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The Components of the Gospel

The Gospel is a literary composition. It assumes a discernible structure that is already indicated in the prologue (1:11–12):

Chs. 1–6: “He came to his own home.”

Chs. 7–12: “His own people received him not.”

Chs. 13–17: “To all who received him, . . . he gave power to become children of God.”

Chs. 18–21: Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection.

These parts, however, do not provide a seamless account, as if it had been penned in one sitting. This can be observed in the passion narrative of chs. 18–21, which John’s Gospel has in common with the Synoptics.

Chapters 1–6 and 7–12 encompass the period of Jesus’ ministry, his acts and discourses. Many elements of these chapters were originally independent, for instance, the healing narratives, which were formed orally, as in the Synoptics, and were initially handed down orally. Hence, in the case of some of the texts, there

must have been an *oral phase* preceding them. Chapters 7–12, too, did not come about as a unit but were composed of different elements. Thus, chs. 13–17 are part of Jesus’ life and ministry as well, that is, the farewell discourses, for which there is nothing corresponding in the Synoptics.

The Structure of the Narratives in Chapters 1–12

The basic structure of the Gospel is that of a story. The passion narrative is a coherent account, on which the Gospel focuses from the outset. The structure is made up of itineraries and brief reports. The discourses, as well as the acts of Jesus, are integrated into this structure. The prologue, too, has the form of a story.

The travel references. Jesus ministered as an itinerant. If his ministry was to be recounted contextually, there was no option other than an account of his journeys. In many parts of the world the recounting of a journey was a very early medium for handing down tradition. It plays a significant part in the Old Testament. Descriptions of journeys were not a matter of invention. This also applies to place references, such as John 4:5–6: “Jacob’s well was there.” These also originated in the oral tradition. The generation following the disciples could learn of Jesus’ ministry only on the basis of the places where Jesus had ministered. Particularly helpful are the instances where, along with a location, it is mentioned that Jesus had visited that location and what had happened there.

The accounts. Individual brief accounts at the beginning form a prehistory: one about John the Baptist (1:19–34; 3:23–36) and another about the call of the first disciples (1:35–51). Important elements are the brief accounts, sometimes only one sentence long.

The accounts about *the effect* of Jesus' words and deeds run through the entire Gospel, up to the beginning of the passion narrative. They all resemble one another. The parallelism of differing responses remains to the end: At no point does no one believe; at no point does everybody believe. The accounts are limited to a restricted context; they address only the ministry and teaching of Jesus. Some approve of it, others argue that he is leading people astray. A division arises over it.

Accounts of actions by Jesus' opponents. An intensification can be observed in these accounts, leading to the passion narrative. Jesus' opponents attempt to seize him. They send temple guards to arrest him (7:32, 45). Repeatedly they intend to stone him. In the end, they decide to put him to death for fear of a tumult (11:47–53). They order that he be reported to them.

These very terse narrative statements are linking segments of an action or a discourse, either introducing or concluding them. Their purpose is to allow the entire account to function as a unified narrative. In this regard, they resemble parts of the book of Jeremiah, in which the words and actions lead to a passion narrative as well. Here, too, the relationship between the story of Jesus of Nazareth and that of the prophet is difficult to miss.

The Acts of Jesus in Chapters 1–12

The Healings

To perceive Jesus' healings merely as isolated acts in his life, or as a sign of something greater, means to misconstrue them. They can be explained only on the basis of their prehistory in the Old Testament, which already relates healings by prophets. Their concern is to reveal the works of God in a suffering individual.

4:46b–54: The official of Capernaum. The prerequisite for the healings was the unconditional trust in the healer. In the case of the official from Capernaum, it was trust from a distance; he had only heard of Jesus (cf. 1 Kgs 5). The narrative indicates that this trust is possible for everyone, that everyone has access to him. It is a personal trust, like that found in the Psalms of trust in the Old Testament, the entrusting of self by the whole person. It is not a form of believing equivalent to a conviction and a viewpoint, such as whether or not Jesus is the Messiah. In the Psalms it denotes the trust into which laments are transformed (Pss 13; 22). It is the work of his Father, whom the suffering ones in the old covenant implored to transform their sorrow. The healings of Jesus are significant because in them the one who transforms sorrow has become human. They can be understood only against the backdrop of the laments of the Old Testament.

