CHAPTER FIVE

JOHN 17: JESUS’ PRAYER TO HIS FATHER

1. John 17 as a literary unit

John 17 contains a prayer of Jesus to his Father. He begins by asking for his glorification (17,1-5). Then he looks back upon his work of revelation and its results and prays for those whom this work concerned, that they may be kept safe and be sanctified (17,6-19). He prays not only for them, but also for those who will believe in him through their word, that they may all be one (17,20-23). Finally, he expresses his will that they may be with him where he is to behold his glory (17,24). They have reached the insight that Jesus was sent by God; to them he has revealed God’s name, and he will continue to do so in the future (17,25-26).

The unity of John 17, already suggested by this description of contents, is made even more evident by the difference in literary genre between John 17 and what precedes and follows. The preceding section (13,31-16,33) is commonly named the ‘farewell discourses’: Jesus is addressing his disciples before leaving them. The following section (18-19) is the Johannine passion account. Intervening these is John 17, whose literary genre is a prayer of Jesus to his Father, delivered in the presence of his disciples. This is obvious from several indications: Jesus looks up to heaven (17,1) which is an attitude of prayer (cfr. 11,41; Ps 123,1; Mark 6,41 parr; Luke 18,13); in the entire chapter, the Father is referred to in the 2nd pers. sg., and he is addressed with the vocative πατερ (17,1.5.11.21.24.25), with imperatives (17,1.5.11.17) and by means of the verb ἐπιτιθήμεν (17,9.15.20).

These considerations suffice as a legitimation to look upon John 17 as a unit; 17,1aa concludes, then, the preceding discourses, and 17,1ab introduces the prayer.

Does the unity of John 17 also appear in numbers of S and W? The chapter has a length of 941 S, made up of 25 S of narrative (17,1a) and 916 S of discourse (17,1b-26). The number of W is 498 for the entire chapter, made up of 12 for 17,1a, and 486 for 17,1b-26. The technique of making the whole unit or one of its components (narrative or discourse) count a round number of S and/or W does not seem to have been applied to John 17. One of the above numbers is, however, significant in another way. 486, the number of W of 17,1b-26, is also the
numerical value of the vocative πάτερ (80 + 1 + 300 + 5 + 100 = 486), present six times in the text (the first time as its first word) and characterizing it as a prayer to the Father. The size of 486 W suits a prayer to the Father.

2. The sections of John 17 and their connections

Because of its scanty vocabulary, simple syntax and frequently recurring themes, John 17 makes the impression of being a very coherent whole. For the same reasons, it is difficult to determine the sections of this whole and their connections. Several words (e.g., δίδωνα, κάμως, ἔνα) occur so frequently all over the chapter, that they seem to offer hardly any starting point to describe the structure of John 17.

Several efforts have been made to bring to light the literary structure of John 17. In what follows, the methods used and the results achieved in these efforts will be briefly discussed; then, in the light of these efforts, I will propose my own analysis of the structure of John 17, and confront its results with a count of S and W.

a) Extant analyses of the literary structure of John 17

1. Divisions of the text of John 17 given in text-editions, commentaries and other literature are usually based mainly on the contents of the text. So there is a division according to the object of Jesus' prayer: in 17,1-5 he prays for himself, in 17,6-19 for his disciples, and in 17,20-26 for all future believers. Slightly different is the division 17,1-8.9-19.20-26, in which the retrospective passage 17,6-8 is considered as motivating Jesus' prayer for glorification (cfr. 17,4). Elsewhere, we meet a combination of these two divisions: 17,1-5.6-8.9-19.20-26. The two divisions are also found with a bipartition of the final section (17,20-26) into 17,20-23.24-26; the part 17,24-26 is mostly considered as the climax and conclusion of the entire prayer, in which the eschatological achievement is prayed for. They are also found with a bipartition of the final section into 17,20-24.25-26. Combinations of various divisions result in divisions such as 17,1-5.6-8.9-19.20-23.24-26, or 17,1-8.9-23.24-26, or (with the peculiarity of a caesura at 17,3/4) 17,1-3.4-8.9-19.20-23.24-26. For others, 17,6-26 is in its entirety a prayer for the believers. In some instances, main parts are subdivided into smaller units which may coincide with what are considered to be main parts in other divisions.

The differences between these proposals to divide John 17 make it evident that, in order to trace the literary structure of this chapter, considerations based only on the contents of the text — important though they may be — are insufficient. Formal indications for the composition