



WASHING FEET, TRANSFORMING LEADERS: A SOCIO-RHETORICAL READING OF JOHN 13:1–17

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This study examines John 13:1–17 as a model of transformational leadership using socio-rhetorical analysis, with particular attention to intertextual and ideological textures. Grounded in transformational leadership theory as described by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), the research investigates how the foot-washing narrative engages biblical servant traditions while simultaneously challenging Greco-Roman honor-based conceptions of authority. Intertextual analysis demonstrates that the pericope is embedded within broader biblical motifs, especially Isaiah's Servant Songs and ritual purification texts, which collectively frame leadership as humility, obedience, and self-sacrificing service. Ideological analysis reveals that the narrative actively destabilizes hierarchical assumptions about status by redefining greatness as enacted service rather than positional authority. Findings indicate that John 13:1–17 functions as a foundational model of transformational leadership in which identity formation, ethical reorientation, and behavioral imitation are central mechanisms of change. The pericope reflects key dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized concern. It extends these concepts into a theologically grounded framework of sacrificial service. This study concludes that John 13:1–17 offers an ethical model of leadership in which transformation occurs at the level of identity and communal practice, thereby enriching contemporary leadership theory through biblical exegesis.

Keywords: biblical leadership, ideological analysis, intertextuality, leadership identity formation

Transformational leadership is one of the most widely researched leadership models of successful leadership in contemporary leadership studies (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership theory started with the foundational work of Burns (1978) and describes a process in which leaders and followers raise each other to

higher levels of motivation, ethics, morality, and purpose. This framework was further developed by Bass (1985), who operationalized transformational leadership theory into measurable components including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Collectively, this body of work has significantly shaped both academic research and leadership practice across organizational contexts (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Despite its empirical strength, transformational leadership theory has been critiqued for its limited engagement with deeper moral, narrative, and theological foundations of leadership transformation (Tourish, 2013). While the theory effectively explains behavioral influence and organizational outcomes, it is less explicit in addressing how leadership identity is formed, how moral meaning is constructed, and how transformation is sustained within broader ideological or narrative frameworks (Ciulla, 2004). This limitation has led scholars to explore complementary perspectives, including servant leadership, ethical leadership, and identity-based leadership theories (Greenleaf, 1977).

Within this evolving discourse, biblical texts have been recognized as valuable sources of insight on leadership theories and characteristics, especially when analyzed through rigorous exegetical methods (Wright, 2018). The socio-rhetorical approach developed by Robbins (1996) and applied in leadership research by Henson et al. (2020) provides a multidimensional framework for analyzing biblical texts. This method emphasizes the “textures” of a text, including its intertextual relationships and ideological structures, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed within sacred narratives (Robbins, 1996).

Among New Testament narratives, John 13:1–17, which discusses the account of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, offers rich context for examining transformative leadership (Köstenberger, 2004). This passage illustrates a reversal of conventional leadership norms, as Jesus performs an act associated with the lowest social status to instruct His followers in the nature of true greatness (Keener, 2003). This pericope raises important questions about the relationship between authority, service, identity, and transformation. John 13 also serves as the opening movement of the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17) in which Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure by emphasizing love, mutual indwelling (“remain in me,” *New International Version*, 2011, 15:4), obedience, and participation in his ongoing mission. Consequently, the foot washing functions not as an isolated ethical episode but as the narrative introduction to John’s broader vision of embodied discipleship and communal identity (Carson, 1991; Köstenberger, 2004).

John 13:1–17 is often cited in discussions of servant leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977), but relatively few studies have analyzed the pericope through the dual lenses of intertextual and ideological textures to create a coherent model of transformational leadership theory (Henson et al., 2020). Existing information is known to isolate ethical principles from narrative and theological contexts, thereby limiting the depth of leadership insight that the text may offer.

To address this gap, this study employs socio-rhetorical analysis examining how John 13:1–17 constructs a model of transformational leadership through its engagement with biblical traditions and its subversion of dominant cultural ideologies (Robbins, 1996). By analyzing the pericope’s intertextual connections, including the servant

themes of Isaiah 52–53, and its ideological restructuring of power and authority, this study seeks to demonstrate that the foot-washing narrative offers a robust, textually grounded framework for understanding transformational leadership as identity transformation, ethical reorientation, and embodied service.