5:1–16: At the pool of Bethesda. Just as in the Old Testament journey accounts, the distinctiveness of the location is explained at the outset. Jesus comes this way and attends to *one* sick man; therein lies the distinctiveness of this healing. It is precisely the description of the multitude of the sick who hope for their healing that demonstrates clearly that there is a limit to Jesus' ministry here: Jesus is a human being with limitations. He can attend to only *one* sick man; the prerequisite for this is the personal contact: "Do you want to be healed?" The question can mean only this. That he understands people (4:7ff.) holds also for the healings. Jesus' compassion for the sick man stands in contrast to the rigid legal piety of the Jews, for whom this healing is sin because it occurred on the Sabbath. The response of the one healed is directed against them: "The man who healed me said to me. . . ." Now he obeys the one who healed him.

9:1–41: The healing of a man born blind. The disciples ask a theological question: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents . . . ?” Jesus answers, “that the works of God might be made manifest in him.” The disciples accept this man’s blindness as a fact, while Jesus has compassion on the one who suffers. The disciples are locked into the doctrine of recompense, and living with Jesus has evidently not brought about a change in this. By means of his response, Jesus implies that it is not true that for every sickness there has to be some blame. Against this he argues that the works of God are the works of the one who heals; they can be brought to bear upon everyone. As long as there is life in human beings, wonderful things can happen to them. The continuation of the narrative indicates that the reaction to the healing was by no means unmitigated praise and thanksgiving. The parents are afraid, and in their blindness the Pharisees publicly denounce the healing because it happened on the Sabbath. They are put in their place, however, by the one who was healed: “Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see.” This healing narrative expresses why healings are a sign of Jesus’ relationship with God—“We know that God does not listen to sinners”—and the authorities cannot say anything further in rebuttal. All they can do is insult the healed man and cast him out.

11:1–46: Lazarus. In keeping with the view held at the time of Jesus, the difference between raising someone from the dead and a healing is only relative. Of particular significance here are the conversations. The slight rebuke by Martha (“if you had been here, my brother would not have died”) is followed by a statement of trust: “Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” And if she offers merely an evasive answer to Jesus’ affirmation—“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection”—this dialogue seeks

to express the following: This woman cannot believe that her brother, who is already lying in the tomb, will be made alive again; nevertheless, she has kept her trust in Jesus. The personal trust in Jesus remains unbroken, even in the face of death. This is the meaning of the saying in the middle of this conversation: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (v. 25).

Summary. In the healings, Jesus works “the works of my Father.” They are not merely “signs” pointing to the work of redemption as such; they are a major part of his ministry. They are based on what the Psalms express about sorrow and transforming suffering; they have their prehistory in the healing narratives of the Old Testament. They point up the difference between a *faith* performed by the head only and a *trust* embracing the whole person. In the healing narratives, the emphasis rests upon what transpires between the sick person and the one who reaches out in compassion. The miracle takes place only where the response to this compassion is unconditional trust. From this arises the new relationship between the one healed and the healer.

Other Acts of Jesus

Jesus’ acts can be divided into three groups:

(1) 2:1–11 (the wedding at Cana) and 2:13b–17 (the temple cleansing) represent accounts from the early part of Jesus’ life, before the actual beginning of his ministry.

(2) The two accounts in the middle, in 6:5–15 (the feeding of the five thousand) and 6:16–21 (the rescue from the storm), deal with salvation from kinds of situations other than sickness; thus they supplement the healings (following Ps 107).

(3) Toward the end of this first part, there are two acts, 12:1–11 (the anointing at Bethany) and 12:12–19 (the entry into Jerusalem); 13:1–19 (the footwashing) represents a parabolic action which is already part of the conclusion.

