; 4:21; 19:26; 20:15; cf. also 8:10) (also picked up by Seim 1987:60); use of allusions (for example the scene at the well in John 4 alludes to the betrothal scenes of the patriarchs, and Mary Magdalene’s search for Jesus contains echoes of the Song of Songs); and in cases where men and women characters appear to be deliberately contrasted by means of narrative structure and content, namely the Samaritan woman with Nicodemus, Mary of Bethany with Judas, and Mary Magdalene with the two male disciples at the tomb. A last example of such a contrast is that of Martha and Peter, which calls on the reader’s familiarity with Petrine tradition.

interaction with women sets the women apart, at the same time Jesus embodies very stereotypical, hypermasculine characteristics and ideals. Very masculine imagery is used for Jesus and God, with a large emphasis on the use of father-son language. This image is also not counteracted by the presence of Wisdom imagery in the gospel, despite a desire by some to reclaim “Jesus Sophia” as somehow reflecting a feminine aspect of Jesus (Conway 2003b:101).

Schüssler Fiorenza (1994:153) states in this regard that the father-son language of the Fourth Gospel - introduced at the very beginning and used throughout - reinscribes the “metaphorical grammatical masculinity” of the “logos” and the “son.” They are considered congruent with the biological masculine sex of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The tension between the grammatical feminine gender of Sophia and the “naturalized” gender of Jesus is thereby dissolved in the Gospel of John. Furthermore, the traditions placing emphasis on the role of Divine Woman Wisdom in co-acting with God in creation and in the life of Israel, are also marginalized and silenced.

For Conway (2003b:102), as much as there seems to be a challenge to the constraints of earthly gender configurations in the Gospel of John, characters seem to meet these same constraints again at a cosmic level. The manner in which women seem to gain prominence in the narrative is by means of the proper (gendered) response to the one who represents the ideal male subject. A remarkable independence of Johannine women from male relationships have been noted through feminist studies, yet women are in the final instances celebrated for their recognition of and devotion to the ultimate male figures in the narrative, namely the Father and the Son. This type of configuration of gender relations appears to be the opposite of what one reads in the Pauline writings. For Paul, freedom from constraints of gender identity occur at the spiritual level (Galatians 3:28). In the Fourth Gospel, women appear to be free from traditional gender categories in the social realm, but in the spiritual realm the customary male-female relationship is reinscribed.

Brant (2011:184) is also critical of the use of women in the Johannine narrative, measured against the context of Greek and Roman literature. She is of the opinion that the author’s purpose of such a strategy may be Christological and that he is thereby saying more about Jesus than about women. For her, the author of John seems to use the tensions created when Jesus enters into women’s space to explore Jesus’ male identity. Toward the end of the Fourth Gospel the patriarchal structures are still firmly intact; followers of Jesus reside within the house of the Father, and Jesus remains God’s obedient Son.

At the same time, she argues that there is some indication of the reversal of the categories of honour and shame that will be exemplified in the new notion of glory established at Jesus' crucifixion. During Jesus' ministry, he encounters women in social locations that are liminal spaces, such as weddings and funerals. These are spaces in which men and women mix and the boundary between the private and public spheres are temporarily blurred. The content of the conversations in these encounters are typically filled with domestic concerns (provision of more refreshments in Cana; marriages at the well in Samaria; and the proper care for corpses at the tomb of Lazarus). In these scenes, Jesus' identity is threatened or challenged. In a context during which the boundaries between the female private realm and the male public realm were important markers for maintaining honour and shame, Jesus is preparing the way for the ultimate act of reversal that is to come (Brant 2011:184-185).

In a later scholarly contribution, Conway considers the construction of masculinity in the Fourth Gospel from the perspective of the ancient genres in which it participates. She draws two conclusions: On the one hand, female characters are used to accentuate the male self-hood of Jesus; on the other hand, female characters function to "safely" push the edges of theological and social boundaries. To a certain degree, it might be that the audience is invited to try an alternative role in a marginal space outside of the dominant masculine worldview that might more readily reject the Christological claims presented in the narrative. However, the female figures hardly undercut masculine structures of authority in the Fourth Gospel. Rather, the focus of the narrative repeatedly returns to the masculine - "the masculine Father and Son, and the community of male disciples, and in the end, especially Peter, and the disciple whom Jesus loved" (Conway 2015:83-84).

Such scholarship, which articulate a movement away from the so-called equality readings of the Gospel of John, and rather re-emphasize the role of gender difference and gender relations in biblical narratives, are related to the widening circle of interpreters and interpretative frameworks within scholarship on the Gospel of John and gender - particularly within the sphere of ideological criticism and reader response approaches.

Although different frameworks can be distinguished, the lines are also not always that clear and the troublesome task of "naming" approaches within postmodern biblical scholarship is exemplified in the case of gender and the Fourth Gospel as well. For the purposes of this research project, I do think that the naming of interpretative categories is at the very least a helpful starting point, as to avoid the fuzziness of a general category of

“gender studies” used to include everything and everyone concerned with any element of gender.

Up and until now, a large number of the scholars reviewed in this chapter found themselves within the sphere of literary and/or feminist approaches to the narratives of the Gospel of John. Thus, in the last part of the overview on scholarship on the Gospel of John and gender I will pay particular attention to the influence of the recent interpretative voices from the perspectives of critical masculinity studies, queer biblical interpretation, and postcolonial feminist interpretation.

2.5 Adding critical masculinity studies, queer, and postcolonial feminist voices to the choir

In recent years, ongoing developments have taken place among and proceeding from the voices critical of the interpretations representing “equality portrayals” of women characters in the Gospel of John.

For some interpreters, this has led to a re-focusing on the character of (the male) Jesus, and the way in which he is portrayed as interacting with female characters. Contrary to the earlier (predominant feminist) opinions of the character of Jesus’ non-typical behaviour within a patriarchal setting, later feminist and gender scholars, especially in the sphere of critical masculinity studies, have picked up on the way in which the characterization of Jesus much rather enforces than challenges patriarchal and sexist ideals, or at least then offers a portrayal of Jesus in which his masculinity could be described as being fluid.

Other interpreters have noted the predominantly heteronormative approach to the scholarship on gender in the Gospel of John, and scholars positioned within queer biblical interpretation have raised their voices by means of both queering and queerying the narratives of the Fourth Gospel. Besides critiquing of heteronormative interpretations, queer critical readings of the Gospel of John also suggest a range of queer interpretations which take seriously the experiences of LGBT* persons.¹⁵

¹⁵ Marchal (2014:279) argues that critical masculinity studies and queer studies should not be regarded as a completion of or competition with feminist approaches, but rather as mostly particular kinds of feminist approaches. Often the participants of such studies learned their critical perspectives and approaches as, with, and/or from feminists.

Yet another group of interpreters have flagged the intersections involved in biblical interpretation, particularly in terms of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and imperial domination. Consequently, within postcolonial feminist circles the Gospel of John and its familiar interpretations is being reread critically, and thereby reimagined.

In what follows, a selection of voices representing these three foci is discussed briefly, with the aim of finally plotting the current research project with its focus on (gendered) characterization in John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 in section 2.6.

2.5.1 Critical masculinity studies

The interest in representations of masculinity as presented in the Gospel of John, relates to the broader interest in masculinity studies within biblical scholarship. Amongst others, masculinity studies in the field of New Testament scholarship is concerned with the construction of (hegemonic) masculinity in biblical and cognate texts (Moore 2003:1). The principle focus in New Testament masculinity studies has been on the representations of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament writings (Moore 2014:542).¹⁶

Jo-Ann Brant (2004:210) argues that female presence in the Fourth Gospel contributes to the exploration of Jesus' male selfhood. However, unlike the Greek tragedies, the gospel does not thereby reaffirm male structures. Moreover, Brant (2004:220) is of the opinion that the way in which Jesus encounters women in the Fourth Gospel, is a manner that rejects the kind of authority that is substantiated with public recognition by men in political office, or the bestowal of titles of honour. Although women are bold and direct in the Fourth Gospel, they do not signify a threat to Jesus' authority, but rather confirm that his authority is not of this world. Jesus does not seek the honour given by the world; he possesses the glory bestowed to God's only Son.

Brant argues for an interpretation of Jesus in the Gospel of John, which recognizes liminality and the gendered implications of such liminality in a context shaped by the gendered boundaries of honour and shame. She notes such liminality specifically with regards to the body of Jesus, and the social spaces in which Jesus is portrayed. With reference to the portrayal of the body of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, Brant (2004:211)

¹⁶ Prominent scholars in the field of masculinity studies and New Testament interpretation include Stephen Moore, Sean Burke, David Clines, Deryn Guest, Brigitte Kahl, Björn Krondorfer, and Ken Stone. For a thorough overview of the relationship between masculinity studies and biblical studies within the field of the New Testament, see Moore 2003:1-22 and Moore 2014:542-544.

argues that the acts of mourning and lamenting were assigned to the female sphere in ancient Mediterranean societies. When Jesus speaks to the disciples about the suffering that lies ahead for them, he explicitly says that they will become like women. Such association of weeping and mourning with women's activity is further substantiated by the progression from the anguish of lament to the pain of childbirth (John 16:20-22). Brant (2004:211-212) notes that the references made to Jesus' body, particularly those associated nearest to his death, do not explicitly compare him to a woman. However, they do seem to play along the borders of emasculation. Examples assuming roles more frequently personified as female, include Jesus' body that becomes the temple (2:19), and Jesus as the source of living water (4:10-14; 6:35c; 7:37-38). At the crucifixion, Jesus' body is pierced and becomes the force of water and blood, reminding of a woman's life-giving body from which emissions in the form of menses, lactation, and birth fluids come. Brant (2004:212) notes that the gospel writer seems to represent the body of Jesus by analogies to the vulnerability of the female body. In ancient Mediterranean societies it is the female bodies rather than the male bodies that denote suffering.

Brant (2004:212-213) further argues that the social location of Jesus' encounters with women tend to be at events such as weddings and funerals. These were the setting which most readily afforded interaction of male and female, and accordingly, it is logical that either marriage or death is central to all of Jesus' dialogues with women: His mother at the wedding in Cana, the Samaritan woman at the well, Mary and Martha mourning at the tomb of their brother, Mary at a supper where she anoints Jesus' body for burial, Jesus' mother at the public death of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene at the tomb. Although such a pattern does reflect the cultural milieu, gender identification is still threatened at such boundaries between male and female spaces. A particular movement is also noted by Brant (2004:214): In the earlier parts of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' encounters with women are either set at a marriage or draw marriage into the conversation. As Jesus moves toward his death, the occasion and themes of conversation turn toward morbidity and bring Jesus into the female realm of emotional pain and concern for a corpse.

Furthermore, several scenes in the second part of the Fourth Gospel represent private (female) space, namely a meal and a burial. One would expect to find women, but they are absent in the narrative. In both these spaces, men take on female roles: Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepare his body for burial (Brant 2004:216). Accordingly, she draws the conclusion: There is an

affirmation of the importance of the private over the public, the personal over the collective and mutual affection over expressions of power in the Gospel of John (Brant 2004:219).

Peter-Ben Smit (2006:31.1) posits that both a construction and a deconstruction of hypermasculinity take place within the Gospel of John. First, he provides an analysis of the relationship between Jesus and his (unnamed) mother, as well as other women in the Gospel of John, as it relates to contemporary (ancient) gender and family ideologies. According to Smit, this enables the construction of a Johannine “macho christology”. Second, he argues that the paradoxical glorification of Jesus on the cross radically questions this macho christology, and opens the doors towards alternatives. He calls his approach a historically informed synchronic approach in which the reading of John as a literary whole is central. This allows for the various elements of the Johannine story-world to interact with one another and (re)interpret each other continually. Thereby, new meanings are continually constructed by deconstructing the previous one. This yet again goes to show that nothing is as it seems (at first) in the Gospel of John.

With regard to masculinity studies and the Gospel of John, the work of Conway again merits attention. In Chapter 8, entitled “‘He Must Increase’ - The Divine Masculinity to the Johannine Jesus,” in her publication “Behold the Man,”¹⁷ Conway shifts the focus to the Jesus character and the manner in which he is portrayed as a hypermasculine male who is able to measure up very well to ancient stereotypical notions of masculinity. She draws this conclusion based on a number of characteristics in the characterization of Jesus in the Gospel of John: The repeated emphasis on his relationship as Son to God the Father; the lack of interest in the flesh and control of passions of Jesus (with the exception of anger and his tears at the death of Lazarus, even though this might also paradoxically contribute to his portrayal as a virtuous and compassionate man); the self-assurance and control demonstrated by Jesus during the passion and crucifixion scenes; the relative absence of references to the vulnerable or wounded body of Jesus; and the power and authority of the Johannine Jesus (Conway 2008a:144-152).

However, she makes an interesting observation under the sub-heading “Wisdom and the Relative Gender of the Johannine Jesus” (2008a:152), namely that a certain degree of fluidity of gender connotations can be found in literature around the figure of Wisdom (2008a:153). She draws this conclusion based on Philo’s philosophical understanding of

¹⁷ This chapter is an elaboration of a chapter similar in content and published elsewhere (Conway 2003a:163-180).

Wisdom. According to Conway (2008a:155): “Wisdom can be feminine or masculine, impregnator or impregnated, depending on her partner in procreation” and “(t)he Fourth Gospel can be seen as a narrative expression of ideas that Philo relates philosophically”.

Conway (2008a:155-156) argues that Jesus fulfils two types of masculine gender roles in the Gospel of John. With respect to the people who occur in the Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a good example of masculinity. However, when it comes to his relationship with God the Father, he is portrayed as assuming a less masculine status. In this relationship he is obedient, submissive, and dependent (for example John 5:19; 6:38; 7:16; 12:49; 15:10). Thus, in comparison to God, Jesus takes a less masculine position, echoing the manner in which John the Baptist related to Jesus. She compares this to Philo’s understanding of Wisdom as masculine relative to human beings (particularly men) and as feminine in relation to God. In the same way, Jesus can also be seen as relatively masculine and feminine; although the latter only in relation to God, such as for Philo the feminine aspect of Wisdom is only that (s)he is second to God.

The relation of Jesus to other characters in the Gospel of John thus affects his gender status, by no means a fixed entity, although Conway argues that the Johannine Jesus ultimately remains an ideal man in his deified state up to the point of his exit of the narrative stage (2008a:156). Wisdom motifs much rather emphasize the ways in which he is second to the ultimate male, God, than what it highlights Jesus’ feminine side (2008a:156). Here, therefore, the masculinity of Jesus remains central; not surprising, though, given the ancient understanding of gender and androcentrism which characterized the ancient Mediterranean context (to be discussed further in Chapter 3).

In a later contribution entitled “John, Gender, and Genre,” (2015) Conway focuses in her conclusion more explicitly on the role of female characters in such construction of masculinity, yet again highlighting that what initially appears as ambiguous (positive and negative) presentations of the role of female characters, are upon investigation merely serving the masculine agenda. From one perspective, the female characters serve the purpose of accentuating the male self-hood of Jesus; they evoke expectations of erotic encounters, yet Jesus is shown as completely resistant to such concerns. From another perspective, the female characters also fulfil the function of “safely” pushing the edges of theological and social boundaries in the narrative. As such, these women invite the audience to try on an alternative role in a space outside of the dominant masculine worldview that might more readily reject the Christological claims being presented. This is

done by letting the audience listen in on their conversations and accompanying them to dangerous places. Yet still, according to Conway, these female figures contribute sparsely to any permanent undermining of masculine structures of authority. Rather, the focus of the narrative remains centred on the masculine: The masculine Father and Son, the community of male disciples (especially Peter, in the end), and the disciple whom Jesus loved (Conway 2015:83-84).

2.5.2 Queer readings¹⁸

Yet another development within the sphere of scholarship on gender and characterization in the Gospel of John, has been voices that do not necessarily directly challenge the “equality portrayals” of female characters in the Fourth Gospel, but rather include more characters in the conversations related to gender and the Gospel of John - and then so specifically related to the experiences of contemporary readers of biblical narratives.¹⁹ The lived experiences of LGBT* persons are central to queer biblical criticism and readings, aimed at challenging heterosexist interpretations of biblical narratives and “queering” the way in which particular narratives and/or characters have been presented in the traditions of biblical interpretation. Queering describes a hermeneutical activity that is a deliberate challenging and exposition of what might be perceived as heterosexual prejudice in religious language, doctrine, and practice (Thatcher 2011:140).²⁰

Two characters in the Gospel of John, who have received considerable attention from queer biblical interpreters, have been Lazarus and the Beloved Disciple. It is particularly the relationship Jesus had with each of these two characters that have opened queer interrogation and thereby, also possibilities. Given the nature of queer readings of biblical narratives, the reliance on socio-cultural or historical contexts of the narratives themselves are not as much the focus as is the experiences and contexts of queer theology (in all its various forms). Rather, there is an invitation to engage the narratives imaginatively, and

¹⁸ Queer theology is rooted in queer theory, which according to Punt (2007:249) “critically analyse social dynamics and power structures regarding sexual identity and social power, by challenging and deconstructing normality especially as supported by essentialist notions of identity.” Queer theology is a form of liberation theology, offering for biblical hermeneutics a lens from the position of persons aligning themselves with sexual minority groups. Prominent queer theologians include Elizabeth Stuart, Steven Moore, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, Dale Martin, Virginia R. Mollenkott, Halvor Moxnes, Gerard Loughlin, Marcella Althaus-Reid, Lisa Isherwood and Todd Penner. See, for example, the work of Stuart (1997) for introductory theological input from the position of queer theology.

¹⁹ For some queer interpreters, the understanding of female characters in the Gospel of John as “empowered women” serve the agenda of queer interpretations and inclusion of minority groups in faith communities and in leadership very well (cf. Goss 2006:555).

²⁰ For an extensive introduction to queer biblical readings of the Bible, see Goss & West 2000a:1-12.

from the social location and lived experience of persons who identify with sexual minority groups - particularly then also in reaction to mainstream heteronormative interpretations and traditions.

The narrative of Lazarus' death and resurrection (John 11:1-44) has been read as an invitation to and encouragement of "coming out", namely the process of disclosing one's sexual orientation identity as a queer person. Mona West (2003a:149-150) provides a short overview of scholars who have appropriated the Lazarus story in the context of queer people of faith, stating that "(i)ts themes of resurrection and Jesus' command to 'come out' have been applied to gay and lesbian lives." These include Chris Glaser, Benjamin Perkins, and Elizabeth Stuart. The resurrection theme in the Lazarus story has also been central for many gay men who have struggled with AIDS. With the development of combination drug therapies, many gay men have experienced a return to life after being at death's door.

Particularly intriguing is Perkins' understanding of the "coming-out process-event" as a sacrament that should be celebrated liturgically as such. For him, the Lazarus story is one of praxis: God's, the individual's, and the community's. All parties must do their part in a "nexus of liberation" (Perkins 2000:196-205). West relates her coming out story not with the character of Lazarus, as has typically been done, but with the character of Martha. She regards her as the central character in the story, the one who has the most interaction with Jesus, and who undergoes the most change (West 2003a:150-158).

Havea (2011:157-173) offers a queer reading of the Lazarus narrative, by appropriating queering as a reading strategy that subverts and opposes privileging, not confined to the sphere of the sexual. Such a process involved reading the narrative with a group of prisoners for almost four months, focusing on the troubles of Lazarus and how the story of Lazarus troubled them as a group.

The relationship between the anonymous character, the beloved disciple, and Jesus, has been particularly appealing to Johannine scholars in general; the same applies for queer biblical scholarship. As part of a discussion on "what the Bible says" about same-sex love and specifically in reaction to the question, "How gay-friendly is the Bible?", Thatcher (2011:169-170) suggests an exploration of narratives which might provide alternatives to the condemnation typical of more conservative interpretations. He briefly refers to the four instances in the Gospel of John to the disciple whom Jesus loved (13:22-25; 19:26-27;

21:7; 21:20-23) and then poses the questions (2011:170): “Jesus loved all his disciples, so why was there a particular disciple for whom Jesus had a particular love? What was this love?”

Robert Goss (2000:208) argues that traditional heterosexist readings of the intimate teacher/disciple relationship between Jesus and the beloved disciple typically interpret it symbolically and as an asexual relationship.²¹ According to Goss, the beloved disciple has remained a powerful metaphor for homoerotic friendship and love for centuries. He identifies the beloved disciple with Lazarus, based on intertextual and extratextual evidence. He notes that he, as a gay male, identifies with the beloved disciple. He reads the narrative from a position of grief, having lost his life-partner to death. His focus is on the resurrection as a continuing bond with the crucified Jesus (2000:208-217).

In a later publication, Goss argues how the narrative of John 7:53-8:11, the woman caught in adultery, is a powerful reminder of the way in which the church and faith communities attempt to regulate human sexuality. He regards the characterization of Jesus, who demonstrates moral superiority in comparison to the religious authorities, as a powerful critique on the “erotophobia” of the Christian church; “it has nearly equated sexuality with sin, following Pauline sources” (Goss 2006:556). For him, this narrative is meaningful for queer persons who experience the condemnation of their sexual lives (Goss 2006:556).

Burke (2014:304) is of the opinion that the Gospel of John could be considered as displaying gender transgression, particularly then a mixing of masculine and feminine activities and/or attributes. Concerning women characters, they perform activities that their culture gendered feminine, such as serving meals to men (12:1-2) and ritually preparing the bodies of the dead (12:3-8). However, women characters also perform activities gendered masculine, such as initiating a theological debate with Jesus (4:19-24) and testifying to his resurrection (20:16-18). The character of Jesus also displays both masculine and feminine actions: He defends his (figurative) household against a hostile world (17:12-15) (a masculine gendered activity), and literally (6:5-13) and figuratively (6:48-51) serves meals.

²¹ Goss (2000:207-208) mentions Van Tilborg’s interpretation of the relation of Jesus and the beloved disciple as a pederastic relationship. Van Tilborg, however, understands this as a nonsexual pederastic model - yet another example of shying away from any sexual connotations that such a relationship often did have in the educational model of the first century Greco-Roman world.

Continuing with the theme of gender transgression in the Fourth Gospel, Burke (2014:305) further notes that there is general consensus among scholars that the characterization of the Logos/Jesus in the Fourth Gospel has been influenced by the characterization of female-personified Wisdom (found in texts like Proverbs and Sirach). Some scholars have drawn the conclusion that the result of the interfigurality of Logos/Jesus and Wisdom is that a female figure is being co-opted and superseded by a male figure. Others argue, rather, that such interfigurality produces a Jesus who transcends the boundaries of binary sex/gender. Tat-siong Benny Liew suggests, through the lens of cross-dressing, that the Wisdom/Jesus of the Gospel of John puts on gender both to conceal and to reveal, thereby demonstrating that gender itself is an effect of bodily performances rather than an expression of an immutable essence at a person's core (Burke 2014:305). Goss (2006:550) is of the opinion that "John is the queerest of all the Gospels," in view of the gender fluidity demonstrated by the character of Jesus. Jesus is both the supreme manifestation of God's Word and the embodiment of Divine Wisdom. There is mobility and fluidity of God's embodied Word in the Gospel of John.

2.5.3 Postcolonial feminist readings

According to Tan Yak-hwee, Musa Dube can be regarded as a biblical scholar with a particular focus on gender within the field of postcolonial feminist biblical criticism. Dube concurs with Segovia and Sugirtharajah that biblical texts are colonizing narratives that validate traveling and taking possession of foreign lands and people. However, her work brings gender especially to the fore of such postcolonial biblical investigations. This is done by recognizing the authorization of travel through divine claims, the representation of the superiority of the colonizers, and the gender representations used to construct the colonizers' claims (Tan 2014:285).

Dube (2000:23) argues for postcolonial Bible interpretation that takes both imperialism and patriarchy seriously. In her view, Western feminist discourses have inscribed themselves within the Western imperialist parameters and this needs to be critically engaged. She proposes that feminist biblical readers must also become decolonizing readers (2000:42-43):

those who demonstrate awareness of imperialism's pervasive exploitative forces and its literary strategies of domination, who demonstrate a conscious adoption of feminist

decolonizing strategies, and who demonstrate a genuine search for liberating ways of interdependence between nations, races, ethnicities, classes, genders, and sexual and religious orientations. This will demand taking both patriarchy and imperialism seriously in our feminist biblical practice.

Lynne Darden describes Dube's interpretive point of departure as a cultural-critical, feminist, framework that suggests a reading strategy that privileges marginal social locations. By doing so, it questions the motives of the production of an entrenched patriarchal historical critical paradigm in biblical studies that has dominated since the nineteenth century. As such, it is a radical and risky position that exposes the field of biblical studies to "other" ways of interpreting biblical texts; ways that intentionally interrogates the socio-political praxis of the status quo (Darden 2012:64).

With regard to the Gospel of John, Dube has done such postcolonial feminist interpretations of John 4:1-42. In one instance (Dube 1996:37-49), she argues that residing within this Johannine text is the colonial ideology that sanctions the cultural subjugation of foreign lands and people. She does an intertextual rereading of John 4:1-42, making use of Mositi Totontle's *The Victims*, thereby interrogating the oppressive constructions of gender, race, geography, and religion. With her intertextual rereading she puts forward the Samaritan identity as an ideal space for contemporary post-colonial subjects and era.

In a later publication, Dube (2001:40-65) rereads the narrative of John 4:1-42 by following the interpretative tradition whereby the five husbands of the Samaritan woman and the woman herself are featured as symbols. Her rereading is done from the position that the Samaritan woman stands for both Africa and women of Africa. It presents a comment on history and the current world systems from a story-telling point of view. The husbands are presented as historical periods, namely the pre-colonial times, the colonial times, the struggles for independence, post-independence neo-colonialism, and globalization.

Such rereadings emphasize the role of social location in engagement with biblical narratives; furthermore, that there is no universal interpretation of gendered representations in the Gospel of John.

2.5.4 Does anything remain to be said?

As is evident from the aforementioned overview of scholarship on gender and the Gospel of John, great strides have been taken since the initial interest in women characters within the debate on the ordination of women in the (Catholic) church. These strides have not necessarily all been in the same direction - some opting for the position of equal representation of male and female characters, others criticizing such a position strongly; and others still heading in a myriad of different directions from there on further, while still keeping gender on the agenda of further exploration.

Overall, this leaves one with a colourful landscape within which to pursue yet more studies on gender and the Gospel of John. It might rightly be asked, is there still anything left to be said? Have all the positions not been covered yet?

In my opinion, this is precisely where the social location and agenda of the interpreter comes in play. For as long as any next interpreter poses questions, queries, interrogates, from their position and location, there is more to be said. This is not to say that interpreters are merely engaging solely individualistic endeavours where each and every voice is simplistically regarded as a contribution on a scholarly level in the field of Johannine biblical studies; however, given the only rather recent acknowledgement and interest in the role of the interpreter in biblical scholarship, and particularly so from the perspective of gender criticism as one of the many variables involved in the process of interpretation, there does then still remain much to be explored.

Although there are scholars who have ventured into readings of the Johannine narratives that can be considered to be gender-critical (especially within the most recent developments of critical readings), these voices are still relatively few in comparison to the bulk of biblical scholarship on the Gospel of John and gender. Moreover, my impression has been that a number of the more recent critical engagements with the gendered representations in the Gospel of John are still often based on (traditional) binary understandings of gender and sexuality - be it then male/female, men/women, heterosexual/queer, patriarchal/feminist, or even postcolonial/Western. Thereby the outcome remains framed by an oppositional understanding of gender and sexuality, even if intersectional and venturing beyond the scope of early feminist work.

In my opinion, more deliberate hermeneutical engagement from the perspective of gender criticism, which does not necessarily attempt to provide either/or suggestions within a binary framework, is required. Rather, hermeneutical engagements allowing for ambiguity, fluidity, and multiplicity are required - engagements which challenge and destabilize binary systems as a whole.

2.6 Plotting the current research project

In the final section of this chapter, I will attempt to position my own contribution to be pursued in this research project, within the varied landscape of scholarship on gender and the Gospel of John, particularly then from a gender-critical perspective.

As a biblical scholar, I find myself in agreement with those who concur that gender as a category is a crucial (and unavoidable) part of the characterization of the Gospel of John; as mentioned earlier, this is not surprising given the context of the narratives, both in the worlds within and behind the texts.

Furthermore, I opt for a more “complex” judgement of the gender relations and gender identities represented in the Gospel of John. Here I concur with Conway (2003:103), who says that we must recognize that gender representations and relations in the Gospel of John function in ambiguous and multifaceted ways, just as in life. Therefore, a search for simple answers is in itself an unfruitful goal to pursue. Given earlier research,²² I am of the opinion that there are sufficient arguments to be made that both male and female characters fulfil temporary and “unstable” gender roles, namely that these roles and identities are constructed and are dependent on the relation to other characters, the plot, and the rhetorical aim of the narrator. Gendered movement in biblical narratives is not necessarily the large and obvious jump between hypermasculine and hyperfeminine; rather, it is often more subtle - however with a particular understanding of masculinity as the yardstick by which gender performance is measured.

²² My Masters' thesis (Müller van Velden 2014) involved a gender-critical rereading of the crucifixion narrative in the Gospel of Luke. In this study I concluded that Jesus is characterized as a hypermasculine male, for whom the Lukan crucifixion event served as validation of his hypermasculine male identity (as measured against a first century Mediterranean setting), rather than as a deconstruction thereof. I concluded by suggesting a queer reading of the Lukan crucifixion event, which rather takes up the shaming and dishonourable effects of a crucifixion on a male person in such a setting. Thereby I attempted to indicate how interpretation of narratives are shaped by the gendered portrayals offered by the biblical authors; furthermore, how such gendered portrayals are by no means objective and thereby fixed, but are open to new interpretations.

My own contribution within this sphere of scholarship on the Gospel of John and gender, is to approach the narratives of John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17 with gender-critical suspicion, to discover with a critical curiosity in what ways both the male and female characters in these narratives “measure up” (or not) to the prevailing gender ideals of their setting. This is, in broad strokes, the ancient Mediterranean world; more specifically, then, a Jewish-Christian setting within the ancient Greco-Roman world, dated approximately at the turn of the first century CE. I will use the point of departure that gender is a constructed form of identity, dependent on social expression and the approval and/or disapproval of specific characteristics (and/or lack thereof) for men and women respectively.

The choice for these two narratives, given their place in the larger plot of the Gospel of John, has been motivated in Chapter 1. However, given the gender dynamics that I will be interrogating, it is worthwhile noting that it is also a deliberate choice to not merely focus on narratives where a male-female dynamic is at play. Rather, I have specifically opted to study narratives in which both a male-female characterization (Jesus and Mary, John 12:1-8) and a male-male characterization (Jesus and his disciples, John 13:1-17) is described. In this way, I hope to move beyond the male-female binary often still set up by scholars (even by those who claim to have moved towards a more complex understanding of gender dynamics), and thereby broadening the scope of the role of gender in narratives - both within the narrative itself, but also in dialogue with contemporary contexts of interpretation. Such broadening includes paying attention to the intersection of gender with class and social standing in these narratives, thereby challenging universalistic claims of gender (albeit gender as a constructed entity).

I am especially curious to investigate whether one character can fulfil dual gender roles simultaneously (along the lines of Conway’s interpretation of Jesus, God and Wisdom), particularly in relation to other human characters. Thereby the complexity of gender as a construct could be brought even more to the fore, and specifically the relational nature (and implicitly the constructed and relational power) involved.

I will pursue this investigation by first providing the markers of gender and gender identity within the ancient socio-cultural setting of said narratives (Chapter 3), and thereafter focusing on a reading of the narratives themselves from a gender-critical perspective, in light of these markers (Chapters 4 and 5).

2.7 Concluding remarks

In this chapter I aimed to provide an overview of prominent scholarly voices in the discussions on the narratives of the Gospel of John, and gender. What started out as an attempt to provide scholarly motivation for faith communities as inclusionary spaces for both men and women has since then developed into a diverse and dynamic network of interrelated, yet distinguishable positions, within the broader scope of gender studies and the Gospel of John.

The dynamic nature of gender as a social construct, and its accompanying gender relations - further complicated by the role of the interpreter and the process of interpretation - open the possibilities of new and ongoing engagement with the narratives. As such the interpretation of the Johannine narratives is a challenging, yet relevant and much needed endeavour.

At the same time, such complexity and diversity signals a certain development in terms of scholarship on the Gospel of John and gender: Namely, a movement away from an either/or approach (namely having to make a choice on whether the Fourth Gospel is affirming of or offensive to its women characters, and by implication then affirming of or offensive to women readers today?) to an both/and approach - an approach which acknowledges an ambiguity within the narrative of the Gospel of John which places the complexity of gender (and sexuality), then and now, on the table.

3. THE (GENDERED) WORLD BEHIND THE JOHANNINE “FEET AND MEAL NARRATIVES”¹

3.1 Introduction

This research project explores the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 from a gender-critical perspective; that is, a narrative exploration with a gendered lens focused on the manner in which gender and sexuality are constructed and portrayed in the narratives themselves. By picking up on the constructions of gender and gendered relations of characters within the narratives, an informed dialogue within contemporary discourses on gender - from a Christian theological perspective - will consequently be proposed.

Within this methodological framework, these two Johannine narratives are approached as whole and complete entities in themselves, the usefulness of which for this project is not dependent on historical accuracy or external historical verification outside of the narrative world created by the implied author and narrator, intended for the narratee and the implied reader.

According to the theoretical scope and frame of narrative criticism, any reader can fulfil the role of the implied reader. As such, the role as implied reader is “a literary construct built on the premise that readers can fully understand and interpret a narrative within its given narrative world by simply picking up on the various clues offered within the narrative itself” (Müller van Velden 2014:77). Theoretically, all elements and information required for successful interaction between the sender and receiver are assumed to be contained within the narrative itself. From this theoretical position, the narrative is posited as being timeless, relatable and universally understandable by any person or group who wish to step into the narrative world created by the implied author and/or implied narrator - irrespective of their particular historical and socio-cultural location.

¹ In Chapter 4 of my Master’s thesis (Müller van Velden 2014:77-105) I did a similar overview of the gendered world of the ancient Mediterranean context, where the gendered dimension of honour and shame, gender performativity and physiognomy were explored. This dissertation continues and furthers those earlier deliberations and findings by including a broader range of scholars in the discussion, as well as focusing on the intersection of gender and class in the ancient Mediterranean context. Thereby a more complex view of gendered world of this context is presented, than previously. Furthermore, this research project focuses on Johannine narratives, and as such the characteristics of the Johannine Gospel as a whole serves as background for such an overview, rather than that of the Lukan Gospel.

However, criticism directed at narrative-critical approaches by contemporary biblical scholars posits that it is not quite as simple to apply such a timeless and universalistic understanding of literary roles when it comes to engaging biblical narratives. The narratives are indeed the result of a choice for a particular narrative genre, but they are rooted in a very specific socio-cultural and historical world - a world far removed from the views, assumptions and understandings of contemporary readers of the biblical narratives. The themes, language, events and nuances of narratives are never timeless, but reflect particular social or cultural and other norms and have a very specific context in mind, the “retrievability” of which does not impose on its existence.²

In my opinion, such criticism bears merit. Therefore, I align myself with proponents of the methodology of narrative criticism as applied to biblical narratives, who generally encourage a dialogue of some sort, between the narrative itself and the socio-cultural world it represents. This is also the position from which I apply the methodology in the current research project.

In practice this means that, in order to fulfil the role of the implied reader who is situated in the twenty-first century CE, one requires a frame of reference with regards to the historical and socio-cultural context from which the narrative one is engaging with, emerged. This opens the possibility of picking up on the various context-specific nuances, clues, and elements that contribute to construction of the narrative world, and ultimately the interaction between the implied author (and narrator) and the implied reader (and narratee). For the purpose of this research project, clarity on such terminology of narrative criticism (as will also be applied through a gender lens in the close readings of the two narratives in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) is in order.

Within the framework of the narrative criticism, the real author and the real reader of the narrative is not of primary concern, as is the case within the scope of historical criticism. Rather, the literary constructs of an implied author and an implied reader are appropriated within the text. The implied author is the constructed projection of the real author. He or she is defined by the literary choices reflected in the narrative, such as the use of settings,

² Powell (2010:254-255) distinguishes between different types of critique on narrative criticism: historical critical criticism (namely the historical dimension of the biblical narratives are ignored); reader-oriented literary criticism (the vast variety of potential responses that real readers bring to texts are ignored); ideological criticism (an adoption of the implied reader’s perspective prevents dialogue with what might be objectionable in texts); and criticism towards the application of the method (for example an anachronistic application of modern concepts to ancient literature, or dealing with the Gospel writings as if they were novels or fictional works).

irony, characterization, narrative time, suspense, and distance. These choices will determine the reader's response to the narrative, as well as the image that the reader will have of the author (Culpepper 1983:6). This is a perspective that must be constructed by readers on the basis of what is evident within the narrative itself (Powell 2010:241). The choices are conveyed by means of a narrator, namely the voice which tells the story. The perspective and point of view of the implied author and the narrator respectively can either be easily distinguishable, or hardly different - dependent on the specific narrative (Culpepper 1983:6-7).

The implied reader is defined by the narrative text as the one who performs all the necessary conceptual moves required to enter into the world of the narrative and to respond to it as the implied author intended him or her to do. The narrative projects a picture of the type of reader for which it was intended (Culpepper 1983:7-8). As such, a distinction can be made between the real responses of readers to a narrative, and the responses that the text appears to invite (Powell 2010:243). The portrayal of the type of reader which the narrative was intended for is most evident by the types of explanations offered in a narrative, and those that are absent. Explanations imply that the intended reader would not have understood a particular point without it. Omission of explanations implies that the intended reader should be familiar with a certain character, place, custom, term, or symbol. The narratee is the narrative respondent to the narrator. As in the case of the relationship between the implied author and the narrator, the implied reader and the narratee can either be distinguished easily from one another, or hardly at all (Culpepper 1983:8).

Gowler (1991:9) argues that all narratives are both narrations of a succession of events, and socially symbolic acts. Narratives assume, utilize, and/or controvert elements of the cultural environment in which they were created, either overtly or covertly. Accordingly, Gowler uses the term "socio-narratological approach" to describe a perspective which takes cognisance of the critical role played by cultural scripts in any narrative. He regards an interchange between literary analyses and analyses of the cultural contexts in which the narratives were originated as necessary, considering that the cultural scripts inherent in any text are an important form of implicit communication between the implied reader and the implied author. By recognizing these cultural scripts, the capabilities of readers are enhanced.

Gowler (1991:13) notes that many cultural scripts are left unspoken in biblical narrative texts. Therefore, the study of cultural scripts assumed in texts is an irreplaceable tool of narrative criticism. For Stibbe (1992:51), it is important that a reader is alert to the value-system in the biblical narrative, either explicit or implicit. Furthermore, the reader should also be alert to the sociological significance of these value-signs.

From the perspective of the narrative-critical study of biblical narratives with due attentions to their socio-cultural embeddedness, the aim of this chapter is to shed light on the world in which the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 are embedded - with a particular focus on the way in which gender and sexuality was framed, perceived, and expressed. Given the estimated dating and location of the Gospel of John, both more general, as well as particular contexts of these two Johannine narratives will be explored. Such focus on the socio-cultural framework will pave the way for an informed close reading of the two narratives in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, where the focus will be extended to the content and gendered socio-cultural elements in the narratives themselves. As stated by Gowler (1991:12), "(n)owhere is the importance of cultural contexts seen more clearly than in the portrayal of characters and their actions."

By way of introduction to this type of general overview of the socio-cultural context of the Johannine narratives, I will provide comments in view of the possible pitfalls of such an overview in section 3.2; moreover, with due recognition of such possible pitfalls, I will state the possible value of proceeding to offer such an overview - albeit general - for the purpose of this research project.

In section 3.3 the broader context of the ancient Mediterranean world will be the focus. In the ancient Mediterranean context, honour and shame served as pivotal cultural script. It was also the foundation for the manner in which gender and sexuality was understood and expressed. Accordingly, in section 3.3.1 I will discuss the notions of male honour and female shame, gendered boundaries, patriarchy, and the intersection of class hierarchy and gender. In section 3.3.2 I will discuss the manner in which gender was constructed, namely by means of gender performativity and by means of evaluation of such performance in light of the gender continuum. Finally, in section 3.3.3, I will discuss the school of thought engaged with the shaping of gender performativity, namely physiognomy.³

³ An in-depth general overview of the Greco-Roman world as a whole is beyond the scope and focus of this study, therefore a choice for a focus on the gendered nature thereof has been made. Relevant specific

In section 3.4, on a more particular level, I will turn my attention to the context of the Johannine faith community, who find themselves in the Greco-Roman environment of the 1st century CE (in as far as this can be determined). As a relatively young Jesus follower community, they are still in the process of establishing their identity amidst a variety of political, religious and philosophical influences – amongst which the Roman Empire, pagan beliefs, Judaism, and Gnosticism. Both the more general level of the ancient Mediterranean context, and the more particular level of the Johannine context, provides a helpful entry to the narrative world of the Gospel of John.

In section 3.5, a few concluding remarks as to the relevance of these insights for this particular research project will be provided.

3.2 Socio-cultural endeavours and the danger of generalization

Before embarking on such a socio-cultural exploration of the context of the narratives in the Gospel of John, it should be noted that I do not regard such an exploration as an attempt to excavate “objective” historical facts.⁴ The interpretation of history is, in my opinion, as much a subjective exercise as is any other type of interpretation - irrespective of whether it concerns historically informed texts, or not. Rather, this is an exploration of the socio-cultural markers in general, with the full knowledge that such interpretation on my part is shaped by the subjectivity of the sources I use, the traditions within which those sources and their authors stand, and my own social location and subjectivity in the process of interpretation of the content I deem relevant for this research project (in itself yet another subjective choice).⁵

Moreover, caution can and should also be heeded against any simplistic use of the category “ancient Mediterranean context,” as if it implies that all individuals, communities

markers of the Greco-Roman world will receive attention in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, where a close reading of the two pericopes will be done.

