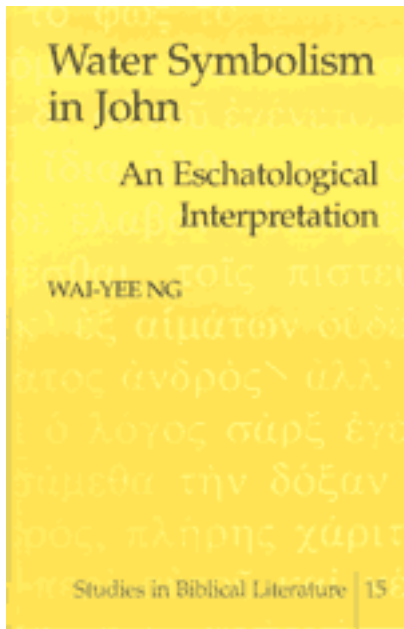


RBL 01/2005



Ng, Wai-Yee

Water Symbolism in John: An Eschatological Interpretation

Studies in Biblical Literature 15

New York: Lang, 2001. Pp. xiv + 241. Hardcover.
\$56.95. ISBN 0820444537.

Ron Fay
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Deerfield, IL 60015

In *Water Symbolism in John: An Eschatological Interpretation*, Wai-Yee Ng compels Johannine scholarship to reassess both what it means to read John symbolically as well as how those symbols convey different themes at different times. Ng's work is a revision of her dissertation for Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia under the supervision of Moisés Silva. The book consists of a brief introduction, four chapters, and a brief conclusion.

The introduction begins with a quick sketch of the controversies swirling around eschatology in the Gospel of John. She notes how discussion seems to have limited itself to the issue of the present and the future without integrating the rest of the Johannine message. Ng proposes a more comprehensive stance, "recognizing the literary, the historical, as well as the theological character of Johannine water symbolism" (3). The first chapter discusses the questions of symbolism in John. The author delineates eight types of symbolism. The key categories are metaphorical, narrative, sacramental, representational, and thematic. She then explores the relationship between symbol and metaphor, reaching the conclusion that they are both on the same "continuum as literary devices, but symbols have a broader application and a more expansive nature" (6). The different *sēmeia* and surrounding pericopes constitute some of the narrative symbolism.

This denotes the manner in which an entire story can itself be seen as a symbol interpreted through the central symbolic object. Ng also allows for a double meaning in many of the different symbols, something that will be instrumental to her thesis. She then wades into the quagmire of sacramentalism in John's Gospel by giving a historical approach to the discussion, mentioning such notables as Cullmann on one side, Bultmann on the other, and Brown as somewhere in the middle. Commenting on how the concept of sacramental symbolism has grown to cover more and more ground, Ng contends for a wider understanding in this connection. In arguing for a thematic symbolism, the author uses Meeks as a catalyst for her own work, agreeing with the idea that what matters is "being grounded upon a vigorous inquiry of the literary motif, and sober references to the historical sociological context, namely, the polemic faced by the Johannine circle" (21).

After detailing the different kinds of symbolism generally found in John, Ng attempts to define symbolism. The book quickly covers different historical views on symbolism in the Gospel, such as form-critical, linguistically critical, linguistic/philosophical views and, finally, Dodd's multifaceted view. The author seems in close agreement with Dodd on many points in terms of how symbolism functions in John. Three different definitions for symbolism are given, with a very helpful and needed reference to Ricoeur's work in linguistic philosophy. Ng seems to agree with Ricoeur that symbolism is "the reaching out of the human to the supra-human" (40). The author recaps different theological interpretations of symbolism, deciding on salvation history as the most appropriate rubric. Instead of moving forward with an overly specific approach, however, Ng intentionally takes what she calls an integrative approach, blending together the literary, the historical, and the theological. In a somewhat bold move, the author decides that a purely scientific approach to literature will never comprehend symbolism, and therefore she will proceed in such a way as to allow for a fuller significance from the various symbols by being satisfied with "multiple meanings as well as inconclusive investigations" (46).

The second chapter describes the development of Johannine water symbolism within a literary context. The section begins with a review of scholarship, highlighting different outlines of the Gospel and how water fits into each structure. Ng summarizes the minor passages that mention water but clearly hold no symbolic reference (3:22–24; 4:46; 10:40). The passages that possibly have a symbolic significance are discussed next (5:1–15; 6:35, 55; 9:1–12), where the author avers that each fits the mold of symbolic language. More obvious, Ng argues, is the symbolic nature of 1:14–34; 2:1–11; and 3:1–15, all of which constitute the stress on water language in the early chapters of John, carrying the theme of water as part of preparation. Instead of seeing just a single role for water in 4:1–42 and 7:37–39, the author vigorously defends the understanding that both passages have references to spiritual cleansing (perhaps as allusions to baptism) and to