The footwashing, introducing the farewell discourses, needs to be addressed in particular here. As an act of service, a *diakonia*, it portrays Jesus' concluding exhortation to his disciples and hence points to a fundamental attitude that ought to determine their entire lifestyle. It is noteworthy that the exhortation is given in the form of an action. Accordingly, the church as a whole should become as one who serves. But when the church's chief office became that of the *episkopos*, the overseer, and the office of the *diakonos* was subordinated to it, the church chose a direction that did not follow the intent of this parabolic action of Jesus. The later structure of church government sharply contrasts with his action.

*Two Accounts from the Early Part of
Jesus' Ministry: 2:1–11 and 2:13–22*

The oral tradition about Jesus, like the early historical narratives of the Old Testament, began with family narratives (Luke 1, 2). The turning of water into wine takes place in the context of a family celebration; Jesus himself attributes no special significance to this act (2:24).

The incident on the way to Jerusalem is also an early account: Jesus is gripped with anger over the profaning of the temple. His action is akin to the work of the prophets of judgment.

*The Feeding of the Five Thousand and the
Rescue from the Storm: 6:5–21*

Chapter 6 mentions further difficulties from which Jesus saves, in which he helps. By means of these examples the evangelist intends to show that Jesus' comprehensive, helping, and preserving intervention is an essential part of his salvific work.

6:5–15: The feeding. As the one who provides for his own, he is sent by his Father for this hour. He represents

the God who blesses. In this act he recalls the provision of manna for the people in the wilderness. Yet just as he was usually able to heal only *one* person in the case of the healings from sickness, so he is also able to feed the hungry only with *one* meal. Nevertheless, he can demonstrate thereby that miracles also occur in the present. Here, too, the decisive thing is trust: Your heavenly Father provides for you. This narrative is paralleled by John 21:1–14, Peter’s catch of fish.

6:16–21: The rescue from the storm. This account, too, is a kind of parabolic action, and the predicament here is a human situation as well: “Some went down to the sea in ships” (Ps 107:23–32). It speaks of an endangering of the person in travels by land, by sea, and in the air, and here too Jesus calls for trust: “It is I; do not be afraid.” When the disciples see Jesus walking on the water, when he draws near them and they reach the shore immediately, he shows them the presence of God, parabolically, in life-threatening dangers.

Since the two accounts of salvation from distress are framed by two healings before and two after, what is presented here is the work of God in the ministry of Jesus as the one who heals, blesses, and protects in every area of life.

The healings are typical miracle stories. They are not so because they narrate “supernatural” deeds; as elsewhere in the Bible, the concept of the “supernatural” is inappropriate and wrong here. “Supernatural” would be what transcends creation, what is outside creation, but this is not in keeping with biblical thought. The healing power of the creator is at work *precisely* in the miracles of healing; Jesus said, “My Father is working still, and I am working” (5:17).

From the perspective of the one who is sick, the experience of a wondrous healing is part of his life story. As the one who is healed, he is able to recount it later. This encompasses the earlier time of suffering, the

low point in his illness (when the physicians had already given up on him), and the wonderful transformation into recovery. A miraculous healing is always special and rare. This special event, which is experienced as a miracle by the one who was healed and for which he gives thanks, is remembered as such. This parallels the psalms of lament and of thanksgiving. Psalm 77:12–20 shows what the Gospels mean by miracles.

Jesus' Speeches

The speeches of Jesus in the Gospel of John are not “speeches” in terms of rhetoric. Jesus’ discourse is not a speech from up on a podium or a pulpit. When Jesus speaks, he is on the same level as his audience, regardless of whether they are adherents or opponents. On account of his mission, Jesus is always vulnerable in speaking. As the incarnate one, he is their equal who does not want to have an advantage over his hearers; he is always exposed to their questions and challenges. When they turn away from his discourse (6:60), he has to let them depart. His speaking is part of the humiliation of the Son of God.