⁴ Pertaining to the deductions made about the history of the Gospel of John from the text itself, it is important to be reminded that the Johannine text is not scientific history; rather, it is data of history that has been refigured and interpreted in the interest of positing a particular theological position on the part of the implied author (Tovey 1997:264).

⁵ Reinhartz (2008:70-71) contends that the obstacles that stand in the way of historical certainty does not mean to say that scholarship from the perspective of historical criticism is impossible, unimportant, or uninteresting. She argues that scholars who are interested in history should continue asking historical questions of the literary biblical texts, but in recognition of and in dialogue with literary-critical perspectives. Her own approach to the history of the Johannine community is one she describes as marked by humility, imagination, and good humour.

and societies, who found themselves within the geographical location of the Mediterranean world within a particularly long timeframe, thought, acted and believed exactly the same.

I am very aware that this was not the case and that vast differences existed between individuals, communities, and societies. Simply taking the collected New Testament texts as case in point, one discovers rich diversity and variety in various early Christian faith communities, in spite of their relatively close proximity in terms of location, time, and beliefs.

Even while focusing on the more particular timeframe applicable to the Gospel of John, namely the first century CE, deSilva (2000b:519-520) notes that great variety existed in the first century Mediterranean world; “within a dominant Romanized Hellenistic culture, one found the ethnic subculture of Judaism, philosophical schools and the Christian minority culture, among others.” Such diversity and variety has been and still is the case at any given point in history.

Cognisant of such diversity and complexity, and fully aware of the danger of overt generalization, at least some point of departure and broad outline is required in order to bridge the gap between past and present, when engaging with ancient narratives set in a particular time and space - albeit then in more generalizing terms.

Amongst others, the works of biblical scholars who apply social-scientific approaches, have shed much light on the ancient world and often show upon its vast difference from present-day contexts.⁶ The contribution of this field of study has been far-reaching. Reference to the so-called “cultural scripts” of the ancient Mediterranean world has by now become common practice amongst biblical scholars for discussions on the historical and socio-cultural background of New Testament texts, precisely because of these approaches.⁷ I regard the contributions of biblical scholars who appropriate social-scientific approaches as particularly helpful for engaging the socio-cultural contexts of biblical narratives.

⁶ Social-scientific or sociological approaches within biblical studies consider the contributions from the fields of archaeology, cultural anthropology, sociology, and psychology in order to unravel the broader context within which biblical texts came into existence. As such, these approaches are helpful for understanding the world behind, within, as well as in front of the text (Barton 2010:40).

⁷ The most well-known cultural scripts include the values of honour and shame, kinship and a collectivistic understanding, and patron-client relations (discussed extensively by, for example, Malina 2001).

For the purpose of this research project, it is the cultural script of honour and shame in its intersection with gender and social class, which merits the most attention.

3.3 The ancient Mediterranean context

The ancient Mediterranean context refers to the context of the geographical world of the Mediterranean, which is the territories embracing the inland Mediterranean Sea. Ancients considered this to be the known and civilized world, namely the *oikumene*. In terms of temporality, this world began with the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) and continued until at least the middle of the second century CE. Politically and socially, the Roman Empire starts leaving its mark with the accession of Augustus in 31 BCE, yet Hellenistic civilization continues through the time of the early empire (Johnson 1999:23). As noted by Martin (2012:44), when the Romans started becoming more powerful in the eastern Mediterranean, they adopted the Greek system and did not attempt to “romanize” or “latinize” it. Thereby, the Greek language, culture, religious practices, education, and the polis structure all remained in the East throughout its Roman Rule, and beyond. Thus, the most encompassing symbolic world of the New Testament writings can be designated as Greco-Roman culture (Johnson 1999:23).

3.3.1 Honour and shame as foundation for social interaction

It is widely accepted by scholars within New Testament studies that the framework that most determined personhood within the context of the ancient Mediterranean world was the cultural script of honour and shame (Malina 2001:27; Gowler 1991:16; Plevnik 1993:106; deSilva 2000a:23). Evidence thereof can be found in the corpus of literature from both the Greek and Roman periods, of which the texts of the New Testament form a part (deSilva 2000a:23). Irrespective of a person’s age, gender, or class, honour and shame framed and guided all behaviour - on an individual and on a group level. The goal at all times was to maintain and preferably increase honour; furthermore, to associate with honourable persons and value-systems and enact honourable actions. Constructions of honour and shame took diverse forms and were dependent on factors such as geographic location, cultural expectations, and class hierarchy. Despite such variations, there were clear gendered assumptions embedded in the concepts of honour and shame (Whipple 2014:396).

Honour and shame found expression on two levels in the ancient Mediterranean context. On a group level, honour and shame was collectively aspired to by all persons who form part of the particular group. Symbolically, the value of honour was considered the male aspect, and the value of shame the female aspect of the whole - each characterized by specific features. Within the ancient Mediterranean context, the “we” always had preference over the “I”. Thus, the honour and shame prescriptions applicable to the particular group of which an individual was a part - their particular corporate reality - would guide all subsequent behaviour of the individual, be they male or female.

On a concrete level, the expression of this male honour and female shame ran along gender divisive lines, as already evident in the association of male and female with honour and shame respectively. Strict social boundaries were to be maintained to keep male and female spheres as distinct from one another as possible. Where these lines were crossed and boundaries blurred by individuals, the identity of the individual as well as the group which they represent, came under fire and could have serious consequences. Thus, as much as the corporate reality was the primary identity marker of an individual, the individual did have a particular role to fulfil in order for the corporate reality to be realized.

The overview that follows will take as starting-point the corporate, collectivistic meaning of honour and shame (focusing on these values within a group) (section 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.1.2), followed by the concrete meaning thereof (the practical expression of the values in terms of gender differentiation) (section 3.3.1.3). The role of patriarchy within the honour and shame worldview merits attention (section 3.3.1.4), as well as the manner in which class and gender hierarchy intersected within this honour and shame worldview (3.3.1.5).

This overview is broad and as such generalized, yet offered with the knowledge that exceptions did occur. The purpose of this section is an attempt to map out the broad outlines of the cultural script of honour and shame which informed the narratives, which constitute the major focus of investigation of this research project.

3.3.1.1 Honour and collectivistic identity

A person born in the ancient Mediterranean world was trained from childhood to seek honour and to avoid disgrace at all costs (deSilva 2000b:518), increasingly so as people found themselves higher on the various social hierarchies of the time. On a symbolic level, honour referred to a person’s rightful place in society, namely a person’s social

standing. This position of honour was marked off by boundaries shaped by authority, gender status, and location on the social ladder. On a functional level, honour was the value of a person in their own opinion (namely their own claim of worth), as well as the person's value in the eyes of their social group. Honour was thus simultaneously the claim to or estimation of worth by an individual, and the social acknowledgement of worth (Malina 2001:30, 52; Gowler 1991:16). Osiek and Pouya (2010:45) describe honour as both a manner of regarding the self, and of critical competition with the other. The affirmation of one's worth by peers and society was awarded on the basis of the ability of the individual to embody the virtues and attributes that their society regarded as valuable (deSilva 2000b:518).

According to deSilva (2000a:25), honour is to be understood as a concept which was both dynamic and relational. It was the basis of one's reputation and social standing, regardless of gender (Malina 2001:48). The purpose of honour was to serve as a type of "social rating". This entitled a person to interact with their equals, subordinates and superiors in a particular manner. These interactions were guided by the prescribed cultural cues of the specific society and vary among cultures and over time (Malina 2001:52; deSilva 2000b:518). Osiek and Pouya (2010:45), quoting Barton and Langlands, describe the counterpoint movement of honour; the honour of the poor stood in relation to the honour of the aristocracy, the honour of women stood in relation to the honour of men. Strategies were always in relation to an "other" - either as a mirror, a complement, or an alternative.

Honour was first and foremost a public matter, considering that it primarily came from and was directed at group recognition. The individual did not simply represent their own honour, but the honour of the group of which they were a part. Honour was confirmed when an individual's claim to honour was recognized by the group. As a result, they obtained a new social status. This status entailed an expectation of honourable behaviour from the group that was in line with the particular status (Moxnes 1996:20). For Plevnik (1993:107), honour was in the first instance a group value, as individual members of a group shared in the group's honour. Therefore, Malina (2001:53) notes, the individual was required to "defend and represent the honor of all bound up with him and at times, her." Those who served as the heads of groups (be it a natural or an optional group) determined the level and embodiment of the honour rating of the group.

Two types of honour can be distinguished, namely ascribed honour and acquired honour. Ascribed honour was the honour that a person passively received through their birth, family connections, inheritance, or an endowment by notable persons in positions of power (Malina 2001:52; Gowler 1991:16), and to which the individual themselves have made no contribution (Moxnes 1996:20). Variables such as class, race, and religion also played a part in the honour ascribed to a person at birth (deSilva 2000a:28). The honour of an individual could often only be evaluated in relation to the corporate family they are a part of (Gowler 1991:16). Therefore, the possibility existed that a person could be ascribed honour later in life than at birth, for example by means of adoption into a family more honourable than their own, through grants of office, or through grants of special citizenship status (deSilva 2000a:28).

Acquired honour was honour that was actively sought and obtained. This usually happened at the expense of an equal in a social contest known as challenge and riposte (Malina 2001:52; Gowler 1991:16; deSilva 2000a:28-29). According to Moxnes (1996:20), acquired honour could also be conferred on the basis of persistent virtuous behaviour. This means that the individual built up a reputation for being honourable and expressing the honourable virtues that were deemed most highly by the group.

Challenge and riposte was implicit ritualized social interaction that served as the contest for honour. It took place in a public setting and involved two persons of an equivalent "honour rating" (Gowler 1991:16; Malina 2001:52; Moxnes 1996:20). If a person challenged an inferior or someone without honour, the challenger brought shame and humiliation to themselves (Müller van Velden 2014:82).

Honour was usually symbolized by certain behaviours and in the treatment given to the physical person. As such, physical affronts were always considered as symbolic affronts that require responses (Malina 2001:53). Three possible steps were involved in challenge and riposte interactions: First, an action took place during the interaction in which there was either a positive or negative challenge. This could take the form of a word, gesture, or action that attempted to undermine the honour of another person (Plevnik 1993:111). Usually it was done in verbal form, with a clear understanding of the rules for challenge-riposte exchange in these types of communities and societies (Moxnes 1996:20). Thereafter, the person being challenged needed to perceive the action as a challenge. The same was required of the witnesses present. Lastly, the person being challenged had

to respond to the challenge. Not responding would lead to publicly witnessed dishonour and disgrace (Plevnik 1993:111; Malina 2001:53).

A response could take on three possible forms: Negative refusal, namely no response (which immediately leads to dishonour); positive rejection (for example scorn), which the original accuser must in turn defeat to reclaim their own honour; or acceptance and the offer of a counter-challenge to which the original challenger must respond in order to maintain their own honour (Gowler 1991:16-17). Due to the public nature of challenges, the witnesses present made the judgment whether the person who was challenged had defended their own honour successfully, or not (deSilva 2000a:29).

Honour and dishonour represent the primary ways in which social control was exerted in the ancient Mediterranean world. Those who embodied the expected values contributed to upholding the values of a society, and were accordingly rewarded with honour. Dishonour, on the other hand, represented a group's disapproval of a member based on their lack of conformity with the values deemed essential for the group's ongoing existence. In this sense, the threat of dishonour supported a society's prohibitions of socially disruptive behaviour and thus, honour and shame served as ordering principle and first step in the discussion of ethics (deSilva 2000b:519).

3.3.1.2 Shame and collectivistic identity

On a group level, where honour was represented by both male and female persons collectively, shame was a positive symbol, referring to a sense of shame. Such positive shame or sense of shame refers to sensitivity about one's own reputation, and sensitivity to the opinion of others. Such sensitivity led to the avoidance of actions that brought disgrace (deSilva 2000a:25; Malina & Neyrey 1991:44; Osiek & Pouya 2010:45). Within the honour and shame social system, all persons were required to have the positive value of shame, as a sense of shame made it possible to live in a manner regarded as dignified. This implied that one accepted and respected the rules of human interaction (Malina 2001:49).

However, there was a difference between the positive notion of having shame, and the negative notion of being shamed or acting shameless. Persons, who did not recognize the rules of human interaction and/or the boundaries of social engagement, were regarded as shameless. A shameless individual lacked concern for their honour and was insensitive to

the opinions that others may have held of them (Moxnes 1996:22). Furthermore, such a person had a reputation that was dishonourable beyond all social doubt. They transgressed the boundaries of acceptable moral life. Therefore, they were denied normal social courtesies. If one showed courtesy to a shameless person, one brought shame upon oneself. It was considered foolish to show respect for social boundaries when persons themselves do not acknowledge such boundaries (Malina & Neyrey 1991:45; Malina 2001:49).

When persons aspired to a certain status and this status was publicly denied, they got/were shamed. This means that he or she was humiliated, disgraced, and stripped of honour for aspiring to an honour that was not deemed socially appropriate for him or her. Whereas (positive) honour assessments involved a movement from the inside to the outside (from a person's honour claim to public validation thereof), (negative) shame assessments involved a movement from the outside to the inside (from public denial of the claim to the person's recognition of the denial thereof). To be shamed or get shamed thus involved both an external obstruction to one's personal claim to worth or status, as well as an internal recognition of loss of status involved in this rejection (Malina 2001:50).

Honour and shame as cultural script shaped the way in which a group and its members spoke and behaved. It was dependent on the extent to which individual members of the group were successful in either maintaining or acquiring honour, and the manner in which they simultaneously balanced such attempts with the necessary sensitivity and positive shame.

3.3.1.3 Gender, sexuality, and personhood within the honour and shame system

The discussion of honour and shame thus far, has considered the meaning of these values in terms of a collective framework, namely a person's place within a group and the manner in which collective identity was understood within the ancient Mediterranean context. On this group level, honour and shame served as symbols of proper behaviour for all persons, irrespective of being male or female.

Within the ancient Mediterranean context, the social or collectivistic understanding of personhood was central, in contrast to the individualistic understanding of personhood in many contemporary contexts. Persons knew each other in terms of the social, primarily in terms of gender-based roles and the groups in which they were embedded. All of this was

framed with an ever present concern for public acknowledgement of honour and respect (Malina 1996:35-36). According to Plevnik (1993:107), kinship groups inherited honour from their own ancestors who had been honourable. Such inherited honour had to be maintained and defended at all costs by all members of the current generation, male and female. Behavioural control took place on a social level and all persons were expected to participate in and adhere to the social structures applicable to their group. A large part of such behavioural control found expression in gender separate social situations. As such, social spaces were generally gender divided. Furthermore, there was also a large emphasis on and a concern for behaviour that could be considered gender-specific, with the aim of preventing sexual transgression. The reason for such an aim was because kinship stood central (Malina 1996:42).

As discussed in sections 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.1.2, the collective honour and shame of the group entailed both male and female aspects on a symbolic level. From this perspective, honour symbolized the male aspect, while shame symbolized the female aspect. Collectively speaking, shame referred to the sensitivity a person had for what others think, say, and do in relation to their honour (be they a man or a woman). In natural groups, male honour and female shame were entwined with each other (for example in a family, village or city). This was considered to be collective honour and shame (Malina 2001:53).

Yet, moving toward the moral division of labour and the daily activity of real people, honour and shame were gender specific and embedded in gender. The roles were clear; the role of the man was to defend corporate honour of the group. He also had to defend any female honour that was embedded in the corporate honour. The woman was the symbol of the shame aspect of corporate honour. Accordingly, she had to demonstrate a positive sensitivity to the good standing of individuals and groups (Malina 2001:53).

Individual men and women were expected to embody particular characteristics to contribute to such honour and (positive) shame of the group. Honour was presented as a primary male attribute, and shame (in the sense of modesty and chastity) was presented as a primary female attribute (deSilva 2000b:519; Whipple 2014:396).

Male honour and female shame were also seen to be bodily or corporeally expressed. Male honour (symbolized by the testicles) implied active pursuits of honour (which could increase and decrease, depending on the outcome of a challenge) by men. They had to demonstrate manliness, courage (including a willingness to challenge and affront another

man), defence of the honour of the family, authority, a concern for prestige, and social importance (Malina 2001:49). Furthermore, men were expected to be sexually aggressive, bold, have a concern for prestige and superiority, and display a daring attitude (Malina 2001:50).

Female shame (symbolized by the maidenhead) required of women to (passively) maintain (positive) shame, but with the threat that once it was lost, it could not be regained. According to Arlandson (1997:156), a sense of shame was considered absolutely appropriate for, and required of, women in the first century. They were to remain sexually exclusive and demonstrate inward qualities, such as modesty, display feelings of sensitivity or shame to reveal nakedness, submit to authority, and demonstrate an unwillingness to risk. Furthermore, they had to demonstrate passivity, shyness, blushing, timidity, purity, and restraint. For women a concern for shame, shyness, and deference demonstrated shame (Malina 2001:49-50; Arlandson 1997:156).

Crossing the boundaries of honour and shame had very different consequences for men and women respectively. A man avoided dishonour (and thereby negative shame) at all costs. Should a man be dishonoured, or act in a dishonourable manner, he lost honour and was thereby shamed. When shamed he lost repute and worth in the eyes of others, especially those of his peers. Being shamed was the result of an exposure of a man's weakness, cowardice, pretension or foolishness. However, the particular behaviour that led to such judgment was dependent on the context and particular group of which the individual was a part (Plevnik 1993:107-108). Given the collective identity of which a man was a part, he brought negative shame over himself and the group he represented when he was dishonoured or acting in a dishonourable way. A woman, who tested the limits of positive shame, placed herself in the position of being reckoned as shameless. Being without adequate positive shame was for a woman what being dishonourable was for a man.

Besides the negative effect on the corporate identity, a dishonourable man or shameless woman confused the gender boundaries of themselves as individuals in relation to other persons. Men who were dishonourable and women who were shameless blurred the rigid categories of male and female and thereby the common sense order of the group and society of which they were a part. Such instability on the part of individuals were considered dangerous to the identity of a group, and had to be dealt with as soon as possible – either by means of correction, distancing, or expulsion.

Such a gendered understanding of personhood and life as part of a group was enforced already from the time of birth of a child. Upon birth, babies were immediately evaluated in terms of gender - either as future man or woman. Such distinction fits into the broader engendered worldview of the Mediterranean in which not only persons, but also nature, time, space, and deities were perceived in terms of gender (Malina 1996:51). Such gender categorization of a person finds its primary value in kinship terms, rather than in economic, political, or religious terms (Pilch & Malina 1993:xx). Already from a young age, boys and girls were trained to behave and act in the appropriate ways as to contribute to the delicate honour-shame balance scale of the group they were a part of. Such socialization was very strict, with influences of outgroups being kept to a minimum (Malina 1996:52) to ensure that a sound foundation was always in place.

3.3.1.4 *The role of patriarchy within the honour and shame worldview*

Within the honour and shame cultural script, the social structure of patriarchy also played a central role in the manner in which personhood - particularly then on the level of gender and class - was perceived and embodied in the ancient Mediterranean world. According to Arlandson (1997:157), women were gaining ground in every area of life during the first century. Yet at the same time, men still controlled most of the financial, reputational, and political resources related to their own class.

This can, to a large extent, be ascribed to the large influence that the political philosophy of Aristotle had on Roman laws. For Aristotle, the family was the smallest unit of the city state. Therefore, the formation and maintenance of the family by the “ideal natural order” was considered to be the basis for the prosperity of the state. The three basic relationships, in which the “natural order” of control over the body by the soul was embodied, were father over children, male over females, and master over slaves. To a large extent, first century law followed this principle (Yamaguchi 2002:16).

At its most basic level, such a male position of authority and legal power was represented in the patriarchal household. The patriarchal framework implied that the oldest free man of the household (usually the father or the grandfather, if he was still alive) was the head of the household, namely the *paterfamilias* (“father” of the “familia”) (Martin 2012:45). By law he was able to participate within the city, state or kingdom in which his household was located (Jacobs-Malina 1993:1). These households did not resemble the modern nuclear family as we know it today: Besides sons, daughters, and slaves, it also included

freedpersons - former slaves who had been freed but were still considered part of the household and in Roman law were legally still part of the household and still owed the householder duties. Many households also included some free people who were unofficially connected to the *paterfamilias*, functioning as members of the household, yet not legally part of it (Martin 2012:45).

The *paterfamilias* was the patriarch who had to ensure that all household members fulfilled their particular (gendered) roles in accordance to the prescribed expectations - for the sake of his and his family's good repute. Unlike the Greeks and many other peoples of the time, the Romans did not allow the wife of the *paterfamilias* to become a legal member of the household of her husband. They remained legal members of the household of their father and were legally also expected to be under the control and protection of their fathers; even of their brothers or grandfathers if they were still living. The reason for this was to ensure some balance in size and importance among the major elite households and families of the upper-class Romans. There was little concern of the household arrangements of the much larger lower class (Martin 2012:46). Even if not legally under his legal power (*patria potestas*), the (elite) wife was under the authority of her husband by tradition (Yamaguchi 2002:16; MacDonald 2010:30).

In the ancient Mediterranean world, children were taught at a very young age that they were to be subordinate to the authority of the father and/or male head of the household. Such obedience and subordination were instilled through frequent and at times severe physical punishment - especially of adolescent boys. This stood in strong contrast to the experience of the first few years of a boy's life, since infants and children (both boys and girls) remained under the mother's influence. Once puberty was reached, boys are moved from the world of women into the world of men, often a very traumatic experience given the enormous contrast between the relative safety of the domestic (female) sphere versus the harshness and competitiveness of the public (male) sphere (Pilch 1993a:145-146).

This position of privilege that the patriarch as head of the household held was based on the generally-held assumption that during conception, the male seed alone provided everything that was required to form his offspring.⁸ The role of the woman was to provide the place for the seed to grow until birth. After birth, her role was to care for and nurture the offspring of the man. Thus, a particular understanding of human reproduction served

⁸ A few ancient writers were of the opinion that the woman also played a role during conception, albeit of less importance than the role of the man.

as basis for the manner in which societal and universal ordering was maintained. In this ordering, male always held a position superior to that of female.

Already at birth, a male person was afforded his superior position by the ascribed honour he received symbolically. On a practical level, this meant that boys were considered whole and complete, and girls as dependent on the male for her own “completeness” (Jacobs-Malina 1993:1). Boys were taught to dominate, and girls to submit, from as young an age as possible. Considering that the role of the man in society was to defend and acquire honour by dominating others (especially other men), it was deemed necessary that such skills should be part of the social location of the household as well. Characteristics such as aggression, demonstration of self-mastery, and the expectation of being served by a wife, children, and slaves in the future, as well as the expectation of deference from other males, were part of the manner in which boys were raised (Müller van Velden 2014:88). As such, they were merely following in the footsteps of the adult men in their household and group, and were being groomed to be honourable men according to the prescriptions held up in these settings. Women, on the other hand, were taught to live with a positive sense of shame, so that she could bring honour on the men to whom she was attached (Jacobs-Malina 1993:1). The destiny of women in general and particularly those in the family circle was to serve and obey the men (Pilch 1993a:146-147).

The roles fulfilled by men and women respectively within the contours of honour and shame, were not a case of “different, yet equal”; by far and large a man always enjoyed a privileged status in comparison to a woman. Such hierarchy was deemed necessary for the maintenance of stability in society, where everyone was clear on what their place was and how they should act to ensure their contribution to such stability. A particular system of power was thus in place that was deliberately and deeply gendered.

This is evident in the manner in which the honour and shame cultural script placed the focus on men. Men held the dominant public position in such types of societies. Therefore, a male perspective dominated public discourse on honour and shame. Due to the private nature of the world of women, public discourse does not pay much attention to the way the honour and shame system function in the world of women (Müller van Velden 2014:88).⁹

⁹ Arlandson (1997:156) is of the opinion that the link between a female’s sense of shame being tied to domestic and private spheres is often overemphasized in discussion on honour and shame, as not enough attention is paid to the role of class hierarchy as contributing factor. See 3.3.1.5 for comments on the intersection of gender and class hierarchy amidst the values of honour and shame in ancient contexts.

Men were constantly competing with other men to defend their socially-perceived maleness. This included demonstrating the ability to defend the chastity of all women under their authority and protection. Should a woman lose her chastity, she brought shame to the family and household as a whole. Consequently, women were always at risk for being sources of negative shame. On the other hand, a woman who expressed modesty, shyness and respect, namely positive shame, could thereby protect her own chastity and demonstrate the required obedience to the male head of the family of which she formed a part (Moxnes 1996:21). Contra men, women could never regain honour after it was lost.

The patriarchal structure thus meant that masculine honour and feminine shame were always shaped by the need for the *paterfamilias* and other male members to preserve their honour. This was to take place through the protection of their female kin's sexual chastity, as well as through their own self-mastery (Whipple 2014:396).

3.3.1.5 The intersection of gender and class hierarchy amidst honour and shame values

The particular societal class to which a person belonged, played a determining role in the manner in which the honour and shame cultural script was embodied in the ancient Mediterranean world. Arlandson (1997:156) notes that the cultural value of shame was not always the same for the wealthy and powerful, when compared to the poor and weak. Powerful women were not necessarily required to show deference to all men. Slaves and peasants, however, had to. One thing did remain certain, namely that women and men who were poor and lowly, had to submit in the presence of wealthy and powerful men and women.

The shame of a man was increased dramatically if a woman from a class lower than his class played a role in his losing face. With such a public shaming event, he would lose honour among his peers, as well as risk social damage from the perspective of those persons over whom he had wielded power and respect (Arlandson 1997:156). Class distinctions even took slight priority over gender, although class and gender were always bound together. Thus, in a particular situation the social hierarchy at play must be considered as an even stronger factor than gender (Arlandson 1997:157).

Corley (1993:11-15) distinguishes between different categories of women in antiquity, based on the social classes that existed in the ancient world. Wealth did not necessarily

affect one's actual social status in the ancient world, as it was already determined by birth. For women, the categories of social classes were: Aristocratic women (Roman elite); freedwomen (women born in slavery who have gained their freedom through earning their purchase prices or otherwise, who were lower in status but not necessarily lacking wealth); free women (women born into free families of various social means, apart from the freeborn aristocracy); and slave women (who were employed in practically all sectors of society). The same categories of social classes applied to men, however within each class men would be considered as the superior and the women as the inferior.

Osiek and Pouya (2010:47) note that the class hierarchy had an influence on the manner in which especially women acted. In poorer households, it was not really an option for female members to stay indoors in the "private sphere" of quiet domesticity. Evidence also seems to indicate that elite women married younger than non-elite women. The amount of control and freedom a married woman had, depended yet again on the class hierarchy in which she found herself. Elite women were often actively engaged at many levels of society, and fulfilled roles such as benefactors, property owners, builders, and patrons.

According to Yamaguchi (2002:17), there were a variety of households in the ancient Mediterranean context, in spite of the strictly patriarchal legal structure of families. These included households headed by women, or those consisting of brothers only, sisters only, or brothers and sisters combined. The everyday experience of people did not always correspond with the prescriptions of the law. Furthermore, different ethnic groups could, to a certain degree, follow their own traditional laws and customs. Although work environments varied by sexual, geographic, and ethnic differences, the greatest differences related to social and economic status.

Status and authority (and thereby honour) of women increased when they became mothers, particularly if they gave birth to sons. In contrast to motherhood, childlessness, resistance to child raising, and sexual behaviour of women past childbearing age were often described as morally reprehensible. The role of patriarchy was, however evident, in the fact that the *paterfamilias* usually had the authority to determine whether an infant was allowed to be reared or exposed to die, often irrespective of the mother's wishes (Osiek & Pouya 2010:47).

Royal and aristocratic men were the most powerful group of persons in the patriarchal structure of the first century Roman Empire. Women in these circles also exercised

political power; at times directly, but mostly indirectly through their fathers, husbands, or sons. Elite women often had stronger ties with their fathers than with their husbands. Considering that women remained under her father's legal control after marriage and that such ties often remained firmly in place, women were well integrated into the elite class of the Roman society. Furthermore, elite women possessed and exercised a large measure of economic and social autonomy, independent of their husbands (Yamaguchi 2002:23-24).

The most vulnerable group within the ancient gender-defined world, were those persons who were seen as not possessing gender. These were male persons stereotyped as lacking the socially-required manliness, such as male slaves, defeated enemies, and barbarians (Osiek & Pouya 2010:47-48). Such stereotyping was not limited to only specific groups of men; certain groups of women were also stereotyped. Slaves, both male and female, were amongst the most stereotyped persons in the Greco-Roman world.

Martin (1990:48-49) and Yamaguchi (2002:22-23) argues that slavery in the Greco-Roman society was complex and ambiguous - especially during the early years of the Roman Empire. For a small minority, slavery was a means of upward social mobility, and it was recognized as such throughout the society. One's perspective on slavery was determined by one's social position: For the upper class, voluntary slavery was despicable; for a person with fewer options, it could be something to be embraced. The complexity of slavery is rooted in the fact that slavery as a social institution functioned differently for different people.

For persons involved in the lowest levels of slavery (most likely where most slaves served), there was little hope for improvement of their situation. Slaves on the middle level, namely managerial slaves, educated slaves, and slaves trained in skills, could hope for improvement with more confidence. Additionally, the wealth, position, and disposition of the slave's owner directly impacted a slave's own position in society and his or her future (Martin 1990:49).¹⁰

Schüssler Fiorenza (2014a:464-465) notes two characteristics of Roman slavery in distinction to Athenian slavery: First, there were ideological, as well as practical tendencies in the Roman Empire to mitigate at least urban slavery (although slavery as a whole still

¹⁰ Martin (1990:1-49) discusses the complexity and ambiguity of ancient slavery and status in detail in the first chapter of his publication titled "Slavery as Salvation. The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity" (1990). Martin, however, makes very little mention of the gendered nature of such complexity and ambiguity.

remained a brutal institution). Physical cruelty and an emphasize on slaves as being human beings who should be allowed some independence, as well as certain rights and freedoms, is evident from law and literature of the time. Second, Roman slavery condoned manumission by individuals and corporate manumission, and as such manumission was widespread. Thus, at least for some, Roman slavery was not automatically a lifelong state.

Regarding the intersection of slavery and gender, within the slave system of antiquity slaves were said to have sex (male or female), but not gender (Elkins 2014:407). The genders of both male and female slaves were considered irrelevant. A male slave was not considered a man (*aner, vir*) and therefore no masculine traits could be ascribed to him. Socially constructed expectations of masculine behaviour could also not be placed on him, nor could he claim any of the status inherent in the cultural construct of masculinity. A female slave was not considered a woman (*gyne, mulier*). Consequently, no feminine traits could be ascribed to her, nor could the social expectations of a woman in her culture be applicable to her. She could also not claim any status privileges inherent in the cultural construct of womanhood. There were thus no cultural safeguards for female slaves, as was the case for protection of women in other social classes (Osiek & MacDonald 2006:96).

The category of slaves had particularly defined characteristics and expectations. Given such categorization, they could not make claims for honour, status, rights, or protection based on their maleness or femaleness - as would free persons do. The most marginalized persons in a household were female slaves (including children). Because they were considered not to have any boundaries, male and female slaves had no sexual privacy and could be sexually used at any time by their owner or anyone else with their owner's permission (Osiek & Pouya 2010:48; Elkins 2014:407; Corley 1993:15; MacDonald 2010:39). The widespread use of male and female slaves as sexual objects in the ancient world included child slaves (MacDonald 2010:39). This was due to the fact that slaves were regarded as lacking honour, and therefore bodily subjection was fully permissible (Osiek & MacDonald 2006:103).

The system of patriarchy was evident even in such matters: A wife who had sex with a slave could have been charged with adultery. The male slave could also be accused of adultery, seeing as male slaves were legally capable of committing adultery with a free married woman. A husband's action would be considered legally neutral and, for the

majority of men, also morally neutral (Elkins 2014:407; Osiek & MacDonald 2006:105). Many men fathered children by their female slaves. These children also became the property of their fathers. Even when afforded the opportunity to purchase their freedom, females were more often bound to their master's household following their emancipation (Corley 1993:15).

Women and slaves of the ancient Greco-Roman world shared much in common from the male perspective of the patriarchal household. However, they did not belong to overlapping categories (Osiek & MacDonald 2006:95). The treatment of female and male slaves by women slaveholders was seemingly no less ruthless or authoritarian than men toward their own slaves. If females who were slaves had to fit into either the category of women or that of slaves, both male and female ancient thinkers would have considered them simply as slaves, not as women. Females who were slaves were regarded as doubly fit by nature to be ruled and dominated (Osiek & MacDonald 2006:96).

Within the honour and shame society of the ancient Mediterranean world, slaves were considered as totally lacking in honour by definition, whether ascribed or attributed, in their interactions with free persons. Those born as slaves were born without honour. Those enslaved later, consequently moved into a classification in which honour no longer existed. There was no way in which they could acquire honour; they stood outside of the honour system of the dominant free society. Because they did not have any honour, slaves were not expected to behave honourably (Osiek & MacDonald 2006:97).

Female slaves could lay no claim to chastity or shame. This is due to the fact that she as a slave cannot have sensitivity toward chastity. There is no honour to be violated because it does not exist. However, the property rights of her owner over her can be infringed upon in the case of sexual violation, injury, or death by another who does not hold such property rights. Female slaves were granted no legal recognition to sexual privacy (Osiek & MacDonald 2006:97).

In continuation of the discussion up to this point, the following section focuses on the manner in which adhering to what was considered appropriate gender and sexuality norms was understood as particular ways of behaving within a social system of honour, shame, patriarchy, and class.

3.3.2 Performing gender in ancient contexts

Within the broader framework of honour and shame, as well as the patriarchal structure of the ancient Mediterranean world, a particular understanding of gender was to be found, namely that gender - in the sense of the manner in which a person's identity as belonging to the sphere of either male or female was perceived in social interactions - was dependent on being publicly performed in the appropriate manner by the individual. Persons were not automatically socially regarded as men or women because their genitals indicated a specific sex at birth; rather, they had to constantly act in very specific ways deemed socially appropriate for either a male or female, to comfortably fit into the specific category. Genitals were merely a first step in what was to become a lifelong performance of the corresponding classification. Such gendered actions had to be performed continuously and repeatedly, particularly as male honour was constantly being contested. One's gender was ultimately dependent on the acknowledgement received from one's community (Conway 2008a:16). Likewise, women had to ensure that they acted in ways that maintained positive shame at all times. In this manner the individuals played their part in the honour and shame stability of the group of which they were a member.

Such requirements and prescriptions of particular gendered behaviour were framed by specific understandings of gender and sexuality within the ancient Mediterranean world. Two models that have proven to be particularly helpful in analysing the ancient context are the one-sex model (Thomas Laqueur) and the teratogenic grid (Holt Parker) (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009:59-61).

Osiek and Pouya (2010:45) note that "(t)o appreciate ancient constructions of gender, we must recognize that the ancients did not think in our modern, dichotomous, biological terms that define male and female sexes."¹¹ According to Laqueur, the ancient understanding of sex and the body differed significantly from modern notions of two

¹¹ The modern notion of a dimorphic "two-sex" model, whereby persons are classified as biologically opposite and belonging to either the male or female sex based on these biological differences, was only adopted from the eighteenth century onwards (Thatcher 2011:8; Schüssler Fiorenza 2014b:8). A radical shift occurred between the pre-Enlightenment and the Enlightenment, by which all sorts of writers were determined to express the difference between men and women, male and female, on discoverable biological differences. Some, such as the founder of "moral anthropology" Jacques-Louis Moreau, argued that such difference was on every conceivable aspect of body and soul, and in every possible physical and moral way. By the nineteenth century such difference was said to be even discernible on a microscopic level, when studying cellular physiology (e.g. Patrick Geddes) (Laqueur 1992:5-6). Accordingly the body and sexuality was seen as representing and legitimating a particular social-political order of exclusion (Schüssler Fiorenza 2014b:8). Knowledge of this rather recent development of understandings of gender and sexuality is crucial for informed biblical and theological discourses on "what the Bible says" in contemporary settings.

biological sexes. Based on Greek evidence tracing back to Aristotle, he proposes the one-sex model as the reigning conceptualisation of human sex in antiquity. In this model, the male body was considered perfect, and the female body merely an imperfect male body. Both internally and externally, the female body represented the incomplete or underdeveloped male body. According to Aristotle's understanding, female persons were the result of a father's lack of *dynamis* ("power") in the sexual act. Thus, physical weakness on the part of the male results in female offspring (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009:60).

Laqueur (1992:4) states that the Greek physician Galen of Pergamum (second century CE) developed the "most powerful and resilient model of the structural, though not spatial, identity of the male and female reproductive organs." He taught that males and females have the same sets of genitals, a belief already rather old in his time. The difference between males and females was that females contained their genitals inside their bodies, whereas males displayed them on the outside. A female was thus thought to also have a penis and testicles, but these were simply contained within her body (Thatcher 2011:8; Schüssler Fiorenza 2014b:8). In such a one-sex model, the vagina was understood to be an interior penis; the labia the foreskin; the uterus the scrotum; and the ovaries the testicles (Schüssler Fiorenza 2014b:8). The reason for this was that females, contrary to males, did not produce enough heat to push their penis outside so that it would be external to the body (Laqueur 1992:4; Vander Stichele & Penner 2009:60). Although both males and females had sperm, the sperm of the male has great heat and therefore is more perfect (Laqueur 1992:4; Thatcher 2011:9).

Men were considered warm and women cold because men are more perfect. It was believed that bodies were filled with four basic substances. These substances were known as "humours." The quantity and quality of humours determined where on the scale of male to female a person was. Men were governed by hot and dry humours and women by cold and wet humours (Thatcher 2011:9). Thus, there was an assumed link between heat and perfection. Furthermore, the male body was perceived to be stronger, as well as firmer than the female body. Male strength and firmness were a reflection of the greater powers of understanding and discernment. Therefore, the male body was more susceptible to self-control and to the control of its desires (Thatcher 2011:10). Females were regarded as biologically deficient males, whose inferiority was also grounded in a natural order of being (Conway 2008a:18; Van der Stichele & Penner 2009:60).

Therefore, women's bodies were considered as weaker, uncontrollable, emotionally unstable, and lustful (Thatcher 2011:10).

This proposed one-sex model had a very real impact on the way in which persons in the ancient Mediterranean context behaved and interacted socially. As all persons were considered to be biologically similar, the expected clear gendered difference between male and female, as men and women, was to be visible in all they said and did.

Such enacted difference was further determined by the social rank and by one's place in the household. One had to perform a cultural role according to one's social status, and was not considered to biologically be one of two incommensurable sexes. Accordingly, it was the social status of the free, elite, propertied male head of the household that determined his superior gender status. Ancients did not resort to sexual difference for supporting the claim that freeborn men and women were inferior to free men. It was because freeborn women and men were considered to be subordinates that their "nature" was believed to be inferior (Schüssler Fiorenza 2014b:8).

The one-sex model implies that biological sex exists on a single continuum, with male on the one side, and female on the other. Sexual difference was perceived to be in degree, not in kind (contrary to the dimorphic two-sex model) (Laqueur 1992:6; Thatcher 2011:10-11). Because bodies contained the same sexual organs and fluids, the danger always existed that male persons could become female, and female persons could become male; in other words, that gender slippage could take place (Conway 2008a:18; Thatcher 2011:10-11). Such slippage - from masculinity, through effeminacy, and finally to femininity - was to be avoided by men at all costs (Thatcher 2011:31).

Performing one's gender was crucial to ensure the appropriate gender classification. Given the importance of gender division, patriarchy, male honour and female shame, no person in antiquity wanted to be the cause of gender(ed) confusion. Therefore, male persons repeatedly attempted to prove that they were not merely "male", but rather "manly males" (Conway 2008a:18).

Gender performance is the focus of the "teratogenic grid" of Parker. This grid system, based on the Roman division of sex differentiation, implies that the perfect male fulfilled the active role and the female the passive role. Thus, the male was the penetrator and the female was the penetrated. The deficient opposite for the active male (*vir*) and the passive

female (*femina/puella*) was the passive male (*cinaedus/pathicus*) and the active female (*virago/tribas/moecha*). It was of crucial importance for the honour of the active male to remain the penetrator, albeit then with a passive female or passive male partner. He was not to fulfil the role of passive receiver of any sexual acts, as this leads to feminization. Likewise, females were not supposed to take on active roles of initiators in sexual experiences or enjoy sex too much, as this was considered masculine roles (Thatcher 2011:11).

Penetration as normative feature of this grid system meant that everything else was defined in relationship to the centrality of the male or the phallus. The phallus was the metaphorical representation of hegemonic male power (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009:61).¹² At the same time, the active role contained contradictions for men; as much as they had to fulfil active roles in private sexual practice and in the public life, this active role also meant acting with control and restraint. Passions and treatment of the other had to take place within respectful boundaries (Conway 2008a:21-22). Being ruled by one's passions was considered shameful - whether one was male or female.

This relates strongly to suggestions elsewhere that male genital and phallic assertions were almost obsessive (Malina 1996:57-58). For Conway (2008a:15), it found concrete expression in the Greco-Roman society where each person had to understand their place in a hierarchical universe that was ordered by the rational. Free, elite men were at the top of the pyramid, and all who fell beneath this class were to a greater or lesser degree classified as "unmen".