This study asks: how does John 13:1–17 construct a model of transformational leadership through intertextual and ideological textures?

John 13:1–17 functions as a transformational leadership model in which leadership is redefined through intertextual servant traditions and the ideological reversal of power structures, producing identity-based and imitative leadership transformation.

STATE OF THE SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarly engagement with transformational leadership has been dominated by the work of Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), who conceptualized leadership as a process where leaders elevate their followers' motivations, ethics, values, and moral commitments. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, moral development, and the reorientation of follower identity toward a collective purpose (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Recent interdisciplinary studies have sought to integrate transformational leadership with biblical studies, especially through exegetical methodologies. The work of Henson et al. (2020) applied socio-rhetorical analysis to derive leadership frameworks and characteristics directly from scriptural texts rather than imposing external theoretical frameworks. This approach prioritizes textual, contextual, and theological coherence (Robbins, 1996).

Biblical leadership studies consistently highlight servant leadership as a central model, often rooted in Gospel narratives such as Mark 10:42–45 and Matthew 20:25–28, where leadership is defined in opposition to hierarchical domination (Blanchard & Hodges, 2003; Greenleaf, 1977). These studies emphasize the reversal of power structures and the redefinition of greatness as service. At the same time, Pauline texts such as Philippians 2:5–11 have been interpreted as theological foundations for transformational processes, especially in their articulation of self-emptying and subsequent exaltation (Fee, 1995; Wright, 2013). Such passages suggest that leadership transformation is not merely behavioral but ontological, involving a fundamental reorientation of identity and purpose.

Despite these developments, a gap is found in the literature regarding integrating socio-rhetorical analysis with specific pericopes that explicitly connect intertextual and ideological textures to transformational leadership theory (Henson et al., 2020; Robbins, 1996). This study addresses that gap by examining John 13:1–17 as a model text for leadership transformation.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

Transformational leadership has been one of the most extensively studied models in leadership research, originating with the work of Burns (1978), who defined leadership as a process in which leaders and followers elevate each other to a higher level of motivation and morality. This was later expanded by Bass (1985), who

operationalized transformational leadership into measurable components, including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Further empirical research has validated the effectiveness of transformational leadership across organizational contexts. For example, the study by Podsakoff et al. (1990) demonstrated that transformational leader behaviors significantly enhance follower trust and organizational citizenship behaviors. Meta-analytic work by Judge and Piccolo (2004) further confirms the strong relationship between transformational leadership and follower performance, while broader reviews (Wang et al., 2011) highlight its consistent predictive validity across diverse settings.

Despite its empirical strength, transformational leadership theory has been critiqued for its relative lack of grounding in broader philosophical or theological frameworks, often emphasizing outcomes and behaviors without sufficiently addressing the deeper moral and identity-based dimensions of leadership transformation (Ciulla, 2004; Tourish, 2013).

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AS A PARALLEL MODEL

Running parallel to transformational leadership is the tradition of servant leadership, first discussed by Greenleaf (1977), who proposed that effective leadership begins with a commitment to serve others. Servant leadership shifts the focus from leader-centric authority to the development of the follower while emphasizing humility, empathy, and ethical and moral responsibility.

Contemporary research has further refined this model. For example, van Dierendonck (2011) provided a comprehensive synthesis of servant leadership, identifying core dimensions such as empowerment, accountability, and stewardship. Similarly, Liden et al. (2008) developed a multidimensional measurement scale, reinforcing the construct's empirical viability.

