CHAPTER FIVE

DISCURSIVE I: JOHN AND “THE EUCHARIST”

5.1. Introduction

The Johannine community would have consumed edible and potable goods at their communal meals, and it is highly likely that bread and wine were on the menu. Bread and wine were staple products, and, at least for members of the group with Jewish roots, a blessing over the bread would have been expected (Jn 6:11, 23).

Whether or not the community performed a ritual containing bread and wine, possibly after the meals, cannot be discerned. The Fourth Gospel lacks an account of the so-called Lord’s Supper as well as the words instituting the “Eucharist.” Instead, the Gospel of John offers its own characteristic account of a last meal taking place before Jesus’ crucifixion. This Johannine account of Jesus’ last meal differs from its Synoptic parallels in a number of ways, including chronology and content. Instead of an institution of the Eucharist the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus washing his disciples’ feet.

The absence of the words of institution raises the question of whether or not John talks about the Eucharist at all, and, if so, in what way. The reasons for the lack of the eucharistic institution during Jesus’ final meal with his disciples could be, first, that John was totally unfamiliar with the Eucharist tradition. Other possibilities are, second, that John consciously left out a specific account of the Eucharist, or that, third, he presupposes the Eucharist without mentioning it. In order to explore this question,

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1 While the verb εὐχαριστέω appears three times in John (Jn 6:11, 23, 11:41), the corresponding noun “Eucharist” (εὐχαριστία) is absent in both John and the Synoptics. The use of the term “Eucharist” is nevertheless widely spread in New Testament scholarship and will be used in the following discussion. Retaining the term is a way of expressing that there is something more to the consumption than just the intake of calories. This does, however, by no means imply that there was a ritual with a fixed form that corresponded to the term at the time that the Gospel of John was written.

2 While the Synoptics have Jesus’ meal on the first day of Passover, the Fourth Gospel has it on the day before.

3 Cf. Silke Petersen, “Jesus zum ‘Kauen’?: Das Johannesevangelium, das Abendmahl
I will undertake a comparative analysis at the semantic and narrative level and discuss it against the backdrop of socio-historical evidence. I will investigate each Johannine meal passage, exploring whether any words, objects, phrases or behaviours are reminiscent of the Eucharist. The Synoptic accounts of Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples and, particularly, the words of institution in their Synoptic (Mt 26:26–29; Mk 14:22–25; Lk 22:15–20) and Pauline versions (1 Cor 11:23–26), will serve as the prime points of reference.

The availability of texts of reference, the first of Hays’ criteria of intertextual assessments, needs to be addressed at this point. The availability to John of written sources about the Eucharist, i.e. the Synoptic accounts of the institution, can neither be affirmed nor denied with certainty. For this discussion, it is not necessary to presuppose that John knew the Synoptics or the letters of Paul in a written form. Whether or not the author of the Fourth Gospel was familiar with the very accounts of the institution of the Eucharist as worded by the Synoptics remains uncertain. But the fact that as early a text as 1 Corinthians (stemming from the mid-first century) offers an account of the institution, strongly suggests that some form of eucharistic ritual was practiced in early communities. This undergirds the claim that the author of the Fourth Gospel was at least familiar with some kind of eucharistic tradition and that he deals with it in his writing. Furthermore, all of the Gospels obviously share common traditions. A number of accounts are found in all of the canonical Gospels, including for example, the accounts of the cleansing of the temple and the feeding of the multitudes. It is thus possible to presuppose that John shares with the Synoptics the tradition of Jesus’ last meal even if John departs from the Synoptics in notable ways.

What follows is an attempt to discuss markers in the Johannine text that, for the original readers of the Fourth Gospel, may have been reminiscent of texts, concepts, or traditions of the Eucharist in their cultural surroundings. John 13 is the chapter in which a reader who is even only vaguely familiar with Pauline and/or Synoptic traditions would normally

4 Cf. p. 11.
5 This has been doubted by Kysar who claims that: "the johannine community did not know the institution narratives in any form." Kysar, The Fourth Evangelist and his Gospel, 259. See also: Craig R. Koester, "John Six and the Lord's Supper," LQ 4 (1990), 433.