Vander Stichele and Penner (2009:61-62) raise critical questions about these models. As useful as these models are for providing a heuristic lens of the ancient context, their historical accuracy may be queried. Laqueur's model is based on observations drawn from literary sources not intended to be historical textbooks. There also seems to have been traces of "two-sex" understandings in antiquity and one might ask how widespread

¹² Hegemony "refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life" (Connell 1995:77). Accordingly, "(h)egemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 1995:77). However, "(h)egemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (Connell 1995:76).

the idea of the “one-sex” model really was.¹³ Furthermore, one might ask to what extent the ideas are a reflection of the elite, and how widespread they also were among the non-elite. The same could be asked of the teratogenic grid: Was this “ideal” active penetrator simply the ideal of the elite, or of all persons in all classes of the Roman Empire? As such, these models are helpful, but it should be reckoned that they do not provide the full picture; rather, they provide a glimpse on the imperial centre of empire. Fluidity on the margins or borders thereof is to be strongly assumed.

One might ask how did persons know how to behave and interact in social contexts, in gender appropriate ways? Here, a theory and practice that was widespread in ancient times, known as physiognomy, played a large role.

3.3.3 Physiognomy

The term physiognomy refers to the ancient practice or discipline of “reading bodies”, a practice that was considered a science in antiquity, practiced by specialists and trusted by philosophers, doctors, rhetoricians, and the wider, uneducated populace (Martin 1995:18). Its roots go back to at least the time of Aristotle. This science posited that a correlation could be drawn between a person’s outward appearance and their inner character. As such, particular physical characteristics were a reflection of the inner virtue of a person, their character, disposition, and destiny. At the same time, certain inner characteristics were said to be made visible in the outward body of a person. The term physiognomics refers to the body of literature that describes this type of observation and position (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009:45; Malina & Neyrey 1996:108; Conway 2008a:18).

According to specific criteria, it was argued that virtuous people “appeared” virtuous, and likewise people of doubtful character would be recognized accordingly by their physical look. A classification and taxonomy of the specific features and their correlating characteristics were collected in ancient textbooks. This had a profound impact on especially the descriptions offered in narratives and the manner in which visual representation took place (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009:45).

¹³ The views of Hippocrates of Kos, a Greek physician, probably form the basis of the two-sex understanding of humanity in antiquity. However, the one-sex model supported by Aristotle was the view accepted generally.

As a practice, physiognomy reflects a broader cultural ethos as to both the manner in which bodies were read, as well as constructed, in antiquity. According to Vander Stichele and Penner (2009:64), the body is considered as the primary site by which personal and corporate identity is established; “either by mastering, constraining, controlling, denigrating or mutilating the body of another,” whether an enemy or a subordinate. There is a correlation between the control and ordering regulation of the individual body, and the manner in which society as a whole was understood to be regulated and structured.

With regard to gender, physiognomy played an important role. Not only did it serve as a general framework for determining the identity of a person, but it also served as the guidelines for the social understanding of the formation of male and female bodies in society - particularly with regard to the manner in which their behaviour was to be directed in the desired direction. In a framework within which gender had to be acquired and proved, body-language was of great importance. As anatomical sex was not decisive for gender differentiation, the possibility existed that both male and female persons could display masculine and feminine characteristics. The balance between these two determined where one would find oneself on the male to female gender continuum. Of utmost importance was discipline and self-control (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009:67).

Also within physiognomy, the intersection of class hierarchy and gender is crucial. The idealized values of masculinity and femininity reflected in ancient literature reflect the perspective of the elite. The lower people found themselves on the class hierarchy, the greater was their risk of not living up to the ideal. Elite households had the means and knowledge to purposefully shape the bodies of their members in the required direction. This was a luxury not afforded to the largest part of society (Vander Stichele & Penner 2009:67-68).

Education and physical exercise were among the ways in which such shaping could take place. The primary place where young boys of the elite could learn how to be a man was in the educational system they had access to. Literature was used as medium of instruction, providing both positive and negative examples of the ideal male. Elite boys were trained in rhetoric, due to the fact that rhetorical skill was considered necessary to be judged as manly in the circles of the elite. Physical and mental discipline was taught during physical exercise training (Conway 2008a:30-34).

The fact that such a field of study and body of literature was considered useful in antiquity, already and again highlights the manner in which ancient societies were directed towards a clear structuring that places immense importance on proper, honourable gendered behaviour - for the sake of the individual, as well as the collective; and ultimately, the morality of a society.

3.4 The world of the Johannine Gospel

In section 3.3 the focus was on the broader outlines of the ancient Mediterranean society, specifically from the perspective of the honour and shame cultural script and the prominent position that gender held within such a framework.

The narratives found in the Gospel of John are embedded in such broader outlines. Yamaguchi (2002:2) argues that the broad socio-cultural contextual understanding of the Greco-Roman environment is perhaps the most appropriate for reading the narratives of the Gospel of John, considering that there is little consensus on where it was written exactly. Although there is general agreement that it was probably written in a city in the Greco-Roman world in the latter half of the first century, there is little agreement on the possible author/s, editor/s, process of composition, or on the precise time and place it was written.

However, one might argue that this is the case for many of the New Testament writings, and such a position would thus imply that a large part of the New Testament corpus should then only be read within broad and general understandings of the Greco-Roman environment. In as much as I agree with caution against any overly simplistic historicity of the Gospel of John, given the uncertainty that there indeed is, the work of biblical scholars regarding the more particular socio-cultural and historical contexts of this writing is still helpful for fine-tuning the landscape that has been presented in section 3.3. As such, it also serves as a reminder that the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 are rooted in a particularly setting, which in turn informed the implied readers of these narratives.¹⁴

Accordingly, this section will briefly focus on the typical background topics provided as introduction to most commentaries on the Gospel of John: in 3.4.1, the dating and location

¹⁴ Pertaining to the deductions made about the history of the Gospel of John from the text itself, it is important to be reminded that the Johannine text is not scientific history; rather, it is data of history that has been refigured and interpreted in the interest of positing a particular theological position on the part of the implied author (Tovey 1997:264).

of the Gospel of John; and in 3.4.2, the possible purpose(s) of the Gospel of John, are discussed. The dating and location provides a more nuanced timeframe and geographical setting to the narratives, whereas the possible purpose(s) for the document could shed light on the rhetoric used by the implied author and implied narrator in shaping the narratives.¹⁵

As in 3.3, this brief overview still forms part of the aim of sketching broad outlines and does not attempt to provide a detailed historical-critical study of the Gospel of John; thus, it will work with the general consensus on each of the topics, as an attempt to plot the setting of the writing slightly more specific - within the broader context of the ancient Mediterranean world.

3.4.1 Dating and location of the Gospel of John

The dating of the Gospel of John has been argued to be from before 70 CE until late in the second century CE. Usually it is assumed that the Gospel developed over a long period of time (Du Toit 1990:18), making a slightly later rather than earlier dating within this range more plausible. The general opinion that the Fourth Gospel is of a relatively late date goes back to the patristic writers who often regarded this Gospel as the latest of the four (Beasley-Murray 1987:lxxv; Morris 1995:25).

Some of the latest suggested dates have placed the Gospel in almost every decade of the second century to its last quarter, for example 100-125 CE (Holtzmann and Jülicher), 130-140 CE (Keim and Schmiedel), 140 CE (Barrett), 140-155 CE (Volkmar and Schwartz), 150-160 CE (Loisy), 160-170 CE (Baur and Bauer), and 170 CE (Delafosse) (Beasley-Murray 1987:lxxv; Du Toit 1990:18). Arguments for such a late dating are often based on the assumptions that the symbols of the Fourth Gospel came from Hellenistic philosophy, which apparently would necessitate composition outside of Palestine. Furthermore the high Christology of this Gospel, it is argued, demanded a long period of development (Johnson 1999:526). Others stated that early Christian writers showed a lack of clear knowledge of the Fourth Gospel (Beasley-Murray 1987:lxxv). These arguments have been considered to be unsatisfactory and generally speaking, 100-110 CE is fixed as the latest plausible date for the written composition of John (Brown 1966:LXXX; Du Toit 1990:18).

¹⁵ The categories of historical authorship and historical recipients of the Gospel of John will also be alluded to briefly, although they are not considered of primary concern for the purpose of this research project.

Two forms of external evidence are typically appropriated to determine the latest plausible date at the turn of the first century, namely papyrus fragments of the Gospel of John from Egypt, and patristic citations (Edwards 2003:56).

The archaeological discovery of Greek papyri manuscripts of the Gospel of John in Egypt, dating from the late (P75, P66) or even early second century (P52), has proved to be one of the most conclusive arguments against the late 2nd century dating of the Gospel of John (Brown 1966:LXXXII; Du Toit 1990:18; Johnson 1999:526). P52 contains the text of John 18:31-33, 37-38, which suggests that the Gospel was known in Egypt by 100 CE (O'Day 2015:431). It would appear as if the Gospel of John was in wide circulation by the middle of the second century CE. The first commentary on John was written by Heracleon around 150 CE. The church fathers Irenaeus (180 CE) and Melito of Sardis (175 CE), both located in Asia Minor, show knowledge of the Fourth Gospel. This is also the case for Bishop Polycrates (190 CE) and the Muratorian Canon (180-200 CE) from Rome. Tatian's Diatesseron, composed circa 175 CE, draws on texts from John and they are treated with the same authority as does the synoptic Gospels. Ignatius of Antioch may also have had knowledge of John as early as the start of the second century (O'Day 2015:431).

The earliest possible date is more difficult to determine. Internal evidence has often been cited for determining the earliest possible date of the Gospel of John, specifically the expression ἀποσυνάγωγος ("put out of a synagogue") found in John 9:22; 12:42; and 16:2 (O'Day 2015:431). In a highly influential study in 1968, Martyn proposed that the expression refers to a practice of excommunicating perceived heretics from the synagogue. This practice was formalized in the Twelfth Benediction or *birkat ha-minim* ("blessing of the heretics"), a benediction that was introduced into the synagogue liturgy sometime after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, most likely between 85 and 95 CE (O'Day 2015:431). However, many serious problems with using the *birkat* to date the Gospel of John have been raised. These include questions over whether particularly Christ-followers would have been included with the *minim* ("heretics"), and whether the dating of circa 85 CE is reliable. Furthermore, it is also questionable whether the Palestinian rabbis had authority to impose such prayers throughout the Jewish world, including Ephesus, where most scholars locate John's "community." Accordingly, the evidence of this *birkat* for dating purposes should be approached with much caution (Edwards 2003:56-57), although it may be helpful in as an indicator of the tensions

between the Jewish Christians and their non-Christian compatriots presupposed by the author (Beasley-Murray 1987:lxxviii).

A few scholars (e.g. Robinson, Cribbs, and Morris) argue for a composition date before 70 CE, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (Du Toit 1990:18; Edwards 2003:56). Their arguments are based on the difficulty of proving allusions to circumstances after 70 CE, the possible presence of old Palestinian traditions, and the failure to mention the destruction of the temple as a past event (Edwards 2003:56). As stated by Carson (1991:82-83) an argument from silence is tricky; there could have been a number of reasons why the destruction of the temple is not mentioned. Older traditions could just belong to an early edition or have been incorporated from fresh sources after 70 CE (Edwards 2003:56).

The majority of scholars support composition after 70 CE (Edwards 2003:56). Although many are willing to acknowledge an early date of the traditions utilized in the Fourth Gospel, they contend that the final embodiment of these traditions in the Gospel will have taken place at a later date. There is, however, no exact certainty on how long such a process would have taken to be completed (Beasley-Murray 1987:lxxvi). Most scholars tend to place the final written form of the Gospel of John late in the first century, and more specifically at 90-100 CE (Du Toit 1990:18).

Dating preferences have important consequences for preferences on historical authorship, and vice versa. However, given the oral traditions which form part of the formation of the Gospel traditions, the question can be asked whether historical authorship refers to the person/s and/or school of thought with whom a particular Gospel tradition started (albeit then in oral form), the actual person writing the manuscript(s), or the person/s responsible for the final product in its completed form?

Based on external evidence, possible authors that are typically suggested are: John, the son of Zebedee (either as author or founder of the Johannine tradition); John the Presbyter; and John Mark (Brown 1966:LXXXVIII-XCII; Du Toit 1990:20-22). Based on internal evidence, the Beloved Disciple has been the most popular option. The Beloved Disciple has been suggested as being a particular historical person (traditionally John the son of Zebedee, Lazarus; John Mark; or an unknown John), while others contend that this is a symbolical figure who exemplifies the ideal and perfect disciple of Jesus (Brown 1966:XCII-XCVIII; Du Toit 1990:22-24).

For Du Toit (1990:23) the most certain suggestion regarding authorship is that it can be traced back to the original generation of witnesses from the time of Jesus. However, Brown is more specific and of the opinion that John, son of Zebedee, is the strongest hypothesis based on both external and internal evidence – particularly if the Gospel's claim of an eyewitness source is taken up seriously (1966:XCVIII). Scott (2003:1161), on the other hand, is of the opinion that there is “no certain access to either the historical author or her/his audience, even if there are strong pointers to a community in crises being addressed throughout.” Perhaps Culpepper (1998:37) provides a sufficient balanced description, by stating that the Gospel “rests on early eyewitness testimony that was shaped by the worship and struggles of the Johannine community.”

The Gospel of John contains no explicit mention of the place of composition. Thus it has to be deduced from internal suggestions (for example topography, language, and climate of thought) and later external testimonies (Edwards 2003:53). Internal evidence such as topographical familiarity with Palestine; the use of koine Greek with Semitic influences; possible knowledge of Aramaic; occasional distancing from things Jewish and the negative portrayals of the Jerusalem religious leaders; and so-called “Hellenistic” ideas have all been suggested. None of these, however, serve as conclusive evidence for a particular location (Edwards 2003:53-55).

Based on external evidence, Ephesus in Asia Minor has traditionally been viewed as the place of composition, primarily due to the testimony of church fathers such as Irenaeus (Beasley-Murray 1987:lxix; Du Toit 1990:19; Morris 1995:54). The dominant early church tradition is that John wrote the Gospel near the end of the first century to churches in and around Ephesus in western Asia Minor (Blomberg 2001:41).

The discovery of papyri manuscripts such as P52 has served as motivation for identifying Egypt as the location, particularly then Alexandria. It is argued that there are also similarities between the Fourth Gospel and the gnostic Valentinus, as well as the Hermetic writings (Brown 1966:CIII; Du Toit 1990:19). Furthermore, the teaching of the Gospel of John is said to have points of contact with the allegorical method considered to have been characteristic of Egypt (Morris 1995:55).

Antioch in Syria is considered a strong possibility. Some contend that there are parallels to the Odes of Solomon in the Fourth Gospel, which was thought to belong to Syria. There

are also some similarities of language with the writings of Ignatius, who was the bishop of Antioch. Furthermore, there appears to be signs of pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Gospel that was present in Antioch at the time. Further motivations include the non-heretic commentary by Theophilus of Antioch, and the indication that Christian communities (amongst which perhaps then also the Johannine community) existed in isolation in Palestine and Syria after the Jewish War (Du Toit 1990:19; Morris 1995:54).

Edwards (2003:55) is of the opinion that the case for Ephesus weakens, however, if apostolic authorship is rejected; even more so if John is not closely linked with the Book of Revelation. Moreover, there is no proof that the whole Gospel was not written in Palestine, or in any other Jewish-Christian community in Asia Minor (or Syria, or elsewhere) where both the languages of Greek and Aramaic were spoken. Morris (1995:55) contends that none of the three main suggestions are compelling and that we are left without certain proof, even if there is a little more to be said for Ephesus than for either of the others.

Whereas the approximate dating of the final shape of the Gospel of John appears to be slightly more certain for most commentators who suggest 90-100 CE, the location of the Gospel is much less certain. However, it would seem that amidst the uncertainty, a setting in the diverse ancient Mediterranean setting of the first century is appropriate - particularly then also a setting representing a variety of philosophical and religious influences (such as Hellenism, Gnosticism, Judaism, and the early Christian movement) (cf. O'Day 2015:432-433). For the purposes of this research project, I concur with the majority of scholars who suggest a dating at the end of the first century CE. As far as the location goes, I contend with assuming that the Gospel could likely have found its final expression within the boundaries of Asia Minor, however that here perhaps the more general description of an early Christian community in the ancient Mediterranean world at the turn of the first century CE is the most certain estimation.

3.4.2 (Possible) purpose(s) of the Gospel of John

In terms of a theological and evangelical purpose, the Gospel of John itself provides one with an indication in this regard in 20:31: that the readers may believe / continue to believe that Jesus is the Anointed, the Son of God, and that by believing they may have

life in his Name (own translation). It seems to suggest that the main purpose of the author was to encourage faith in Jesus as Messiah that gives life (Edwards 2003:45).

From the perspective of a more pastoral purpose, the strongest reason for the above-mentioned dating of 90-100 CE is, for some, the apparent reflection within the narratives of organized expulsion from the synagogue (John 9:22, 34; 12:42-43). Although hostility between Jewish Christians and non-Christian Jews was present from the start, the actual expulsion from the synagogue is most likely a later step towards the formalization of the parting of ways that took place in the decades after the fall of the temple (deSilva 2004:394). According to Burke et al. (2009:215) the author(s) of the Gospel of John appear(s) to address a community who is struggling with identity. The Gospel depicts a Johannine community unsure of how to deal with the prestigious synagogue community in their midst, and against and toward whom they are to be witnesses of Jesus Christ.

Stibbe (1992:61) puts it more generally, namely that the Gospel of John reflects a severe controversy with Judaism. According to him, the social function of John's narrative form is to encourage, vindicate and bring purpose to the Johannine Christians in the wake of traumatic a-socialization (due to their beliefs in Jesus Christ), which most likely produced this controversy. Although the exact details of the events surrounding are harder to explain with certainty, it is possible to say that the Johannine story of Jesus is also a story of a community in crisis, and that the implied author uses the narrative and literary devices at his disposal to address the pressing social needs of his day.

DeSilva (2004:402) also opts for such a "reassurance" purpose of the Gospel of John, stating that in its present form the Fourth Gospel primarily addresses a Christian readership. It reflects the need to assure especially Jewish Christians in the face of opposition and criticism from non-Christian Jews. The latter most likely rejected the claims of the former about Jesus' significance and were in the process of excluding increasingly more of those who they considered to be too far from the centre of pharisaic Judaism. References to "the Jews" in the Gospel are generally to the religious authorities and others who were hostile to Jesus. They are the textual representations of the author's contemporaries who were putting pressure on Christian Jews to either hide or to renounce their convictions about Jesus as the Messiah. If they did not, they risk excommunication from the synagogue and suffer dislocation from their social networks (deSilva 2004:403).

For Johnson (1999:527) it is a rather complex matter to define the reason for the writing of the Fourth Gospel. Some have suggested an apologetic function, others persuasive functions with the aim of conversion. Still others have emphasized polemical aspects, in opposition to heresies in Christology (e.g. Docetism) or certain forms of Gnosticism. Thus, he states, "(i)t is doubtful that a composition as rich as this can be reduced to a single function." Rather, he is of the opinion that the movement of the story corresponds to the perceptions of a community that was trying to define itself through opposition to unbelievers. Furthermore, the complex coding of the narratives hinders understanding by those persons who do not share in the symbolic system and convictions of the community (Johnson 1999:528). Svärd (2015:252) is of the opinion that the rhetorical situation of John is complex, since it is likely the author of the Fourth Gospel wrote with a broad audience in mind. He does, however, narrow it down slightly by situating John and his primary addressees in a Jewish context towards the end of the first century CE.

As was indicated in the above discussion on the dating, location and possible purpose(s) of the Gospel of John, it seems that one is left rather with the options of informed guesses than certainty when inquiring about the typical historical points of departure for a New Testament writing. Considering that the purpose of this overview of the particular setting of the Gospel of John is not in the first instance to validate particular references within the narrative, but rather provide a more detailed picture of the background world in which the narratives of the Gospel was told and heard, it does suffice.

The suggestions made for a dating towards the end of the first century, and a probable location in Asia Minor, draws the narrative worlds, the settings of the initial implied readers and implied author, and the broad outlines of the world of the ancient Mediterranean closer to each other. As such, I regard these narratives against the background of the late first-century, Greco-Roman context of early Christ-followers, who were at the very least familiar with Jewish beliefs, embedded in a Hellenistic environment, and who found themselves under the rule of the Roman Empire. Most likely the community were not only familiar with the Jewish beliefs, but in an active process (and perhaps even struggle) of reinterpreting their relationship to the Jewish faith in view of the following of Jesus Christ - in an environment that was not necessarily open for or friendly towards such a new belief-system.

3.5 Concluding remarks

The aim of this chapter was to provide the socio-cultural backdrop for the exploration of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17. This was done by exploring the more general social context of the ancient Mediterranean world, with a particular view on the manner in which the cultural scripts of honour and shame shaped understandings and expectations of gendered behaviour.

As was reiterated throughout, the goal of describing this socio-cultural backdrop is to enable a more informed gender-critical reading of these two Johannine narratives in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. As such, a world very different from my own, is made slightly more familiar. Without such guidance, the potholes of uninformed ignorance and anachronistic readings of the narratives are all too tempting. Yet, as emphasized in section 3.2, such a limited description runs the danger of presenting overly generalized perspectives on complex settings. Aware of such a danger, I consider the general perspectives to be a crucial part of engaging biblical narratives, particularly when appropriating a gender-critical lens to such readings.

In section 3.3.1 I attempted to navigate the waters of honour and shame in the ancient Mediterranean context - a cultural script that was inherently gendered in nature and resulted in very specific (and contrasting) prescriptions for acting male and female. Within the patriarchal framework of antiquity, such behaviour had as aim the sustenance and promotion of the honour of the *paterfamilias* and the household he represented in society.

Social class and hierarchy intersected with gender and as such highlights the oft overlooked complex nature of being male and female in the ancient world. Social class determined to what extent an individual had power over their own corporeality or bodilyness (both male and female persons), yet even the most free of persons were still part of the male-orientated and thereby, gendered unequal realities of ancient societies.

In section 3.3.2 I discussed how gender as a performative entity was underscored by the so-called one-sex model, by which all persons were regarded as either “more” or “less” male. Maintaining the dichotomy of masculine and feminine was of crucial importance. In terms of sexuality, this is particularly obvious in the so-called “active” and “passive” roles that specific categories of persons fulfilled, as suggested by means of the teratogenic model. The study of the relationship between bodilyness and moral character in the form

of physiognomy (section 3.3.3) was yet another expression of the importance of honourable and shame-sensitive behaviour, as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour led to ethical judgements (either positive or negative) of persons and the groups they represent.

In terms of the broader ancient Mediterranean context, it is in my opinion clear that understandings of gender and sexuality were profoundly shaped by the gendered frameworks of honour and shame, further amplified by the social structure and ideology of patriarchy and androcentrism.

In section 3.4, the more particular world of the Johannine Gospel was described (in brief terms). The presentation of the Gospel narrative has been shaped theologically and rhetorically by an author/s who had a particular group of Jesus followers in mind who found themselves within specific social locations. The author/s most likely had to encourage them to adhere to their commitment and loyalty, in spite of social and religio-cultural resistance - both from within and from outside of their community. This was a time of profound identity formation, within a society saturated with all forms of appeals to conformation and group-belonging.

As such, the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 offer a glimpse on a complex world very different from our own; yet within a broader framework of Jesus-following that continues to be pursued in contemporary settings all over the globe.

In the following two chapters, the magnifying glass will be picked up for a close-up engagement with these two prominent narratives, which give literary hand and feet to the world that has been explored generally and from a distance - specifically with an eye for the gendered details they contain.

4. READING JOHN 12:1-8 THROUGH A GENDER-CRITICAL LENS¹

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3 the stage was proverbially set for close, gender-critical readings of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17. This was done by providing the broader socio-cultural contours of the Gospel of John as a whole, specifically by offering comments on the ancient Mediterranean context and the relevance of gender, sexuality, and class within the overarching system of honour and shame. Furthermore, the more particular setting of the Gospel of John was briefly explored from the position of possible dating and location, as well as purpose(s) thereof.

Such contextual parameters are aimed at creating awareness for the ancient contexts represented in the Fourth Gospel narratives when engaging them from the perspective of contemporary interpretations - contexts which are vastly different from those of contemporary interpreters of these ancient narratives. In this research project, the contextual parameters are by no means regarded as objective, unbiased facts. Rather, they are offered with the understanding that subjectivity is involved in all processes of interpretation - whether with regard to ancient contexts, texts, or contemporary contexts. It is precisely the subjectivity of engagement with biblical narratives, set in ancient contexts, and read in contemporary contexts, that has motivated this research project.

The acknowledgement of subjectivity imbedded in the biblical narratives themselves is of importance, generally but for this study in particular. The texts have been written from a particular perspective, and the author/s of the Fourth Gospel purposefully set out to provide the version of the Good News of Jesus in a specific way, as it is presented in its final form. What is presented to those receiving the texts - whether past or present - is a deliberate form of communication, with the aim of convincing and persuading towards specific positions.

My own subjectivity as a biblical scholar located within a particular contemporary setting, is also part of the process of interpretation. Even with the contextual parameters at hand and sensitivity for the selective portrayals of characters and plot in the Fourth Gospel by

¹ Sections of the material in this chapter has been used in an article titled "Questioning the "natural given": Reading John 12:1-8 with a gender-critical lens" (forthcoming publication).

the author/s, there is no getting around my own worldviews and interpretative frameworks in this process of engaging ancient texts set within and against the worldviews of the first century CE.

It is amidst such (acknowledged) levels of subjectivities - and with a deliberate and explicit choice for a (subjective) focus on gender(ed) expressions in biblical narratives (informed by interpretations of ancient socio-cultural clues and my own gender understandings) - that I now turn to close readings of John 12:1-8 (Chapter 4) and 13:1-17 (Chapter 5). The narratives are approached as the ancient texts that they are, set within the narrative world of the ancient Mediterranean context. By applying a gender-critical lens to the readings of the narratives, I attempt to bring to the fore the gendered dimensions of the narratives, as expressed especially by means of characterization.

According to Kitzberger (2003b:180), gender is an important aspect of characterization in biblical narratives. As a social construct and as related to literary characters, it is established by the roles attributed to a character within the narrative, and by the context in which a character is portrayed. Furthermore, narratively gender is constructed by means of the relation of a character to other characters, male and female, of the same text (configuration) and of other texts (interfigurality).² Gender in biblical narratives finds its shape in two processes: First, the construction of the text by its author; second, by its reconstruction on the part of the reader. This is no different than any other aspect of characterization. In this sense, gendered characterization is also a very individual issue, dependent on the readers and their own social location. Readings that concentrate on gender as constructed in the text and as reconstructed by the reader emphasize gender as a category of analysis (Kitzberger 2003b:206).

The focus of Chapter 4 and the next chapter is the way in which the implied author of the Fourth Gospel has constructed gender, within the reference domain of the ancient settings of the narratives and communicated through the narrator of these narratives to an implied reader. In Chapter 6 the focus will be on the reconstruction and interpretation of gender on the part of the contemporary reader, i.e. I as researcher. I am fully aware that these two parts of the process can be distinguished, but not necessarily neatly separated or kept apart - a measure of overlapping in both directions necessarily also does take place.

² Interfigurality is a term coined by Wolfgang G. Müller and refers to the interrelations that exist between characters of different texts. It is considered one of the most important dimensions of intertextuality (Kitzberger 2003b:179).

However, for the purpose of this research project it is helpful to have focused discussions on both parts individually, before engaging them in conversation with one another.

By appropriating the more general observations made by a range of commentators about these narratives, I will focus particularly on the observed gender configurations and constructions in the narratives - whether explicit or implicit. Such interpretations and assumptions of gender configurations and constructions are derived from the socio-cultural context of the narratives, as was alluded to in Chapter 3. In the present and following chapter, particular elements and markers will be discussed in more detail, as they relate to the specific narratives. Thus, I will offer close readings of the two narratives, alert to the socio-cultural signifiers, particularly on the level of gender and gender relations.

The question behind my close readings is: How are the traditional cultural expectations of male and female behaviour affirmed, critiqued, and/or transgressed in these Johannine narratives, against the broad background of the first century ancient Mediterranean context of the Roman Empire - and more particularly so, against the likelihood of a background context of early Jesus followers who were familiar with Jewish traditions and customs?

Whereas the focus in Chapters 4 and 5 is very specifically close readings of the narratives individually, their relation (briefly discussed in Chapter 1) will be revisited in Chapter 6 - also through the lens of gender criticism. Thereby, this research project does not only offer isolated gender-critical readings of the narratives, but also applies such an approach to their narrative interrelationship. It is precisely such collective observations that will form the springboard for engaging the contemporary theological discourses on gender, sexuality, and biblical narratives.

4.2 John 12:1-8³

^{12.1} Ὁ οὖν Ἰησοῦς πρὸ ἐξ ἡμερῶν τοῦ πάσχα ἦλθεν εἰς Βηθανίαν, ὅπου ἦν Λάζαρος, ὃν ἤγειρεν ἐκ νεκρῶν Ἰησοῦς. ² ἐποίησαν οὖν αὐτῷ δεῖπνον ἐκεῖ, καὶ ἡ Μάρθα διηκόνει, ὁ δὲ

³ The account of the anointing of Jesus in 12:1-8 rings similar to the events narrated in Mark 14:3-9 (paraphrased in Matthew 26:6-13) and Luke 7:36-38. Although interesting work has been done with regards to comparisons between these narratives, highlighting both the similarities and the differences, such comparisons are beyond the scope of this research project. For the purpose of this research project, I will focus only on the narrative as presented in John 12:1-8. I do acknowledge, however, that the Johannine redactor/s was most likely familiar with a similar narrative or narratives when finalizing the specific Johannine version found in John 12:1-8 (cf. Beasley-Murray 1987:206). At the same time, it would appear as if a deliberate choice was made to present a particular version of the narrative - one which would serve the broader purpose of the Johannine tradition and theological thrust (Moloney 1996:180; Newbigin 1982:150).

Λάζαρος εἶς ἦν ἐκ τῶν ἀνακειμένων σὺν αὐτῷ· ³ ἢ οὖν Μαριὰμ λαβοῦσα λίτραν μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτίμου ἤλειψεν τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ ἐξέμαξεν ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ· ἢ δὲ οἰκία ἐπληρώθη ἐκ τῆς ὀσμῆς τοῦ μύρου. ⁴ λέγει δὲ Ἰουδᾶς ὁ Ἰσκαριώτης εἶς τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ, ὁ μέλλων αὐτὸν παραδιδόναι· ⁵ Διὰ τί τοῦτο τὸ μύρον οὐκ ἐπράθη τριακοσίων δηναρίων καὶ ἐδόθη πτωχοῖς; ⁶ εἶπεν δὲ τοῦτο οὐχ ὅτι περὶ τῶν πτωχῶν ἔμελεν αὐτῷ, ἀλλ' ὅτι κλέπτῃς ἦν καὶ τὸ γλωσσόκομον ἔχων τὰ βαλλόμενα ἐβάσταζεν. ⁷ εἶπεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Ἔφες αὐτήν, ἵνα εἰς τὴν ἡμέραν τοῦ ἐνταφιασμοῦ μου τηρήσῃ αὐτό· ⁸ τοὺς πτωχοὺς γὰρ πάντοτε ἔχετε μεθ' ἑαυτῶν, ἐμὲ δὲ οὐ πάντοτε ἔχετε.

4.2.1 Introductory comments on John 12:1-8

In view of the literary structure of the Fourth Gospel, John 12:1-8 finds its place in the “Book of Signs,” roughly the first half of the Gospel of John (1:19-12:50). Such a designation describes the main content of this section of the gospel, namely the miracles of Jesus, referred to as “signs,” and discourses which interpret the signs. By contrast, the word “sign” (σημεῖον) occurs in the second part of the gospel only in the summary statement of 20:30. The public ministry of Jesus is narrated in this part of the Fourth Gospel: Jesus shows himself in sign and word to his own people as the revelation of his Father, only to be rejected (Brown 2003:298).

John 12 itself does not contain any miraculous sign, and no sustained discourse (Carson 1991:425). Three incidents lead to the final comments of the Johannine author upon the results of the public ministry (12:37-43) and the final witness of Jesus to the nation (12:44-50). These three incidents are: The anointing at Bethany (12:1-8); Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (12:9-19); and the approach of the Greek inquirers (12:20-36) (Newbigin 1982:149). The first two narrative episodes of John 12 (namely 12:1-11 and 12:12-19) report events in which others honour Jesus - in settings where many do not grasp the importance of what is happening at that very moment (Carson 1991:425).

As is the case in all of the Fourth Gospel, the audience is most informed of all the parties involved in this narrative; by means of asides and descriptive comments, the narration of the events far exceeds merely dialogue between characters. The asides are often characterized by irony, with the result that the “readers always know more than the characters in the narrative and can appreciate their words and actions at quite another

level” (Johnson 1999:532).⁴ This often leads to multiple layers of possible meaning - a prominent feature of the Johannine Gospel. One of the most ironic (and perhaps dramatic) elements of the narrative of John 12:1-8 is the link between life and death: Mary offers thanks for the gift of life given to Lazarus, whilst at the same time offering said gift by performing a ritual for burial - pointing towards the death of Jesus. The blurring of boundaries thus appears to be prominent in this narrative.

Symbolism and symbolic value, so typical of the Fourth Gospel (Johnson 1999:533), further contributes to dramatic experience on the part of the audience of this narrative.⁵ On the level of characterization, the character depiction of Judas is juxtaposed with that of Mary (Conway 2003b:91), thereby accentuating the representations of both of these characters. Jesus’ defence of Mary implies that she is a prophetic representation, just like that of her confessing sister, Martha, in John 11. Mary is the positive counterpart to Judas; the true female disciple as an alternative to the unfaithful male disciple (Reinhartz 1994:583). Beasley-Murray (1987:208) notes that Mary is also contrasted with Caiaphas, given that the anointing scene is set right after the account of the Sanhedrin’s meeting. Such juxtaposition and contrast between Mary and Judas, as well as Caiaphas, is noteworthy given the male/female oppositions at stake in these pairs.

In its entirety, the act of Mary anointing Jesus is laden with symbolism and ambiguity. According to Ridderbos (1997:419), this story has a clear double meaning: On the one hand, there is a celebratory banquet where Jesus’ glory amidst his own has reached a climax; on the other hand, there is no more escaping the end of Jesus’ life.

In what follows the narrative is discussed in detail.

⁴ Cf. Culpepper 1983:165-180

⁵ Cf. Culpepper 1983:180-198

4.2.2 Close reading of John 12:1-8⁶

^{12.1} Ὁ οὖν Ἰησοῦς πρὸ ἐξ ἡμερῶν τοῦ πάσχα ἦλθεν εἰς Βηθανίαν, ὅπου ἦν Λάζαρος, ὃν ἤγειρεν ἐκ νεκρῶν Ἰησοῦς.

Οὖν (“And so”, “Then”) indicates a transition between the end of John 11, and the start of John 12 (Harris 2015:224). The narrative episode of the dinner opens with an exact indication of time, place, and cast of characters (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:204).

Jesus arrives at the geographical setting of Bethany in John 12. In 11:1 it is stated that Lazarus was from Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. In 11:2 the connection between Mary, Martha and Lazarus is made clear; they were siblings.⁷ Given that no mention is made of the husbands of Mary and Martha, it can be assumed that the unmarried sisters lived with their brother, Lazarus, as was the patriarchal custom of protection of female persons by a male family-member; thus, Bethany was their collective home town.

In 12:1 Jesus returns to the “miracle hometown” of Mary, Martha and Lazarus after travelling to the city Ephraim with his disciples (11:54), because of the plot to end his life (Newbigin 1982:150). Bethany was close to Jerusalem (less than three kilometres), the

⁶ The complexity related to a translation of the term Ἰουδαῖοι is of particular importance for biblical interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. On the one hand, the term itself is very prominent in the Gospel (approximately seventy references); on the other hand, certain readings of Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel have served anti-Semitic ideologies through the centuries, with horrific consequences. The variety of positions regarding the English translation of the designation Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John continues to be debated rigorously (cf. Law & Halton’s 2014 publication, titled “Jew and Judean”). Two of the most prevalent possibilities within contemporary biblical scholarship are “Jud(a)eans” (e.g. Mason 2007:457-512) and “Jews” (e.g. Reinhartz 2009:382-393). In my opinion, the complexity of the choice lies in various factors: the range of contextual gaps that need to be filled when translating ancient texts; the particular understanding of historical accuracy for translation, and the criteria for such accuracy; the politics of translation, namely who determines the criteria of an accurate translation; the influence of contemporary settings and social locations on the actual choices made in translation; and the perceived (ideological) effect that a particular translation will have vis-à-vis another translation. The two narratives under consideration in this research project do not contain the designation. Where the designation is mentioned, as it relates to these narratives, I have opted for translating Ἰουδαῖοι as “(the) Jews.” Thereby I make a choice for an understanding of the designation that implies a complex amalgamation of ethnic, cultural and religious associations of a particular group of persons within the ancient setting of the ancient Mediterranean world and Greco-Roman context, at the end of the first century CE. In instances where the designation is interpreted as referring to particularly the religious authorities of the Jewish tradition of the time, I will elaborate as such.

⁷ Read from a feminist perspective which aims to imagine the role and position of women in the Johannine community, Reinhartz (2003b:23) states that Mary, Martha and Lazarus’ sibling relations can be interpreted on a second level to represent a household of believers in the Johannine Jesus-follower community. When Martha makes her confession in John 11, she is articulating the faith of the community. Her role as servant at the table in John 12 hints at the role of women as deacons who formally “serve” this community (see also footnote 25 below). Mary, on the other hand, kneels at Jesus’ feet which imply the utter commitment of at least some women the Jesus represented in the Gospel of John. Mary’s anointing of Jesus may represent the activity of women prophets in this community.

religious capital of the Jews - and therefore, given the portrayal in the Fourth Gospel, in the danger zone for Jesus (Adeyemo 2006:1277). The close proximity of Bethany to Jerusalem was emphasized in 11:18. In 12:1 it is specified as the place where Lazarus, “the one whom he had raised from the dead”, “was” (De Jonge 1996:162).⁸ This does not necessarily indicate that the meal took place at the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus - simply that the event takes place in their hometown (cf. 12:2b) (Ridderbos 1997:414; Sloyan 1988:153).

The setting provided in 12:1 prepares the way for the events of 12:2, and serves as introduction to the dinner and the anointing. The anointing, again, points forward to Jesus’ death (12:8). There appears to be no coincidence in this narrative; much rather a deliberate proceeding of events. The mention of Passover in this context is a reminder that the one who provided life to Lazarus is on his way to his own death, as a sacrificial and Passover lamb (Carson 1991:427). One here has a ritual space in which rites of hospitality become funeral rites (Brant 2011:179).

This narrative is best understood against the background of John 11:1-44.⁹ According to Kanagaraj (2013:123), John 12 provides continuity for John 11. Brant (2011:170) describes the link between John 11 and 12 as follows: “Grief and censure turn to an expression of gratitude - the anointing of feet - that in turn comes to signify a funerary rite.”

The connection between this narrative (12:1-8) and the narration of the illness, death, and resurrection of Lazarus (11:1-44) is stated clearly by the narrator - even though these two narratives are in such close proximity to one another.¹⁰ For Harris (2015:224), the references to Lazarus (12:1-2, 9-10) are the link between John 11 and 12. He states: “If the central theme of 11:1-44 is the lordship of Jesus *over* death (see 11:17-37), 11:55-12:50 presents Jesus as victor *through* death” (Harris 2015:223). In 11:2 Mary is identified as Lazarus’ sister with a proleptic epithet, as the one who “anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair” (ἡ ἀλείψασα τὸν κύριον μύρω καὶ ἐκμάξασα τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς) (Brant 2011:179). At the start of the anointing narrative in John 12 the narrator introduces Lazarus with an analeptic epithet (Brant 2011:179), recalling how

⁸ This is a replacement of the title “the one whom Jesus loved” (11:3, 5, 36). The new title is repeated in 12:9 and has overtones both of Jesus’s title (the one whom God had raised from the dead), and of God’s self-revelation (the one who raised Jesus from the dead) (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:204-205).

⁹ Svärd (2015:254) considers the whole of chapter 11 to be an introduction to the anointing episode.

¹⁰ Some commentators suggest that the Lazarus story was added to the present chronological sequence at a rather late stage, and/or was separate from the story of the anointing. This would explain why it was necessary to identify Bethany in 12:1 as the place where Lazarus resided (Brown 1966:447).

Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead and noted that Lazarus himself was also present at the supper (12:1-2).

In John 11:1-44 the audience was introduced to two distraught sisters, Mary and Martha, whose brother, Lazarus, was gravely ill (11:1). Having accepted that Jesus is a miracle worker and healer (Culpepper 1983:140), they approach Jesus with the news that “the one whom he loves is ill” (ὁν φιλεῖς ἀσθενεῖ) (11:3). Rather than hastening to Lazarus, he responds by stating that this illness will not be for death but for the glory of God (11:4). After the narrator explicitly states that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus,¹¹ it is mentioned that Jesus then remained two more days in the place he was (11:5-6). By the time Jesus finally makes his way to Lazarus, he is fully aware of his death that has taken place in the interim (11:14); by then Lazarus was already in the grave for four days (11:17) - even though Bethany was close to Jerusalem (11:18).