While servant leadership shares significant overlaps with transformational leadership, especially in its focus on follower development, it places more emphasis on ethical orientation and relational dynamics (van Dierendonck, 2011). Much of the literature treats servant leadership as a contemporary organizational construct; this is often without engaging deeply in its historical and biblical foundations (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). This creates an opportunity to explore how biblical texts may provide a more robust grounding for servant-oriented leadership models.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the need to clarify the theoretical and conceptual foundations of servant leadership while distinguishing it from related leadership constructs such as transformational and ethical leadership (Eva et al., 2019). Although many studies acknowledge biblical influences on servant leadership, the construct is most often investigated through organizational or psychological frameworks rather than through sustained exegetical analysis of specific biblical texts. This study contributes to that emerging conversation by examining John 13:1–17 through socio-rhetorical analysis, arguing that servant leadership in the Johannine context is not merely an ethical orientation, but a theological identity grounded in the revelation of Christ and enacted through embodied service. In doing so, the study provides an

exegetically grounded account of servant leadership that complements and extends contemporary organizational scholarship.

AUTHENTIC, ETHICAL, AND IDENTITY-BASED LEADERSHIP

Recent developments in leadership theory have increasingly emphasized the role of identity, authenticity, and ethics in the process of leadership. Authentic leadership theory, advanced by Avolio and Gardner (2005), highlights self-awareness, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective as essential components of effective leadership. Similarly, ethical leadership research (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño et al., 2003) underscores the importance of normative behavior and moral management in shaping organizational culture.

Identity-based approaches deepen this perspective by examining how leadership influences followers' self-concepts. For example, Shamir et al. (1993) argued that charismatic and transformational leaders motivate followers by linking organizational goals to their self-identity. Likewise, Lord and Brown (2001) suggested that leadership effectiveness is closely tied to the alignment between leader values and the self-concepts of followers, and Howell and Shamir (2005) emphasized the active role of followers in the leadership process.

Together, these perspectives suggest that leadership is not just behavioral but also deeply transformational at the level of identity and values (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Lord & Brown, 2001). However, while these theories acknowledge moral and psychological transformation, they often lack a coherent account of how such transformation is grounded in a broader narrative or worldview (Ciulla, 2004).

GAPS IN BIBLICAL-EXEGETICAL INTEGRATION

Although leadership studies have increasingly incorporated ethical, rational, and identity-based elements (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Brown & Trevino, 2006), there remains a significant gap in the integration of biblical exegesis and leadership theory (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004; Clarke, 2012). Much of the existing literature either applies contemporary leadership frameworks to biblical texts superficially or extracts isolated principles from the scriptural context, especially the meaning as it relates to the original author (Osmer, 2008; Vanhoozer, 1998).

The work by Henson et al. (2020) addressed this limitation by employing socio-rhetorical analysis to derive leadership constructs directly from biblical texts. This approach emphasizes the importance of examining intertextual connections and ideological frameworks to understand how leadership is constructed within biblical narrative itself (Robbins, 1996). However, few studies have applied this methodology in a focused and systematic way to specific pericopes, especially to articulate a model of transformational leadership (Clarke, 2012). In particular, the pericope of John 13:1–17, which depicts Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet, has not been fully explored as a transformational leadership text through the combined lenses of intertexture and ideological analysis (Keener, 2003; Köstenberger, 2004).

In summary, the leadership literature demonstrates strong empirical and theoretical support for transformational, servant, and ethical leadership models (Bass &

Riggio, 2006; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Greenleaf, 1977), each of which emphasizes aspects of follower development, moral orientation, and identity transformation. However, an important gap remains in validating these frameworks within a tightly rigorous and theologically informed framework (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004; Clarke, 2012). This study addresses that gap by employing socio-rhetorical analysis to examine the pericope John 13:1–17, thereby contributing to a more integrative understanding of transformational leadership rooted in biblical exegesis.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative exegetical research design to examine leadership models within John 13:1–17. Qualitative textual analysis was appropriate for this study as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of meaning embedded within biblical texts, especially as it relates to leadership theory and theological interpretation (Osmer, 2008). The research integrated biblical exegesis with leadership studies by utilizing a socio-rhetorical analytical framework to derive theoretical insights inductively from the text.

This study adopted socio-rhetorical analysis (SRA) as developed by Robbins (1996) and applied in leadership research by Henson et al. (2020). SRA is a multidimensional interpretive methodology that examines the various textures of a text to uncover its rhetorical, cultural, and theological meanings. While SRA includes multiple layers of analysis, this study focused on two primary textures: intertexture and ideological texture.