Conversations with Individuals

Conversations with individuals are very significant in the Gospel of John. They are indispensable for Jesus’ type of ministry. While no verbatim records have been handed down to us, the evangelist does indicate by means of several examples how important such conversations were. This is already demonstrated in the fact that Jesus’ speaking in the Gospel begins with two conversations with individuals. The most important aspect here is that Jesus thereby places himself on a par with those he addresses. He knows that he himself does not have the power to bring about a change in those addressed by him. He could never have used the term

“conversion,” a result of the motif of “the Son’s relationship with the Father” (cf. pp. 29–31). He desires only to do what his Father wants, and he does not decide that. Hence, Jesus never applies pressure in his conversations. He knows that God alone can bring about a transformation, though he is not obligated to do so.

The conversations also demonstrate that Jesus addressed the people in their sphere of life: Nicodemus as a scribe and the Samaritan woman as a simple country woman. In both conversations Jesus does not answer questions directly; the answers are merely alluded to, or they remain deliberately concealed. The conclusion of ch. 4 indicates that the Samaritan woman was nevertheless moved by what she heard; it points the way from the conversation with the individual to those with the inhabitants of the town. They become receptive to what the woman tells. Here the beginnings of tradition are shown.

In the final healing narrative (11:20–28), conversations with individuals become prominent once again. If Jesus asks too much of the two women in his demands for faith here, hidden in this is the recognition that such faith is meant to grow and that personal trust is the decisive thing in this growth, even if they cannot yet comprehend everything at this time. Martha and Mary express that this trust in Jesus remains unbroken, even if Lazarus’s death were final. This conforms to Jesus’ saying, “he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (11:25).

Jesus’ conversation with his brothers (7:1–13) has affinities with the conversation with individuals. His brothers intend to prompt him toward a public ministry, and they call on him to appear in Judea at an approaching festival. Jesus rejects this because his time has not yet come. That is to say, he is focusing on a time different from the one his brothers have in mind. When he still goes to Jerusalem, although in private, it indi-

cates that his time in public will be different from what his brothers desired. In the conversation with his brothers Jesus chose the nonviolent way that the prophets had modeled.

Dialogues Associated with an Action

The conversations held in the context of healings should be considered conversations with individuals, although they constitute only brief statements.

Other conversations in conjunction with an action are the following: The call of the disciples (1:35–51) contains some statements made by Jesus and by the disciples; they are part of the action and are not a self-contained conversation. This also applies to 2:1–11. John 2:18–22 is probably an addition belonging to the controversy dialogues. In other instances, too—for example in 12:1–8 and 13:1–8—exchanges of words are part of the action. This holds true for Peter’s confession in 6:66–71 as well. In the Gospel of John, the conversation bears the same significance as in the Old Testament.

Independent Discourses:

The Farewell Discourses, Chapters 13–16 and 17

The real locus of the independent discourses of Jesus is the complex of the farewell discourses in chs. 13–16. They are clearly different from the conversations with individuals, even if they are interspersed with occasional words by one of the disciples. Before the farewell discourses, the conversational form is the decisive feature in the Gospel. There are also the two parables in 10:1–18 and 15:1–8. These are, however, essentially developments of a comparison.

The farewell discourses. Chapter 12 contains the statement “I have come to this hour” (v. 27). It is also the hour of his farewell from the disciples. The farewell discourses are preceded by the parabolic action of the

footwashing, whose meaning is developed in the words of farewell. Through this demonstration of service, Jesus provides the disciples with the new commandment to love one another, as he has loved them (13:34–35). The basis for the commandment is the love that Jesus has shown his disciples.