Upon Jesus’ arrival the mourning rituals are in full swing (11:19). Martha meets Jesus as he arrives, and states that her brother would not have died if Jesus had been there. However, she remains confident that Jesus can still ask of God anything that he wishes to (11:20-22). Jesus responds that Lazarus will be raised again. Martha mistakes his words as merely a reference to the resurrection on the judgement day, a belief she already holds (11:23-24). The meeting becomes a moment of revelation and Jesus identifies himself to Martha as the resurrection and life personified (11:25). He invites her to believe this and thereby have the promise of eternal life (11:26). In a profound confession, Martha states it clearly: “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world” (Ναί, κύριε· ἐγὼ πεπίστευκα ὅτι σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἐρχόμενος) (11:27).¹²

It is then Mary’s turn to meet Jesus, and Martha calls her to him (11:28). She meets him in the place where Martha met him, outside of the town (11:29-30). The Jews mourning with her and comforting her mistook her departure as a visit to the grave (11:31). Upon

¹¹ Love (φιλέω) in the Greco-Roman world meant that - in the case of a man - one is not merely intimately related to one’s friend, but also the household of one’s friend. Thereby the rules of honour and shame that restricted interaction with the women of that household, were relaxed (Brant 2011:171). The only other individual in the Fourth Gospel described as being loved by Jesus, is the Beloved Disciple (Culpepper 1983:141).

¹² Brown (1979:190-191) and Culpepper (1983:141) notes that other Christian communities might have regarded Peter as the one who made a supreme confession of Jesus as the Son of God and the one to whom the risen Jesus first appeared. However, the Johannine community seems to have associated such memories with female disciples like Martha and Mary Magdalene. In 11:27 it is to a woman that the mystery of Jesus as the resurrection and the life is revealed, and the confession of Christ as the Son of God is made by a woman, Martha, sister of Mary and Lazarus.

meeting Jesus, Mary repeats the words of Martha, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Κύριε, εἰ ἦς ὧδε οὐκ ἄν μου ἀπέθανεν ὁ ἀδελφός) (11:32), yet in contrast to her sister she never verbalizes her faith in Jesus (Culpepper 1983:142).

What follows is most likely one of the most intimate portrayals of Jesus. He sees Mary and the Jews with her weeping and is deeply moved in his spirit, troubled by what he experienced (11:33).¹³ Upon his request they took him to the grave, and Jesus wept. Those present at the occasion, took this as a sign that he loved Lazarus (11:34-36). According to Brant (2011:171), the liminality of friendship, as well as mourning here opens a gap in John’s narrative. This “causes the steady stride of the Son of God to falter;” friendship bridges the private realm of the family and the public realm of the civic order, and mourning marks the passage from life to death.

Upon arriving at the grave, Jesus orders Martha to remove the stone covering it. She was well aware that decomposing bodies do not smell appealing and reminded Jesus that Lazarus had already been dead for four days (11:38-39). Jesus reminded her of his promise to her, namely to see the glory of God in return for belief (11:40). With that the stone was removed, and Jesus prayed out aloud to God in a prayer of thanksgiving (11:41-42). Jesus then cries out with a loud voice for Lazarus to come out from the grave - upon which Lazarus appeared, still covered in linen strips and cloth. Thereby Jesus represented the disciple to whom life has been given, and challenges the implied reader to accept the realization of eschatological expectations in Jesus (Culpepper 1983:141). Jesus ordered those present to loosen him and let him go (11:43-44). Mary’s response to the miraculous events is withheld until the next chapter (Brant 2011:177).

In the interval between the raising of Lazarus and the anointing of Jesus (11:45-57), it is made clear that this miracle was the tipping point for the Jews opposed to Jesus (specifically Pharisees and chief priests). Their plot to kill Jesus was intensified from this time onwards (11:53) (O’Day 2012:524; Culpepper 1983:141). According to Brant (2011:179), this became the “warrant” for Jesus’ arrest, placed between the two Bethany episodes. Its placing makes it clear that both episodes are indications of the crucifixion that will follow shortly. From the perspective of the audience, the miracle event is

¹³ The space before the tomb is liminal and adds to the confusion between public and private spheres. The reason for this is that mourning women were released from the social structures that ruled the living. They were allowed to speak frankly amidst their grief. The private sentiments usually reserved for the home, were now publicly displayed (Brant 2011:171). Neyrey (2009:63) distinguishes between fixed and fluid spaces. Fixed spaces correlate with fixed roles and statuses. Fluid spaces, such as the space before a tomb, fluid behaviour is (at least to some extent) allowed.

immediately clouded by the ominous knowledge that life for Lazarus translates as death for Jesus.

In 11:55-57 the preparations for Passover become visible in the roads leading to Jerusalem, as “many” (πολλοὶ) are said to have gone out of the country to Jerusalem to fulfil certain cultic purification obligations before the day of the Passover feast (Ridderbos 1997:411).¹⁴ This feast was the perfect time to take Jesus captive, from the perspective of the Pharisees and chief priests. They most likely assumed that Jesus - as an observant Jewish male - will visit Jerusalem for the Passover feast (O’Day 2012:524). Given the references to the high priest, plans to kill Jesus, the Passover, and the temple (11:49-56), the meal could be viewed as set in a sacrificial context which recalls the characterization of Jesus as “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29) (Svärd 2015:256).

With the resurrection miracle in mind, the narrator stated in 12:1 that the time was six days prior to the Passover. Jesus thus takes ample time to be able to participate also in the preparation for the feast, rather than simply wait and appear at the feast only when it is already in full progress. It was already evening by the time he made his entry into Jerusalem (Ridderbos 1997:412). According to Beasley-Murray (1987:208), “six days before the Passover” (πρὸ ἕξ ἡμερῶν τοῦ πάσχα) denotes the time from Saturday evening to Sunday. Thus, the dinner starts at the conclusion of the Sabbath, namely on Saturday evening.¹⁵ It is unlikely that the particular indication of six days have symbolic force here (Carson 1991:427).

This is the third (and final) Passover that Jesus will celebrate, according to the Johannine narrative (cf. 2:13; 6:4) (Carson 1991:424).¹⁶ Despite the large number of pilgrims who would have come to Jerusalem for the feast, the impression is created that Jesus became the centre of attention - given that this will be the hour that will be fulfilled for Jesus (Scott 2003:1191).

¹⁴ Passages like Numbers 9:10, 13 and 2 Chronicles 30:17ff. are usually cited as grounds for this practice of cultic purification (Ridderbos 1997:411). Such ceremonial purification before Passover is required of those persons who had contacted ceremonial defilement of some sort. These purification rites occupied the week before Passover (Carson 1991:424).

¹⁵ Martha could not be serving the table if the Sabbath had not yet come to an end (Brown 1966:447).

¹⁶ It is possible, yet unlikely, that the unnamed feast of 5:1 refers to another Passover (Carson 1991:424).

² ἐποίησαν οὖν αὐτῷ δεῖπνον ἐκεῖ, καὶ ἡ Μάρθα διηκόνει, ὁ δὲ Λάζαρος εἷς ἦν ἐκ τῶν ἀνακειμένων σὺν αὐτῷ·

At this point in the narrative, it appears as if a resurrection feast is being celebrated, in honour of Jesus and the miraculous deed he has performed in raising Lazarus from death. Lazarus' very presence in the flesh demonstrates what has taken place earlier in Bethany (Ridderbos 1997:414) and serves as theological affirmation of Jesus as the one in whom life is truly found (Scott 2003:1191). The dinner seemingly takes place in his honour.

There is no clear subject indicating who the “they” are that made dinner for Jesus “there” (Carson 1991:427-428; De Jonge 1996:162). This makes the active voice of ἐποίησαν equivalent to a passive voice, namely “a dinner was given” (Harris 2015:224; Brown 1966:448). Martha is stated as serving the meal.¹⁷ One of those “reclining” for the meal with Jesus was Lazarus.

Given the information contained in the upcoming narrative events, it can be assumed that the group present included then at least Jesus, Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and Judas (all of who are named) - and most likely also the rest of the disciples. The audience can suppose from the context that the family at Bethany (Lazarus, Martha and Mary) provides the meal (Moloney 1995:180).¹⁸ For Svärd (2015:255-256) this appears to be a rather private setting with only those present gathered for a feast inside the house. The occasion has a sense of secrecy, since Jesus has recently stopped travelling openly and the people are not aware of his whereabouts (11:54-57). Amidst such secrecy, this dinner can be considered as “a kind of resurrection party” (Kitzberger 2003b:185) given in Jesus' honour (Adeyemo 2006:1277). It could have been an occasion to mark this family's love and gratitude to Jesus (Kanagaraj 2013:123).

Carson (1991:428), however, states that if this was a type of village dinner honouring Jesus as celebrated guest, it might well have been that several families were involved with doing the work involved in such an event. Newbigin (1982:150) is of the opinion that it would be rather natural, in view of the circumstances and in the particular society, that this

¹⁷ Δεῖπνον, translated as “dinner,” can refer to a meal at any time of day. According to Louw Nida 23.22 the term, in a more generic sense, denotes a meal – either simple or elaborate. Additional meanings are “banquet” and “feast,” to be determined by the literary context in which it appears. Harris (2015:224) states that it refers to the main meal of the day, usually served in the evening. Therefore the translation possibilities are “dinner,” “supper”, and “banquet”.

¹⁸ “It has been suggested that Simon the Leper (Mk. 14:3) was the father of Lazarus and his sisters, and therefore the real owner of their home, even though for all practical purposes they owned it. This is an attractive hypothesis, but completely without supporting evidence” (Carson 1991:428).

was a communal banquet organized by the whole village in Jesus' honour.¹⁹ Ironically, what would have been the funeral banquet of Lazarus is now a celebration of life (cf. Brant 2011:179).²⁰

According to Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:207-208), meals in antiquity were considered as ceremonies, rather than rituals. Whereas rituals confirm a change of status, ceremonies are regular, predictable events. In ceremonies, roles and statuses in a community are affirmed and legitimated. The microcosm of the meal is thus a parallel to the macrocosm of everyday social relations. Meals did not normally include people of varying social ranks, except under very special circumstance, seeing as social relations were affirmed at a meal. Corley (1993:25) notes that meal practices are among the most conservative aspects of society, as they often maintain and stabilize social systems, rather than change them. Included in these social systems that were to be maintained and stabilized, were the gendered roles of men and women. In the case of banquets (such as this meal appears to be, given the occasion), women were typically not allowed to join as guests. Towards the first century BCE, married women were admitted (Malina 1993:84).

Malina (1993:82-83) distinguishes between two general types of banquets in the ancient Mediterranean context; ceremonial and ritual. A ceremonial feast was a banquet in which the inviter and the invited celebrated their mutual solidarity, their belonging to each other, and their oneness. A ritual festive meal was one that marked some individual or group transition or transformation, held to give honour to those undergoing the important social change. Feasts marked important transitional points in a person's life, e.g. a wedding. This meal appears to create group solidarity in the form of table fellowship among Jesus' followers, and yet the events that take place at this meal are by no means regular or predictable - and much rather ritualistic in nature.

The narrator sets the scene for what is to follow by painting a rather typical picture of gendered roles; at the same time the narrator is preparing for Mary's break with convention (Brant 2011:179). Martha fulfils the role of hostess here by "serving" the meal²¹ - a role characteristic for her, at least as depicted in the Gospels tradition

¹⁹ In Mark 5:43 and John 21:12-13 the impression is created that eating after resurrections is important (Kitzberger 2003b:185).

²⁰ In later rabbinic tradition the first meal after the burial is described as a "meal of comfort" and as a family occasion (Brant 2011:179).

²¹ Depending on how large the group gathered was, Martha could have been one of a number of persons serving (Newbiggin 1982:150).

(Ridderbos 1997:414).²² The verb *διακονέω* (“to serve”) is rare in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 12:26) (Scott 2003:1191). In wealthier families, this task of serving the meal would have been the role of the servant/s. Although it could be argued that Martha is fulfilling a typically female gendered role, it is noteworthy that Lazarus, as the male family-member, is not taking on the explicit role of a male host - as might be expected given the cause for the occasion (Scott 2003:1191).²³ Rather, he is “reclining” at the table with Jesus, indicating that he is taking up the role of a guest (Harris 2015:224).²⁴ There thus appears to be some uncertainty, or at least vagueness, about who is acting as the host or hostess of this dinner. Martha’s action indicates that she has entered fully into discipleship by her earlier confession and now her active service. The verb further is also suggestive, since by the time the Fourth Gospel was written, there was apparently in some Christian communities an office of “deacon” (Thurston 1998:88).²⁵

As was the case in John 11:1-44, the two women, Martha and Mary, are characterized as the protagonists in this narrative (with prominence given to Mary and her deed) (Talbert 1992:184). Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:330) argues that Mary plays a subordinate role to that of Martha in 11:1-54, but in 12:1-8 she is the center of action. In the Gospel of John, however, Mary and Martha are not seen in competition with each other.

Lazarus takes on a much less prominent role in comparison to the two women. Lazarus never speaks in either of the narratives, whereas Martha and Mary both engage in dialogue with Jesus in 11:1-44. In 12:1-8 Martha and Mary do not speak, however, they

²² Carson (1991:428) states that the picture of Mary adoring and Martha serving, is consistent with the portrayal of the two women in Luke 10:38-42.

²³ Whipple (2014:398) argues that hospitality within the broader Mediterranean culture carried with it certain gendered assumptions. It was customary for the male head of the household to formally extend the offer of hospitality (although there are also examples of females serving as heads of households). Regardless of who offered the hospitality, the actual work of providing for guests often fell to women. Women served as the embodiments of hospitality, whether directly involved in providing the services or overseeing the actions of the household.

²⁴ Malina (1993:83) notes that the custom of reclining on a couch with the elbow on a cushion was introduced among Roman elites at the end of the second century BCE. It was never adopted the custom for ordinary people. Brant (2011:179) states that Jews in Palestine had adopted the habit of reclining at table by the late Second Temple period, as a statement of their status as free people.

²⁵ According to Brown (1979:187) 12:2 might be the only text in the Fourth Gospel that reflects directly on women in church offices. Although Martha serving the meal may not seem significant on the story-level of Jesus’ ministry, it does bear more significance read against the socio-cultural background of the narrative when dated towards the end of the first century: “the evangelist is writing in the 90s, when the office of *diakonos* already existed in the post-Pauline churches (see the Pastorals) and when the task of waiting on tables was a specific function to which the community or its leaders appointed individuals by laying on hands (Acts 6:1-6). In the Johannine community a woman could be described as exercising a function which in other churches was the function of an ‘ordained’ person” (Brown 1979:187). Scott (2003:1191) also states that *diakonos* was an established term at the time of writing of the Fourth Gospel, describing an office of ministry in some parts of the church.

are performing particular acts - serving and anointing.²⁶ Given the social customs of verbal and physical participation for women in social settings - even in settings where the boundaries between male and female spaces often were slightly blurred (such as funerals or feasts) - this is an interesting development for a first century (Jewish) setting. Reinhartz (1994:583) is of the opinion that the two sisters hosted a dinner for Jesus, at which others of his inner circles were present. This implies that the sisters, or women like them, were also part of or close to this inner circle of Jesus. This is a counter-balance to the narrative in 1:31-51 (the call of the disciples), in which no female actors are mentioned.

³ ἡ οὖν Μαριάμ λαβοῦσα λίτραν μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτίμου ἤλειψεν τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ ἐξέμαξεν ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ· ἡ δὲ οἰκία ἐπληρώθη ἐκ τῆς ὀσμῆς τοῦ μύρου.

In 12:3, Mary fulfils the prolepsis of 11:2 (Moloney 1996:178) and the scene is described in some detail (Scott 2003:1191). The verbs used in 11:2 (aorist participles ἀλείψασα and ἐκμάξασα) are repeated here; this time, however, Mary now actively perform the deeds of anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair (aorist indicatives ἤλειψεν and ἐξέμαξεν) (Moloney 1996:180). Both the deeds and the possible reasons for them merit attention.

In the first century cultural contexts, people usually washed and anointed their own feet. Hosts would typically provide a basin and water for guests to wash their feet, before sharing the meal - especially if the guests had travelled some distance to the host on dusty roads. In some cases, a host would also provide oil for his guests. Guests would then usually also rub it onto their feet (Koester 2003:127-128).²⁷

However, it was customary among especially the elites to have slaves wash the feet of guests before a meal; indeed, a slave was socio-culturally the only person who could be expected to wash and anoint the feet of another person. Rabbinic rulings did allow children to perform these tasks for their parents, however, by far and large the washing or anointing the feet of another person remained identified with slavery (Koester 2003:128).

²⁶ Brown (1979:192) notices the order of names in 11:5 (Martha, Mary, and then Lazarus); moreover, in 11:1-2 Lazarus is identified through his relationship to Mary and Martha. One possible reason could be that the two women were known in the wider Gospel tradition (cf. Luke 10:38-42), whereas Lazarus is a peculiarly Johannine character (at least in a more historical setting, cf. Luke 16:19-31). He is introduced into the Fourth Gospel by being placed in a family relationship to Mary and Martha similar to the introduction of the Beloved Disciple into well-known scenes by placing him in a relationship to Peter.

²⁷ Examples of such foot washing practices attested in biblical texts include Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21; 2 Samuel 11:8 (Koester 2003:127).

The reason for foot washing was mainly for hygienic reasons; people's feet were hardly clean, given the lack of infrastructure for sewerage and other rubbish. Streets thus served multiple purposes, amongst which to function as informal sewerage systems. And of course, given that dinner guests were reclining, they usually found themselves in close proximity to the feet of those near them (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:205).

What happens in this narrative is unusual on a few levels: Hosts did not usually deal with the problem of foot-odour; feet were not usually anointed with expensive perfume (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:205); and a woman would hardly ever fulfil the role of an anointer. Simply put, to anoint the feet of guests was not a common Jewish custom during the meal (Kanagaraj 2013:123).²⁸ For a woman to fulfil this role, and certainly for a man to whom she not connected agnatically or by marriage, was highly unconventional (Ridderbos 1997:414).²⁹ Whereas Martha did what was socially ascribed, by serving the meal, Mary chose to do something different, and shocking (Brant 2011:179). For Svärd (2015:265), it is noteworthy that a woman anoints Jesus instead of a male prophet, as in the Old Testament anointing episodes; this contributes to the Johannine description of women as having important spiritual insights and tasks.

All of this suggests that Mary's action is symbolic (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:205). It is at this point that the implicit readers are encouraged to broaden their understanding of the meal as merely a celebration of Lazarus' life.

The whole scene is one of extravagance and excess (Scott 2003:1191; Bennema 2009:153), thereby transgressing the gendered boundaries of expected controlled and restrained behaviour.³⁰ Mary has come prepared with a "pound" (λίτρα)³¹ of "perfume" (μύρον). This "perfume" is further described as "pure" (πιστικός) and "expensive"

²⁸ Coakley (1988:246-248) contests the arguments of scholars such as Legault and Brown who are of the opinion that anointing of the feet was completely unknown and unparalleled in the context of the ancient Mediterranean world. He provides a catalogue of eight instances from ancient sources, where reference is made to the anointing of feet. These sources include Homer, Aristophanes, Athenaeus, Pliny, Petronius, Curtius, Tosepta, and *Sipre*. Thereby he does not wish to argue that the anointing of feet was an everyday occurrence in the time of Jesus in Palestine. But it could suggest that it may have been a "natural and spontaneous act of extravagance" in societies making use of oils and perfumes.

²⁹ Some commentators are of the opinion that the anointing of the feet signifies a fusion of the two traditions represented in the parallel narratives in the Synoptic Gospels: a woman who anointed Jesus' head two days before the Passover at Bethany (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9); and of another woman who wet Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair (Luke 7:36-50) (Kanagaraj 2013:123).

³⁰ As noted by Moxnes (2003:76-77) the ideal of self-mastery or self-control was gendered as male, according to Jewish, Greek, and Roman sources. A lack of self-mastery was gendered as female.

³¹ A λίτρα refers to the Roman "pound," equivalent to approximately 325 grams. In John 12:2 it could however refer to the quantity rather than the weight, and translated as "pint". Rounded off this would equate to approximately 500 millilitres (Louw Nida 86.4; Adeyemo 2006:1277).

(πολύτιμος)³² “nard oil” (νάρδος) – the oil extracted from the roots and spike of the exotic nard plant (Ridderbos 1997:414; Louw Nida 6.210; Beasley-Murray 1987:204; Carson 1991:428).³³ Since there has been no indication up to now that Mary belonged to one of the wealthier classes (in fact, Martha serves the meal rather than a servant) the ointment would have been a major expenditure for an average, or worse, household (Koester 2003:129). Adeyemo (2006:1277) notes that the amount of perfume that Mary poured on Jesus’ feet showed what humble service she was willing to offer.³⁴

Jesus and the other guests are reclining for the meal, a possible explanation for the fact that she anoints Jesus’ feet and not his head (Talbert 1992:184). Given Jesus’ reclining position, she most likely passed behind him before pouring out the precious perfume on his feet (Ridderbos 1997:414-415). The choice of the feet rather than the head fulfils the prolepsis of 11:2, as well as indicating the uniqueness of this event (Moloney 1996:180; Bennema 2009:153). The previous mention of Jesus’ feet was also in Bethany, when Mary had fallen at his feet and cried out to Jesus, stating that her brother would not have died had he been there (11:32) (Adeyemo 2006:1277). Talbert (1992:184) notes that if Mary had anointed Jesus’ head, it would have had Messianic implications. In view of Jesus’ reclining position, Mary could have anointed much more than only Jesus’ feet (Carson 1991:428).

The fact that the feet of Jesus is mentioned twice in 12:3 could be intended to put stress on the “deep reverence and humility with which Mary goes about her act,” rather than indicating a choice for mere practicality. In terms of the symbolism further established in John 13, her focus on Jesus’ feet at the very least suggests the greatest possible measure of self-humbling devotion and love - regardless of cost or of what others might think (Carson 1991:428).

³² In a more general sense, the word could mean “valuable.” However, in some contexts it implies a particular monetary value, i.e. “expensive” (Louw Nida 65.3). In this verse it most likely includes both possible meanings: it is “valuable” due to the fact that she anoints specifically Jesus’ feet with it; it is at the same time obviously also costly, given Judas’ exclamation in 12:5.

³³ Beasley-Murray (1987:204) and Carson (1991:428) state that the description of the nard oil as πιστικῆς is not likely to reflect the Aramaic word for “pistachio nut”, as πιστικός occurs elsewhere with the meaning “faithful”, and here “genuine”. Carson (1991:428) is also not convinced of the interpretation of πιστικῆς as a derivative of *pino* (“I drink”), translating then as “liquid nard”. The only other biblical reference to nard is in Song of Songs 1:3, 12 (Brant 2011:179).

³⁴ Carson (1991:429) states that, given the value of the “expensive perfume,” Mary and her family were either very wealthy, or this was a family heirloom that had been passed down to her. Given that Martha serves the dinner and not slaves, as would be expected in a wealthy family, and that no mention of any sort is made of the origin of the “expensive perfume,” its origins should not be considered of utmost importance.

In Israelite society, the feet were considered the body zone that symbolizes action. The story thus, from that perspective, can be read as pointing to a ritual of forthcoming transformative action. One might expect at this point that Jesus was about to do something of great significance. Mary acknowledged and affirmed Jesus' forthcoming significant action (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:205):

Aside from grooming, anointing was usually used for rituals of status elevation (anointing the head of one becoming priest, prophet, or king) and status transformation (anointing the whole body of a dead person who moves from the state of family member to ancestor). But here it is neither Jesus' head nor his whole body that is anointed, just his feet.

Conway (2003b:91) describes Mary's action as a sign-act that is interpreted by Jesus for those gathered around him. The most unusual part of this act is the fact that Mary anointed the feet of Jesus, since it is typically the head that is anointed (and feet that are washed). According to Brant (2004:218), Jesus returns the respect given to his body by turning it into a prophetic act that anticipates its mortality. As such, a woman meets Jesus' disclosure of his identity in a narrative in which Jesus is not always forthcoming about whom he is.

However, it does not end there; not only does Mary anoint his feet, but she also "wipes off"/"wipes dry" (ἐκμάσσω) the perfume with her hair. This was also not a normal Jewish custom (Kanagaraj 2013:123). A towel or her sleeve would have been the usual way of drying feet (Bannema 2009:153). Ridderbos (1997:415) states that it appears as if Mary might want to protect Jesus from any annoyance her extravagant act of adoration might cause him. Adeyemo (2006:1277) considers the wiping of Jesus' feet as an indication that Mary did not care what others thought of her, so long as she was serving her Lord. Scott (2003:1191) is of the opinion that Mary loosening her hair to wipe the ointment is not only a messy picture, "but also one with a quasi-erotic tone." Pippin (2003:146) regards the hair of Mary as a dominant echo of this narrative, and describes it as one that sounds danger. Loose and/or long hair has long been regarded as a temptation that men must avoid. For her, it seems that not even Jesus is safe from potentially dangerous tresses in this narrative.

D'Angelo (1999:136) argues that erotic touches in the representations of women in the Gospel of John coexist with ascetic and spiritualist tendencies and anxieties about physicality, particularly the physicality of Jesus, that frequently accompany prophecy. If

the scene of Mary anointing and wiping Jesus' feet is prophetic and messianic, it achieves such effects by casting Mary in the role of the woman lover from Song of Songs 1:12, where a king is reclining on his couch and nard gives forth an odour.

Ilan (1995:122-134) offers interesting perspectives on the preservation of Jewish women's chastity within the setting of Greco-Roman Palestine. These include the prohibition of speaking to a woman, looking at a woman, secluding a woman in her house, and head-covering and bound hair in public settings and in the presence of strangers. This is already picked up by earlier commentators such as Morris (1971:576-577), who notes the fact that such an act - of a Jewish woman with unbound hair in public - went against the prescriptions for Jewish women as it "marked loose morals."³⁵ According to Adeyemo (2006:1277), "(m)any of those present would have been shocked that a respectable woman would let her hair hang loose in public." Israelite women did not usually unbind their hair in public - often not even in the home (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:205). The reason why Mary might have chosen to do the anointing in this way, could have been so that the family's joy could be shared with other guests - given that the entire house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume (Kanagaraj 2013:124).³⁶

Feet, in the biblical tradition, have at times broader connections, amongst which serving as euphemism for the male genitals, or sometimes considered to have erotic connotations, as well.³⁷ In combination with the uncovered and loose hair of Mary, and the odour of the perfume surrounding all present, an erotic tone to this event may also be discerned. Loader (2012:346) argues that Jesus is depicted as responding to Mary in a way which was unexpected and ran contrary to the expectations of those present. For him, nothing suggests her act was sexual, although it was clearly sensual and tactile, which would have people worried about drawing fine lines on fuzzy boundaries. Yet, nothing suggests that Jesus was in any way constrained by the potential sexual danger that most hearers of the narrative would have understood her to represent.

³⁵ Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:15.

³⁶ Kurek-Chomycz (2010:353) notes that explicit comments on the aroma of the anointing oil are only found in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel. This could indicate the Johannine author's sensitivity and awareness for the symbolic meaning of fragrance, including the association between social order and smell. This emphasis on fragrance is in line with the author's interest in sense imagery elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. sight, sound, and taste). Here it contributes to the positive portrayal of Mary of Bethany and her relationship with Jesus. It also serves as boundary marker which introduces the transition to Jesus's last days on earth, his death, and his resurrection.

³⁷ Cf. Genesis 49:10; Exodus 4:25; Ruth 3:4, 7, 8; Isaiah 6:2; Ezekiel 34:18-19

According to Newbigin (1982:150), Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet is an act which could be a symbol of the anointing of the whole body for burial; "the shaking loose of the hair would be incomprehensible were it not the familiar sign of the deepest grief." Thus, there is simultaneously the act of utter devotion, love, and humility by Mary towards Jesus; and the performance of a sign of what lies before Jesus (Newbigin 1982:150). One might even interpret the act as a mirroring of Jesus' own utter devotion, considering that he is on his way to death; "(t)he love of the Savior is met and mirrored for a moment by the love of one he came to save" (Newbigin 1982:150). Mary heightened the sense of humility already reflected in her willingness to serve Jesus as a slave, by using her hair to wipe his feet (Koester 2003:129). These interpretations do, however, reflect a tendency to underplay the sensual, erotic tone of the event. In as much as the act did carry profound meaning, the guests present would not at this point of the narrative have known what this deeper meaning was. In their present experience, this is a scandalous and unacceptable sequence of events taking place - given who Jesus is, who Mary is, and who they are. Pippin (2003:148) purposefully pushes the boundaries by asking:

Is the anointing a foretext for his cross and burial, as traditional readings hold? Or is this act as foreplay of what could potentially be the ultimate erotic derailment (*sans* sword) of Jesus' mission?

That the house was "filled with the fragrance" of the perfume, emphasizes the dedication, abundance and extravagant nature of the act performed by Mary (Moloney 1996:181).³⁸ All who are present can participate in the anointment of Jesus. In terms of narrative contrast, it is precisely the scent that is noteworthy; the previous mention of scent in connection with this family was in 11:39, when Martha was concerned about the odour of Lazarus' decomposing body. Now, the odour is the enticing fragrance of nard. Thus, the odour of death has been replaced by the odour emanating from Mary's extravagant love for Jesus (O'Day 2012:524-525). Such contrasting odours represent contrasting locales: Formerly, the dark depth of death, and now the kingdom and wealth represented and brought about by Jesus. Ironically, this pleasant fragrance symbolizes the death of Jesus that is to come for such a change to take place in its fullness.

Scholars have interpreted this spreading of the odour as a symbol of the spread of the message of the gospel through the gentile world, and even as a symbol of the gentile

³⁸ The word ὀσμὴ could refer to either an agreeable smell ("fragrance") or a disagreeable smell ("stench") (Harris 2015:224). In the context of John 12, it is clearly an agreeable smell given the content thereof, although the extent thereof could for some have bordered on becoming disagreeable.

church receiving the gospel message at the feet of Jesus (cf. Mark 14:9; 2 Corinthians 2:15) (Moloney 1996:181; Newbigin 1982:151). In a more general sense, it might suggest that the fragrance of the act will extend far beyond this event itself (Carson 1991:428).

Harris (2015:224) summarizes the surprising irregularities of Mary's actions as follows: The feet were anointed; the anointing took place during a meal; hair rather than a cloth was used for wiping Jesus' feet; Mary, a woman, let her hair down in public; and the oil was wiped off. And yet, the extravagant hospitality, the extraordinary gesture of letting down her hair among men from outside the household, and touching of Jesus, does not seem to offend or repel Jesus (Thurston 1998:88). By means of the act of Mary the body of Jesus - his physical presence - in the room becomes central. The other bodies - Mary, Judas, and the others, revolve around this body (Pippin 2003:149). The incarnation of Jesus and the effect thereof is seen, felt, and smelt in this narrative.

The meaning of the anointing of the feet, at this point in the narrative, is still unclear. Given that the narrator does not state explicitly Mary's reason/s for anointing Jesus' feet, commentators have offered a number of possibilities.

The events narrated in John 12 are not miraculous deeds performed by Jesus, as was the case in earlier sections of the Book of Signs. Rather, they are events in which others perform actions for the honour of Jesus, and which are seen to be related to the sovereign purpose of God, through him. Thus, they function as signs of the divine sovereignty (Beasley-Murray 1987:206). According to Ridderbos (1997:415):

(n)ever did the Son of God dwell more gloriously among humans than at that last banquet, and nowhere else was the response of their faith and love to his presence more vivid and eloquent. Mary's action expresses what she did not have the words to voice...

At a first level, specifically also in light of the links made with the narrative of Lazarus' resurrection, Mary's act appears to be an obvious gesture of gratefulness to Jesus for bringing her brother back to life (Koester 2003:127). Others note that Mary is anointing Jesus' feet as an act of total devotion to Jesus, indicating his authority and his royal status. This could possibly be the case if one draws on the tradition of anointing of royalty;³⁹

³⁹ Svärd (2015:249-268) is of the opinion that John 12:1-8 should be interpreted as a refashioning of a private royal anointing scene. His reasons for such an understanding is based both on the Christology of the Fourth Gospel, as well as the literary genre. Furthermore, the placing of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, where he is acknowledged as the king of Israel, is told immediately after the anointing episode (in contrast with Mark and Matthew). He compares the Johannine episode with the Old Testament royal anointing scene (specifically those of Saul, David, and Jehu) by evaluating the ways in which the generic elements of the

however, in such cases it was not the feet that were anointed, but the head (Moloney 1996:180). For Kysar (1993:151), Mary's act is more than an expression of thankfulness for her brother's life. Rather it is a prophetic gesture, one that says more than she herself knows. It is the anticipation of the grand exaltation of Jesus by means of his crucifixion.

Beasley-Murray (1987:208-209) offers an explanation that appears to be a convergence of the interpretations of burial preparation and consecration of Jesus to royal service. For him, an anointing of the feet instead of the head would have been interpreted as a consecration of Jesus to royal service; yet, this royal service was the death of Jesus by which salvation and sovereignty comes.

As would later become clearer with Jesus' response to Judas in 12:7-8, Mary (most likely, unknowingly) does also appear to be performing a burial ritual, in a proleptic way, given that Jesus' impending death is coming closer and closer. The scene has been constructed as a struggle over who will define the meaning of Mary's action - Jesus or Judas (Brant 2011:179). Yet, in spite of the portrayal of Mary's extraordinary transgression of boundaries, it is noteworthy that Mary herself is not offered the opportunity to speak for herself; rather, it is Judas who protests, and Jesus who will provide clarity on her deeds on her behalf.

⁴ λέγει δὲ Ἰούδας ὁ Ἰσκαριώτης εἰς τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ, ὁ μέλλων αὐτὸν παραδιδόναι· ⁵ Διὰ τί τοῦτο τὸ μύρον οὐκ ἐπράθη τριακοσίων δηναρίων καὶ ἐδόθη πτωχοῖς;

Mary's act in John 12 elicits two reactions: one by Judas (12:4-6) and the other by Jesus (12:7-8) (Talbert 1992:184).

Juxtaposed to the depiction of Mary's great love in 12:3 (De Jonge 1996:162) is the description of Judas (literally "Judas the Iscariot") in 12:4. The contrast between these two

private royal anointing scene of the OT also feature in John - whether similarly, or differently. The generic elements of the scene for comparison are: an integrated narrative unit of prose; a private, secret, and dangerous setting in the vicinity of Jerusalem; connection to table fellowship and sacrifice; a male prophet commissioned to anoint; anointing of a divinely elected man; a journey; a container is taken and oil is poured upon the head; the "anoint-X-to-be-king" formula; a statement of commissioning; and the coming of the Spirit. John refashions the scene in mainly the following ways: a prophetic woman instead of a male prophet performs the anointing; and fragrant ointment on the feet instead of oil on the head. Other significant changes include: replacement of the "anoint-X-to-be-king" formula with a public declaration of Jesus' kingship in the following episode; an implicit reference to Jesus' commission rather than an explicit statement of commissioning; and the relocation of the coming of the Spirit to Chapter 1 of the Fourth Gospel in the form of a dove. To my mind, it need not be an either/or choice in terms of the meaning of the anointing scene; rather, it could allude to both the death and the glorification of Jesus, since the Fourth Gospel theologically posits the suffering of Jesus, and his crucifixion and death as ultimate "proof" of his glory. Furthermore, in literary style, the Fourth Gospel excels in irony, where double meanings are often at play.

characters - the female disciple, Mary versus the traditional male disciple, Judas - could not be more evident (Scott 2003:1191), depicted at the meal “in all its radical and deadly seriousness” (Ridderbos 1997:415). In comparison to the similar narratives in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, it is very specifically Judas who protests Mary’s action (rather than “some” in Mark 14:4 or “disciples” in Matthew 26:8) (De Jonge 1996:162).

On a more sympathetic note, it is most likely that although Judas speaks, the others who were present also had the same thought, even some of the other disciples perhaps (Carson 1991:428; Harris 2015:225). Not only has Mary performed a seemingly reckless and extravagant act - Jesus also accepted it (Harris 2015:225). Moreover, he has accepted such an act done by a woman.

Even though being explicitly described as one of Jesus’ disciples, Judas is immediately identified by the narrator as “the one about to betray him” (ὁ μέλλων αὐτὸν παραδιδόναι), emphasizing the prior knowledge conveyed to the implied reader (Scott 2003:1191).⁴⁰ The power of darkness was manifesting itself even in the most intimate circle of Jesus and his disciples - and this at the climax of their time together with him (Ridderbos 1997:415).

Brant (2004:215) argues that the narrator imputes ulterior motives for Judas’ objection to the display of affection or respect demonstrated by Mary; yet the objection in its cultural context is probably appropriate. In an honour and shame world, the inability to control one’s women and one’s money is consistently connected. Judas here draws attention to the inappropriate use of money by a woman. Mary has clearly crossed boundaries, and the man who was supposed to put her in her place, did not.

This is the second time Judas is mentioned in the Johannine Gospel. By this time, he is already known as a disciple who will betray Jesus (6:60, 71) (Moloney 1996:181). In both cases (12:4 and 6:71), he is characterized as a thief whose greed is masked with a false concern for the poor.

Judas objects to the extravagance portrayed by Mary’s act with a seemingly valid question, given the society in which they found themselves. In his view, the wasteful use of the “pure nard” (τὸ μύρον) has no place in the ministry of a person like Jesus, or of his disciples. Rather, such a precious possession could have been sold for a large sum of

⁴⁰ “The persistent habit of the Evangelists to tag Judas as the traitor...does not spring from any prescience they enjoyed at the time, but from the shocking force of their hindsight. It is as if they cannot recollect anything he said and did without also remembering that he as the one who ultimately betrayed the Lord of Glory for thirty pieces of silver” (Carson 1991:428-429).

money, “three hundred denarii” (τριακοσίων δηναρίων), and the proceeds given to the poor (Moloney 1996:181).

The denarius is the monetary unit most commonly mentioned in the Gospels. It was a Roman coin, minted of silver, and one denarius was generally given as the equivalent of the normal payment for a day’s work by an unskilled labourer (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:206). Given that for Jewish people the working week was six days (no money would be earned on Sabbaths and other holy days) the sum mentioned in this narrative represents more or less a year’s wages for a fully employed man (Adeyemo 2006:1277; Beasley-Murray 1987:208; Carson 1991:429; Harris 2015:225).

Koester (2003:129) notes that many readers of this narrative may have understood Judas’ negative reaction. Using expensive perfume on one’s feet was considered a wasteful luxury, mocked by Greek comics and playwrights.

Judas’ protest is bracketed by the narrator with two comments: First, by the description of Judas as the one who will hand over Jesus (12:4); second by the later aside on Judas’ intention to help himself to the contents of the “common purse” (12:6) (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:206). O’Day (2012:525) states that Judas’ protest to the anointing does not diminish Mary’s act, but rather reaffirms the extravagance of her gesture. Whereas Judas is portrayed as trying to establish a situation of either/or love (either you love Jesus, or you love the poor), Jesus’ refutation of Judas affirms the type of both/and love Mary has shown - a love for Jesus and for the poor. As such, this male character’s protest serves to reaffirm the acts of boundary transgression by a female character.

⁶ εἶπεν δὲ τοῦτο οὐχ ὅτι περὶ τῶν πτωχῶν ἔμελεν αὐτῷ, ἀλλ’ ὅτι κλέπτῆς ἦν καὶ τὸ γλωσσόκομον ἔχων τὰ βαλλόμενα ἐβάσταζεν.

This verse is a good example of the asides used by the narrator to provide the implied reader with information that the characters themselves do not necessarily possess. Had the portrayal of Judas been dependent on merely his own words in 12:5, one might judge his disapproval of Mary’s actions as an expression of narrow-mindedness, or as understandable but misplaced opposition to so much extravagance in a world full of poor people (Ridderbos 1997:415).

Judas may seem right, but his motive was wrong (Kanagaraj 2013:124). The audience, who has already been warned of the treachery of Judas, is aware that social concern cannot be the real motive for his objection (Moloney 1996:181). Rather, the narrator makes it clear that Judas was lying for his own gain: He would much rather have seen that large sum of money in the “common purse” (γλωσσόκομον)⁴¹ that he administered and from which he (literally) enriched himself (Ridderbos 1997:415; Moloney 1996:181-182).⁴² That Judas was the handler of the group’s money is also mentioned in 13:29. He was also the disciple willing to betray Jesus, shortly before his arrest and crucifixion.⁴³ In this sense, Judas is already showing his true colours (Adeyemo 2006:1277).⁴⁴

This is the only place in the New Testament where Judas is called a “thief” (κλέπτης), or where any charge other than his role as ultimate betrayer is levelled against him (Carson 1991:429), and is thus the most explicit negative assessment of Judas’s character in any of the four Gospels (Brant 2011:180).

From a gender-critical perspective, Judas is presented as a dishonourable man. His protest affirms such an interpretation, rather than counting in favour of his honour (as may have been expected). The character of Mary is contrasted all the more to Judas: she will shortly be affirmed by Jesus as acting honourable, rather than shameless, as Judas had tried to argue.

⁷ εἶπεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς: Ἄφες αὐτήν, ἵνα εἰς τὴν ἡμέραν τοῦ ἐνταφιασμοῦ μου τηρήσῃ αὐτό·

Jesus’ responses to Mary and Judas respectively are significant. Judas is harshly rebuked with the words, “Leave her alone.” Mary is defended in the form of interpretation: Jesus recognizes her actions in relation to his own impending death (Koester 2003:129). Mary is

⁴¹ The γλωσσόκομον here most likely refers to coin case or coin box used by Jerusalem pilgrims. It was a necessary security measure in which temple redemption money, taxes, and alms were transported (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:206). In the case of this narrative, it was a receptacle for the gifts given to Jesus and his disciples (cf. Luke 8:2-3) and can therefore be translated as “the common purse” (Harris 2015:225).