Intertexture refers to how a text interacts with other texts and cultural narratives. This includes explicit citations, implicit allusions, and thematic echoes across the biblical canon. In this study, intertextual analysis was used to identify connections between John 13:1–17 and prior scriptural traditions, especially the Servant motifs in Isaiah and ritual purification practices found in the Pentateuch. These connections were analyzed to determine how the Johannine narrative constructed meaning through continuity and reinterpretation.

Ideological texture examines the systems of belief, values, and power dynamics embedded within the text. This dimension explores how the text reflects, reinforces, or challenges prevailing social norms and structures. In this study, ideological analysis focused on how John 13:1–17 redefines leadership by challenging hierarchical and honor-based frameworks characteristic of the Greco-Roman world and replacing them with a model grounded in humility and service.

The primary unit of analysis for this study was the pericope John 13:1–17, which described Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet. This pericope was selected due to its narrative coherence, theological significance, and explicit instructional component, "you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15), making it especially suitable for leadership analysis. The study was limited to this pericope to maintain analytical depth and methodological clarity. While the analysis focuses on this discrete pericope, it also recognizes that John 13 inaugurates the Farewell Discourse (John 13–17), whose themes of love, abiding, obedience, and mission provide the immediate theological context for interpreting Jesus' act of foot washing.

This analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Textual elimination: the pericope was examined in its literary context to identify key themes, narrative structure, or rhetorical features relevant to leadership behavior and instruction.
2. Intertextual analysis: the study identified and analyzed connections between the focal text and related biblical pericopes, including Servant traditions, leadership teachings in the Gospels, and ritual purification texts. These intertextual links were evaluated for their contribution to the understanding of leadership meaning.
3. Ideological analysis: the ideological assumptions embedded in the text were examined, with special attention to how the narrative challenges dominant cultural norms regarding authority, status, and power. This stage explored how the text constructed an alternative leadership model and how the model aligns with transformational leadership theory.

Following exegetical analysis, findings were interpreted in dialogue with transformational leadership theory as discussed by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985). This integration allowed for a comparative framework in which biblical insights were examined alongside established leadership constructs such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation.

To ensure methodological rigor, this study employed several strategies consistent with qualitative research standards:

- Textual grounding: all interpretations were rooted in close reading of the biblical text.
- Intertextual validation: connections between texts were supported by established canonical and thematic relationships.
- Theoretical triangulation: findings were examined in relation to both biblical theology and contemporary leadership theory.

The study was limited by its focus on a single pericope and two specific textures of SRA. While this allowed for depth, it did not encompass the full range of SRA dimensions such as social-cultural and sacred texture.

DATA ANALYSIS

Intertextual Analysis of John 13:1–17

The intertextual texture of John 13:1–17 reveals that the foot-washing episode is deeply embedded within broader biblical traditions that inform its meaning as an act of transformational leadership (Henson et al., 2020; Robbins, 1996). Rather than functioning as an isolated narrative, the pericope draws on and reconfigures multiple scriptural motifs, particularly those related to servant leadership, spiritual cleansing, and covenantal identity (Beale, 2012).

A primary intertextual connection is found in the servant traditions of Isaiah (42:1–4; 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). These passages construct a theological image of leadership grounded in obedience, humility, and redemptive suffering (Goldingay, 2005; Watts, 1997). In John 13, Jesus' action of washing the disciples' feet functions as

a performative embodiment of this servant identity (Keener, 2003; Köstenberger, 2004). The act is not just symbolic humility but a reenactment of a long-standing biblical narrative in which authority is exercised through self-giving service rather than domination (Wright, 2013). This intertextual link establishes continuity between prophetic servant theology and Johannine Christianity, positioning Jesus as the fulfillment and reinterpretation of the servant paradigm (Beale, 2012).