Like the footwashing scene itself, so also the words following it belong to the context of the household, the family and its sphere of life: the Father's house, going away and coming back, as well as being united in the Father's house. Hence, the farewell discourses likewise are words spoken to the particular situation. As Tobit 4 shows particularly well, the blessing, linked with an admonition, has its place in the farewell (especially in the case of a son leaving his father's house). The admonition is contained in the parabolic action of the footwashing, alongside the love commandment. This ushers in the farewell discourses, which belong to the semantic field of blessing, rather than to that of mission, tasks, and duties. Now Jesus is leaving them, but they will be reunited in the Father's house (14:2, 3). This part concludes with the pronouncement of peace; it speaks of the peace in the sheltering house of the Father. Blessing and peace belong together.

15:1–17: The vine and the branches; abiding in God's love. The farewell discourses are shaped by the semantic field of blessing, peace, and abiding. John 15:1–8 develops the metaphor of the vine and the branches. In ch. 14 it is the peace of the sheltering house of the Father; by comparison, ch. 15 speaks of the disciples' work after Jesus' departure. They are to produce fruit, and their work is to be effective. But this is possible only in their abiding relationship with their Lord. When Jesus chooses the metaphor of the vine and the branches precisely here, in his farewell, there is a direct connection with the parables of growth in the other Gospels. Here the evangelist does not explicitly articulate the

great commission, “Go into all the world,” for the important thing for him is to express that what Jesus intended to bring to humans, the reason the Father sent him, cannot be propagated through human activity and human effort. It will grow. Therein lies a gentle critique of the understanding of community as found in the Acts of the Apostles, where everything depends upon human activity. (It is possible that 15:2–3 is an addition.)

15:18–16:33: Announcement of persecutions, warning, and consolation. Not until now, enveloped in this affirmation of blessing, does Jesus speak of the dangers to which the disciples will be exposed. But their sorrow is to turn into joy. The conclusion is given in the pronouncement of peace in 16:33: “In the world you have tribulation. . . .”

John 17. John 17:1–26 is a broadly developed reflection on the farewell prayer of Jesus. The actual prayer comprises only parts of vv. 1, 4, 5, 6, 12, 15, 24.

- 1: “Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son.”
- 4: “I glorified thee on earth.”
- 5: “And now, Father, glorify thou me.”
- 6: “I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me; . . . and they have kept thy word.”
- 12: “I have guarded them, and none of them is lost.”
- 15: “I . . . pray . . . that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one.”
- 24: “Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am.”

That John 17 as a whole is not a prayer can be seen in the many repetitions and in many of the sayings that depart from the form of prayer, for instance, v. 3, a saying that explains the meaning of eternal life and in

which Jesus speaks of “Jesus” in the third person. It further becomes apparent that in the prayer itself, congruent with the farewell context, Jesus only petitions God to guard from the evil one those who have been left behind, so that they might be reunited with him. The petition for them to be one, for unity, occurs only in the expansion, however, and within that it occurs five times, in 17:20, 21, 22, 23. Furthermore, the goal of knowing God is found only in this expansion, namely, in the words of the recognition formula, as in Ezekiel.

Thus it is to be assumed that the expansion was preceded only by Jesus’ brief petition to God in the hour of farewell from the world (vv. 1, 4–6, 12, 15, 24). The expansion was added in a later situation in which the unity of the community was threatened and “knowledge of God” was particularly important.

The Gospel of John apart from the Controversy Dialogues

Only if the Gospel is read apart from the controversy dialogues does the impression of a continuous account arise, which leads, from the outset, to the passion narrative. The account as a whole is an event whose goal is the passion narrative.

In this way only does the structural function of the travel references become clear. The Gospel delineates the way in which Jesus acted and spoke. There are events and conversations en route, and these references give the situations in which they occurred. By means of notes appended to the references, the situations are often spelled out more specifically. The travel references are missing from the controversy dialogues and from ch. 17. Thus, the Gospel proceeds as follows:

The prologue (1:1–18), prefacing the whole Gospel, yet already implying its major sections, is followed by the introduction, the account of John (1:19–28, 34) and the call of the first disciples (1:35–51).

The two accounts of the wedding at Cana (2:1–11) and the driving of the traders from the temple belong to an early period of Jesus' ministry (his mother and brothers travel with him). Here, too, are the first of the travel references (2:12–14), which are characteristic of Jesus' journey from this point to the end, and the first of the accounts on the reaction to Jesus' ministry (2:23–25), which recur time and again on this journey.