⁴² On a semantic level, verse 6b appears to form an A-B-A pattern of inclusion: Judas is a thief (κλέπτης) (A1); whilst (literally) having the money box/purse (γλωσσόκομον) (B); he carried (it) (βαστάζω) (A2). The latter is considered by some to be a euphemism for “stealing money” (Beasley-Murray 1987:205; Carson 1991:429; Harris 2015:225). Ridderbos (1997:415) argues that the noun (A1) and the verb (A2) should be understood here in relation to one another.

⁴³ The Fourth Gospel does not mention a payment for Judas’s act of betrayal, as found in the Synoptic tradition (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:206). The reason is that his betrayal is the result of two things: it is a response to the “order of the religious authorities (11:57); and it is because of Judas’ possession by Satan (13:27) (Scott 2003:1191).

⁴⁴ The notion that Judas stole from the common purse may reflect a tradition that he was motivated by greed. In narrative terms, however, it functions as an ironic reinforcement of the contrast between true and false disciples (cf. 10:7-13) (Scott 2003:1191).

portrayed as the one who is attuned to Jesus' coming hour. In contrast, Judas will soon betray Jesus (13:30) and stand alongside the soldiers when they come to arrest him (18:5) (Conway 2003b:92). Thurston (1998:89) notes that Mary assumes that she has the right to approach Jesus and express her love. When a man (Judas) objects, Jesus not only confirms that she does, indeed, have the freedom to do so, but goes on to rebuke the man who would attempt to restrict her. Jesus thus publicly sides with Mary, rather than with one of his male disciples.

This is the first time in the narrative that Jesus' proximate death is recognized. The passion of Jesus is at hand, and the action performed by Mary is preparation for the death of Jesus. Mary has symbolized the significance of that death by anointing the feet of Jesus, and wiping it with her hair (Moloney 1996:182). From Mary's perspective, her act was simply a way of telling her Lord how much she appreciated him; from God's perspective, however, her act marked the start of Jesus' passion (Adeyemo 2006:1277). According to Koester (2003:129-130), the gift of ointment was, in one sense, a very appropriate response of gratitude to Jesus for the gift of life that Jesus had already given by raising Lazarus from the dead. In another sense, the elaborate anointing with the perfume was a proleptic response to the enormous gift Jesus was on the brink of giving, namely his own life. The self-giving extravagance of Mary's actions points to the unrestricted self-giving of Jesus through his crucifixion. This self-giving extravagance of both Mary and Jesus, which is so deeply physical in nature yet profoundly symbolic in meaning, blurs the boundaries between flesh and spirit.

Ridderbos (1997:417) notes that Jesus responds to Judas in two parts. The Johannine response is a reversal of the Synoptic responses; here he first eludes to his burial, and then follows the saying about the poor. Furthermore, the burial saying in the Fourth Gospel is presented in a particularly difficult form, which leads to ambiguity (Beasley-Murray 1987:205). This has resulted in numerous translation options by commentators:

(1) The simplest rendering would be, "Leave her alone in order that she may keep it for the day of my burial," namely that she may use it on that particular day. However, this would assume that Mary has barely begun to pour the perfume on Jesus, whereas 12:3, 5 imply that Mary had used all the ointment (Beasley-Murray 1987:205; Carson 1991:429).

(2) Others suggest that Mary could not be preserving any of the ointment. They set "leave her alone" apart from what follows and take the following as an elliptical clause, i.e. as a

statement of Mary's purpose in preserving the oil: She is reserving it for the day of Jesus' burial. Such a translation would read: "Let her be! She wanted to keep it for the day of my burial" or "had to keep it for the day of my burial" (Beasley-Murray 1987:205; Carson 1991:429). Thus, Judas' criticism is then directed at Mary keeping the expensive perfume for the coming occasion, rather than selling it and distributing the proceeds to the poor (Carson 1991:429). This would imply that the day of Jesus' burial had already begun. From such a point of view, Mary had indeed "kept" the oil, resulting in a meaning close to Mark 14:8.

Criticism of such an interpretation is that Jesus in the Fourth Gospel never speaks of his death or burial as an occurrence that had already begun, and that such a translation seems to be forced. Mary's anointing of Jesus can be considered as an act that anticipates Jesus burial, but this does not imply that by the act the day of his burial had already commenced (Ridderbos 1997:417). Furthermore, an anointing at the burial of Jesus is also narrated in the Fourth Gospel (19:39-40) (in which Mary seems to play no part) (Scott 2003:1191); thus, this anointment is not a replacement of the anointment that would take place after Jesus' death.

(3) Some opt to stay as close as possible to the Synoptic saying (found in Mark 14:8; Matthew 26:12), by translating it in an imperative sense as "let her be and [let her] keep it for the day of my burial," (Beasley-Murray 1987:205) with the emphasis on "keep" (τηρέω). What is to be "kept", however, is unsure. Everything in the Johannine narrative seems to suggest that Mary has poured out all the ointment, and that there is no remaining ointment to be stored for future use. The Synoptic Gospels also make no mention of "keeping" (Ridderbos 1997:417). Carson (1991:429) states that such an imperative use of the Greek translation is rare. The only way in which such an imperative use could make sense, is if "keep" means something similar to "keep in mind" or "remember." There is, however, very little lexicographical support for such a meaning (Carson 1991:429-430).

(4) The "it" (αὐτό) could denote "the credit" [of having poured out this perfume] that Mary should keep, but this seems to be an unlikely and generous paraphrase (Carson 1991:430).

(5) Yet another possibility would be to take the second clause as an elliptical rhetorical question that Jesus, in defence of Mary, poses to Judas: "Leave her alone! Do you suppose she should have kept it [the ointment] until the day of my burial?" This would

make sense considering the time remaining for the disciples and others to be in the presence of Jesus, before his death. It connects well with Jesus' second saying, namely that the poor are always present, but Jesus not. If Mary wishes to display her love and devotion to Jesus, then now is the time. Otherwise she would only be able to use the oil for Jesus' burial. Jesus seems to convey that Mary grasps this, but not Judas. Criticism against such an interpretation is primarily due to the fact that 12:7b contains no interrogative particle (Ridderbos 1997:418-419).

Although there is no certainty, (2) seems most fitting. A choice for such a translation need not imply that Mary herself intended the anointing to be a prefiguring of Jesus' burial. There is no clear indication that Mary (or anyone else) understood before the crucifixion actually took place that Jesus had to die. She is acting in humble devotion, yet by performing this act she signalled more than she herself knew (Carson 1991:430).

Mary is (unknowingly) performing a prophetic act. Her act of sacrificial anointing looks forward to the day of Jesus' burial. The outcome of Jesus' death, namely the fragrance of God's sacrificial love being spread in the world, is already exhibited in Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet. Mary's anointing proclaims Jesus' enthronement as King on the cross, in fulfilment of God's redemptive plan for humanity. The meaning of Jesus' death is brought to the fore even before the Passover, as seen in the sacrifice made by one of his female followers (Kanagaraj 2013:124). Although the final events of the public ministry of Jesus are surrounded with triviality (11:16, 21-22, 24, 27, 39, 55-56) and the threat of a violent death (11:57; 12:4-6, 8), the presence and symbolic action of Mary (11:2, 28-32, 45; 12:3, 7-8) point the implied reader toward a more positive understanding of the violent events that lie ahead (Moloney 1996:183).

In the culture of the day, it was not considered inappropriate to spend extravagant sums of money at a funeral, including the cost of the perfumes designed to suppress the smell of a body's decay. And yet, Mary is lavishly pouring out perfume on Jesus while he is still alive. It is not surprising that Jesus considers it to be a prefiguring of the anointing after his death, which will be performed by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (19:38-42) (Carson 1991:430). Although women were typically involved with the anointing of the dead, O'Day (2012:525) notes that Jesus is anointed in secret at his death in the Fourth Gospel, by men who are afraid to make public their faith (19:38-39). In this story, in contrast, Mary anoints Jesus unashamedly in front of all who are present. Thereby the conventional gendered boundaries of public male and private female are reversed.

⁸ τοὺς πτωχοὺς γὰρ πάντοτε ἔχετε μεθ' ἑαυτῶν, ἐμὲ δὲ οὐ πάντοτε ἔχετε.⁴⁵

The second part of Jesus' response falls harshly on the ear of a modern reader. It is, however, not unfamiliar words for a Jewish audience; and only contains half of the law which devout Jews would have known very well (cf. Deuteronomy 15:11).⁴⁶ Here it is a proverb typical of a "limited good" society such as that of the Johannine communities; societies in which everything that can exist, already exists, and is already fully distributed. This means that no person can get more unless someone else gets less. "The common sentiment was that the current distribution of things should not be altered. The rich will remain rich and the poor will remain poor" (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:206).

Understood in its larger context and bearing in mind Jesus' concern at this particular point of the narrative, it is clear that Jesus is not trying to argue whether care for "the poor" (τοὺς πτωχοὺς) is a worthy cause or not; rather, he is responding to Judas's apparent concern uttered in 12:5 in relation to the events that lie ahead.

It seems as if Jesus is trying to give perspective on his own earthly presence (limited and only for a brief time), compared to the presence of the poor (an eternal presence in human history) (Moloney 1996:182; Carson 1991:430). The disciples will not always have him with them (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:206). For Jesus, the priority at this point in time is to acknowledge him as the messianic King and to spend anything expensive for his sake, rather than to give money to the poor without real concern for them (Kanagaraj 2013:124). The immediate fate of Jesus is reflected, as well as the proper celebration of his presence. It also stands as a rebuke of the false attitude of Judas, who is seen as the real defrauder of the poor in this narrative episode (Scott 2003:1191). Newbigin (1982:151) argues that setting alms to the poor over against devotion to Jesus misses the actual motive of discipleship. A devotion to Jesus and gratitude for his sacrifice should lead to a service of the poor - a service always needed. This is something very different from almsgiving that is legally required.

⁴⁵ The final part of Jesus' response (12:8) is missing in some important manuscripts (e.g. D it^d syr^s) (Harris 2015:226) – either in part or entirely. Accordingly some commentators judge the omission to be original (Scott 2003:1191; Carson 1991:430; Harris 2015:226). For the purpose of this research project, I consider the text as it has been presented in its most common form, i.e. including verse 8.

⁴⁶ This is most likely one of the most abused verses in the New Testament. The Deuteronomist commandment related to this expression dissolves any illusions of apathy for those who suffer: "There will always be poor people in the land. *Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land*" (emphasis added) (NIV).

Thus far, Mary is the only one who commits herself unconditionally to Jesus' presence, given the very short period that he is with them (see 7:32-36; 8:12-14; 9:4-5) (Moloney 1995:182). Had she not done the service then, she would never have had another opportunity; Jesus was on his way to the cross (Adeyemo 2006:1277). Mary, as the female character, has insight that no male character demonstrates in this narrative. Thereby she disturbs the presumed gender roles whereby insight and understanding was associated with men.

4.3 Concluding remarks

This chapter offered a gender-critical reading of the narrative of John 12:1-8 against the broad background of the ancient Mediterranean world; a world within which meals provided social spaces for affirming stability and familiarity, and where particular gendered behaviour was expected from men and women.

In John 12:1-8, an unusual experience of a dinner is narrated: What was supposed to be a funeral banquet has now changed to a celebration at which the person formerly dead, is present. Mary finds herself at the feet of Jesus, anoints his feet with a huge amount of expensive perfume, and dries it with her loose and unbound hair. When a disciple utters his dismay at the cost of the perfume that could have been used for the alleviation of poverty, Jesus rebukes him and makes it clear that Mary is performing much more than merely a ritual of thanksgiving; she is acting as a prophet who knows more than any other person present up to that moment.

In the next chapter, the narrative of John 13:1-17 will be read in a manner similar to the approach used in this chapter.

5. READING JOHN 13:1-17 THROUGH A GENDER-CRITICAL LENS

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 follows the same structure than that of Chapter 4. Without repeating everything that has already been stated in the Introduction to Chapter 4 (4.1), it is sufficient to note that this chapter also applies a gender-critical reading - this time for the narrative of John 13:1-17. This approach entails a reading of a biblical narrative with a particular sensitivity for the manner in which gender as a component of characterization features in the narrative. In this chapter, the focus is again on the way in which the implied author has constructed gender in the narrative itself, as conveyed by the narrator to the implied reader.

The narrative under consideration in this chapter is that of John 13:1-17, namely Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Again, the focus will be on the roles that characters fulfil in the narrative, and how these roles play out in relation to the roles of other characters. Jesus is the protagonist of this narrative and will be at the centre of the discussion. As with John 12:1-8, the characterization will be read against the background of the socio-cultural contours of the ancient Mediterranean world and the Johannine context to discern the gendered dimension thereof.

Such a reading is done with the full understanding that the search for and interpretation of such gendered dimensions is in itself a subjective undertaking from the perspective of the contemporary interpreter. This reading is thus no search for objective “truths” to be unveiled, but much rather an explicitly stated search for those elements that can contribute to more nuanced discourses on gender and sexuality in contemporary settings.

Accordingly, in this chapter, a close reading is offered of John 13:1-17. I will again make use of a range of commentary sources, with a focus on socio-cultural signifiers that relate to gender constructions and gender relations in the narrative.

5.2 John 13:1-17

^{13.1} Πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα εἰδὼς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἦλθεν αὐτοῦ ἡ ὥρα ἵνα μεταβῆ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἀγαπήσας τοὺς ἰδίους τοὺς ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ εἰς τέλος

ἠγάπησεν αὐτούς.² καὶ δεῖπνου γινομένου, τοῦ διαβόλου ἤδη βεβληκός εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἵνα παραδοῖ αὐτὸν Ἰούδας Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτου,³ εἰδὼς ὅτι πάντα ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ πατήρ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας, καὶ ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν καὶ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὑπάγει,⁴ ἐγείρεται ἐκ τοῦ δεῖπνου καὶ τίθησιν τὰ ἱμάτια καὶ λαβὼν λέντιον διέζωσεν ἑαυτὸν.⁵ εἶτα βάλλει ὕδωρ εἰς τὸν νιπτῆρα, καὶ ἤρξατο νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας τῶν μαθητῶν καὶ ἐκμάσσειν τῷ λεντίῳ ὃ ἦν διεζωσμένος.⁶ ἔρχεται οὖν πρὸς Σίμωνα Πέτρον. λέγει αὐτῷ· Κύριε, σύ μου νίπτεις τοὺς πόδας; ⁷ ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Ὁ ἐγὼ ποιῶ σὺ οὐκ οἶδας ἄρτι, γνῶσις δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα.⁸ λέγει αὐτῷ Πέτρος· Οὐ μὴ νίψῃς μου τοὺς πόδας εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς αὐτῷ· Ἐὰν μὴ νίψω σε, οὐκ ἔχεις μέρος μετ' ἐμοῦ.⁹ λέγει αὐτῷ Σίμων Πέτρος· Κύριε, μὴ τοὺς πόδας μου μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν.¹⁰ λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Ὁ λελουμένος οὐκ ἔχει χρεῖαν εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας νίψασθαι, ἀλλ' ἔστιν καθαρὸς ὅλος· καὶ ὑμεῖς καθαροί ἐστε, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ πάντες.¹¹ ἤδει γὰρ τὸν παραδιδόντα αὐτόν· διὰ τοῦτο εἶπεν ὅτι Οὐχὶ πάντες καθαροί ἐστε.

¹² Ὅτε οὖν ἔνιψεν τοὺς πόδας αὐτῶν καὶ ἔλαβεν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνέπεσεν, πάλιν εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· Γινώσκετε τί πεποιήκα ὑμῖν;¹³ ὑμεῖς φωνεῖτέ με Ὁ διδάσκαλος καὶ Ὁ κύριος, καὶ καλῶς λέγετε, εἰμὶ γάρ.¹⁴ εἰ οὖν ἐγὼ ἔνιψα ὑμῶν τοὺς πόδας ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ διδάσκαλος, καὶ ὑμεῖς ὀφείλετε ἀλλήλων νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας.¹⁵ ὑπόδειγμα γὰρ ἔδωκα ὑμῖν ἵνα καθὼς ἐγὼ ἐποίησα ὑμῖν καὶ ὑμεῖς ποιῆτε.¹⁶ ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐκ ἔστιν δοῦλος μείζων τοῦ κυρίου αὐτοῦ οὐδὲ ἀπόστολος μείζων τοῦ πέμψαντος αὐτόν.¹⁷ εἰ ταῦτα οἴδατε, μακάριοί ἐστε ἐὰν ποιῆτε αὐτά.

5.2.1 Introductory comments on John 13:1-17

Whereas approximately the first half of the Fourth Gospel (chapters 1 to 12) is identified by most commentators as “The Book of Signs,”¹ the second half (chapters 13 to 21) is referred to as “The Book of Glory.”² As such, 13:1 marks an obvious shift in the orientation of the narrative of the Fourth Gospel - previously, Jesus’ hour has been anticipated (cf. 2:4; 7:30; 8:20) and acknowledged as forthcoming (12:23, 27); 13:1 signals that it has now arrived (O’Day 2015:612).

¹ This was discussed in more detail in the Introduction (4.1) of Chapter 4, as it relates to John 12:1-8.

² Raymond Brown is one of the leading figures in Johannine scholarship who designates these chapters of the Fourth Gospel as such. CH Dodd prefers the description of the second part of the Gospel of John to be “The Book of the Passion,” although of the nine chapters only two (18 and 19) are devoted specifically to the Passion. Furthermore, the term “passion” (or “suffering”) suits better the Synoptic versions of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, than the depiction thereof in the Gospel of John (Stevick 2011:5).

The Book of Glory consists of the foot washing scene, Jesus' long farewell speech (chapters 13-16) and a lengthy prayer (chapter 17) during his last meal with his disciples, the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus (chapters 18-19), and his resurrection (chapters 20-21). The choice for such a title for this part of the Gospel of John is derived from the vocabulary of the Fourth Gospel itself - in his trial and death, Jesus is glorified; paradoxically, his glory is exhibited in his death on a cross (Stevick 2011:5).

John 13:1-17:26, the pre-Passion chapters, are known as the Farewell Discourse(s), and narrate Jesus' last meal with his disciples and the accompanying discourse.³ The reason for this title is that Jesus here has his last discussions with his disciples prior to his arrest, trial, and death. All the events contained in these five chapters, as well as the events in chapters 18 and 19, happen in one (Jewish) twenty-four-hour day (Bruner 2012:747; Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:217; Brant 2011:199).⁴ In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus is portrayed as instructing his disciples at points throughout his ministry with intensification in the last days of Jesus' ministry, the author of the Fourth Gospel has set almost the whole instruction of Jesus to his disciples in the context of their last dinner together (Beasley-Murray 1987:222).⁵

The centrepiece of Jesus' final conversations with his disciples is the command to love one another as Jesus has loved them (15:12-27). Previously, God's love and concern for the world, and the relationship between Jesus and the disciples was the focus. Now Jesus addresses the need for disciples to love another in accordance with the example he has set for them (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:217). In the Book of Signs, a "sign" or "event" typically takes place and is then followed by a longer explanatory "sermon"; in the Book of Glory, the sequence is reversed with the Farewell Discourse(s) taking place first, after which the supreme signs of the cross and resurrection take place (Bruner 2012:758).

³ The Farewell Discourse(s) should be read against the setting and style of a Greco-Roman banquet at which a Sage offers parting wisdom to his guests. The Johannine interpretation of the meal subverts the rigid social stratification which typically characterized such events in the Roman society, in this case through the foot washing incident (Scott 2003:1193-1194).

⁴ Bruner (2012:747) opts to call these chapters "Jesus' Discipleship Sermon(s)" or "Discipleship Course". He is of the opinion that they compare favourable in both depth and in influence with the Sermon on the Mount contained in Matthew 5 to 7.

⁵ The genre of farewell discourses or testaments of famous men was known in Hellenistic literature and was particularly prominent in Jewish writings of the ancient world. Examples include the blessings of Jacob on his sons (Genesis 49); Joshua's address to his people (Joshua 22-24); and David's address to Solomon and the nation (1 Chronicles 28-29). The feature also occurs in writings of early Judaism, e.g. *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. The most important example is the Book of Deuteronomy, which in its entirety consists of the farewell discourses of Moses to Israel and might have been in the author's mind when composing the discourses of the Last Supper (Beasley-Murray 1987:222-223; Morris 1995:543).

The chapters of the Farewell Discourse(s) comprise three large units (O'Day 2015:612): 13:1-38, the foot washing scene and subsequent dialogues between Jesus and his disciples; 14:1-16:33, Jesus' farewell discourse; and 17:1-26, Jesus' prayer. The dialogues serve to prepare the disciples for Jesus' departure from them and for their subsequent life as his followers in his absence. Jesus' words offer a vision of the new life that is possible for all persons who follow him. Central to this vision is the community's love for one another (O'Day 2012:525).⁶

The Johannine foot washing narrative is unique in the Gospel writings. The only other foot washing narrative in the entire Gospel tradition, apart from this one in the Gospel of John, occurs in Luke 7:36-50 (Kitzberger 2003b:187).⁷ In the last meal depicted in the Fourth Gospel, there is no reference to the words of Jesus concerning the bread and wine. Some consider John 6 as proof that the Lord's Supper was of importance for the author of the Fourth Gospel, in spite of no Synoptic-like last supper episode. They argue that the Johannine community was very familiar with the words of the institution of the Eucharist and the focus of the Fourth Gospel is on the teaching that gave meaning to these words. Therefore, the foot washing is not so much a replacement of the traditional Eucharistic acts and words of Jesus, but rather an interpretation of them (Beasley-Murray 1987:225-226).

For Ridderbos (1997:455), the interpretation of the foot washing served to focus the attention of the readers on the significance of Jesus' death. According to Brant (2011:199-200), the reader approaches the scene of the last supper disorientated and therefore maybe more attentive to the details that will be shared in comparison to the expected actions that do not happen (such as the institution of the Eucharist).⁸

Morris (1995:543) states that, in comparison to the Synoptic Gospels, the teaching that is assumed to have taken place is actually narrated in the Gospel of John. Before the sustained instruction begins, two important actions are narrated: first, the washing of the disciples' feet; and second, the giving of the piece of bread to Judas along with Jesus' words to the traitor (Morris 1995:543).

⁶ The most explicit statement of this vision of love is contained in 13:34-35; 15:12; and 15:17. However, the language of love runs throughout the Farewell Discourse (e.g. 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:8-9) (O'Day 2012:525).

⁷ According to Kitzberger (2003b:187) this naturally opens up intertextuality between these two narratives, and consequently interfiguralty between the Johannine Jesus and the anonymous Lukan woman is established.

⁸ In John 12:1-8 it was predominantly the sense of smell that was appealed to, with the senses of touch and sight featuring in the narrative itself.

For Becker (2015:269-281), this narrative of the foot washing at the final dinner is a “counter-memory”⁹ rather than a recalling of memory. It would appear as if the author of John did not only erase the particular memory of the Eucharist in his depiction of the final dinner, but also at the same time suggested the memorization of a different action, namely the foot washing. Thereby, the author presents a counter-memory which provides a discursive practice through which memories are continuously revised and reshaped (especially in interplay with the Gospel of Luke).¹⁰

For the purpose of this research project, the narrative is considered from 13:1 to 13:17.¹¹ The narrative can be further divided into two parts, namely 13:1-11 and 13:12-17.¹² 13:1-11 narrates the actual event of the foot washing (with 13:1 as introduction and 13:2-3 as temporal setting for the account). 13:12-17 narrates Jesus’ discussion with his disciples following the extraordinary event - in this case considered to be the explanation of the meaning thereof (Harris 2015:241).¹³

I would suggest a further division as follows (cf. Culpepper 1998:203-207): 13:1-3 (introduction); 13:4-5 (foot washing); 13:6-9 (first conversation between Jesus and Peter); 13:10-11 (aside by narrator on Jesus’ forthcoming betrayal); and 13:12-17 (Jesus explains the theological and ethical significance of the foot washing to his disciples).¹⁴

In what follows, a close reading of each verse of the narrative is offered.

⁹ “Counter-memory opposes a concept of history which serves the transmission of tradition and thereby the idea of continuity; in consequence, it conceptualizes history in opposition to memory and questions or deconstructs various types of identity (social, cultural, religious)” (Becker 2015:277).

¹⁰ “Luke’s construct of the last supper ultimately generates an institutional approach to history-writing, while John depicts the commencing passion story as exemplary history. Luke clearly focuses on the rise of missionary history in its global dimension, while John identifies how Jesus’ cosmic presence has defined the paradigm of brotherly love and community” (Becker 2015:281).

¹¹ In Chapter 1 the choice for this demarcation of the narrative has been explained.

¹² Neyrey (2009:356-376) applies notions of cultural anthropology to distinguish between two different types of actions depicted in 13:6-11 and 13:12-20, respectively. He regards the foot washing (particularly here of Peter) as a one-time ritual event serving as a status transformation (becoming “wholly clean” and so having a special inheritance or place with Jesus). The commandment to the disciples in the teaching that follows, involves the practice of regularly repeated ceremonies in which their role and status as leaders of the group are confirmed by their acts of hospitality to group members.

¹³ I consider this pericope of 13:1-17 as a cohesive narrative unit, given that the focus is on the narrative in its final form and not on the various views on possible sources underlying it. I thus refrain from making a formal distinction using categories such as “sacramental” and “moral”, “christological” and “sacramental”, and “cleansing” and “humility”, as has been applied in the past with reference to 13:6-11 and 13:12-20 respectively (cf. Neyrey 2009:356-357; Ridderbos 1997:464-466).

¹⁴ Some commentators (e.g. Neyrey) suggest that 13:1-3 is the prologue to the Book of Glory, as 1:1-18 is the prologue to the Book of Signs (Bruner 2012:759).

5.2.2 Close reading of John 13:1-17

^{13.1} Πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα εἰδὼς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἦλθεν αὐτοῦ ἡ ὥρα ἵνα μεταβῆ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἀγαπήσας τοὺς ἰδίους τοὺς ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ εἰς τέλος ἠγάπησεν αὐτούς.

John 13:1 as a whole clearly indicates a transition to a new section of the Gospel of John and serves as introduction to the entire Book of Glory, not only chapter 13 or the foot washing narrative (Sloyan 1998:168; Culpepper 1998:203; Beasley-Murray 1987:230; Bruner 2012:749). The Johannine narrative has increasingly built up to the Passion narrative that will start soon after this section. It now reaches the meal on the evening prior to the day of Jesus' death (Ridderbos 1997:451).¹⁵ For Beasley-Murray (1987:232), verses 1 to 3 contain the chief elements of the Johannine theology:

Jesus' knowledge of 'the hour' (cf. 12:23; 17:1), his love for his own (1:11), the Father's placing all things into Jesus' hands (3:35), the fact that he had come from God and was going to God (16:28), and the devil's opposition to God's work in Christ, particularly through Judas Iscariot (12:31; 13:27).

John 13:1 consists of one long sentence in the Greek text, containing three participial clauses that introduce the one finite verb clause - and climax - of the sentence (εἰς τέλος ἠγάπησεν αὐτούς) (O'Day 2015:614).¹⁶ According to Brant (2011:200), this one verse contains a summary of all the major themes to be covered in Jesus's last hours with his disciples: His departure from the world, his relation to God, and his love for his disciples.

Two frameworks are established in 13:1, i.e. an external and an internal framework. The external framework is that of the Passover festival. This is the third Passover mentioned in the Gospel of John (cf. 2:13, 23; 6:4), and this final Passover has been signalled since 12:1. The internal framework (or "inside view" according to Culpepper 1998:203) refers to the clues provided by the narrator to view the events of the farewell meal from the perspective of Jesus' knowledge and love (O'Day 2015:613). In typical Johannine fashion, the chapter opens with a mark of time (Morris 1995:545). Culpepper (1998:203) distinguishes between two systems of time that are set in relation to each other in this

¹⁵ Seeing as the narrator states that this meal is partaken prior to the Passover, it is neither the Passover meal nor the synoptic "last supper" (Haenchen 1984:106).

¹⁶ Bruner (2012:750) notes that verses 1 to 5 contain participle after participle - eight participles in five verses.

introductory verse: The calendar of Jewish festivals, i.e. “before the day of the Passover (Πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα), and the approach of Jesus’ “hour” (αὐτοῦ ἡ ὥρα).

This reference to the Passover resumes the story that was interrupted in 12:37-40. The repeated reference to the feast that is approaching (cf. 11:55; 12:1) indicates that the story has now entered its decisive phase. The Passover provides an interpretive background for the events that are to follow (Stevick 2011:22). Πρὸ emphasizes the imminence of the feast (Ridderbos 1997:452). According to Carson (1991:461), this reference to the Passover alerts readers to the Passover theme developed throughout the Fourth Gospel (2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; cf. 18:28, 39; 19:14) and invites them to see in the foot washing an anticipation of Jesus’ own Passover act as the Lamb of God. Ridderbos (1997:456-457), however, is of the opinion that there is no ground for the view that the author posits Jesus as the true Passover lamb, considering that no mention is made of such an interpretation of Jesus’ death in the context.

Jesus’ “hour” refers to the time of Jesus’ departure from this world¹⁷, and his return to the Father (ἵνα μεταβῆ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου πρὸς τὸν πατέρα).¹⁸ It thus refers to the hour of his death, although not given this designation. Bruner (2015:751) considers Jesus’ departure to be a transfer - the earth is exchanged for the heaven, where the Father resides. The exchange that will take place is not merely a change of location, but more specifically for the qualitatively different realms of power represented by “this world” and “the Father” (Haenchen 1984:105).¹⁹ Thereby, he will break through the boundaries of this world and return to the place he came from, and to the Father who sent him to the world (Ridderbos 1997:452). This description alludes to the focus of the Farewell Discourse(s): How the disciples can remain in touch with an invisible Lord, whom they can no longer see or hear (Bruner 2012:751). For Kanagaraj (2013:135), “ascend” is closer to the literal translation of the verb than “depart”. However, for Malina & Rohrbaugh (1998:219), it is precisely not meant to indicate a vertical dimension (as this would symbolize power, where descent is loss of power and ascent is gain of power). Rather it is a horizontal dimension with the symbols of coming out and going in. Horizontal movement symbolizes the

¹⁷ “World” (κόσμος) occurs 78 times in the Fourth Gospel, of which 40 times during the account of the Farewell Discourse. Jesus is preparing his disciples for a mission to “the world” (Morris 1995:545). In the Farewell Discourse a sharp contrast is drawn between Jesus’ “own” (his disciples), and the “world” from which they were drawn and in which they have to live until their final vindication (Carson 1991:461).

¹⁸ There are seven references to Jesus’ “hour” in the Fourth Gospel: 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; and 17:1 (Bruner 2012:751).

¹⁹ Louw Nida 15.2 considers the verb μεταβαίνω to denote the effect of a change of location in space, with the implication that the two locations are significantly different.

interpersonal, belonging and solidarity, because Jesus came out of God and goes into God. Goss (2006:548-549) describes this intimate relationship between Jesus and God as God coming out in Jesus, thereby revealing the nature of God as divine lover and opening up new possibilities of life and transformation. Jesus is portrayed as one who descends from heaven and reveals the nature of God. Jesus is the exalted Christ who reveals God as parent and who is one with God.

For Morris (1995:545), the “hour” is not thought of at this point in terms of glory (as in 12:23), but of leaving the world and of going to the Father, i.e. the decisive end of Jesus’ ministry. Beasley-Murray (1987:232-233) argues for the opposite: This is the hour wherein God would glorify Jesus and Jesus would glorify God through a death for the salvation of the world; the hour of judgment for the world; the hour of the defeat of the devil and of the exaltation of Jesus to exercise divine sovereignty; thus the hour of Jesus’ “crossing over” from this world to the Father. From a queer perspective, such movement of Jesus between this world and God fits well within the view that the Gospel of John contains a strong theme of mobility and fluidity, thereby posing a challenge to any view that attempts to box, control or regulate God’s love (cf. Goss 2006:550-551).

Jesus appears in complete command of this situation, seeing as it was amidst his “knowing” (εἰδῶς) that his hour had “come” (ἦλθεν). This verb recurs (13:3, 11, 18; cf. 18:4; 19:28) as the author of John reiterates this point. “Always in the Fourth Gospel Jesus knows ... He is not taken by surprise; he is never the victim of events” (Stevick 2011:23). There was no surprise in the hour that had come; Jesus knew that it had to come and acted accordingly (Morris 1995:545). It was an event planned by Jesus himself for this world and for his own (Bruner 2012:751); for Newbigin (1982:167) the hour has rather been determined by the Father - Jesus is the loving and obedient Son who does the will of the Father “from moment to moment as it is disclosed to him in the context of the actual events.” Such control and command of the situations fits well with the gendered expectation of men in antiquity (as mentioned in Chapter 4).

Jesus’ “own” (τοῦς ἰδίους) are his disciples who were chosen from the world for the world (Bruner 2012:751). Beasley-Murray (1987:233) considers this designation to include all persons who belong to him through his demonstration of love, and those who immediately received this ministry of love. Up to this point in the narrative, Jesus had ministered to people in general. From this point onward, he concentrates on those he loves intimately (Morris 1995:546) - the “community of the elect” (Carson 1991:461). Jesus’ own find them

being loved by him whilst in the “world”. In a sense, the author is describing Jesus’ ministry on earth as a “time of love for his own.” This is noteworthy, considering that up until this point no mention has been made explicitly of Jesus love for his disciples and friends at all (with the exception of the record of his love for the Bethany family in 11:5) (Bruner 2012:752; Ridderbos 1997:452; Kitzberger 2003b:182).²⁰ Although not mentioned explicitly, Brown (1979:192) is of the opinion that within the broader narrative of the Fourth Gospel it is clear that women are included in the category of Jesus’ “own”.

Jesus will now also demonstrate that his love for his own is εἰς τέλος. This is the only place in the Fourth Gospel where this noun is found.²¹ It is ambiguous and can be understood temporally, meaning “to the end” (“to the very finish”), and adverbially, meaning “to the utmost” (“perfectly”). Most likely, this is a deliberate Johannine double meaning, with both of these meanings intended (Morris 1995:545; Bruner 2012:753; Carson 1991:461; Harris 2015:242). Hereby, the narrator reminds the readers that the departure of Jesus does not mean an end to his solidarity with his followers. “Love” is the term used in the Fourth Gospel for loyalty and group attachment (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:219). This special and focused love for Jesus’ “own” does not jeopardize or displace the love of God for all humankind (Harris 2015:242). At this point in the narrative, the reader must still wait to hear what exactly Jesus’ loving “his own” “to the end” will mean (Talbert 1992:190).

² καὶ δεῖπνου γινομένου, τοῦ διαβόλου ἤδη βεβληκός εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἵνα παραδοῖ αὐτὸν Ἰούδας Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτου,

John 13:2-5 is again one long, complex sentence in the Greek text. Verses 2 and 3 contain no finite verbs, but rather a series of participial clauses that introduce the finite verbs of verses 4 and 5. Verses 2 and 3 introduce the foot washing, and verses 4 and 5 narrate the actual event thereof (O’Day 2015:614). According to Bruner (2012:754), 13:2 contains a second formal introduction to the Farewell Discourse(s). It differs from 13:1 in that everything is earthlier than the transcendental nature of 13:1, and that the main characters are Jesus’ adversaries and their motives and planned actions.

²⁰ CH Dodd notes that the words “life” (ζωή) and “light” (φῶς) dominated chapters 1 to 12. In chapters 13 to 17 the word “love” (ἀγαπάω) (both as a verb and as a noun) is suddenly used excessively, both as a verb and as a noun: 31 times in comparison to only 6 times in chapters 1 to 12 (Bruner 2012:752).

²¹ The same word is used in its perfect-tense verbal form in Jesus’ last cry from the Cross (19:30), i.e. “Τετέλεσται” (“Finished!” or “It is finished!”), that is the end of the Passion story. The noun form of the word is thus an appropriate choice for the gradual beginning of his Passion story (Bruner 2012:753).

The action begins “in medias res”; the dinner was already underway (καὶ δείπνου γινομένου) (Brant 2011:199; O’Day 2015:614; Haenchen 1984:106).²² It is the last meal Jesus shares with his disciples, according to the narrator of the Fourth Gospel (Ridderbos 1997:458). The location of the dinner or the exact time is not provided. The unusualness of the foot washing is exemplified by this time indication, as the foot washing interrupted the meal rather than taking place beforehand as would be expected (Morris 1995:546).

Judas’ appearance already here in the introduction of the narrative contrasts his action with the humble and loving service of Jesus (Beasley-Murray 1987:233). The reference to the devil and Judas (τοῦ διαβόλου ἤδη βεβληκός εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἵνα παραδοῖ αὐτὸν Ἰούδας Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτου) is ambiguous. It is unclear from the text whether the devil has “put”²³ it into his own heart, or into the heart of Judas, that Judas will betray Jesus. Either way, it emphasises that the dinner takes place against the backdrop of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. This struggle will be enacted in Judas’s betrayal of Jesus (O’Day 2015:614). The devil and Judas are now conspiring to bring Jesus to the cross (Carson 1991:462); Jesus’ departure from this world (13:1) was simultaneously the hour of his great contest with the devil, i.e. “the ruler of this world” (Ridderbos 1997:458). Judas Iscariot’s loyalty to Jesus is being tested; in 13:27 he will succumb, after being given the morsel by Jesus (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:219).

Bruner (2012:754) and Stevick (2011:26) prefer the translation “hand over” to “betray” for Judas’ act, in line with the multiple handovers found in the Gospel narrative, especially during the Passion. In this sense it has a juridical and even a gospel sense. This point of the narrative is “the demonic starting point in the process that pervades the entire story from start to finish as a chain of faithlessness” (Ridderbos 1997:458). In the Gospel of John, no reference is made that Judas betrayed Jesus for the sake of money, as in the Synoptics (cf. Matthew 26:14-16) (Kanagaraj 2013:135).

The combination of the dinner that is already in progress and the devil’s decision about Judas’ betrayal of Jesus is significant. It signals a tension between fellowship and betrayal that will persist throughout 13:1-38 (O’Day 2015:614). The remarkable part of this is that Jesus will wash the feet of all the disciples, including Judas Iscariot (Carson 1991:461). A division among Jesus’ “own” is obvious to the reader, even before the introduction of those

²² It is evident from 13:26 that the incident of the foot washing took place before the end of the dinner, contrary to some manuscripts that prefer the reading “after supper” (Morris 1995:546; Harris 2015:242).

²³ The perfect tense of the verb βάλλω depicts a once-off, completed action, which results in a continuing state (Harris 2015:242).

who are present. At least one of “his own” will not follow Jesus to the end (cf. 12:26) (Kitzberger 2003b:182).

³ εἰδῶς ὅτι πάντα ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ πατήρ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας, καὶ ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν καὶ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὑπάγει,

Although no subject for the verbs εἰδῶς, ἐξῆλθεν and ὑπάγει is mentioned in 13:3, it must be assumed that it is Jesus (Morris 1995:546). John 13:3 again takes the reader inside the mind of Jesus (cf. 13:1) and is an interesting juxtaposition with 13:2, which took the reader inside the “mind” of the devil (O’Day 2015:614; Brant 2011:200). John 13:3 repeats what was stated in 13:1, namely that Jesus had knowledge that this hour to depart to the Father had come. This repetition has two variations: He had “come from God” (ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν) and the Father “had put all things in his hands” (πάντα ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ πατήρ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας). Thus, he has the Father’s commission and authority, and was empowered to fulfil the sovereign will of God in judgment and salvation (Beasley-Murray 1987:233; Carson 1991:462). The emphasis on Jesus’ knowledge again highlights his total command of the situation (Morris 1995:546). Jesus takes an informed initiative (Stevick 2011:28). Given Jesus’ knowledge of his all-embracing sovereignty (Harris 2015:243) and power, the reader might have expected him to defeat the devil immediately with a powerful display of confrontation; yet he is about to wash his disciples’ feet, including that of his betrayer (Carson 1991:462). In spite of such a portrayal of Jesus’ controlled behaviour, which exemplifies his male honour, he will soon startle those around him with seemingly shameful and scandalous behaviour.

According to O’Day (2015:614), the essence of Jesus’ ministry is expressed by his knowledge in 13:3, namely that everything he has is given to him by God, and that his home from where he come and to which he returns is with God. As was the case up to now, these two realities will remain at the centre of Jesus’ words and works at the last meal, and in his death and resurrection. What Jesus does, grows from his relation to the Father - the one who was his origin and is his destination (Stevick 2011:29). The reference to the Father makes it clear that God is not an idle spectator at the Passion, but is actively involved in doing his will (Morris 1995:546).

The act about to be performed by Jesus stands in strong contrast to the fact that he comes from and goes to the Father (Haenchen 1984:106); he will move from a very lowly place, to the highest possible place (Morris 1995:547). Yet he will do this with authority (Stevick

2011:28); the cross will be the beginning of Jesus' exaltation and glory, not his humiliation (Bruner 2012:756). By turning such an appalling and shameful event into the cause for glorification, the queerness of Jesus in the Gospel of John is further underscored.

⁴ ἐγείρεται ἐκ τοῦ δείπνου καὶ τίθησιν τὰ ἱμάτια καὶ λαβῶν λέντιον διέζωσεν ἑαυτόν·

In verses 4 and 5, the description of the foot washing is offered with very clear detail; Haenchen (1984:107) describes it as “unusually graphic”. Each step of the action is meticulously narrated to create the effect of a “real time” event. The details are intended to draw the reader’s attention to the extraordinary nature of the event, whilst also providing important clues to the theological significance of this foot washing for the author of the Fourth Gospel (O’Day 2015:614-615). The detailed description draws the reader into the scene; he or she is no longer merely a spectator, but becomes a potential addressee of Jesus’ action (Kitzberger 2003b:182). The description contains seven moments: (1) Jesus rose from the meal, (2) laid down his garments, (3) took a towel, (4) girded himself with it, (5) poured water into the basin, (6) began to wash the feet of the disciples, and (7) wiped them with the towel around his waist (Kanagaraj 2013:135). Besides being very detailed, the description is also very intimate: It revolves around the body of Jesus, being unclothed and transitioning in appearance from an honourable male, to a slave. Goss (2006:556-557) describes this as degrading behaviour for a free man: it is unmanly.