Additional intertextual resonance emerges through ritual purification texts such as Exodus 30:17–21 and Leviticus 16:4, where washing functions as a prerequisite for priestly service (Milgrom, 1991). In John 13, foot washing similarly signifies readiness for participation in divine mission (Carson, 1991). However, the Johannine narrative reconfigures this ritual logic: instead of priests washing themselves before approaching God, the divine figure himself performs the washing of followers (Köstenberger, 2004). This reversal intensifies the theological meaning of cleansing as an act initiated by divine leadership rather than human preparation (Keener, 2003).

Beyond these canonical intertexts, the foot-washing narrative must also be interpreted within the theological framework of the Fourth Gospel itself. Throughout John, Jesus' mission is consistently portrayed as the self-revelation of the incarnate Logos who makes the Father known (John 1:1–18). Consequently, the foot washing is more than an ethical demonstration of humility; it is a revelatory act that discloses the character of God through embodied service. Jesus' actions therefore function christologically before they function ethically. The disciples are called to imitate the foot washing because it manifests the divine identity revealed in the incarnate Son. Leadership, in Johannine perspective, is thus grounded not merely in exemplary behavior but in participation in God's self-giving life as disclosed through Jesus.

Further intertextual support is found in the prophetic promises of internal purification, especially in Ezekiel 36:25–27 and Psalm 51:7, where cleansing is associated with spiritual renewal and the transformation of the human heart (Block, 1997; Brueggemann, 1997). These texts reinforce the idea that washing in John 13 symbolizes not only external service but also internal transformation, aligning closely with transformational leadership theory's emphasis on value and identity change in followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Finally, New Testament parallels such as Mark 10:42–45 and Luke 22:24–27 reinforce the continuity of Jesus' teaching on servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Wright, 2013). These pericopes establish a consistent narrative trajectory in which greatness is redefined as service, thereby situating John 13 within a broader canonical discourse on leadership inversion (Keener, 2003).

IDEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF POWER AND LEADERSHIP REVERSAL

The ideological nature of John 13:1–17 reveals a deliberate subversion of dominant cultural assumptions regarding authority, status, and leadership. In the Greco-Roman world, leadership was typically associated with honor, hierarchical position, and the maintenance of social distance between leaders and followers (Malina, 1993; Neyrey, 2008). Within this ideological framework, the act of foot washing was associated with the lowest status within the household service structures, and was typically reserved for slaves (Keener, 2003).

Against this backdrop, Jesus' assumption of the role of a foot washer constitutes a radical ideological inversion. The narrative explicitly destabilizes conventional honor-shame structures by presenting the highest possible authority figure voluntarily adopting the lowest social position (Koester, 2008). This inversion is not just symbolic but pedagogical, as Jesus explicitly instructs the disciples to imitate his action: "you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). Leadership, therefore, is redefined as an enacted ethic rather than a positional status (Greenleaf, 1977).

This ideological shift aligns closely with transformational leadership theory, especially the dimension of idealized influence (Bass, 1985). However, the Johannine text extends beyond behavioral modeling to reconstitute the very ontology of leadership. Authority is no longer derived from social rank but from embodied service that transforms both leader and follower identity (Wright, 2018).

Moreover, the passage introduces a reciprocal transformation dynamic. The instruction that followers are "not greater than their master" (John 13:16) does not reinforce hierarchy but instead establishes a flattened moral structure in which leadership is reproduced through imitation rather than control. This aligns with identity-based leadership theories that emphasize the internalization of leader values within followers' self-concepts (Lord & Brown, 2001; Shamir et al., 1993).

The ideological outcome of the passage is therefore a redefinition of greatness itself. Leadership is no longer measured by authority over others but by the capacity to engage in sacrificial service that produces communal transformation. This constitutes a direct ideological challenge to both ancient hierarchical systems and contemporary leadership models that prioritize influence without sufficient ethical grounding (Greenleaf, 1977).

JOHN 13:1–17 AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF LEADERSHIP AUTHORITY

Integration of Intertextual and Ideological Findings

When intertextual and ideological textures are considered together, John 13:1–emerges as a coherent model of transformational leadership grounded in narrative theology (Culpepper, 1983; Koester, 2008). The intertextual analysis demonstrates that Jesus' actions are rooted in and reshape existing servant and purification traditions (Exod. 30:17–21; Isa. 52:13–53:12; Keener, 2003), while the ideological analysis reveals that the actions actively reconstruct prevailing assumptions about leadership and authority (Malina, 1993; Neyrey, 2008).