There follow two conversations with individuals, Nicodemus (3:1–12) and the Samaritan woman (4:1–16) (cf. pp. 15f. on their significance); this, in turn, is followed by an account of the results (4:39–42).

Two healings follow, at intervals: of the official of Capernaum (4:46–54) and of the sick man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1–16). The relationship between the two and 6:5–20 becomes clear only when the long controversy dialogue intervening in 5:17–47 is bracketed.

Then follow two accounts of deliverance from other troubles, namely, the feeding (6:5–15) and the rescue from the storm (6:16–21). Travel references have been inserted before and after these references, in 6:1–4 and 6:21–24. Peter's confession (6:66–71), which concludes the section composed of chs. 1–6, is separated from the rest by the extensive controversy dialogue in 6:25–65.

The section composed of chs. 7–13 begins with the conversation with the brothers (7:1–13); Jesus decides against a public appearance. From this arises the third controversy dialogue in 7:14–29, followed by the account of results. Then comes 7:37–39 ("On the last day of the feast . . .") and the reactions by the people (7:40–44), then by the officers (7:45–49) and Nicodemus (7:50–52). Here is inserted the story about Jesus and the adulterous woman (8:1–11). It is followed, without context, by the controversy dialogue in 8:12–59. The story continues in 9:1ff. with a healing.

The section composed of chs. 9–11 is framed by the two further healings: that of the one born blind (9:1–38)

and the resurrection of Lazarus (11:1–46). In between is the parable of the Good Shepherd (10:1–18). This is followed by the fifth controversy dialogue in 10:22–59. The text concludes with the Sanhedrin’s resolution to put Jesus to death (11:47–53), which leads into the passion account.

Chapter 12 contains two contrasting expressions of homage: the anointing at Bethany (12:1–8) and the entry into Jerusalem (12:12–19).

In 13:1–11 the footwashing and two announcements (Judas and Peter) prepare the way for the passion narrative, which then begins with the farewell discourses and the farewell prayer. The briefer texts between the longer ones are mostly either travel references or reports of the effects of Jesus’ words and actions.

If the Gospel without the controversy dialogues in chs. 5–8 and 10 and without the speech supplements makes such a different impression, the main reason is that without them the acts (events) and words of Jesus are roughly balanced. (The controversy dialogues also include 2:18–21, an announcement of Jesus’ death and resurrection in the form of a controversy dialogue.)

More important, however, is that *without* the controversy dialogues, there are only scant traces of gnostic expansions and derivations in the Gospel. Only in speech supplements and in the prologue are there a few gnostic statements. Thus it is no longer possible to speak of the influence of gnostic thought and teaching on the *entire* Gospel. Such influence is limited to the particular complex of controversy dialogues and isolated verses inserted later. The Gospel without this complex provides the story of Jesus of Nazareth *without gnostic influence*.

Excursus:

Event and Interpretation in the Gospel of John

In contrast to the Synoptics, the Gospel of John is interspersed throughout with interpretations, as is, for

instance, the book of Deuteronomy as compared with the books of Exodus and Numbers. Here event and interpretation often merge. (Commentaries do not appear alongside the historical books until early Judaism.) Speeches represent a particular form of interpretation, both in the historical books (Deuteronomy, Joshua) and in the Gospel of John. Thus Jesus' discourses interpret his parables and parabolic actions. One complex in the Gospel of John forms an exception to this: the controversy dialogues in chs. 5–10 (excluding 9). Although they contain events as well, these are only window dressing and a frame for the dialogues. The latter are not concerned with events, but rather with assertions and their challenges. This can already be observed from the fact that they are not found in the context of travel references; that is, they are not events on a journey. Rather, the issue is the contrast between two groups. This is where we encounter most of the sayings that are recognized as gnostic statements. Elsewhere these are touched on only occasionally.