John 13:4 narrates the change in Jesus’ position and physical appearance as preparation for the foot washing described in 13:5. Up to that moment in the narrative, Jesus and the disciples were reclining, probably on thin mats around a low table. Each is leaning on their arm (most likely the left) (Carson 1991:463). Jesus then “gets up” (ἐγείρεται) from reclining “during the dinner” (ἐκ τοῦ δείπνου). For Morris (1995:544), the fact that the foot washing takes place during the meal and not on arrival or before the meal is served,²⁴ indicates that it is an action undertaken deliberately, and not simply usual act of courtesy. It is “a parable in action,” not merely an example demonstrated for the sake of a lesson in humility.

Jesus “removes” his “outer garment” (τίθησιν τὰ ἱμάτια)²⁵, leaving him wearing a loin cloth, just like a slave (Morris 1995:547; Adeyemo 2006:1281; Bruner 2012:763). Thereafter,

²⁴ For example Genesis 24:32-33; Judges 19:21 (O’Day 2015:615).

²⁵ The plural τὰ ἱμάτια denotes the “upper garment,” “outer garment” or “robe” (Harris 2015:243).

“girding himself” with a “towel” (λαβὼν λέντιον διέζωσεν²⁶ ἑαυτόν)²⁷, he prepares the water for the foot washing. Jewish men usually wore an inner tunic, an outer tunic or robe, and an outer garment or cloak. The cloak was typically removed when moving indoors, but the outer tunic was kept on. Jesus however removed also his outer tunic and stripped down to his inner tunic. This dress was looked down upon in both Jewish and Gentile circles (Carson 1991:463) because of the lowliness it presented. The action of Jesus removing his outer garment and tying a towel around his waist emphasizes the shame attached to his action (Beasley-Murray 1987:233).²⁸

Instead of saying that Jesus “took off” and “put on” his robe, the verb used in the text to describe Jesus’ removal of his clothes (τίθημι) is the same verb used for Jesus to describe laying down his life in other passages in the Gospel (10:15, 17-18; cf. 10:11; 13:37-38; 15:13). This verb choice in typical Fourth Gospel style indicates a connection between Jesus’ act of foot washing and his gift of his life (O’Day 2015:615; Morris 1995:547; Talbert 1992:191), a meaning that would only become apparent “afterward” (cf. 13:7) (Koester 2003:131). Moreover, the next time Jesus’ clothes would be removed is at the cross, where the soldiers would cast lots for it (19:23) (Koester 2003:132) - a means of literally stripping a person of their honour publicly before being crucified.

⁵ εἶτα βάλλει ὕδωρ εἰς τὸν νιπτήρα, καὶ ἤρξατο νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας τῶν μαθητῶν καὶ ἐκμάσσειν τῷ λεντίῳ ᾧ ἦν διεζωσμένος.

John 13:5 carries the action further and describes the act of foot washing performed by Jesus. He “pours water into a basin” (βάλλει ὕδωρ εἰς τὸν νιπτήρα)²⁹ and “began to wash the feet of the disciples” (ἤρξατο νίπτειν³⁰ τοὺς πόδας τῶν μαθητῶν). Not only did he wash their feet, he also “dried it with the towel wrapped around his waist” (ἐκμάσσειν τῷ λεντίῳ ᾧ ἦν διεζωσμένος). Jesus was dressed like a slave *and* did the work of a slave

²⁶ In the New Testament, the verb διαζώννυμι is only found in the Gospel of John (13:4, 5; 21:7).

²⁷ This is the only instance in the New Testament where the word λέντιον occurs. It is a loanword from the Latin *linteum*. It refers to a long towel or cloth made of linen with which Jesus could gird himself and still use the free end to dry the disciples’ feet (Morris 1995:547; Harris 2015:243).

²⁸ “The Midrash on Gen 21:14 states that when Abraham sent Hagar away he gave her a bill of divorce, and took her shawl and girded it around her loins ‘that people should know that she was a slave’ (Str-B 2:557)” (Beasley-Murray 1987:233).

²⁹ The meaning of the word νιπτήρ is uncertain. Again this is a word that is a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament. Washing did not take place in a basin, but rather by pouring water over the feet from one vessel and presumably caught in another. It is not clear which of the two vessels was the actual νιπτήρ (Morris 1995:547; Harris 2015:243).

³⁰ Thirteen of the seventeen New Testament occurrences of the cognate verb νίπτω occur in the Gospel of John (Morris 1995:547).

(Adeyemo 2006:1281; Brant 2011:200). It is not mentioned in which order Jesus washed the feet of the disciples (Morris 1995:547).

As mentioned earlier, foot washing was practiced commonly in both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts in the ancient Mediterranean world. Foot washing had three main functions: Serving personal hygiene; constituting an act of hospitality; or being a cultic act. Most often foot washing took place upon guests' arrival at their destination. It was considered a way to welcome those who have travelled the typical dusty and dirty roads of the ancient Mediterranean landscape (O'Day 2015:615; Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:223).

Foot washing as service by slaves or low-status servants of a host, is closely linked with hospitality (O'Day 2015:615; Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:219). The task of foot washing was reckoned in Jewish society as being too lowly for Jewish slaves to perform, as is evident in descriptions of works that Jewish slaves should not be required to do.³¹ It was a task reserved for Gentile slaves, or for wives and children and pupils (Beasley-Murray 1987:233; Kanagaraj 2013:135; Carson 1991:462; Harris 2015:243). According to Habermann (2012:672-673), foot washing in the ancient world was an act of hospitality, honour, and love; yet at the same time an unequivocal signal of hierarchical power relationships. The washing of feet is an example of an everyday action that is simultaneously also the bearer of social and religious order: in the washing of feet the hierarchical pattern of the patriarchal society was reflected.

The reason it was considered so lowly and demeaning was because it meant washing off human and animal waste. Human excrement was emptied onto the city streets each morning and animal waste was ever present, wherever one moved around. No matter how well a person bathed, sandals and feet inevitably became smelly and dirty on the way to a meal at another's house (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:219-220). Given the Jewish purity laws and the prescriptions to stay away from anything causing personal defilement, it is understandable why this task was therefore not considered suitable for Jewish slaves (Habermann 2012:672).

Foot washing was considered such a menial job that no teacher would expect his disciples to do it (Adeyemo 2006:1281). Occasionally, however, disciples would perform such service to their teacher as sign of devotion (Kanagaraj 2013:135) and one might imagine

³¹ *Mekhilta* on Exodus 21:2; based on Leviticus 25:39 (Beasley-Murray 1987:233; Kanagaraj 2013:135).

Jesus' disciples would have been willing to do so for him (Carson 1991:462).³² On a symbolic level, a person who voluntarily washed someone else's feet, showed that they were devoted enough to act as that person's slave (Koester 2003:128). Peers on rare occasions washed one another's feet, as a mark of great love. The reluctance of Jesus' disciples to perform such a task would be fully understandable in their cultural setting (Carson 1991:462).

There is no parallel in extant ancient literature for a person of superior status voluntarily washing the feet of someone of inferior status, as is the case here in the Fourth Gospel narrative where a rabbi performed the task on his disciples. The act Jesus is performing can be considered to be a challenge to the conventional notions of social hierarchy, particularly then a subversion of the familiar categories of honour and shame. Not only is he an honoured teacher who is performing a shameful act; he is also a divine figure who reigns over the cosmos who has taken on the role of a slave (Bruner 2012:762-763; Carson 1991:462; Harris 2015:243). One should imagine the complete shock of the disciples at finding their sense of how things should be, shattered (Carson 1991:462). After the washing, Jesus dried their feet with the towel wrapped around him.³³ According to Habermann (2012:673) something offensive is occurring here: a free Jewish man washes feet - possibly not only of men, but perhaps also of women; a rabbi washes the feet of his male and female pupils.

However, Jesus did not act as a slave who must do his work unnoticed and then disappear from the scene before the meal is served; it is after he has reclined at the table with his disciples, after he has already started to eat and drink with them, that he suddenly got up and took the initiative to wash their feet (Ridderbos 1997:459). The fact that the foot washing in this narrative is depicted during the meal and not upon arrival indicates that it is a symbolic washing. Both the meaning of feet and washing of the feet is important to note (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:223).

Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:220, 223) relate the foot washing to the antilanguage and symbolic behaviour of the Johannine antisociety. When considered from this perspective, foot washing is a prophetic action that symbolizes forgiveness. Feet and hands represent activity and purposeful action; thus, to wash another's feet is to wash away the effects of the actions they may have performed - hence, forgiveness of "trespasses" or

³² It appears as if Jesus is alluding to this custom in 13:13-14 (Brown 1970:564).

³³ Cf. the expression "put on the apron of humility" in 1 Peter 5:5 (Harris 2015:243).

“transgressions”. In John 13, the foot washing is a farewell gesture performed by Jesus and urged upon his disciples; they must forgive one another as he forgives their “offenses” against him.

The foot washing serves therefore as anticipation of the cross and expresses the meaning of the cross vividly as a deed of Jesus. Such anticipation was necessary since the author of the Fourth Gospel could not represent the death scene as an act of love; the tradition had shaped the scene too much a passion for that purpose (Haenchen 1984:106).

Bruner (2012:756) asks: “Isn’t this Disrobing-Rerobing Scene, in short, a little picture of Jesus’ Cross and Resurrection?” Jesus removing (13:4) and replacing (13:12) his garments is often interpreted as an allusion 10:17, 18 where the same words are used to describe Jesus laying down his life. The foot washing seems to be a symbolic act by which Jesus lays down the foundation on which the future fellowship of his followers in the world could rest (Ridderbos 1997:458). According to Habermann (2012:673), Jesus speaks to the scandal and the paradox of his action, one that requires reflection and explanation - as would be the case for his nearing crucifixion.

Jesus’ final words and actions in the Farewell Discourse(s) should be understood within the context of Mediterranean antiquity and the practice of a dying person conveying significant information to their kin (or fictive kin) group before their death. Final words of dying persons dealt with the concern for the disruption of the social network resulting from the dying person’s departure. The information imparted was directed at the group in general and individuals in the group. This included the appointment of a successor and advice to the kingroup members on how to keep unity amongst the group. The dying person would also offer good wishes and express concern for the well-being of the group. Amidst such a context of parting words, the foot washing of Jesus is a parting gesture that will be followed by a wealth of information about the future for his kin group – his disciples (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:222).

⁶ ἔρχεται οὖν πρὸς Σίμωνα Πέτρον. λέγει αὐτῷ· Κύριε, σύ μου νίπτεις τοὺς πόδας;

The action seemingly takes place in solemn and stunned silence, with Simon Peter³⁴ described as the first (and only) disciple who speaks, and only when his feet are about to

³⁴ Simon Peter is here referred to by his double name, as elsewhere when his most striking and characteristic interventions are described (6:68; 13:9, 24, 36; 18:10, 15, 25; 21:3) (Ridderbos 1997:459).

be washed by Jesus (Morris 1995:548). According to the portrayal of Peter, Jesus is acting outrageously and his actions should not go uncontested (Bruner 2012:764). The other disciples might be embarrassed at the proceedings and keep it to themselves, but for Peter the embarrassment means he had to object (Carson 1991:463).³⁵ The dialogue between Peter and Jesus is narrated in 13:6-10, with an aside by the narrator in 13:11 as clarification of 13:10. It is a threefold dialogue (Talbert 1992:191) and offers insight on the nature of Jesus' humiliating gesture of hospitality (O'Day 2015:615).

Jesus approached Peter, upon which he asked Jesus, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" The opening word of his statement creates the impression of Simon Peter spluttering in astonishment and incomprehension (Beasley-Murray 1987:233).³⁶ In the Greek text, "you" (σὺ) and "my" (μου) follow directly after one another which highlight the contrast between Peter's understanding of himself compared to Jesus (Morris 1995:548). This Greek construction of the question suggests indignant emphasis (Carson 1991:463; Brant 2011:201).

The words "Lord" (Κύριε) and "feet" (τοὺς πόδας) are placed at emphatic points of the sentence, i.e. the beginning and the end. They are in tension with each other and depict the fundamental impossibility of the act: How can a *teacher* wash the *feet* of a *student* (Haenchen 1984:107)? Peter's question arises from his understanding of the social norms that prescribe superior and inferior social standings. Jesus has displaced these norms by laying aside his garments and washing his disciples' feet (Culpepper 1998:204).

Peter's reaction to the foot washing echoes what the later reaction of Jesus' followers would be to the cross of Jesus - it is equally scandalous in its interpretation, that Jesus would wash disciples' feet, as that he comes to the end of his life on a cross (Haenchen 1984:107). As much as the disciples cannot yet understand how or why the one whom they revere as the Messiah must go to the cross, so they cannot understand the symbolizing acts that anticipate the cross (Carson 1991:463).

³⁵ Given the use of feet as an idiom for genitals in the biblical tradition, Goss (2006:557) offers the queer interpretation that the symbolic action of washing the feet is Jesus' symbolic purification of human genitals and his recognition of the original blessing and purity of human sexuality. Peter's resistance and alarm at the foot washing has remained a symbol of the Petrine institutional church failing to recognize the purity of human sexuality. Although such an interpretation may be regarded as quite an unbiblical reading of Jesus' action for many scholars trained in a heterosexist reading of the scriptures, it does resonate with many LGBT* persons experience of condemnation by the Christian church.

³⁶ It should not be inferred from 13:6 that Jesus washed Peter's feet first (so Augustine) or that he came to Peter last (so Origen). Rather, Peter speaks as the representative disciple in the narrative (O'Day 2015:615).

⁷ ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· Ὁ ἐγὼ ποιῶ σὺ οὐκ οἶδας ἄρτι, γνῶσθι δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα.

Jesus' response to Peter's question placed the emphasis on Peter's incomprehension. He answered and said, "What I do, you do not know yet, but you will understand after these things." This time "I" (ἐγὼ) and "you" (σὺ) are placed in emphatic contrast (Morris 1995:48). According to Bennema (2009:56) Peter frequently misunderstands the actions and mission of Jesus. The misunderstanding of the foot washing is his first in the Gospel of John.

Jesus' response points to a time when his gesture will be comprehensible for Peter (O'Day 2015:615; Haenchen 1984:107). It is not necessarily clear to what point of time μετὰ ταῦτα refers to - after completion of the foot washing, after Easter, or after Pentecost? Most likely, the author had all these "ends" in mind (Beasley-Murray 1987:233), given the multi-referential use of words by the author of the Fourth Gospel. O'Day (2015:615) is of the opinion that Jesus alludes here to the time after his return to the Father (cf. 13:1 and 13:3). The disciples are reminded that what Jesus teaches them will become understandable to them only after his "hour", that is the time after the passion and Jesus' resurrection (Ridderbos 1997:459; Carson 1991:463). The Holy Spirit will lead the disciples to understanding in the future (14:25-26) (O'Day 2015:615). Morris (1995:548) considers that the primary reference here is to the illumination of the Holy Spirit that was necessary, and that would be given.³⁷

Peter's misunderstanding echoes the numerous misunderstandings on the part of enemies and disciples alike, during the time of Jesus' public ministry (Carson 1991:463).

⁸ λέγει αὐτῷ Πέτρος· Οὐ μὴ νίψῃς μου τοὺς πόδας εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς αὐτῷ· Ἐὰν μὴ νίψω σε, οὐκ ἔχεις μέρος μετ' ἐμοῦ.

Peter still does not understand what Jesus is doing. He is not asking questions but now speaks vehemently to Jesus without responding to what Jesus had said in 13:7 (Haenchen 1984:107; Ridderbos 1997:460): "Under no circumstances will you wash my feet – to eternity!" The emphatic double negative subjunctive οὐ μὴ is backed up with εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα (Morris 1995:548). Peter is expressing himself in the strongest terms possible (Bruner 2012:765). In spite of Jesus' words in 13:7, Peter will not ever allow Jesus to assume the

³⁷ The plural μετὰ ταῦτα most likely points to all the events associated with the Passion (Morris 1995:548).

menial role of a servant (O'Day 2015:615; Morris 1995:548).³⁸ He is giving orders to Jesus - not because he is arrogant, but because he is humble, and is all too familiar with the honour and shame context in which he finds himself (Bruner 2012:765).

Jesus responded to Peter's resistance with an equally absolute answer (Ridderbos 1997:460), "If I do not wash you, (then) you do not have a part with me."³⁹ This response holds the key to understanding the foot washing: This act is stipulated as a necessary condition for Peter's "share" with Jesus (O'Day 2015:615). In typical Johannine manner, the word "wash" (νίψω) has a double meaning. In the immediate context it refers to the washing of feet. But Jesus means more. It is not merely a literal washing of feet that needs to take place; the words take on theological significance, and point to a washing that only Christ can give, namely salvation from sin (Morris 1995:548). "Only by humbling himself before his own as a servant could Jesus come to glory and make his disciples participants in that glory" (Ridderbos 1997:460). The forgiveness and the group solidarity that the foot washing creates, is essential to what is happening here (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:221).

The word μέρος ("a part") is used in Jewish thought for having a part in an inheritance, specifically in the form of the promised land. It is also understood eschatologically in terms of blessings and the kingdom of God (cf. Luke 15:12; Matthew 24:51; Revelation 20:6) (Carson 1991:464). The concept of being "a part with me" (μέρος μετ' ἐμοῦ) is developed in John 14:3 and 17:24 (Beasley-Murray 1987:233-234). To have a share with Jesus is to have fellowship with him and to participate fully in his life, to be in relationship with him and thus, in relationship with God (O'Day 2015:615; Koester 2003:132). Harris suggests that the best translation here is: "You will be no partner with me (in my work)" (2015:244). For Brown (1970:566), Jesus' words indicate that the foot washing is something that makes it possible for the disciples to have eternal life with Jesus, thereby understanding the foot washing as a symbol for Jesus' salvific death.

In view of such possibility being marked by the foot washing, O'Day (2015:615-616) regards the foot washing as an act of hospitality received from Jesus that decisively alters one's relationship to Jesus - and given the intimacy between Jesus and God, then also one's relationship to God. The salvific dimension of the foot washing lies in the

³⁸ Cf. Peter's response to Jesus in Mark 8:31-33 (Beasley-Murray 1987:233; O'Day 2015:615).

³⁹ This is a Semitic expression expressing solidarity in destiny between two persons and is similarly found in 2 Samuel 20:1 in the Masoretic text and in the corresponding LXX text (Haenchen 1984:107; Ridderbos 1997:460).

relationship with Jesus that it offers. It does not lie in the foot washing as an act of ritual purification, nor as representative of the disciples' sacrificial cleaning by the blood of Christ (O'Day 2015:616). The foot washing scene thus functions metaphorically and proleptically in relation to Jesus' death. It clarifies the meaning of his death to that the reader may have a part in Jesus and his story (Culpepper 1998:205). The intimate act of Jesus touching, washing, and drying the disciples' feet, draws them into a new type of standing with his body that will be crucified - and the consequences that the crucifixion of his body will have.

⁹ λέγει αὐτῷ Σίμων Πέτρος· Κύριε, μὴ τοὺς πόδας μου μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν.

Upon hearing Jesus' ominous words in 13:8, Simon Peter reacts in completely the opposite way to what he has thus far: "Convinced by Jesus' words, Peter will not do the thing by halves" (Morris 1995:549). Fearful of missing out on any promise that Jesus makes, he says to him, "Lord, not only then my feet, but also the (my) hands and head!" He reacts as emphatically with his insistence as he did with his earlier refusal. The hyperbole of the rhetoric in both instances serves to highlight Peter's misunderstanding of the foot washing (O'Day 2015:616). Peter now begins to understand that Jesus had to do the washing and had to perform this act, but his understanding is still limited and he does not grasp the symbolism involved.

Despite Jesus saying that he will understand "later," Peter assumes that he now understands what Jesus means. However, his overreaction simply compounds his failure to perceive the nature of Jesus' action (Beasley-Murray 1987:234; Ridderbos 1997:460). Peter assumes that the value of the foot washing is located in the cleansing power of the water, not in Jesus' offer of relationship (O'Day 2015:616). Peter regards the quantity of the water or the scope of the washing area as the locale of salvation. It is not in the action of foot washing that the cleansing of the disciples takes place, but it is rather a symbol of that cleansing (Morris 1995:549). Peter may even have assumed that having one's feet washed, gives one a share with Jesus - thus a more complete bath will bring a larger share. Instead, foot washing signifies gifts that cannot be quantified; Jesus' love for his disciples and the giving of himself in death is no halfway measure (Koester 2003:132). Such misunderstanding should not necessarily be limited to Peter, but one should rather consider Peter as the example of collective misunderstanding of Jesus' actions (Haenchen 1984:107).

¹⁰ λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Ὁ λελουμένος οὐκ ἔχει χρείαν εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας νίψασθαι, ἀλλ' ἔστιν καθαρὸς ὅλος· καὶ ὑμεῖς καθαροὶ ἐστε, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ πάντες.

In John 13:10, Jesus corrects Peter's misunderstanding yet again and says to him: "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, because he is completely clean." Jesus continues: "And you are clean, but not everyone." He uses the imagery of a person who has bathed at home. Upon arrival at a guest's home, it is only the feet that need to be washed in order to sit at table wholly clean (Morris 1995:549; Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:221). What exactly Jesus' words in the narrative meant, is not clear - the explanation is obscure and the wording uncertain (O'Day 2015:616; Haenchen 1984:108). What is clear, however, is that Jesus is portrayed as referring here to something greater than simply the usual ancient Mediterranean acts of maintaining hygiene or expressing hospitality towards guests.

The manuscript tradition contains two versions of this verse; a longer version (as above) and a shorter version that lacks the phrase "except for the feet" (εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας). This textual variant has typically been understood in two fundamentally different ways, with variations (Carson 1991:464).

(1) The shorter reading usually leads commentators to assume that the verbs λούω (bathe, that is, to wash the whole body) and νίπτω (wash, that is, to cleanse a part of the body) should be distinguished sharply (Carson 1991:464; Brown 1970:552). Concerning the meaning, the disciples then have already "bathed" and their "whole body is clean." Peter therefore does not need a complete wash. The act of foot washing is a symbol of the complete washing and not any form of additional cleansing. If it did suggest an additional cleansing, it would be a relatively insignificant step, which is not compatible with 13:7. According to this view, later copyists misunderstood this point and therefore added the words "except his feet," thereby drastically changing the meaning. Thus, the shorter reading must be accepted as the original (Carson 1991:464).⁴⁰

(2) The longer version views Peter's misunderstanding as an opportunity for Jesus to drive home a new point. In 13:6-8 the foot washing symbolizes the cleansing that results from Christ's impending restorative work through his crucifixion. John 13:9 now allows for the opportunity to emphasize that the initial and fundamental cleansing that Christ provides is

⁴⁰ The shorter reading is attested by Codex Sinaiticus, various Latin texts from the 4th to the 12th centuries, and by the text known to Origen (Carson 1991:464-465).

a once-for-all act. The fundamental cleansing is fully completed. This interpretation regards 13:12-17 as the third and final application of foot washing, namely that it teaches lessons in humility (Carson 1991:465).

The majority of modern scholars view the shorter reading as the authentic version (O'Day 2015:616; Harris 2015:244), although most modern translations have retained the longer version.⁴¹ Ridderbos (1997:462) considers the focus of the narrative to be precisely the fact that Jesus washed the feet, and therefore prefers the longer reading. In the first instance, Jesus' symbolic action is not the purification of the disciples but the servanthood of Jesus himself.

Beasley-Murray (1987:234) notes that this linguistic distinction between the "cleansing" verbs is not always maintained by Greek writers and the Johannine author's fondness of synonyms should caution against maintaining the distinction too sharply. The narrator has, however, used *νίπτω* thus far in the narration to refer to the washing of feet (Haenchen 1984:108). It could rightly be asked, however, what the relationship between these two verbs is, considering that Jesus seems to be underscoring a contrast for Peter that challenges his misinterpretation of the foot washing. The verb *λούω* is often associated with ritual bathing and Jesus' words in the narrative may thus be challenging Peter's assumption about the purifying effects of the water itself. The foot washing is not about water in the first instance, but rather about entering into relationship with Jesus by receiving his gesture of hospitality: "Peter does not need a ritual bath; he needs to have his feet washed by Jesus" (O'Day 2015:616).⁴² The foot washing denotes communion between the giver and the receiver (Kitzberger 2003b:183).

For Talbert (1992:193), irrespective of whether the shorter or longer reading is preferred, the overall meaning remains the same. In 13:6-11 the washing of the disciples' feet symbolizes not their initial cleansing, but rather the continual cleansing from their sins that

⁴¹ There is an ancient tradition of seeing allusions to both baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Johannine foot washing. These types of interpretations consider the "bathing" and "washing" to distinguish two types of cleansings. The first is understood to be the baptism and the second the Eucharist; the former cleanses sin wholly, and the latter cleanses one from sins committed subsequent to baptism. Most textual critics are not convinced of such an interpretation. Although there might be a secondary reference to baptism in the presentation of the foot washing, the majority of expositors render this improbable for two reasons: it follows the tendency of reading baptism wherever water is mentioned; and the emphasis in the narrative is Christological rather than sacramental in the first instance, pointing to the redemptive death of Jesus rather than the rite which reflects it (Beasley-Murray 1987:234-235).

⁴² "From ancient times to the present interpreters have strongly differed on the interpretation of vs. 10 and therefore on the significance of the footwashing [sic]" (Ridderbos 1997:461).

disciples receive through Jesus' death. The foot washing symbolically prophesizes that Jesus was about to be humiliated in death (Brown 1970:568).

Peter cannot get past the fact that he is witnessing the Lord, his teacher, fulfilling the role of a Gentile slave. Peter may be said to be offended that the Lord is demonstrating the service of foot washing to a follower against all relevant codes, while it really ought to be the reverse. Peter is not simply being silly, or ultimately rejecting Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. Rather he has a knee-jerk reaction to the manner in which the incarnate Son of God makes himself known (Haenchen 1984:108). Jesus' concern is not to lead Peter to understand himself as a sinner better. Rather he performs a symbolic act to present himself to his disciples, as he leaves them, for all time to come in the form of a servant (Ridderbos 1997:460).

Harris (2015:244) suggests: "Ο λελουμένος refers to a single bathing of the whole body that is complemented by the periodic washing of the feet." Total cleansing is affected by the death of Jesus and symbolized in baptism; thereafter regular washing is necessary and comes about by the confession of sin, which maintains partnership and fellowship with Jesus.

Jesus' qualification of his statement that "they" (plural) are "clean" (καθαροί)⁴³, but not all of them, is significant. All the disciples received the sign of cleansing and a part with Jesus through his death and resurrection; however, Judas would not accept it. The issue of group solidarity is now on the table. Solidarity is created by the symbolic act of foot washing, namely forgiveness; one member of the group is, however, disloyal and will betray Jesus (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:221).

Judas has rejected the word both spoken (15:3) and enacted by Jesus (Beasley-Murray 1987:234). In 13:10, Jesus' "own" are clean through their reception of Jesus' word. In 15:3, they are clean through their reception of Jesus' spoken word. They need continuous cleansing by the same words (17:17) to remain united in his love (Kanagaraj 2013:136). John 13:10 is thus a supplement to Jesus' words in 13:8, which focuses the attention on the participatory and relational dimensions of the foot washing (O'Day 2015:616). Jesus knows his "own" and has taken them into the fellowship of his love (Ridderbos 1997:461).

⁴³ This word can have ritual connotations as in "free of defilement" (Brant 2011:201).

¹¹ ἦδει γὰρ τὸν παραδιδόντα αὐτόν· διὰ τοῦτο εἶπεν ὅτι Οὐχὶ πάντες καθαροὶ ἐστε.

Jesus' knowledge, already made evident in 13:1, is affirmed again by the narrator in 13:11: because Jesus knew the one betraying him (literally "the one who was handing him over") (Brown 1970:552), he said: "Not all of you are clean." No mention is made of who the unclean person is. Although the reader might know, the disciples will only know at the arrest of Jesus who the traitor in their midst is (Morris 1995:550).

Jesus will not be surprised by Judas' behaviour in the immediate future, as he already knows what to expect. In spite thereof, Jesus makes no distinction when performing the foot washing. This confirms that cleanliness has to do with one's relationship to Jesus and acceptance of the foot washing, not with the cleansing power of the water itself. Uncleanliness is not equated to being unwashed, seeing as Judas is part of the group whose feet are washed during this meal. Rather, uncleanliness is to turn away from union and intimacy with Jesus (O'Day 2015:617). Thus, cleanness and uncleanness are understood in terms of faith and unfaith (Koester 2003:133). John 13:2 and 13:11 place Jesus' act of hospitality, service, and love in the inevitable context of his betrayal (O'Day 2015:617).

Clean and unclean, i.e. purity and impurity, are marked by clear boundaries within the context of the ancient Mediterranean world. Purity is threatened at the margins when boundaries become porous and permeable. One of the most significant ways of maintaining the boundaries between purity and impurity is to have distinct places and roles for all persons. Gender roles play an important role here: members of society who disregard internal lines are considered to be impure and unclean (Pilch 1993b:170-171). Ironically, Jesus is here performing an act that disregards the boundaries of gender (and class) roles, yet typically in content would be regarded as fulfilling the purpose of ensuring cleanliness. Whilst doing so, however, he is stating that it is not the content of the act but rather the liminality thereof that will ensure participation in his community.

¹² Ὅτε οὖν ἔνιψεν τοὺς πόδας αὐτῶν καὶ ἔλαβεν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνέπεσεν, πάλιν εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· Γινώσκετε τί πεποίηκα ὑμῖν;

John 13:12-20 is a discourse spoken by Jesus after the foot washing. Typically, it is identified as an interpretation of the foot washing, but scholars are divided over the

relationship of this “interpretation” to the preceding narrative (O’Day 2015:617).⁴⁴ As stated earlier, the narrative from 13:1-17 is considered as a narrative unit, but with 13:12-17 representing a next “moment” in the narrative following 13:1-11. For Brant (2011:201), Jesus is portrayed as making it clear in the account of his actions, that the foot washing affects and even changes relationships. For Carson (1991:467) both the foot washing, and the atoning death of Christ are supreme displays of Jesus’ love for his own (13:1b), even if the foot washing is said to point in various ways to spiritual cleansing based on the death of Jesus. The foot washing and the crucifixion should be considered two sides of the same coin; “the revered and exalted Messiah assumes the role of the despised servant for the good of others” (Carson 1991:467).

Jesus puts on his garments and resumes his reclining position⁴⁵ among his disciples, exemplifying the power he had used to lay it aside (Ridderbos 1997:459):

With the same deliberation with which he had laid aside his garments and assumed the form of a slave, Jesus now puts on his garments and takes his place at their head – their lord and master. Both actions are described with equal care and seriousness. The master is the slave; the slave is the master. To say that is to say that all normal conceptions of power and authority are overturned (Newbigin 1982:170).

Jesus has completed the foot washing of the disciples and now turned to his disciples with the question: “Do you understand what I did for you?” This question is a rhetorical device, drawing the disciples’ attention to the central paradox of the foot washing: he, their master (lord) and teacher took on the role of the servant. This was a reversal of the expected pattern (O’Day 2015:617). He is challenging the disciples to think about the significance of what he has done (Morris 1995:551). His question makes it clear that he has done this for them (“for you,” ὑμῖν), i.e. as an example for them to follow (Harris 2015:244). He does not wait for them to answer and continues with his teaching (Kitzberger 2003b:183).⁴⁶

For Ridderbos (1997:463), this understanding will only be fully realized later when Jesus lays aside his glory. However, in the foot washing it is already clear that the nature of the

⁴⁴ The division arises because the discourse seems to move in a different direction: in 13:12-20 Jesus speaks of the foot washing as an act the disciples should imitate, whereas in 13:1-11 he speaks of the foot washing as an act that they are to receive (O’Day 2015:617).

⁴⁵ ἀνέπεσεν implies a change of position (Morris 1995:551).

⁴⁶ According to Culpepper (1998:206) the “real audience for this question is not the disciples, who do not yet know about Jesus’ death, but the readers of the narrative, who already know of Jesus’ death and resurrection, though it has not yet been reported in the narrative.”

fellowship offered by him not only unites his disciples with him, but must also be the permanent measure and source of their mutual relations once he is gone from them.

¹³ ὑμεῖς φωνεῖτέ με Ὁ διδάσκαλος καὶ Ὁ κύριος, καὶ καλῶς λέγετε, εἰμὶ γάρ.

Jesus continues with the words: “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Master,’ and correct (or, well) you say, because this I am.” He reminds the disciples of the way they addressed him. The foot washing does not mean that Jesus is not to be honoured (Culpepper 1998:206). “Teacher” is equivalent to “Rabbi” (cf. 1:38) and was the ordinary respectful way for disciples to address their teacher or religious leader (Carson 1991:467). “Lord” was less common and expressed a very high reverence, even with overtones of divinity. In the Fourth Gospel, κύριος is often translated as “Sir” (e.g. 4:11, 15, 19, 49), sometimes as “Master” (13:6, 9, 13-14, 25, 36-37), but in 13:14-15 denotes a more profound sense, i.e. “Lord” (Harris 2015:245).⁴⁷ Jesus commends the disciples and thereby endorses this way of speaking. Such titles as the ones they apply to him, however, do have implications (Morris 1995:551). The bond between Jesus and his disciples

is not merely one of personal affection and respect. It has been shaped above all by the fact that he has bound himself to them and they to him in a fellowship of life and learning in which he is their teacher and master and in which they understand themselves to be subject to his authority and instructions (Ridderbos 1997:463).

¹⁴ εἰ οὖν ἐγὼ ἔνιψα ὑμῶν τοὺς πόδας ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ διδάσκαλος, καὶ ὑμεῖς ὀφείλετε ἀλλήλων νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας·

“If then I washed your feet - the Lord and the Teacher, so also you in turn ought to wash the feet of one another;” this is the first of two imperatives in 13:14-15. In 13:14 the imperative refers explicitly to the foot washing. It is developed as a logical argument from the greater to the lesser: What is true for the “Lord” and “Teacher,” must also be true of the disciples (O’Day 2015:617).⁴⁸ The titles of 13:13 are repeated, but in a reversed order. This emphasizes his dignity; the exalted Person has washed their feet, and they ought to

⁴⁷ The title κύριος was most likely first applied to Jesus as a mark of respect for his teaching role. It is the equivalent of the Aramaic *mar*. “Rabbi” and “Mari” are known to have been used together by rabbinic pupils addressing their masters (cf. SB 2.558). After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, “Lord” took on a richer meaning for Jesus-followers, becoming one of the most important ways of referring to Jesus as the one raised and exalted by God (Carson 1991:467).

⁴⁸ “The inclusion of foot washing among the list of a widow’s ‘good works’ in 1 Tim 5:10 suggests that this imperative was followed by some early Christian communities” (O’Day 2015:617).

wash each other's feet (Morris 1995:551). According to Harris (2015:245), the inversion highlights the humility of the "Lord" in acting as a "slave" in the foot washing.

In being bound to Jesus, the disciples are bound to each other. They have an obligation to wash one another's feet. They can only appeal to Jesus as their master and teacher if they are prepared to do as he has done for them (Ridderbos 1997:463). To wash the feet of another means that one is a slave or servant of the person whose feet are being washed. Jesus does not here indicate that any one person should take on this role. Rather, they are to wash "one another's feet", indicating that everyone washes everyone else's feet. This obligation should be done continually, not just once (Adeyemo 2006:1282).

Here, the cultural assumption is that a service rendered to a client by a patron requires a form of reciprocity to honour the service. In this case, the client does not honour the service by means of reciprocity towards the patron Jesus directly, but by imitating the action of the patron and washing the feet of others (Brant 2011:201-202). The disciples are in no position to refuse Jesus' command, given that he is their "Teacher" and "Lord" (Carson 1991:468).

¹⁵ ὑπόδειγμα γὰρ ἔδωκα ὑμῖν ἵνα καθὼς ἐγὼ ἐποίησα ὑμῖν καὶ ὑμεῖς ποιῆτε.

Lest they might object, Jesus in the narrative points out that he himself has already done this (Adeyemo 2006:1282);⁴⁹ "because an example I gave to you, so that as I did for you, also you should do." This second imperative speaks more generally of an "example" (ὑπόδειγμα)⁵⁰ that was given by Jesus himself and that should be imitated by his disciples (O'Day 2015:617).⁵¹ They are not in the first instance to simply imitate the precise action of a foot washing amongst them, but rather act towards each other in the spirit thereof (Morris 1995:551-552; Harris 2015:245; Talbert 1992:194).

The "example" set by Jesus implies that Jesus' deed is a "rule of life" for the disciples' future association with each other. The conjunction "as" (καθὼς) not only indicates similarity and adherence to the standard set by Jesus, but also the foundation on which

⁴⁹ The aorist verb ἔδωκα expresses an act valid for all time (Ridderbos 1997:463).

⁵⁰ The word ὑπόδειγμα is also found in Hebrews 4:11, 8:6, 9:23; James 5:10; and 2 Peter 2:6. It consistently refers to models of humility (Brant 2011:202). It occurs in the Apocrypha in well-known passages that exhort the faithful to mark an exemplary death, i.e. 2 Maccabees 6:27-28, 31; 4 Maccabees 17:22-23; and Sirach 44:16 (Culpepper 1998:206).

⁵¹ According to Harris (2015:245) the ἵνα indicates both the purpose and the content of the example set by Jesus.

this type of discipleship rests and the source from which it gains its strength - the self-sacrificial love of Jesus. The act of foot washing as ground of their discipleship echoes the manner in which Jesus' love for his disciples has its source and ground in the Father's love for him (15:9) (Ridderbos 1997:463). Talbert (1992:194) is of the opinion that doing "as" Jesus did here does not simply mean being a humble servant, in a general sense. If the foot washing in 13:6-11 symbolizes the forgiveness of disciples' daily sin by Jesus, then acting as he did towards each other means forgiving one another's trespasses.

¹⁶ ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐκ ἔστιν δοῦλος μείζων τοῦ κυρίου αὐτοῦ οὐδὲ ἀπόστολος⁵² μείζων τοῦ πέμψαντος αὐτόν.⁵³

"Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master or a sent one/messenger greater than the one who sends him." Nothing is said here about how a slave serves, or what message this messenger carries (Stevick 2011:35).

The focus now shifts to more general teachings on discipleship and relationship to Jesus. The teacher/pupil contrast is deepened by the introduction of two other pairs, i.e. master/slave and superior/messenger (Carson 1991:468). This is introduced by a "truly, truly" saying that reinforces the imperatives of 13:14-15 and marks what will follow as important (Morris 1995:552).

Although seemingly general, this statement about the relationship between a master and slave, and messenger and sender, should be understood in light of what precedes it. The second clause indicates that it does not just refer to the disciple's mutual relations. There is also a warning carried by "truly, truly" (ἀμὴν ἀμὴν): the disciples still do not realize what the implications will be for Jesus' self-surrender for their sake and the sake of the world, or what following him will mean for them (Ridderbos 1997:464). Jesus washed feet in anticipation of his death - the ultimate act of love. In the same manner, the command to the disciples to wash feet calls them to show love in various forms of service to one another and even laying down their lives for one another when necessary (John 15:12-13; 1 John 3:16) (Koester 2003:133; Culpepper 1998:206-207).

⁵² This is the only place in the Gospel of John where the term is found (Morris 1995:552). Here it does not carry any overtones of the official "twelve apostles"; the word enjoyed a wide range of meaning throughout the time of the New Testament (Carson 1991:468).

⁵³ This saying is found on four occasions (with variants), i.e. John 13:16, 15:20; Matthew 10:24; Luke 6:40; and cf. Luke 22:37 (Morris 1995:552).

The disciples are reminded of the conventional hierarchical arrangement of the roles of a servant and a master (O'Day 2015:617-618). The ordinary expectation in foot washing is that it is done by those of low status for those who are higher; thus, servants are not above masters (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:221). And yet, if their master and sender is willing to do lowly actions, then they, who are the slaves and the sent ones, should not consider menial tasks beneath their worthiness (Morris 1995:552). "Jesus is the one who sends the disciples into the world (17:18; 20:21). If the sender has shown God to the world by love and humble service, the sent ones too should do the same that they may have the joy of the kingdom of God" (Kanagaraj 2013:137-138). This recalls Jesus' previous statement in 12:26, where serving Jesus and following Jesus are regarded as the same. "Serving Jesus and following him thus means joining his mission of serving, exemplified by his washing the disciples' feet." Hierarchies are turned on their head and consequently overcome (Kitzberger 2003b:183). Jesus affirms the idea that slaves are not greater than their masters, but he also completely transformed this idea, "so that it no longer meant that Jesus should not wash feet, but that his disciples should wash feet, following their master's example" (Koester 2003:133).

They are not to argue a case against the command in light of their understanding of hierarchy and social status; Jesus has already turned these on its head through his action (Brant 2011:202). They were expected to imitate their Master - as his disciples, each of them will be both master and servant at the same time; each would receive service and render it (Adeyemo 2006:1282). This entails a complete dissolving of the structures and social roles that they live and breathe. Jesus' actions upset the honour expectations of the socio-cultural context, thereby indicating that the values of the antisociety he represents are radically different than those of ordinary society (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:221). The master Jesus acted as a slave, and thereby the division between slave and master became obsolete. Washing each other's feet establishes equality between the disciples and implies the annulment of patriarchal structures (Kitzberger 2003b:183-184).