This dual movement—continuity with Israel's servant tradition and ideological reconfiguration of power—produces a leadership model characterized by identity transformation, ethical reorientation, and embodied imitation (Greenleaf, 1977; Wright, 2004). Within Bass' (1985) framework, Jesus exercises idealized influence by personally embodying the values He commands, inspirational motivation by calling the disciples into a new communal vision of servant leadership (13:15–17), and intellectual stimulation by overturning accepted assumptions about authority through the paradox of the master becoming the servant (13:6–12). In transformational leadership terms, the pericope simultaneously functions as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and

intellectual stimulation, while also building upon these constructs into a theologically grounded framework of sacrificial service (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978).

Integration of Findings with Transformational Leadership Theory

The findings of this study demonstrate that John 13:1–17 functions as a foundational model narrative for transformational leadership theory when examined through intertextual and ideological textures. The intertextual analysis revealed that the foot washing is deeply embedded within Servant traditions found in Isaiah, ritual purification texts, and broader New Testament teachings on leadership and humility (Isa. 52:13–53:12; Keener, 2003). These connections position Jesus' action not as an isolated ethical gesture but as the culmination and reconfiguration of a long-standing biblical theology of servant leadership.

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When viewed alongside transformational leadership theory as described by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), the passage reflects all four core dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. However, the Johannine narrative extends beyond behavioral influence by embedding leadership transformation within a theological and ideological redefinition of authority itself. Leadership is not merely a set of observable behaviors but a reconstruction of identity that is grounded in embodied service. Within the broader Johannine narrative, however, this identity transformation is sustained through relational participation rather than imitation alone. The command to follow Jesus' example (13:15) anticipates the Farewell Discourse, where disciples are instructed to "abide" (or "remain") in Christ (John 15:4–5). The ability to reproduce Jesus' pattern of servant leadership therefore arises from continued participation in his life rather than from moral effort alone. In Johannine theology, leadership transformation is relational before it is behavioral.

Intellectual stimulation is enacted not merely through Jesus' command to imitate but through the pedagogical sequence that precedes it. Jesus first disrupts the disciples' conventional assumptions about authority, purity, and social status by assuming the role of a household slave (John 13:4–5). Peter's resistance ("You shall never wash my feet," vv. 6–8) exposes the incompatibility of Jesus' action with prevailing expectations of leadership. Rather than immediately explaining the act, Jesus allows the tension to remain until asking, "Do you understand what I have done for you?" (v.12). This rhetorical question invites the disciples to reinterpret leadership itself before they are instructed, "You also should do as I have done to you" (v.15). Thus, the imperative to imitate follows cognitive and interpretive transformation, closely paralleling Bass's

(1985) conception of intellectual stimulation, in which leaders challenge followers to reconsider established assumptions and adopt new ways of understanding reality.

Ideological Reconfiguration of Leadership and Power

The ideological analysis demonstrated that John 13:1–17 actively disrupts Greco-Roman hierarchies of honor, status, and authority (Malina, 1993; Neyrey, 2008). In contrast to dominant cultural models that equate leadership with social elevation and separation from subordinates, the text presents leadership as a voluntary descent into the lowest social role. The act of foot washing thus functions as a symbolic inversion of power, redefining greatness as a service and authority as self-given action (Keener, 2003).

This finding aligns with servant leadership theory as described by Greenleaf (1977) and further developed by van Dierendonck (2011) and Liden et al. (2008). However, the Johannine account intensifies this model by grounding it in divine agency rather than organizational ethics. In this sense, leadership is not simply moral behavior but participation in a divinely initiated pattern of sacrificial service.

The ideological shift identified in this study also extends identity-based leadership theories (Lord & Brown, 2001; Shamir et al., 1993), which emphasize the transformation of the follower self-concept. In John 13, identity transformation is explicitly commanded: followers are instructed to replicate the embodied behavior of Jesus. This establishes leadership as a reproducible identity system in which followers internalize and reenact the leader's values.

Contribution to Leadership Theory

This study expands the current understanding of transformational leadership theory by demonstrating that transformational leadership theory is enriched and redefined when it is interpreted through biblical exegesis. While Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) emphasized moral elevation and follower development, John 13:1–17 introduces a deeper dimension of being and identity in which leadership transformation involves the reconstitution of status, identity, and meaning through embodied service.

Furthermore, the integration of intertextual and ideological analysis reveals that transformational leadership is not merely a psychological or organizational process but can also be understood as a narrative-ethical construct grounded in theological tradition (Culpepper, 1983; Koester, 2008). The Johannine account further suggests that transformational leadership is rooted in relational participation. Throughout the Fourth Gospel, identity is expressed through mutual indwelling: the Father is in the Son, the Son is in the Father, and believers are invited to participate in that same relationship (John 14:10–11, 20; 15:4–7; 17:21–23). Within this theological framework, servant leadership becomes the visible expression of an identity already constituted through communion with Christ. Transformation therefore proceeds from participation to imitation rather than from imitation to participation. This expands existing leadership models by introducing the possibility that transformational leadership is sustained through behavioral and symbolic actions that are rooted in sacred narrative frameworks.

Relationship Between Servant and Transformational Leadership

The findings also clarify the conceptual relationship between servant leadership and transformational leadership. While prior research identifies substantial conceptual overlap between the two constructs, particularly in their shared emphasis on follower development and ethical conduct, the Johannine narrative presents servant identity as the theological and ideological foundation from which transformational leadership emerges. Socio-rhetorical analysis therefore complements contemporary servant leadership scholarship by demonstrating how biblical narrative provides not merely illustrative examples of servant leadership but an interpretive framework through which the construct itself may be more fully understood.

In John 13, transformational leadership is not presented as influence toward organizational goals but as transformation toward a servant identity. This reframing challenges the assumption that leadership effectiveness is primarily outcome-driven and instead positions effectiveness as fidelity to a model of sacrificial service (Greenleaf, 1977).

Theological and Practical Implications

From a theological perspective, the passage affirms that leadership is grounded in divine self-revelation that is expressed through humility and service (Keener, 2003). The foot-washing narrative becomes a theological statement about the nature of authority within the community of followers. This suggests that leadership development grounded in this model should emphasize skill acquisition and identity formation, moral formation, and embodied practice. Leadership training informed by this framework would prioritize experiential learning that reflects humility, service, and relational engagement rather than hierarchical authority structures (Wright, 2004).

Although this study is exegetical rather than programmatic, the Johannine model of leadership developed in John 13:1–17 suggests several implications for leadership formation within churches and other values-based organizations. Rather than centering leadership formation primarily on technical competencies, administrative effectiveness, or positional authority, organizations informed by John 13:1–17 may benefit from structuring leadership development around practices that cultivate servant identity through embodied participation. Such practices could include mentoring relationships in which experienced leaders intentionally model humility and service, opportunities for leaders to engage in acts of service alongside those they lead, and guided theological reflection that encourages participants to examine assumptions about power, status, and authority in light of Jesus' example. These practices reflect transformational leadership's emphasis on modeling, moral development, and follower growth (Bass & Riggio, 2006), while also aligning with research that views leadership development as a relational and identity-forming process rather than simply the acquisition of individual competencies (Day, 2000). In this framework, leadership formation becomes not merely the acquisition of managerial skills but the intentional cultivation of character and communal practices that enable leaders to embody the values they seek to reproduce in others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Greenleaf, 1977).

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by its focus on a single pericope, John 13:1–17, which restricted the generalizability of findings across the broader Johannine narrative and biblical canon. Additionally, while socio-rhetorical analysis provides a robust interpretive framework, the emphasis on intertextual and ideological textures excluded other potentially relevant dimensions such as social-scientific or sacred texture analysis (Robbins, 1996). Furthermore, the integration of transformational leadership theory with biblical exegesis is interpretive in nature and did not establish a historical linkage between contemporary leadership models and ancient textual intent.