¹⁷ εἰ ταῦτα οἴδατε, μακάριοί ἐστε ἐὰν ποιῆτε αὐτά.

"If you know these things, (then) you are blessed⁵⁴ if you do these things." The precise meaning of the words ascribed to Jesus in 13:17 is unclear. "These things" (αὐτά) could

⁵⁴ In the New Testament the word μακάριοί has the idea of joy in the future kingdom of God, which can be possessed now already (Kanagaraj 2013:138). μακάριοί ἐστε is a periphrastic way of saying, "God will bless you"; blessedness is thus a divine gift (Stevick 2011:36).

refer to the double imperative in verses 14 and 15 (cf. Carson 1991:469). If that is the case, the disciples will thus be blessed if they follow the example of Jesus in love and in selfless service (O'Day 2015:618). "Happiness presupposes knowledge and obedience" (Harris 2015:245). This is the first of two Johannine beatitudes (cf. 20:29) (Brant 2011:202).

Knowing and acting on said knowledge is not the same thing; Jesus implies that the disciples do know "these things," but it is left as an open question whether they act on this knowledge (Morris 1995:552). Jesus has already earlier condemned those who hear his words but fail to keep them (12:47-48; cf. 8:31) (Carson 1991:469). Not only should the disciples know the significance of what Jesus has done for them, but they should also live accordingly and in obedience to his commandments (Beasley-Murray 1987:236; Harris 2015:245). It is in conduct that followers of Jesus demonstrate that they are truly his disciples (Ridderbos 1997:464). It is assumed that the knowledge is true; the future performance of the disciples is assumed as possible (Harris 2015:245).

5.3 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, the narrative of John 13:1-17 was read through a gender-critical lens, with a particular view of how honour and shame was not only affected by one's gender, but also by class. Jesus' act of removing clothes and washing feet was not merely an act or performance in the dramatic sense of the word; rather, it was an act of shame, performed by an honourable male, as an example to be followed. Thereby the gendered boundaries of honour and shame have become porous. Even more so, the commands to Peter to accept the foot washing, and to those present to continuously participate in such (gender) fluid behaviour amongst one another, establishes a radical alternative to the boundary-filled world which "Jesus' own" know all too well.

In Chapter 6 the observations of the readings of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 will be discussed more poignantly from the perspective of gender criticism. It leads finally to the question: What are the implications for such readings for contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality?

6. DIALOGUING NARRATIVES AMIDST COMPLEXITY: INDIVIDUALLY, WITH ONE ANOTHER, AND WITH CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES

6.1 Introduction

Chapters 4 and 5 offered close readings, alert to gender constructions and -transgressions in the text, of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17, respectively. Close readings of the two narratives, in view of the interpretations of a range of commentators, have brought to light a rather complex picture of the gender(ed) representations and relations in the narratives.¹

In Chapter 6 the discussion on this complex picture continues and the focus thereof will fall in two parts. Firstly, in section 6.2, the more precise details of such complexity pertaining to gender as it is presented in these narratives will be discussed: The narratives individually, as well as in relation to one another. Generally speaking, the gender complexity of the narratives is rooted in the observed gendered ambiguity represented and performed by particular characters in these narratives. In this part of the discussion the focus is on the potential (and in my opinion, probable) destabilizing effect of such gender complexity within the narratives themselves.

However, such observed gender ambiguity represented and performed in the narratives is not the end of this discussion. Given the role of biblical narratives in theological discourses, particularly then also discourses on gender and sexuality, the observation of gender ambiguity in these narratives requires more, namely a critique of oversimplified notions of gender and sexuality in contemporary theological discourses: notions that are claimed to be “biblically-based” in view of particular interpretations of selected biblical narratives. I am of the opinion that biblical narratives are not simple, straightforward sites of interpretation for the topics of gender and sexuality; instead of harbouring such expectations, biblical narratives should be considered as sites of creative potential and imagination that may serve the purpose of questioning, and troubling, by interpreters and in the process of interpretation.

¹ By “in the narratives” I by no means imply that the process of reading with a gender-critical lens has “exposed” some sort of a pre-existing, objective gender complexity. Rather, such a judgment of gender complexity in the narratives is done from my perspective and location as an interpreter, who deliberately approached these narratives with the aim of recognizing gendered dimensions as presented in the light of the socio-cultural context behind and in the narratives.

Thus, this chapter continues by considering the potential destabilizing effect of the gender complexity of these narratives for contemporary discourses on gender and sexuality in section 6.3. As such, seemingly stable gender entities might be disrupted, and the violent power relations invested in their fictive stability may be exposed. Accordingly, the gender-critical reading of the narratives could cross the boundaries of the narrative world, to meet the contemporary world of present-day readers anew.

I will, therefore, argue that the gender-critical readings of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 could potentially have an effect on two levels: Destabilization within the narrative itself (for the characters in their narrative world); and destabilization by means of the narrative (for the contemporary reader and the context in which he/she or they find themselves).

As unsettling as the concept of “destabilization” might be, I use this term deliberately; precisely because particular popular (and stereotypical) theological notions about gender, gender roles, and sexuality are posited as being stable, unmovable, timeless and universal.² Instead of maintaining such constrictive and exclusive perceptions, which result in skewed and even potentially life-threatening theological discourses³ (that in turn translate into life-threatening practices, relationships and structures in faith communities and broader society), I rather wish to pursue the life-giving and inclusive possibilities of critical engagement by means of biblical narratives that could breathe new life in contemporary contexts.

6.2 Recognizing destabilization in two “feet and meal” narratives

In this section, I will focus on the gender ambiguity and thus gender complexity presented in the narrative of John 12:1-8 (6.2.1), the narrative of John 13:1-17 (6.2.2), and these two narratives in relation to one another (6.2.3).

² Such destabilization relates to the strategies of queering done by queer biblical critics, whereby seemingly stable heteronormative notions of sexuality and sexual relations are questioned and uprooted by posing critical questions to mainstream interpretations, and offering alternative readings and interpretations of biblical texts.

³ I make a deliberate choice for the designation ‘life-threatening theological discourses.’ In my opinion, theological discourses can promote fullness of life and dignity for all persons, but they can also deny and/or actively oppose it.

6.2.1 John 12:1-8: Gendered behaviour and scented feet

John 12:1-8 is a rather short narrative, yet dense with symbolism, irony, and layers of meaning. Brant (2011:181) is of the opinion that the issues that revolve around the readings of the narratives of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary typically tend to focus on questions of identity: The divinity and humanity of Jesus seemingly collide, Judas emerges as “a Judas,” and the prominent role of women become indisputable - yet the significance of their gender role remains contested. For Pippin (2003:145-146) the narrative of the anointment of Jesus is by no means a simple one. It resounds with echoes of head, hair, feet, food, ointment, the disenfranchisement of the poor, erotic touch, (in)hospitality, burial preparation, life, luxury, political anointing, the title of “anointed one,” death, scent, wisdom, danger, and purity.

Through the perspective of a gender-critical lens, I make three summative observations in the reading of the narrative of John 12:1-8. First, certain characters perform actions that can be considered as transgressions of the ancient Mediterranean gendered boundaries of honour and shame; moreover, such transgressions of gendered boundaries are approved of. Second, certain characters perform actions that can be regarded as a reversal of the expected gender roles in the setting of the ancient Mediterranean world. Such a reversal affects the identity of the characters represented in the narrative. Third, the transgressions and the reversal of the reigning gender cultural norms are highlighted by means of their contrast to the depiction of traditional gendered behaviours that are simultaneously performed in the narrative - at times even by the same character.

In what follows, these three observations are described in more detail:

1) Transgressions of gendered boundaries take place primarily in the actions performed by the characters of Mary and Jesus in this narrative. Measured against the cultural expectations of women for the time, she was acting as a shameless woman and thereby bringing negative shame to herself and collectively to her household. Rather than serving the meal, as Martha was doing and as was expected from a woman, Mary was positioned at the feet of Jesus (12:2-3). Furthermore, the act she performed was not one in which she washed Jesus' feet with water, as might perhaps have been acceptable in the event of the absence of male slaves and the presence of an important male guest. Rather, she anointed Jesus' feet - with an excessive amount of expensive and strong-smelling perfume. What is more, she loosened her hair and then dried Jesus' feet in a rather

sensual display of affection, thereby displaying behaviour that could be deemed sexually evocative given the symbolic value of feet and loose hair in the ancient Mediterranean context (12:3).

Such gender-transgressive individual actions by Mary are presented within the framework of an encompassing act which is in itself transgressive on a broader social level; as explained by the character of Jesus, Mary's anointing of him was an indication of his burial which was to come (12:7), and yet, the act of anointing was usually a mark of festivity. Thus, Jesus' remark pointing to his impending death was the last thing to be expected (Morris 1995:514); all the other guests were most likely under the impression that they were attending a dinner celebrating life! Moreover, the character in the text who takes the lead, and the one who, if only by implication, shows more understanding of Jesus, his role and his future experiences, is a woman and not a man. Mary is typical in her domestic social location but untypical in taking over the scene, dominating the course of events, and turning the tables on the expected roles of men and women, even within the enclosed space of a domestic dwelling and the companionship of close friends. In a scene replete with erotic energy, not unlike what would in later centuries become an acceptable and even prominent way for women to relate to Christ, Mary destabilised the role of a typical first-century woman with the accompanying expectations regarding (public) behaviour. She is portrayed as imparting wisdom (Pippin 2003:151).

Jesus also transgressed gendered boundaries - specifically then the cultural expectations of male behaviour - by not reprimanding Mary for such an excessive, intimate, and socially inappropriate range of actions. Thereby, as an honourable man, he is condoning her shameless, transgressive behaviour and acting dishonourable. Moreover, he did not merely accept her behaviour in passive silence - he actively, verbally defended it when Judas, a male disciple, raised objections (12:7-8). In terms of the script of honour and shame, Jesus was siding with a shameless woman who touched and anointed his feet, and used her loose hair to dry it afterwards. Given the gendered nature of honour and shame and the corresponding gender gradient it represented, Jesus was on one level moving his position from the sphere of male honour to male dishonour; even more, siding with female shamelessness: An enormous shift to make from one end of the male-female gradient of gender performativity, to the other.

Transgressions of gendered boundaries are thus actively performed by both the characters of Mary and Jesus, and the two main characters in this narrative to boot, and are also condoned by Jesus on the part of Mary's behaviour.

2) The narrator also offers the portrayal of a reversal of traditional gender roles of the time. Thereby, the boundaries of gender expectations and gendered behaviour are not merely transgressed, but also the entire binary gendered system reversed. The character of Lazarus, by means of his passiveness in this public event, did not fulfil the expected active role of a male host in a social setting (given his social position as brother of Mary and Martha, as depicted in the Fourth Gospel). Socio-culturally public passiveness and subordination belonged to the sphere of women, children and slaves, whereas public active participation and prominence belonged to the sphere of men. One would have expected Lazarus to at least offer a word of thanksgiving to Jesus in this narrative; after all, he is alive! Yet he is portrayed as completely silent, and merely as a witness to the elaborate event (12:2).⁴ In terms of the expectation of performing one's male or female role, Lazarus thus disappoints.

The character that fulfils a public, active, and thereby typically male role in this narrative, is Mary. Besides the contrast with her passive brother, Lazarus, such a role is highlighted all the more by means of the contrast of the female Mary with the male Judas. She is portrayed as a true disciple, who devoted herself completely to Jesus and humbled herself at his feet (12:3). At the same time, through the words of Jesus directed at Judas, the narrator sets Mary up as a prophet who unknowingly conveyed the unavoidable ending to Jesus's life (12:7); at the very least to all the guests present, but perhaps even also to the character Jesus himself. In this narrative there is no other male disciple who takes up any similar (male) role as true disciple or prophet. The only portrayal of a male character that is related to discipleship, is the "anti-disciple example" set by Judas (12:6). Mary seems to be characterized as being everything that Judas is not.

⁴ Neyrey (2009:29-57) distinguishes between describing a character's role and status in a Johannine narrative. For him, role refers to the set of expectations for interaction between a person who holds one position in a group, and another person who holds a reciprocal position. Role, thus, is always in relation to another person/s (2009:29) and is enacted (2009:33). Status, on the other hand, is something that is occupied and which a person has. It is position occupied by a person within society, which is recognized. This position determines where he or she fits in relationship to everyone else. Status implied a system based on honour, where people are ranked according to cultural criteria of worth or excellence. Status implies a vertical relation and ranking to at least one other (2009:33). According to this distinction, he argues that Lazarus plays no role in John 12. However, he reclines with Jesus (12:1-2) which signals significant status. Shortly after the dinner, it is stated that Lazarus will die because of Jesus (12:9:11). These indicate a very high status, even if he plays no noteworthy role in the narrative.

The portrayal of a reversal of expected male and female roles is thus depicted in the characterization of Lazarus and of Mary.

3) An ambiguity in gender performance in this narrative can be traced to the characterization of Jesus. As much as Jesus himself crosses gendered boundaries (both by allowing the transgression of boundaries and by actively defending such transgression), Jesus is also depicted as performing precisely as was expected from an honourable male.

The confrontation between the characters of Jesus and Judas over Mary's behaviour (12:4-8) can be considered as a typical challenge and riposte situation between two men in a public setting, which required the defence of male honour by both parties involved. Judas' objection to Mary's behaviour (12:5) was perhaps in the first instance a challenge to Jesus' authority, as an honourable man who has accepted such type of transgressive behaviour by a woman, rather than a reprimand directed at Mary (Brant 2011:185).

As a disciple of Jesus and given the collective nature of honour and shame, Judas was perhaps legitimately concerned about the effect that Mary's shameless behaviour would have on his own male honour and that of the other disciples, by virtue of his (and their) relation to Jesus who is condoning her behaviour. However, Jesus' response to Judas' challenge was to expose his ignorance (12:7-8), thereby shaming Judas publicly and winning the challenge, according to the social rules of such challenge and riposte situations. No mention is made of any further challenge by Judas, and it can be deduced that he was obliged to concede to the loss. The narrator also portrayed Jesus as having the "last say" and vetting the actions of Mary; by approving and condoning what Mary did with the ointment to his feet, he authorised her work and made it socially acceptable in the circle of those present in the narrative of John 12. The woman's actions are legitimate because the man pronounced it so. Furthermore, and as noted above, Mary is not given an opportunity to speak up for herself but male figures do so on her behalf; in fact, her portrayal appears to be dependent on the explanation offered by Jesus.

From this point of view, it might be argued that the character of Jesus was not only acting transgressive in terms of traditional gendered roles, but also acting in the affirmative of traditional gendered roles. If so, then this would raise the critical question: Did Jesus merely defend Mary for the sake of defending his own male honour, thereby maintaining and affirming the status quo of gendered behaviour of the time?

In summary, from a gender-critical perspective, John 12:1-8 tends to identify, to a large extent, a characterization of male and female characters that do not comply with traditional gender expectations and prescriptions, when reading the narrated behaviour against the setting of the first century Mediterranean world. Yet there are moments in the narrative where the opposite is also true, namely where traditional gender expectations and prescriptions are being complied to; moreover so, instances where the same character - in this case, Jesus - fulfils both the role of traditional and unconventional male in the same narrative, and even at the same moment.

There is thus no one dimensional portrayal of gender performance in this narrative; rather, a complex, and to my judgment a gender ambiguous landscape is presented.

6.2.2 John 13:1-17: Gender, removing clothes, and washing feet

In the foot washing narrative of John 13:1-17, the entire scene is at odds with the familiar course of meal time events, as would have been expected by Jesus' disciples: A meal was interrupted midway for a practice that is usually performed beforehand; a master removed his outer garments and transformed visually into taking up a slave role; pupils' feet (with the chance of both men and women present) were washed by their teacher amidst strongly verbalized protest and misunderstanding; the slave visually transformed back into a master by putting on his outer garments again; and a teacher instructed pupils to express their gratitude for what he has done for them by means of washing each other's feet rather than his own.

From a gender-critical perspective, I make two summative observations in reading this narrative, in particular about the actions performed by one specific character. First, ancient Mediterranean gendered expectations and prescriptions are transgressed. Second, the status quo of such gendered expectations and prescriptions are affirmed. Both of these observations are portrayed by means of the characterization of Jesus, specifically in relation to "his own" whom are present at the time.

1) In taking on the appearance of a slave and washing the feet of his disciples (13:4-11), Jesus transgresses not only the obvious boundaries of class and gender (Goss 2006:556), but also of religion - all of which are major insider-outsider markers within the context of the ancient Mediterranean. In all possible ways, Jesus is moving from the positive sphere of honour, to the negative sphere of shame - and doing so willingly.

The hierarchy of honour and shame was inscribed in and on social and physical bodies: therefore, the task of washing the feet (bottom of the physical body) was the task of a servant or slave (bottom of the social body).⁵ Furthermore, it was usually the task of a female servant or slave (Brant 2011:205).⁶ The gendered identity extends further, since even a male slave was from the position of his servitude endowed with characteristics which were typically female. When the character of Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he thus took on the physical appearance and social position of an effeminate male; he willingly shamed himself physically and socially by removing his outer garments, preparing the water for washing, touching his disciples feet, and drying it.⁷ It was not merely a case of distancing himself from his honour - he deliberately parted with his male honour, an honour ascribed and acquired by means of his male body and his (predominantly) honourable, male performativity thus far.⁸ Taking it even further, Jesus performed a task that in Jewish contexts were considered even too lowly for Jewish slaves to perform; thus, the boundary between Jew and Gentile was also transgressed.

The performance of such multiple transgressions of boundaries in this narrative has a particular effect on the narrative context: The character of Jesus deconstructs and destabilizes (at the very least in that moment) the patriarchal and hierarchical social structures that constituted personhood in the context of the ancient Mediterranean. According to Kitzberger (2003b:184), the presentation of Jesus in this narrative is as an “anti-patriarchal man who advocates the overcoming of hierarchies and, consequently, equality among those following him.” Not only did Jesus move from one extreme (honour, namely superior) to the other (shame, namely inferior); he turns the entire system on its head by commanding his disciples not to wash his feet in return, but to wash each other’s feet and thereby creating an alternative community based on “foot washing values” rather than hierarchical power. They were given the commandment to continue the social, cultural and religious destabilization and deconstruction - a deeply gendered activity - as

⁵ Goss (2006:557) prefers the word “slave” for its disruptive effect on class and gender hierarchies. He regards the translation “servant” as a “vanilla version” which is less accurate and underplays the radical nature of this foot washing event.

⁶ “On occasion a man will wash another man’s feet as an act of extreme humility or an extraordinary gesture by a client to a patron. In his study of foot washing, John Christopher Thomas (1991, 40) cites only three other cases in which a man undertakes the task: *T. Ab.* 3.6-9; Plutarch, *Pomp.* 73.6-7; and Petronius, *Satyr.* 31 (in this case, the youth are clearly assuming female roles). In the other references to foot washing in the NT, women perform the act (Luke 7:36-50; 1 Tim 5:9-10; see also John 12:3)” (Brant 2011:205-206).

⁷ Given the assumed sexual availability of slaves for their superiors in the context of the Roman Empire (as noted by Johnson 2007:161-173 and others, and as discussed in Chapter 3), one might rightly imagine that part of Peter’s indignation about Jesus washing his feet, was because he knew that slavery included such prescriptions.

⁸ The titles used by the disciples, as noted by Jesus, are titles acquired and affirmed by means of honourable, male behaviour.

embodied by Jesus. Jesus' symbolical action is egalitarian, not hierarchical; his body belongs to the community (Goss 2006:557).

This is different from a mere role reversal and exchange between positions of superior to inferior. The character of Jesus not merely acted opposite to what was expected from him; he took it even further by completely blurring the lines between master and slave, teacher and pupil, sender and messenger, so that the familiar hierarchical understanding of order, place and accompanying measure of power was destabilized in its entirety. As noted by Newbigin (1982:168), Jesus' action subverts the system of order and thereby threatens to destabilize all of society. All the normal conceptions of power and authority have been overturned. The reason for this is because Jesus was both master and slave at the same time, and called on his disciples to disregard these distinctions pertaining to one another. In the community Jesus created in the narrative, fixed roles and places are now things of the past.

Jesus did not merely exchange one social class for another; by washing his disciples' feet, he combined the roles of slave and host. By wrapping himself with a cloth, he assumed the dress code and position of a slave (13:4). The act of hospitality he offered, though, was the prerogative of the host (13:5). It was this odd combination of roles that prompts Peter to protest in 13:6 (O'Day 2015:615). The oddness is further amplified by the fact that this took place during dinner; this was not the customary foot washing for guests who enter a home, performed by themselves or slaves; it was something Jesus himself specially chose to do for his guests (Bruner 2012:756). The effect of Jesus' actions is that not only hierarchical roles are reversed, but by Jesus acting otherwise, the very system itself in its dependency upon such hierarchical roles, is challenged.

Thereby the core of the social existence of Jesus' "own" was seriously challenged, given the complete reframing of roles and duties as equals, rather than in hierarchical fashion. Jesus does not merely expect a temporary rearrangement, after which life returns back to normal; he is setting an example of complete disruption and dismantling to be followed from here on into the future, an example that has no place in the society they find themselves in. They are to be servants of one another - no person taking the position of master (Newbigin 1982:170). Jesus is promoting an instability based on love and equality, completely unbeknown to "his own" (13:12-17). Moxnes (2003:105) notes that transgression always presupposes that some sort of spatial ordering exists. Transgression of roles and order do not necessarily mean the abolition of place or space,

but rather its transformation. Jesus here transgresses roles and order, which indeed results in (at the very least) the potential of transformation.

2) Paradoxically, however, the character of Jesus performed these acts of destabilization and deconstruction, and gave his commands for such acts to be echoed, precisely from his social position of power. Had Jesus not in the first instance been “Teacher” and “Lord” of these disciples (cf. 13:13), he would be in no position to appropriate his authority and position of honour in this way. There is no way in which an inferior, or man without honour and authority would have been able to perform and in turn set expectations of this nature to other persons - particularly to men (cf. the dialogue with Peter and his instruction after the foot washing). He is, by way of his relation to them, granted permission to “command” them and they are expected to obey and follow his example, lest they desire to be shamed for not adhering to his instructions. What is more, they will be “blessed” if they follow his instructions - thereby rewarded for doing what he expects of them.⁹

In summary, the gender-critical reading of John 13:1-17 appears to be overshadowed by a portrayal of Jesus which contradicts, challenges and overturns the hierarchical relations of the ancient Mediterranean world - in terms of class, gender, and religious culture. Jesus expects his “own” to follow his example. For the implied reader, this affords the opportunity to imagine a world completely transformed and unbeknown, and simultaneously poses a radical challenge to all those embedded in and comfortable with the status quo. Yet, such complete destabilization appears to be temporal within this narrative, and upon completion of the act of foot washing, Jesus resumes his expected male gendered role of teacher and rabbi. From a position of authority and power, he instructs his “own” to do the same. Jesus thus fulfils, yet again, both the role of traditional and unconventional male in the same narrative, and yet again at the same time.

As was the case with the narrative of John 12:1-8, the narrative of John 13:1-17 presents a complex and gender ambiguous landscape. It is such a convergence and multiplicity of gendered roles, both the affirmation and transgression of roles and order, and recognized in both these narratives that will be brought in conversation with contemporary theological discourses on gender, sexuality, and biblical narratives in section 6.3.

⁹ This “reward” resembles the patron-client relationship of the ancient Mediterranean context, whereby a superior would grant an inferior financial handouts, legal protection, and/or material goods in return for the inferior’s fulfilment of expected sets of behaviour (by which means the superior would have gained in some way or the other).

6.2.3 (Gendered) dialogue between John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17

The conclusions drawn from the gender-critical readings in both narratives are that such readings illustrate complexity and ambiguity on the part of the narratives' contextual gender representations and gendered characterization: In as much as socially-prescribed gendered boundaries and expected behaviour of the first century ancient Mediterranean context are transgressed and even reversed by characters in both of these narratives, there are simultaneously also indications of strict adherence to such boundaries and expected behaviour.

The complexity of such observations is highlighted by the fact that gender transgression, particularly on the part of the characterization of Jesus, takes place from his position of power which is in turn made possible by adherence to precisely such boundaries and prescriptions. As such, it can be argued that variable or gender ambiguous behaviour is recognizable in these narratives; yet framed by a particular hegemonic, patriarchal power relation in which the character of Jesus fulfils the role of the superior, in relation to specific inferiors. There is no complete destruction of the gendered world of this first century Mediterranean setting, although unusual behaviour is most certainly depicted.

The narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 do not follow immediately after one another in the Johannine narrative. However, the literary (and consequently theological) relations between these two narrative episodes are picked up by numerous scholars. The choice for these two specific Johannine narratives for the purpose of this research project has been set out in section 1.4.4 of Chapter 1. In what follows, a more detailed description of their literary relationship is provided. Thereby, the observed complexity of the individual narratives will be heightened further, by considering the acknowledged relation between these two narratives through a gender-critical lens.

The place of these narratives in the broader plot of the Johannine narrative is worth discussing briefly, seeing how this provides a guiding structure for the interpretation of the narratives in relation to one another.

As noted in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the Gospel of John is typically regarded as consisting of two parts, namely the Book of Signs (chapters 1 to 12) and the Book of Glory (chapters 13 to 21). John 1:1-18 is considered to be a prologue, and John 21:1-25 to be an appendix (Johnson 1999:534).

Koester (2003:127) regards the narratives of John 12:1-8 and John 13:1-17 as describing symbolic actions, with the former placed at the end of Jesus' public ministry and the latter at the beginning of his passion. Moloney (1996:178-179) argues that John 12:1-8 forms part of the larger narrative episode of 11:55-12:50, which narrates the last part of Jesus' public ministry. Talbert (1992:188) notes that John 13:1-17 stands at the beginning of Jesus' ministry to his "own", narrated in 13:1-17:26. According to Koester (2003:127), these actions are similar in form and appear together in the centre of the broader narrative of the Gospel of John, thus directing the readers' reflections on the meaning of Jesus' work and death.

According to Talbert (1992:179), John 11:55-12:50 is a unit that functions as a hinge between 2:13-11:54 and 13:1-chapter 21. It starts off with a bridge passage, 11:55-57, between the Lazarus narrative and the events of chapter 12 (Beasley-Murray 1987:205). This serves as an introduction for what is to follow and locates the events near Passover, the setting for the acts and discourses of chapter 12, which are concerned with the approaching death of Jesus (Talbert 1992:179; Beasley-Murray 1987:206). Then the unit falls into two parts which are fashioned around two days (12:1-11 and 12:12-36) and two conclusions (12:37-43 and 12:44-50) (Talbert 1992:179). For a contemporary reader, there might be an awkwardness when reading 11:55-12:50 due to the fact that the last of the unit goes with what comes before (2:13-11:54), while the first of the segment goes with what comes after (13:1-chapter 17). This is in line with ancient directives, where one part in a narrative is related to another by common matter and overlap (Talbert 1992:179-180).

On a literary level, two specific features link the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17: Characterization (especially that of Mary and Jesus); and narrative action (the anointing and the foot washing). These two features overlap and inform one another: On the one hand, the characterizations are depicted by means of the actions being performed in the narratives; on the other hand, it is by means of particular characterizations that certain actions are performed.

In John 12:1-8, Mary acts out of order and thereby shamelessly by anointing the feet of Jesus with an excessive amount of oil at a dinner, and wiping it dry with her hair. Judas objects, and is in turn reproached by Jesus who indicates that Mary has performed this act in light of his nearing death. Judas is the disciple who will betray Jesus. In John 13:1-17, Jesus acts out of order and thereby dishonourable by removing his clothes and washing the feet of his disciples during a dinner, and wiping it dry with the cloth around his waist.

Peter objects when it is his turn and is in turn reproached by Jesus, who indicates that this is a necessary act for every person who wants to have a part in him. Thereafter Jesus puts on his clothes and returns to his reclining position, followed by a teaching. Peter is the disciple who will renounce Jesus. Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:330) considers the centrality of Judas in both scenes as an “evangelistic intention” to portray Mary of Bethany, the true disciple, as counterpart to the unfaithful disciple Judas Iscariot.¹⁰

For Kitzberger (2003b:186), the parallels between John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 are striking. A meal is taking place in both scenes, with Jesus and some of his disciples present. Both times, something completely unexpected happens. In Bethany, Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume of pure nard, and then dries his feet with her hair. In 12:1-8, Judas Iscariot objects to Mary by insinuating that Mary is wasting the perfume. In John 13, Simon Peter objects to Jesus’ action. Judas is again introduced in a negative way; in 12:6 he was called a “thief,” and in 13:11 a betrayer. In both meal scenes, the unusual action is a symbolic act full of meaning. Both times it involves the feet of the recipients. Both narratives also involve the olfactory senses: in 12:1-8, the fragrance of expensive ointment fills the room; in 13:1-17, hints of sewerage and dirt from travelling may have filled the room, until Jesus washed the feet of those present.

Kitzberger (2003b:186) suggests a rereading of 12:1-8 in light of 13:1-20. In her argument, such a rereading sheds new light on Mary of Bethany. She can be viewed as the one who has already carried out what Jesus demands of his disciples, thereby proving herself to be a true disciple (cf. 13:14-15). Such rereading can also enrich the characterization of Jesus. Jesus acted similar to Mary; it may even be said that Jesus appears as the one who seems to have been inspired by Mary’s action: “Thus, Mary becomes a role model for Jesus’ action. He learned from this woman” (Kitzberger 2003b:186).

There is also a noted difference between Jesus’ action and Mary’s action. Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, while he washed his disciples’ feet. The similarity of their actions lies in them both wiping the feet afterwards: Jesus with a cloth, and Mary with her hair (Kitzberger

¹⁰ Assuming what the theological intention of a biblical author was for depicting characters in specific ways, is no simple task. To my mind, such assumptions are interpretative acts at their best. However, from a gender-critical perspective it is interesting to note the marked contrast between the depictions of Mary of Bethany and Judas Iscariot.

2003b:186).¹¹ It is worth noting that the verb used to describe the act of Jesus “wiping” (ἐκμάσσειν) the disciples’ feet with the cloth in John 13:5, corresponds to the verb used for Mary “wiping” (ἐξέμαξεν) Jesus’ feet with her hair in 12:3 (O’Day 2015:615; Conway 2003:91; Kanagaraj 2013:136).¹² It is in this act of “wiping” of feet that a particular and unusual level of physical intimacy is created - between Mary and Jesus, and between Jesus and his disciples. In both cases, this intimacy is depicted within a scene of severe transgression of gendered boundaries. One might ask, if erotic tones have been noted for this act of wiping by Mary, should not mention also be made of the seemingly erotic tones of Jesus wiping off feet - particularly in view of the sexual connotations related to the bodies of slaves?

Habermann (2012:676) considers the depiction of Jesus’ body in the Fourth Gospel to be “the site of his relationship with believers.” However, she does not explicitly mention the narratives of John 12:1-8 or 13:1-17 in the examples she cites to motivate this statement. I am of the opinion that they should definitely be included, given that these narratives revolve around particular depictions of Jesus’ body and bodily senses which in turn involve his relation to his followers.

When Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, she is positioned at his feet. Using her hair to wipe dry the feet covered in oil, is indeed a very sensual act. The intimacy between Mary and Jesus hints towards the intimacy between Jesus and his “own.” O’Day (2015:619) argues that Jesus enters into an intimate relationship with the disciples by means of the foot washing. This is an intimacy that echoes the intimacy of his relationship with God. It is also an intimacy that unsettles Peter, because it overturns all his conventional assumptions of roles and respectability (13:6, 8). However, it is only by accepting Jesus in the unexpected role of host as well as intimate servant that one has a “share” with him and receives the love of God incarnate. This intimacy is not merely on spiritual level; it is physically embodied in the act of Jesus touching, washing, and drying the feet of the disciples. However, such an intimacy - both physical and spiritual - requires that particular gendered social conventions are overturned.

¹¹ Kitzberger (2003b:186-187) argues for a rereading that eventually opens up the text of 12:1-8 to Luke 7:36-50 as an intertext, thereby establishing an interfigural relationship between Mary of Bethany and the anonymous Lukan woman. She draws the conclusion that “(d)ue to the configuration between Jesus and Mary of Bethany and due to her interfigural relationship with the Lukan woman, interfigural relationship is also established between Jesus and the Lukan woman. In fact, there are more parallels between the latter two, because both are actually washing the feet.” From a gender-critical perspective such interfigural relationship between Jesus and the Lukan woman offer interesting possibilities. The focus of this research project, however, is on the Johannine narratives and the relation between 12:1-8 and 13:1-17.

¹² This verb also occurred proleptically in the participial form in 11:2 (ἐκμάξασα).

The literary relation between these two narratives lies further in the effect of the events of John 12:1-8, on the events that will take place in 13:1-17. Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:330) notes that it is possible that the gesture of wiping Jesus' feet with her hair points forward to the dinner, where Jesus washes and dries the feet of the disciples. Edwards (2003:109) argues with more certainty that Mary anointing Jesus' feet is an anticipation of Jesus' own humility in washing his disciples' feet. As a whole, the scene points forward to Jesus' death and burial. According to Kanagaraj (2013:124), Mary's act of anointing Jesus' feet, prefigures what Jesus will do before the feast of the Passover. Her anointing proclaims the enthronement of Jesus as King on the cross, as fulfilment of God's plan of redemption for humanity. Gender transgressive depictions with the potential of transforming space, alludes to the utmost transgressive and transformative event: the crucifixion of Jesus.

For O'Day (2012:525), the story of Mary anointing Jesus anticipates three crucial parts of the remainder of the Gospel of John. First, it anticipates the death and burial of Jesus. Second, it anticipates the foot washing that takes place in John 13: "Mary does for Jesus now what Jesus will do for his disciples later." Third, it anticipates the love commandment that Jesus will give his disciples in 13:34-35; Mary is thus the first person in the Fourth Gospel to live out Jesus' love commandment. Scott (2003:1191) argues that there is true Johannine irony being portrayed in these two narratives. Lazarus, the one who has been given new life, witnesses the seal of death being set on his life-giver, by his own sister. Simultaneously, in her self-giving and potentially humiliating action, she is pointing forward to the marker of discipleship which Jesus himself will point out at the dinner with his followers.

According to Thurston (1998:88-89), the anointing of Mary has two effects. First, it gives Jesus the idea for the foot washing that will follow in John 13: Mary's act becomes the vehicle he appropriates to illustrate dramatically the meaning of discipleship. Second, seeing as the anointing is for the day of his burial (12:7), it helps Jesus to understand that his hour has come - an announcement he will make publicly in 12:20-36. That Mary wipes off the ointment with her hair (12:3) suggests that Mary is not only predicting Jesus' passion, but also his incorrupt resurrection. Whereas Lazarus was expected to have had the stench of decomposition enveloping his body (11:39), the aroma of perfume need not remain on Jesus' body, seeing as he is incorruptible (Thurston 1998:89). Mary's act of anointing is even more than a prediction of Jesus' death and his incorrupt resurrection: In view of what is to follow, she also becomes a disciple in a technical sense as she fulfils the

command that Jesus will give in 13:14-15 (Thurston 1998:89). Accordingly, the messianic confession of Martha in John 11 and the anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary in John 12, both point to the death and resurrection of Jesus, namely his hour of glorification (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983:331).

From a gender-critical perspective, I argue that these narratives do not merely revolve around two anonymous individuals, with an echo of the behaviour of the first individual (12:1-8) by the second individual (13:1-17). More specifically, the behaviour of the male Jesus appears to echo the supposedly shameless behaviour of the female Mary. Thereby the character of Jesus not merely accepts and defends her gender transgressive behaviour in 12:1-8, but he himself follows her example of gender transgressive behaviour in 13:1-17. This the male Jesus however does, whilst remaining in the gender privileged position of an honourable man - both in relation to Mary and the other guests present at the dinner, and in relation to the disciples present at the last dinner. Both Mary and Jesus also remain in their respective female/male embodiments as far as appearance is concerned, which in turn sustains the overarching male/female binary of their context.

Consequently, no clear-cut portrayal of "gender" is offered by these narratives. Rather, I regard such gender ambiguity to be destabilizing within the narratives themselves, with the potential to also have a destabilizing effect by means of such gender-critical readings in contemporary settings.

6.3 Engaging narrative gender complexity: Destabilization by means of narratives

Should the aim be to obtain "proof" from these two biblical narratives for contemporary discussions on gender and sexuality, one would have to contend that the characters and the actions narrated provide validation for two of the more familiar positions. On the one hand, it would seem as if clearly distinguishable gender-specific and traditional gendered behaviour is depicted, (seemingly) performed by characters due to their biological sex, and thereby validating that gender corresponds with sex. On the other hand, context-specific and transgressive gendered behaviour that is adapted and shaped according to the required social situation is also depicted, thereby discrediting the notion that gender is fixed and stable, and necessarily corresponds with sex. Measured against both contemporary essentialist (and implicitly, complementarian) as well as constructivist views of gender (as described in Chapter 1), the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 fail to

provide sufficient “proof” for merely one position, which would exclude completely the other.

If, then, these narratives fail to provide a straightforward answer to a question which requires an either/or answer - either an essentialist position, or a constructivist position - namely, “What does the Bible say about gender,” what is a contemporary interpreter left to do? Both these positions could be validated, depending on the position from which the question is asked. As such, approaching the biblical narratives for “proof” is thus problematic. These narratives portray gender ambiguity, a both/and answer, and thereby no concluding and exclusive evidence for either view.

Being found lacking an either/or answer for such a type of question is precisely the point of this research project: Biblical narratives are not in the first instance meant to provide simple answers or solutions to contemporary debates on gender and sexuality. This was not the purpose of the Johannine or any other biblical narratives, and it would therefore be presumptuous to assume that they can be implored as such. Such a “proof texting” approach does not reckon with the literary, historical and rhetorical dimensions of biblical texts. Furthermore, it does not acknowledge the role of the social location and ideological worldviews of the contemporary interpreter, or the subjectivity of the entire process of interpretation. Moreover, it does not reckon with the development within the field of gender studies, which offers many more perspectives on the understanding of gender and sexuality, than simply the essentialist or constructivist positions.

Rather, in both instances (irrespective of the fact that the position of constructivism might be considered to allow for more diversity and equality, and thus be ethically more appealing for some), the text is simply (and simplistically) appropriated to merely mirror the position of the interpreter without acknowledging the influence of said position on their interpretation of the narratives.

Such complexity in and between the narratives presents a contemporary interpreter with (at least) three hermeneutical options, in view of theological discourses on gender and sexuality; ignorance, opposition, or integration. Ignorance would mean that the interpreter merely takes note of such complexity, but continues as before, as if such complexity was never encountered. Opposition would entail an active reaction to the complexity, with the purpose of propagating existing convictions. Integration opens the possibility of change and the ability to adjust or change course, where needed.

Opting for the hermeneutical option of integration (precisely as an alternative to ignorance and opposition observed in many contemporary theological settings), I regard biblical narratives as potential sites for constructive and life-giving discourses on gender and sexuality: precisely because of the fact that they do not allow themselves to be pushed into neat boxes that confirm what the interpreter already “knows”. Rather, as I have concluded from gender-critical readings of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17, biblical narratives may provide much rather an example of the complexity of gender and sexuality - a complexity present since long before contemporary discourses had taken place.

Such narrative gender complexity - a complexity that might also be described as gender fluidity - could potentially have a much needed destabilizing effect on particular “fixed” ideas and notions about gender and sexuality, and especially on “fixed” and popular hermeneutical approaches to biblical narratives in contemporary discourses. What is required is not more “proof” for particular positions on gender and gender relations, but rather a destabilization of hermeneutical frameworks that regard “proof texting” as the way to engage theological discourses on gender and sexuality. Accordingly the transformative potential that seems to be hinted at in these narratives could be actualized.

It is such potential destabilizing effect of hermeneutical frameworks, by means of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17, that will now be discussed in two parts: First, by means of an exploration of why disruption is required in contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality (6.3.1); and second, by suggesting that biblical narratives can form a vantage-point for biblical hermeneutics that can engage complexity in an ethical manner, given contemporary contexts of gender complexity (6.3.2).

6.3.1 Why is hermeneutical disruption required?

I regard a disruption of the above-mentioned contemporary theological notions of gender and sexuality, by means of biblical narratives, to be of crucial importance for three reasons: First, in such notions the contextual location of both biblical writings and interpreters of biblical writings are typically ignored, which reduces biblical texts to mere vehicles for particular viewpoints and ideologies; second, the perspectives on gender are often merely echoes of popular and stereotypical views on gender, rather than being informed by the broad field of gender studies; and third, there is little or no regard for the type of gendered power relations that are posited as being universal and void of context.

As such it represents a hermeneutical approach that does not sufficiently reckon with the complexity of biblical narratives, gender and sexuality discourses, and biblical interpretation.

The impact of popular contemporary hermeneutical engagement with biblical narratives is concrete and tangible, affecting the lives of flesh-and-blood persons both within and outside of the contexts of Christian faith communities. The impact is felt in a myriad of ways, and often not necessarily even noticed or regarded as harmful or violent. However, in my opinion it sustains a form of systemic violence that is posited as “normal”, and within which a range of binary relations continue to constitute a hierarchy of personhood, where some lives matter more than others.

Here follows a discussion on each of these reasons.

6.3.1.1 Making something of biblical interpretation that it is not

Generally speaking, there has been a welcome movement in biblical scholarship since the late 1960's from a quest for finding objective truths or facts “in” or “behind” biblical texts, towards an acknowledgement of the role of the reader, and the subjectivity of the process of interpretation (Vanhoozer 2010:262). Whereas former objective interpretative endeavours required of interpreters to leave their prejudices behind, the present contexts of readers are now regarded as a valuable element in the process of interpretation (Vanhoozer 2010:263).

Accordingly, meaning is regarded as indeterminate, in other words the place of the reader will determine what he or she gets out of a text. For some reader-response critics, this means that readers simply complete the meaning of a text by following authorial instructions and textual indications. In a more radical sense, indeterminacy implies that texts have no fixed “meaning” and that the reader determines what to make of the text. “The meaning” is the result of a certain way of reading, rather than any inherent entity discovered in texts (Vanhoozer 2010:264).

As noted by Stratton (2000:126), hermeneutical positions need to be adopted with the following assumptions: Meaning is produced by the interaction among author, text, and

reader; texts and their interpretations are shaped through a struggle between competing ideologies; and there is no value-neutral interpretation.¹³

Within the sphere of cultural studies and its relationship to biblical studies, the impossibility of objective interpretation has been highlighted even more pertinently. The diversity of readership of biblical texts is increasingly being recognized, thereby also placing emphasis on the use of different reading strategies and interpretative models. Moreover, the multilevel social groupings represented by readers and to which they belong, is becoming more visible in biblical interpretation. Such ways of reading regard all interpretative models, retrievals of meaning from texts, and reconstructions of history as constructs. These are formulated and advanced by flesh-and-blood readers, who participate in the process of interpretation from different and highly complex social locations. Competing modes of discourse are therefore taken for granted and any idea of a master narrative renounced as in itself a construct (Segovia 1995:31).

Goss & West (2000b:5) note that this recognition of the social location of flesh-and-blood readers in more recent biblical hermeneutics have created space for particularly marginalized and oppressed communities to define their own “point of reference” from which they read the Bible. Thereby they are able to (re)define and (re)affirm themselves in the midst of a problematic social environment, whose skewed perspectives and assertions of supposed Christian values have historically steadily and systematically worked against them. Tolbert (2000b:ix) argues that profound damage has been done to millions of people over hundreds of generations in the name of the Bible. Since each interpretation of a text in the Bible is a combination of the stories themselves and the interests, commitments, and beliefs of the person or group of persons reading the stories, the power of those reading the Bible and how they decide to apply what they have read makes all the difference in what the effect of the reading will be.

All readings of biblical texts are “biased,” in the sense that they reflect the commitments and social and cultural locations of each reader or group of readers. This should relativize all claims to having the final and definitive “truth” about the Bible, but unfortunately, in the history of the use of the Bible in the tradition of Christianity, it has not (Tolbert 2000b:x).

¹³ The following is a feminist perspective of how interpretation is never value-neutral: “That cultures and societies presented or described God in male or patriarchal terms does not make God male or patriarchal. As I understand it, the New Testament is the literary record of God’s most dramatic attempt to be better known by human beings. If the writers of the New Testament in some ways fell short of God’s self-revelation, it is not God’s fault. The Word, after all, became flesh, not book” (Thurston 1998:6).

From the perspective of gender and sexuality, women and LGBT* persons across the globe can attest to this damage and abuse, up to this day still.

Martin (2006:1) is of the opinion that, in spite of the developments in biblical scholarship, one of the common assumptions among both lay Christians as well as scholars is still that the Bible “speaks” and that the role of the interpreter is just to “listen.” For him, there is a “myth of textual agency” that needs to be challenged, seeing as texts do not interpret themselves; rather, they must be interpreted by human beings. Given that the responsibility for interpretation lies with us as human readers of the text, is for Martin (2006:2) not only a point about literary theory, but also an ethical issue: “I believe that one of the most serious impediments to the ethical use of Scripture, especially with regard to issues of gender and sexuality, has been the myth of textual agency.” In his perspective, ethical and political responsibility of interpreters can be masked, denied, or lightened for as long as the text itself is thought to provide its own interpretation or to determine its own meaning. He calls this “the sin of Christian textual foundationalism” (Martin 2006:2). This differs from fundamentalism in that it does not necessarily hold to the complete inerrancy of Scripture, but rather holds that the Bible provides, or should provide, a sound basis for doctrine and ethics, at least if interpreted by the appropriate methods (Martin 2006:2-3).

Such a distinction between fundamentalism and foundationalism is important for discussions on gender and sexuality in contemporary discourses, particularly for the manner in which biblical narratives are interpreted. Foundationalists might be able to identify the creation stories of Genesis as myths of origin with no historical referent. Yet, nonetheless, they appeal to the stories as a basis for ethical guidelines on male-female relations (Martin 2006:3), thereby still implying that an objective truth of some sorts can be “extracted” from a biblical text.

According to Martin (2006:16), interpreters must rather admit that there are no secure foundations for knowledge. There are also no guarantees that any interpreter will not use the biblical text unethically, in spite of the methodology they apply. Instead of continuing to insist that there are reliable foundations for interpretation, we should learn to live faithful and ethical lives without secure foundations. This need not result in fear and anxiety rooted in a quest for modernist certainty, but should rather be considered as a challenge to our imaginations and an invitation to faith without foundations (Martin 2006:154-185). Harrill (2006:2) remarks that the professions of both history and biblical studies have moved beyond an objectivism that regards historical facts naively, as existing prior to and

independent of interpretation. He argues that such an interpretative hegemony can no longer intellectually justified - something that should press us into caution, rather than despair.

For the purpose of this research project, the acknowledgment of the subjectivity and constructed nature of the process of making meaning is central. Gender and sexuality are, in my mind, two of the socio-cultural and ethical issues in contemporary theological discourses that are most debated on the fictive basis of "objective biblical truths." Besides a skewed understanding of the process of meaning making and the role of the interpreter and context, such appeals to biblical texts for "answers" on issues of gender and sexuality also do not take into consideration particular developments in theories about gender.

6.3.1.2 Making something of gender that it is not

Connell (1995:45-52) argues that two opposing conceptions of the body have dominated discussions on gender in recent decades. One conception is that the body is a natural machine which produces gender difference, be it through genetic programming, hormonal difference, or the different roles of the sexes in reproduction. This is a conception that has translated the dominant ideology into the language of biological science. The second conception, prevalent in especially the social sciences and humanities, is that the body is a more or less neutral surface on which a social symbolism is imprinted. A third position has been to opt for a compromise, namely that both biology and social influence combine to produce gender differences in human behaviour. All three of these positions form a part of the contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality. According to Connell (1995:51), such a compromise as is represented by the third position is the formula of sex role theory, which simply adds a social script to a biological dichotomy. Biology and social influence are not equal, as biology is always seen as the most real and more basic of the pair (Connell 1995:52).

Hornsby (2016a:14) argues that many people are willing to accept that gender is culturally produced and articulated by things like hairstyles, clothing, or mannerisms. At the same time, many still cling to the notion that in some way or the other it is our genitals that make us either a man or a woman, regardless of which gender we may perform. From this point of view, a perspective which regards a compromise of biology and social influence for the production of gender as valid, simply maintains a binary pair in which biology is the dominant and social influence is the subordinate. This binary pair, in turn, undergirds and

sustains the exclusivist male/female and masculine/feminine binaries - and a heteronormative (and heterosexist) environment.

Within theological discourses, these opposing conceptions are represented by the positions of essentialism and constructivism. Jones (2000:23) considers the debate on essentialism and constructivism to be the centre of recent feminist theological and theoretical insights concerning women's nature. I contend that it lies at the heart of most theological discourses on gender as a whole - thereby including also gender-critical, masculinity, and queer theological and theoretical discussions.

The term "essentialism" has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy, where all things were classified according to inherent and unchanging qualities or "essences". These "essentials" are often spoken of as "universals". Broadly defined, essentialism refers to any view of the nature of women and men that makes universal claims about women and men, based on characteristics considered to be an inherent part of being male or female. Such a belief in an unchanging core in either womanhood or manhood, signals two additional features of essentialism; its naturalism and determinism. The features are believed to be inherent and natural. Men and women inherently are a certain way, whether they choose to acknowledge it, or not (Jones 2000:25-27). The impact of Aristotelian essentialism¹⁴ on the lives of men and women as social beings are questioned within contemporary (and particularly postmodern) understandings of gender theory (Sawyer 2014:264).

Essentialism is based on "difference": The biological difference between men and women is considered to predetermine how men and women relate to each other. The assumed heterosexual essence of all persons is thereby implied (Jones 2000:27). There are different kinds of essentialism. The most familiar is biological essentialism (with the focus on genitalia and procreation). There are also various forms of psychological essentialism (with the focus on masculine and feminine traits), although the distinction between the two types are not always that clear (Soskice 1996:55).

Within essentialism, the sex-gender scheme (whereby sexual difference is identified with both biological dimensions, and dispositional and social characteristics) and hierarchical

¹⁴ The Aristotelian understanding is that the biology of the individual forms the essence of that individual in terms of identity. This is regarded as irreducible, unchanging, and inescapable. This belief system developed into the religion of the Roman Empire. Contemporary teaching within the Roman Catholic tradition still continues to draw on Aristotelian essentialism to argue why, for example, a woman cannot perform the role priest because of her nature (Sawyer 2014:264).

dualistic patterns (gender binaries) mark all elements in daily life. A gendered logic of essentialized thinking governs all aspects; accordingly, the whole world appears to be not only gendered, but naturally dualistic and often hierarchical (Jones 2000:27-29). Second wave feminism is marked by a clear articulation of the distinction between sex and gender. Sex is said to refer to the physical characteristics inscribed on the body, identifying it as male or female. Gender refers to the distinctive roles ascribed to the two sexes by the societies they live in and the identities they assume within those roles as men and women. Since ancient times biological sex and gender were inextricably bound together, with biological sex constructing the identity and life expectations of gender (Sawyer 2014:264).¹⁵

Second wave feminism was characterized particularly by essentialist understandings of the sex/gender relationship, and universalizing tendencies of such understandings. Not only was “woman’s experience” equated to “women’s experience,” but such an essentialist understanding of “woman’s experience” was typically also a generalizing experience from the privileged position of white, Western women activists. The rejection of the singular “woman’s experience” by, for example, the womanist movement, weakened the view of any essential, unifying commonality among women. Such a widening and deepening of the critical lens marks the shift from second to third wave feminism (Sawyer 2014:265).

From a Christian perspective, complementarity is a framing of essentialist thought by means of particular theological positions. Complementarity is used to assign specific roles to men and women, based partly on the physiological differences between men and women, but mainly on the Bible, on traditions of biblical interpretation and on historically based Christian practice. It has resulted in the assumption that the sexes are not whole without one another. The language of complementarity is the language of a power relationship (Gelder 1996:33). As noted in Chapter 1, the language and theology of complementarity is rife in contemporary theological discourses, influencing and also being influenced by biblical interpretations which are misinformed.

¹⁵ Eriksson (1995:33-36) (following mainly Eva Lundgren) notes three problems with the distinction made between sex and gender. First, by focusing on gender as the social or cultural construct, sight is lost of the fact that in a patriarchal culture, subordination of women does not only take place because of gender, but also because of sex. Second, sex differences are regarded as stable and unchangeable, whereas gender differences are the only aspects regarded as continuously changing. Third, if sex as a category is so strongly divorced from gender and is the only category worth discussing as it is culturally construed, then gender differences need to be seen as relatively uniform and thus tends to become universalistic.

Constructivism is generally applied to make the point that supposed eternal principles of men and women's nature are historically and culturally varied and, consequently, that gender is "formed" rather than "given." Such a formation process happens in a variety of ways. Collectively, it is a role played by culture or cultural constructs, that is the entire system of symbols, languages, beliefs, actions, and attitudes within which persons live and learn to organize and make sense of their world and actions. This system is forever shifting, thereby gendered persons take on many forms and the outcomes are never entirely predictable (Jones 2000:32-33). The constructivist view of gender opens the possibility to move beyond universalistic notions of "being male" and "being female," thereby acknowledging that gender is constructed differently in diverse local settings (Tolbert 2000a:101).

The existence of some sort of commonality among women that extends beyond biology and into shared experience was a vital factor within gender theory among second-wave feminists; without such commonality, there could be no meaningful cohesion and "women" as a category would not exist. Accordingly, essence as debated in second wave feminism was based on social construction: Shared invariant social characteristics became the basis of feminist universalism. However, identifying such characteristics was almost impossible without straying into the sphere of biological determinism (Sawyer 2014:267).

Jones (2000:34-36) distinguishes between weak and strong constructivist views, particularly in reference to feminism. A weak constructivist view insists that there are unalterable bottom-line givens, so-called "raw material of personhood," that can be formed by culture in different ways. Such cultural formation, however, never alters the pre-existing self. Strong constructivists contend that culture so profoundly determines human beings, that it is not possible to distinguish the "nature" from the "nurture" with respect to sexual difference. Apart from the heavily gendered cultural rules about sexual binaries, that govern our societies, it is impossible to identify the "truly natural" - considering that the category "natural" is in itself a construct. Although weak constructivists may respond that there are, indeed, biological differences to be spotted between male and female bodies, strong constructivists such as Judith Butler will argue that culture disposes one to see the human body in terms of sexed difference. Science, therefore, cannot help but identify and analyse biology in gendered terms. Thereby the objectivity of science is disregarded; science itself has been shaped by particular cultural conceptions of gender. For Sawyer (2014:270), strong constructivists represent a rejecting of any notion of biological essential

difference and instead opt for radical constructivism that moves beyond the familiar sex/gender divide.

The movement in feminism, from a general “we-consciousness” of women and an “essence of the feminine”, to an increasing recognition of many and deep differences among women, made possible a breakthrough in biblical interpretation which distinguished between (biological) sex and (cultural) gender.¹⁶ Thereby it became possible to analyse both biological similarities and cultural differences. The distinction between sex and gender also made it possible to expose the supposedly fixed “natural” features, which were actually the product of historical growth, or were cultural givens in the context of a dominant sex/gender system. Consequently, the very different experiences of being a man or woman throughout history could also start being recognized (Wacker 2006:639).

Within gender discourses, strategic essentialism is a position taken from a pragmatic and functionalist point of view. Such a view is the advancement of the struggle for women’s empowerment. Thereby notions about the universals or essentials of women may be strategically applied to further the cause of emancipation. There is no single view of “women” that strategic essentialism regards as pragmatic and useful; it will depend on the particular situation at hand. Positive value is found by making essentialist claims about human nature in general and women’s nature in particular (Jones 2000:43-48).¹⁷

Graham (1996:79-80) identifies three emergent perspectives on gender. First, gender is a fundamental form of social organization, not an ontological state or an intrinsic property of the individual. To be a gendered person means that one inhabits a particular culture. Such social relations - and implicitly gender as one form of social relations - are generated and maintained by human practice, both symbolic and material.¹⁸ Second, the familiar ontological dichotomies (such as nature/culture, private/public and emotion/reason) for which gender difference has appeared to be an integral organizing metaphor, are claimed to be themselves the products of a gendered system of thought. Thus, they reflect a wider

¹⁶ Within queer theory there is much emphasis on the influence of socially expected functions on the construction of biology (genitals) and bodiliness. Thereby not only gender is regarded as being socially constructed, but also sex; our bodies are formed by way of the expectations set to it within predominantly heterosexist and heteronormative worldviews.

¹⁷ According to Sawyer (2014:268), strategic essentialism resists universalistic feminism. The purpose of strategic essentialism is to be a site for shared nominal essence; it is relative, adapting and modifying depending on context. It identifies with women’s experiences at particular moments in history.

¹⁸ In her book “Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Gender Identity” (1990) and subsequent volumes, feminist and queer criticist Judith Butler contends that gender is something that is performed or done, rather than something essential, natural or innate. However, this gender performativity is not boundless or automatic. Rather it is “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (Butler 2004:1).

gender regime of power and social relations. Third, gender difference has become a question of how a variety of social practices and symbolic exchanges creates a human culture that is always already gendered. Difference is regarded as a social, and not a self-evident, ontological or essentialist category. The gendered dimension of human personhood means that all persons are simultaneously being the creators and creatures of gender relations. Critical analyses of what it means to be a gendered person therefore must focus on human practices as the force which generates gender identity, representation and difference.

By exploring the socio-cultural background of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 and their setting in the ancient Mediterranean context of honour and shame, and reading these narratives through a gender-critical lens, I have attempted to indicate how culture and social location shaped the perception and understanding of gender and sexuality in ancient settings. The one-sex model, the gendered nature of the honour and shame worldview, and the influence of class (particularly slavery) on gender were all highlighted. Such an understanding of gender and sexuality determines what types of gendered behaviour and gender portrayals would have been considered as affirming, transgressive, or as gender reversal - within the narrative world of these ancient narratives, as well as for the implied first-century readers of these narratives. Furthermore, the fact that characters could be depicted as performing their gender in various ways - conformance, transgression, and role reversal (rather than being "fixed" in their gender performance), is an indication that gender was considered to be a dynamic and moveable entity.

According to Burke (2014:304), many contemporary theorists argue that gender (and some would also add, sex) is a social construction produced by a multiplicity of discourses in any given time and place. A particular culture or social environment enforces the sex/gender norms that must be performed, and the compulsive repetition of such performances creates the illusion that sex and gender are permanent, stable essences. The very need for repetition, however, opens up space for performing a culture or social environment's sex/gender norms in a transgressive manner. Thereby it is demonstrated that sex and gender are actually social constructions, and therefore unstable and contingent. Furthermore, as Hornsby (2016b:86) argues, if we (theologically) continue to hold on to the notion that there are only two genders and two sexes, and all subsequent

gendered behaviours are natural, thus unchanging, then lasting social and political change is impossible, because it is anchored to nature.¹⁹

Considering the broader scope of discourses on gender and sexuality within the field of gender studies, and particularly the development of these discourses into a multitude of different perspectives over the past few decades, further highlight the contextual and cultural formation of understandings of gender and sexuality. No one single idea of what gender is, how it relates to sex, or what it means to be male and female, man and woman, masculine and feminine, exists or has ever existed as borne out by debates among the ancient Greeks as much as among gender and other theorists today. Instead, notions of gender and sex are continuously being reshaped, reformed, and reinscribed, within social relations on a micro-, meso- and macro-level in societies. This has been the case in ancient settings, and continues to be the case today.

6.3.1.3 Ignoring discursive power and its potentially harmful effects

Apart from ignoring the continuous reshaping and development of thought, expectations, and practices relating to gender, the presence of power in all social, gendered relations is often ignored in contemporary discourses on gender and sexuality.²⁰

Castelli (1991:43-44), in her research on power, rhetoric, and Pauline literature and following the work of Michael Foucault, regards power not as a thing that one person or class hold over and against another person or class. Rather, she argues, power constructs the contours of the relations between people/s, which affects both the dominator and the dominated. Power characterizes all social relations, and conversely, all social relations are power relations. Moreover, liberation from oppressive social systems does not imply the elimination of power; rather, it is a struggle for the reformulation of the concept of power. Power relations are interactive in character. Thereby all actors in a

¹⁹ Hornsby (2016b:86) describes her task as a scholar of New Testament studies as being twofold: first, to uncover the ways in which academics are accomplices in reproducing lies about sex and gender for the masses (namely that gender is natural, stable, and dualistic); and second, to uncover the ways the New Testament contains alternatives to such misperceptions about gender. This she does by appropriating particularly the lens of queer theology and queer biblical interpretation to New Testament interpretation.

²⁰ Foucault (1978:93) regards power to be everywhere, “not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere...power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular situation.” Power’s “condition of possibility” lies precisely therein that “it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter is always local and unstable.” As much as power is inescapable, it can be reconfigured and reshaped by all involved in the power relations. Rouse’s (2005:110) view is that power constitutes as a power relation that depends upon its re-enactment or reproduction over time as a sustained power relationship.

power relationship possess a critical access to agency. Although power relationships are asymmetrical, they do not render the subordinate actor without the possibility for action. Moreover, power is not equal to violence, although violence may in practice be deployed in a power relationship (Castelli 1991:44-45).

Considering that gender is always one of the elements present in all social relations, and then such a presence of power is an intricate part of our gendered relations. Such power can either be life-giving, or life-denying. Particular aspects of ideology contribute to the construction of power relations: Claims to truth, and a drive to produce an all-encompassing, singular, and “natural” truth (Castelli 1991:52).

Not only is ideology part of the gendered relations within which all persons find themselves; ideology is also involved in our (gendered) interpretation of biblical narratives and theological discourses on gender and sexuality. Stratton (2000:126) notes that hermeneutical positions need to be adopted with the following assumptions: meaning is produced by the interaction among author, text, and reader; texts and their interpretations are shaped through a struggle between competing ideologies; and there is no value-neutral interpretation.

I regard the insistence and focus on difference between the binary categories of men and women in contemporary theological discourses to be a life-denying and ideological appropriation of power, due to the fact that such difference is never a difference of two equals. Rather, it always presupposes that one pair of the binary is superior to the other rather than acknowledging the construed nature of such a power relation that may rightly be challenged and opposed. Moreover, I regard the manner in which biblical narratives are appropriated to validate such life-denying and ideological appropriation of power as a further abuse of power, whereby one form of interpretation is held up as the superior one and consequently posited as the prescribed norm for all persons. Such appropriation of biblical narratives, in service of these types of life-denying power relations, ignore the manner in which biblical narratives - such as John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 - construe alternative types of power relation; types that challenge the “givenness” of particular gendered power structures.

Furthermore, the broad differences in the characters traits and behaviour of women and men that are typically posited by socio-biology and propagated by supporters of essentialist and complementarian thought have been discredited time and again by a great

deal of research. Connell (1995:47) notes that the usual finding, particularly on intellect, temperament, and other personal traits, is that there are no measurable differences at all. Where differences do appear, they are small compared to variation within either sex, and very small compared to differences in the social positioning of women and men. Furthermore, the evidence of cross-cultural and historical diversity in gender is vast. The situation is thus far more complex than is typically acknowledged. In a discussion on the isolation of gender as category from others such as race, class, ethnicity and religion, Van Leeuwen (1993:230-231) rightly poses the critical question as to why the category of gender as a social category necessarily needs to be given so much preference. In reading the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 it was evident that the category of gender by no means functions in isolation; it is precisely by means of its intersection with other social categories that it takes shape and is continuously reshaped.

Postmodernist thought has rejected the concept of universals. This not only applies to a distinction of different profiles of essential maleness and essential femaleness, but also the idea of an essential humanness. Any notion of an essential self and universal human values are declared to be social constructions that veil the universalizing of dominant cultural groups of men and women. Such infinite particularity needs to be recognized (Radford Ruether 1998:10). By reading the two Johannine narratives under consideration in this research project against the background of the ancient Mediterranean world, the role of context and social location in construing understandings of gender and sexuality was highlighted.

Queer theory has played a large role in challenging conventional and universal understandings of gender and sexuality. As Guest (2011:9) notes, queer theory has taken a confrontational, uncompromising stance to resist the two-sex, two-gender binary of male/female and masculine/feminine. Queer theory does this by “subverting, undoing, deconstructing the normalcy of sex/gender regimes, cracking them open, focusing on the fissures that expose their constructedness” (Guest 2011:9). Hornsby (2016b:84) argues that if it is believed that two genders are “natural” or “God-given”, then any expression of gender that does not conform to the predetermined sets of actions allowed to that body is considered not merely to be strange, but also morally out of place.

In view of the depicted reactions of the characters of Judas (in John 12:1-8) and Peter (in John 13:1-7), the impression is there that such a moral judgment of unconflicting gender behaviours is not exactly something recent. Rather, the formation of gendered boundaries

in some way or the other is deeply embedded in social life. Yet, the transgression of such gendered boundaries - whether in a first-century ancient Mediterranean context or contemporary contexts - highlights the possibilities of alternatives amidst even the strictest of boundary-making attempts.

Connell (1995:52) contends that not biological determinism (essentialism), social determinism (constructivism), or a combination of the two is sufficient for understanding gender. Although neither the radically cultural character of gender nor the bodily presence can be ignored, other ways of thinking about the matter are needed. Such an alternative is a position from which bodies are seen as both objects and agents of practice, and the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined. Such a pattern can be termed body-reflexive practice (Connell 1995:61).

Body-reflexive practices are not internal to the individual. They involve social relations and symbolism, up to the level of large-scale social institutions. Certain versions of masculinity and femininity are constituted in their circuits as meaningful bodies and embodied meanings. Body-reflexive practices form more than mere individual lives. Rather, an entire social world is formed (Connell 1995:64). For men, as well as women, the world formed by the body-reflexive practices of gender is a domain of politics, namely the struggle of interest in a context of inequality. Gender politics is an embodied-social politics (Connell 1995:66).

Such an approach of body-reflexive practices to gender acknowledges the power relations involved in the formation, sustenance and development of gender relations. Given the agency possible in power relations, the power of these gendered power relations can be addressed, critiqued, challenged, and realigned as necessary. Gender as body-reflexive practices is a movement away from binary relations, which recognizes the intersectionality of gender relations and the various power relations invested in such intersections.

Connell (1995:75-76) argues that gender is a way of structuring social practice in general, rather than a special type of practice. Therefore, it is unavoidably involved with other social structures. Such an involvement with other social structures is described as a continuous intersection or interaction with social structures such as nationality, or position in the world order. Understanding gender implies constantly going beyond gender. The same applies in reverse. Class, race, or global inequality cannot be understood without constantly moving towards gender. "Gender relations are a major component of social

structure as a whole, and gender politics are among the main determinants of our collective fate” (Connell 1995:76). This is also evident from the manner in which particular contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality influence biblical interpretation, which in turn influence the manner in which people are taught (and often prescribed) to relate to one another - both in and outside of Christian faith communities.

In feminist thought, power is re-imagined as energy, creativity, vigour, passion, wisdom, participation, mutuality-in-relation, over and against the powerlessness and subordination of the patriarchal system that has been experienced by women throughout the ages (McBride 1996:182-183). I wish to broaden such a reimagining of power for all social relations, to move beyond the hierarchies inscribed in gendered binary relations, including also the binary of heterosexual/non-heterosexual, and the myriads of further hierarchies created by means of intersections such as race, ethnicity, body ability, class, etc.²¹ Such reimagination of power appears to be presented by the characterization of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 - which could encourage a reimagination of hegemonic power in contemporary contexts.

An intersectional approach to gender - precisely as a means to destabilize hegemonic power - has received much attention in feminist biblical interpretation. In a recent publication, Schüssler Fiorenza (2014b:10) argues that a conceptualization of gender as a practice that produces sex differences should be considered as inflected by race, class, sexual preference, culture, religion, age, and nationality. This will allow for seeing that individuals are much more than simply gendered. The intersection of race, class, sexuality, nation, and religion constructs the meaning of being a man or a woman differently in different socio-political and cultural contexts. Although structures of heteronormativity, gender, race, and class are often seen as working alongside each other, the intertwined and integrated relationship of these structures should be recognized.

By failing to recognize the type of power relations invested in specifically the essentialist and complementarian positions on gender and sexuality in contemporary theological discourses, and by neglecting to critique methods of biblical interpretation that simply appropriate biblical texts and narratives as “proof” for either/or positions on gender and sexuality, gendered binary relations as a whole are kept in place: male/female,

²¹ I here deliberately use the term “non-heterosexual,” to indicate how the binary defines the other as measured against the norm of heterosexuality. As such, within such a binary, the existence of the other on mutual terms is not a possibility.

man/woman, masculine/feminine, essentialist/constructivist, nature/culture, heterosexual/non-heterosexual. Such type of power relations always necessitates an “other”, an opposition, by which to be defined. It does not allow for multiplicity, movement, or change. As such, both parties involved in the binary are in a constant struggle with one another.

I contend that such exclusivist style of hermeneutical engagement on gender and sexuality by no means contributes to life-giving alternatives amidst the complexity of contemporary contexts. A deliberate attempt at a different way of doing is required, if the cycle of misappropriation of biblical texts and disregard for contexts is to be broken.

6.3.2 Dialoguing past and present for the sake of hermeneutics of complexity

I regard the possible destabilization by means of the gender-critical readings of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 for contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality, to be such an alternative to a “competitive” hermeneutical framework, in which one or the other position needs to be “proved.” The gender-critical engagement with the narratives in this research project deliberately does not have as aim the diminishing of gendered complexity or a single “answer,” but rather highlights gendered complexity and is content with seemingly unresolved and open-ended interpretations.

According to Sawyer (2014:272), by uncovering the discourse of gendered identity and revealing its constructed constituents, gender theorists not only open potential means of understanding human agency in contemporary times, but their work also provides a useful hermeneutical lens for reading biblical literature. The fragility of given gendered behaviour patterns are clearly apparent in biblical narratives, whatever the theological purpose may be that it serves. Although the biblical law codes (to which one might specifically also add the household codes) reflect an uncompromising construction of prescribed gendered behaviour, the narratives set beside them often subvert them. Furthermore, gender theory might reveal that the premodern understandings of the human subject have more in common with the postmodern than they ever had with modernity.

I regard hermeneutical engagement with biblical narratives of particular importance for present-day theological discourses on gender and sexuality. One reason is that narratives provide models for action. Narratives shape people’s understanding of the world, and thus, the form and content of narratives have powerful potential for influencing the ways in

which people think, as well as what communities and individuals will think about (Van Leeuwen 1993:186). This is not to say that narratives have particular “messages” in and of themselves; rather, that they are potential sites of hermeneutical engagement, and that their content and the manner in which the content is presented is part of a process of interpretation.

In my opinion, contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality are in need of tools that will encourage interpreters to resist the urge of simplistic notions of perceived certainty, or mere continuation of binary thought regarding gender and sexuality. Given the central role that interpretation of biblical narratives has played in such discourses thus far, one has one of two options in relation to the appropriation of biblical narratives for such an endeavour: Either to disregard biblical narratives completely, out of fear that the pattern will simply continue repeating itself; or to engage biblical narratives, but then from a different perspective.

Given the centrality of the Bible as an authoritative source of meaning-making for so many persons in faith communities, as well as the persistent influence of interpretations of biblical texts in societies at large, I prefer the latter option.

In order to be an alternative hermeneutical framework that can hold the tension of multiplicity, open-endedness, and ambiguity, however, a measure of imagination, on the one hand, and certain practical markers, on the other hand, would be of importance: Both ancient and contemporary contexts need to be engaged in the process of interpretation, in dialogue with one another; the role of culture and social location in the shaping of understandings, expectations and expressions of gender roles and gender identity throughout history need to be acknowledged; the subjectivity of all forms of interpretation need to be reckoned - in narratives, in traditions, and in contemporary settings; narratives should be allowed to invite a variety of interpretative points of view, which may include contradiction; narratives should be regarded as descriptive sites of interpretation, set within a particular context, rather than prescriptive rules that are meant to govern human life in the present day and age.

As such, a movement towards hermeneutical frameworks that create space for both/and options for gender and sexuality discourses, rather than either/or choices, could become a viable option. Such an approach to biblical narratives is a much more encouraging

attempt at dealing with the complexity of gender and sexuality in our contemporary settings, than is an approach that is aimed at eliminating all options but one.

6.4 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I set out to weave together the strands of the research project, by drawing conclusions about the gender-critical readings of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:-17: individually, as well as in dialogue with one another. These conclusions, to my mind, present a gender ambiguity in the narratives, in terms of the gendered portrayal of specific characters, as well as the type of narrative actions that take place. Gender ambiguity is the chosen description, considering that the narratives appear to present both the expected and prescribed, as well as the unexpected and forbidden, gendered performances. Such a judgment has been made against the broad framework of the ancient Mediterranean context, with particular reference to the gendered cultural script of honour and shame. I regard such gender ambiguity as having a potential destabilizing effect within the narrative worlds, as well as for the implied reader of the narratives. As such, the narratives present gender complexity, rather than gender simplicity.

The expectation of a complete destruction of a (narrative) world ordered so clearly by means of gendered boundaries, is likely as unrealistic as would be a similar expectation of any other setting - also then of our contemporary settings. Given that such a complete removal of gendered order and power is highly improbable in all settings, including that of these two Johannine narratives, the transformative potential of gender ambiguous characterization in biblical narratives is all the more poignant. Transgressive behaviour within the confines of power-laden, gendered social systems is by no means a feeble second attempt. Rather, the appropriation of power in a manner which “goes against the grain,” such as was done by the character of Jesus, at the very least queries “naturally given” assumptions about the way things appear to “be”. By posing questions to such assumptions, the temporality, instability, and vulnerability of social systems can be exposed - both past and present; in narrative and in reality.

The chapter continued with a focus on the implications of such gender ambiguity and consequently gender complexity, from the perspective of contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality. I contend that the potential destabilizing effect of gender ambiguity is not necessarily limited to the narratives themselves, but that it could

also potentially have a destabilizing effect in contemporary theological settings. I regard this as a positive potential effect - one that is direly needed amidst particular interpretations of biblical narratives which posit deterministic, universalistic notions of gender and sexuality as being the timeless truth that are applicable to all persons.

I proceeded by providing three reasons why such hermeneutical frameworks are in need of disruption, namely: Biblical texts are approached as if containing objective truths, and with little or no regard for the influence of the social location of the interpreter; developments within the fields of gender studies and gender theory are disregarded, with a preference rather for popular notions of gender and sexuality; and the power inherent to social relations are not recognised, thereby not considering the potential life-denying effects of such hermeneutical frameworks.

Finally, I suggested that an alternative hermeneutical framework for theological discourses on gender and sexuality would be one that is able to dialogue past and present contexts of biblical narratives; and which can create space for complexity, multiplicity, and both/and options of interpretation instead of having to choose an either/or - a space in which the presence of (gendered) power can transform.

7. CONCLUSION

In the final chapter to her publication, “Unprotected Texts - The Bible’s Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire,” Jennifer Wright Knust describes how she is often asked to lead Bible studies at local churches. Studies of Paul and women or of the Bible and sexuality are especially popular topics. When teaching, she usually starts off by asking participants what they wish the Bible said about the topic at hand. She then points out that whatever we wish for, probably can be found somewhere in the Bible, which is why it is so important to admit that we have wishes, whatever they may be (Knust 2011:241). She further states:

We are not passive recipients of what the Bible says, but active interpreters who make decisions about what we will believe and what we will affirm. Admitting that we have wishes, and that our wishes matter, is therefore the first step to developing an honest and faithful interpretation (Knust 2011:241).

In my own experience, it is often the case that such acknowledgement of wishes is not part of contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality, and particularly then of the wishes involved in the interpretation of biblical narratives within these discourses. Rather, wishes are posited as factual truths that have been objectively excavated from biblical narratives and in turn presented as “what the Bible really says” - as if wishes and particular positions happen to be perfectly aligned with a “single truth” already present in a particular biblical narrative or set of narratives, and therefore they play no role in the outcome of our hermeneutical endeavours. It was against this background that the current research project took its point of departure - one that I consider problematic in terms of the interpretative process followed, as well as the outcomes of such an interpretative process.

More specifically, two contemporary theological positions that are characterized by the above-mentioned anachronistic and literalist hermeneutical approaches are essentialism and complementarianism. I regard the oft simplistic appropriation of the creation narratives and subsequent New Testament references with the purpose of validating these positions, to be a disregard of the wide range of biblical narratives that can be explored in theological discourses on gender and sexuality - a range that could complicate seemingly simple matters.

Constructivist positions on gender and sexuality within discourses on gender and sexuality have contributed to a broader range of interpretative possibilities of biblical narratives by acknowledging the fallacy of universal understandings of male/female and man/woman, as well as questioning the presupposition of a corresponding male-man and female-woman relationship between biological sex and gender. Moreover, the distinction itself between sex and gender has been critiqued and problematized from various points of departure. In recent years a broader range of narratives have been consulted for the purpose of the theological discourses on gender and sexuality. Yet often the same process is followed when engaging biblical narratives as is done within the scope of essentialism and complementarianism: a validation of a specific position, by simply applying biblical narratives as a means to an end.

This research project has been an attempt to not primarily argue for a particular position in view of the interpretation of biblical narratives, but rather for a different manner of approaching and engaging biblical narratives in the discourses on gender and sexuality as a whole; that is, to allow for the gendered complexity of biblical narratives to surface. This has been attempted by means of offering gender-critical readings of the narratives of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17, with a focus on the characterization of prominent characters against the background of the first century Mediterranean setting. By means of these readings I have argued that some characters follow gendered socially prescribed norms while others do not. The character of Jesus seemingly does both: He is depicted as the one who utilizes his ascribed gendered power and authority, but does it in a manner that creates room for gender transgression by others (Mary); moreover, he appears to follow her example and also demonstrates gender transgressive behaviour, commanding his disciples to follow this example of gender transgression. Within a setting so dependent on the boundaries between male and female, and its intersecting free and slave classes, Jesus appears in both instances to use the system that gives him a certain measure of power to undermine the same system that construes these power relations.

On a hermeneutical level, such narrative gender complexity implies that the expectations of biblical narratives should not be that they will necessarily serve as a type of watertight “proof” for either one or the other position on gender and sexuality (that is, either validating essentialist and complementarian, or constructivist frameworks). Rather, an approach to biblical narratives that allows for the gendered complexity of the narratives to surface, could be one that can hold together numerous levels for interpretation. In view of this

research project I suggest the following: First, sensitivity for the setting of biblical narratives within the ancient Mediterranean world in which gender and sexuality were understood very differently from our own, thereby recognizing the role of context in shaping understandings of gender and sexuality. Second, openness for the possibility of biblical narratives - when read against the background of said ancient setting - to contain characterization which could simultaneously affirm and challenge its gendered norms and expectations and thereby to recognize the instability of gender and sexuality. Third, an awareness and acknowledgement of the role of social location and subjectivity in the process of interpretation of biblical narratives in contemporary settings (as has been the case throughout history). Last, willingness to not necessarily get a perceived “simple answer” from a biblical narrative, but rather be invited to ongoing dialogue by a biblical narrative: a dialogue between past and present contexts, and ancient and contemporary narratives.

Biblical narratives could consequently fulfil the role of opening up conversations on gender and sexuality in contemporary settings, rather than shutting them down. Thereby the transgression and ambiguity that plays out in the narrative world of John 12:1-8 and 13:1-17 become an invitation to hermeneutical transformation, which could in turn allow for a transgressive transformation in contemporary contexts.

This research project’s very specific focus was on two Johannine narratives - “feet and meal narratives” - selected deliberately because of the presumed potential they carry for contributing to “less certain” forms of discourses on theology, gender, and sexuality. For this reason a purposeful choice was also made for reading the narratives through a gender-critical lens, and for engaging the contexts of the narratives and contemporary contexts on the aspect of gender expectations and gender performance. This potentially opens the door up wide for criticism that I am employing the biblical narratives for the same overall purposes which I am criticizing, that is, to prove a specific predetermined outcome with regards to gender and sexuality.

In response to such criticism, I have attempted to approach these narratives in a deliberate, yet scholarly responsible manner: specifically by means of a dialogue between the contexts of the narratives and the contemporary discourses on gender and sexuality; furthermore, by portraying these complex and diverse locations not merely in an oversimplified manner, but rather sketching the broad outlines of very detailed portraits for the sake of the topic under investigation. Moreover, I have attempted to move beyond

binary thinking with regards to these specific biblical narratives, in view of theological discourses on gender and sexuality. In other words, I have opted rather to struggle with the gendered complexity I deem represented in these narratives, as fitting for the complexity of contemporary theological discourses on gender and sexuality. Thereby I hope to have steered as clear as possible from universalistic and anachronistic interpretations of these narratives, or of privileging particular contexts.

As such, this selection of narratives and approach is subjective and biased - albeit then explicitly so. Given that all researchers approach biblical narratives from their particular subjectivity, and for specific rhetorical purposes, it is impossible to imagine what the outcome of an objective approach to the narratives would have been: I simply do not regard an objective approach in the absolute sense of the word as a possibility. A multitude of other approaches and methodologies have been and still are available for engaging these narratives, and they will inevitably continue to result in different findings than my own. I am content with regarding this research project as but one voice in a choir consisting of masses, and by no means as a soloist who will utter any final note.

Furthermore, I recognize that my own social location in the discourses of theology, gender, and sexuality is a precarious one: I am a white, privileged, Afrikaans-speaking, heterosexual woman who is trained to do research in biblical scholarship within a very particular context of reformed, South African theology. This specific intersection of race, culture, language, socio-economic position, gender, sexuality, religion, and education, gives shape to particular worldviews that I often take for granted. Furthermore, if I wish to advocate for an engagement with the complexities of biblical narratives, contexts past and present and biblical hermeneutics as a whole, I need to be willing to allow for diversity in the voices that participate in the conversations on gender and sexuality. At the same time, I want to create this space in a manner that does not compromise on justice and the creation of life-giving spaces for all persons. My own position on what constitutes a “responsible hermeneutic” for theological discourses on gender and sexuality is as subjective as the next person’s. This is, indeed, a complexity that continues to shape me.

It is against that background that I have attempted to contribute with this research project to the field of gender-critical readings of biblical narratives, a focus that is still rather recent in its development and which forms part of the larger family of gender studies within the field of biblical scholarship. I presume that there is still much to be explored amongst biblical narratives from this gender-critical perspective - not only in the Gospel of John, but

in the New Testament writings as a whole. Here I deem the emphasis on the recognition of social location of interpreters as particularly valuable. There is, in my opinion, still much more room within the larger family of gender studies for further diversity and multiplicity of voices to partake.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to overcome within both the contexts of biblical scholarship and Christian faith communities of our time, is to create not merely space for a range of opinions to exist on matters relating to gender and sexuality; but rather that we can remain in the discomfort of ambiguity, of no certain end in mind, and allow to be continuously shaped, challenged, realigned, amidst the certainty of ever persistent ambiguity that need not be regarded or treated as a threat.

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