Summary of Findings

The analysis demonstrates that John 13:1–17 creates a model of transformational leadership through two primary mechanisms. First, intertextual engagement with Isaiah and related biblical traditions situates Jesus' actions within a broader servant theology that redefines authority through humility (Isa. 52:13–53:12; Keener, 2003). Second, ideological restructuring of Greco-Roman honor-based systems establishes a counterculture model of leadership grounded in enacted service and follower imitation (Malina, 1993; Neyrey, 2008).

Together, these findings support the conclusion that the foot-washing narrative provides a foundational model for transformational leadership, in which leadership is defined not by positional authority but by the capacity to generate identity change through embodied service.

Further, these findings suggest that John 13:1–17 provides a rich and underutilized framework for understanding transformational leadership as a process of identity reconfiguration, ideological inversion, and embodied service. When read through intertextual and ideological lenses, the pericope reflects and expands transformational leadership theory by grounding it in a narrative of sacrificial leadership that challenges conventional assumptions about authority and influence.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine John 13:1–17 as a transformational leadership text through the application of socio-rhetorical analysis, with particular emphasis on intertextual and ideological textures. By integrating biblical exegesis with transformational leadership theory as described by Burns and Bass, the study has demonstrated that the foot-washing narrative functions as a foundational model of leadership transformation grounded in identity reconfiguration, ethical inversion, and embodied service.

The intertextual analysis revealed that the passage is deeply embedded within broader biblical traditions, especially the Servant model of Isaiah, ritual purification practices, and New Testament teachings on humility and leadership. These connections demonstrate that Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet is not an isolated symbolic gesture but a theologically rich reenactment and redefinition of established service traditions. The ideological analysis further showed that the narrative actively subverts

Greco-Roman conceptions of authority by redefining greatness as service and leadership as sacrificial action.

Taken together, these findings support the conclusion that John 13:1–17 offers a robust and textually grounded model of transformational leadership. However, unlike conventional leadership frameworks that emphasize behavioral influence and organizational outcomes, this model situates transformation at the level of identity, moral orientation, and communal reproduction. This framework shows that leadership is not primarily positional but performative and imitative, requiring followers to internalize and enact the values embodied by the leader.

This study contributes to leadership and biblical scholarship in three key ways. First, it demonstrates that transformational leadership theory can be meaningfully enriched through socio-rhetorical biblical exegesis, especially when applied to narrative texts. Second, it advances the integration of servant leadership and transformational leadership by showing that servant identity functions as the ideological foundation of transformational change in the Johannine context. Third, it illustrates the value of intertextual and ideological analysis as a methodological approach for uncovering leadership models embedded within sacred texts.

The findings suggest that leadership development grounded in this framework should extend beyond skill acquisition and performance metrics to include identity formation, ethical development, and embodied practices of service. Leaders are not merely agents of influence but are also symbolic actors whose behavior shapes organizational values and follower self-understanding. Leadership education informed by this model should prioritize humility, relational engagement, and the intentional modeling of service-oriented behavior.

This study was limited by its focus on a single biblical pericope, John 13:1–17, and by its emphasis on intertextual and ideological textures within the socio-rhetorical framework. Future research should expand this analysis to additional Johannine pericopes as well as other New Testament narratives to determine the consistency of transformational leadership themes across broader canonical contexts. Empirical studies may also explore how biblically grounded leadership models influence contemporary organizational outcomes in practice.

In conclusion, John 13:1–17 presents a compelling and theologically grounded vision of transformational leadership in which authority is redefined through humility, service, and identity transformation. The transformational leadership presented in John 13 is therefore grounded not simply in ethical instruction but in Johannine theology, where the revelation of God in the incarnate Son creates a community whose identity is sustained through abiding participation in Christ and expressed through acts of sacrificial service. When interpreted through socio-rhetorical analysis, the passage reflects key principles of transformational leadership and extends them into a deeper moral and narrative framework that challenges conventional assumptions about power, leadership, and influence.

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