eschatological blessing. In 4:1–42, Ng builds a case for an eschatological understanding of water based upon Jesus the Messiah as the giver of God’s gift. The water stands for both what the woman is waiting for alongside what Jesus gives. Thus, it is both preparatory and fulfillment. The notoriously difficult 7:37–39 fits within the scope of Exodus rock imagery, according to the author. She decides that this pericope also has a double meaning of water as both spirit and an eschatological thrust. The rest of John (13:1–17; 19:31–37) much more subtly draws on the water imagery. She summarizes the use of water in John as having three stages of literary development: 1–5 stresses the anticipation theme, 4–12 mingles anticipation and fulfillment, and 13–19 is dominated by the use of water in passion theme contexts. One finds the theological significance of this symbolism in overlapping themes, where the water theme entwines with the revelation of Jesus, sensory language tied to belief, and the Passover theme. In conclusion, Ng argues that water appears as a key symbol in each portion of the Gospel where eschatology emerges as a key theological point.

The third chapter delves into the discourse of John 4, exploring the relationship between eschatology and water. The chapter begins with an argument for the historicity of the episode at the well as characterized by internal evidence. Ng then addresses the various source theories for this passage, interacting especially with Qumran and Samaritan materials. Instead of adopting one of the various theories, the author asks: Which way does the influence flow? She avers that John could not have been overly influenced due to his unique christological claims. Ng next defends her literary approach vis-à-vis Brown’s Johannine communities approach and his emphasis on event over against the text. She examines several structures of the text followed by a description of the internal use of themes and external thematic connections. Ng devotes a large section of this chapter to developing the different images in the second dialogue (e.g., food and harvest imagery). In the first dialogue she explores the imagery of “living water” and “five husbands,” finding the climax in the discussion of the juxtaposition between “this mountain” and “Jerusalem.” This third chapter is the heart of the dissertation. In it she details a specific understanding of the pericope based on an eschatological understanding of water. John 4 brings together the two major uses of water in the Gospel and forces the reader to incorporate it into the theology of the entire book.

The fourth chapter of Ng’s book surveys the use of water in the rest of the Bible, which describes as an exercise in biblical theology. The section begins with an overdue examination of John’s appropriation of the Old Testament. It describes the relationship between specific citations of the Old Testament to allusions, noting the predominance of the latter. The references all culminate in the Passion itself, the apex of water symbolism (i.e., 19:34). Ng then argues that John utilizes the lens of salvation history, which she also calls typology, through which John interprets and uses the Old Testament. John’s

typology centers in some respect on the creation motif found especially at the beginning of the book. This typology is unique to John because of the vertical character intertwined with the horizontal (164). The author then begins her survey of water in the entirety of the Bible, starting with the Pentateuch. In the Torah she finds water used primarily as cleansing and creation imagery. The historical books also have the theme of cleansing, but the wisdom literature does not have a homogenous statement. The prophetic tradition has variable outcomes as well, with such issues as rebellion and salvation, the eschatological Spirit, and the temple included. Water in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts refers nearly exclusively to baptism. Paul mentions water in terms of cleansing, but he also alludes to Exodus in 1 Cor 10:1–5, which, Ng argues, shows a similarity in typology with the Johannine writings. The author of Hebrews explicitly links water with both cleansing and sacrifice. Each of the Petrine Epistles cites the flood and develops that imagery. The last portion quickly moves through the use of water in the Johannine Epistles and Revelation, showing more creative uses of the symbol. Ng asserts that her study shows the Bible is moving “towards the final goal,” which she calls “eschatology” (191). Ng concludes her study by pointing out how John’s water imagery is different from every other book in the Bible, that it is closely linked with eschatology, and, finally, that the typological style of John is what moves this symbolism from creation to consummation.

Wai-Yee Ng’s work is extensive and thought provoking. She displays a solid knowledge of secondary literature both in her specialization and in intersecting fields. Her discussion of language games and referentiality in the first chapter helps to illumine what symbolism means to various scholars and how it should be understood. Her exegesis, while not profound, proves to be sound. The problems in the book tend to be ordering issues. For example, the discussion of how John relies on the Old Testament would have fit the beginning of chapter 2 much better than the beginning of chapter 4, since so much of the exegetical work depends upon it. In addition, one would expect a more thorough discussion of the Ezekiel passages in conjunction with the Zechariah passages due to how John weaves the two themes together throughout, especially in John 7. Another problem of ordering is that the author does not define what she means by eschatology until her conclusion, not to mention that this definition is overly broad. Though Ng rightly points out how the many themes in John overlap time and again, she never takes up the challenge of displaying how other themes support the water imagery or how water imagery might support them, something that would help situate her argument better in the overall scheme of Johannine scholarship. A major issue with this book is how it depends so strongly on chapter 4. The nature of the conversation falls easily into the category of eschatology, yet Ng spends a large portion of her time defending the point. One would rather see the thesis applied to more controversial passages.

Though there are some weak points in the book, overall the discussion is valuable to the Johannine scholar. Ng helps to move along discussion of typology, symbolism, and eschatology in John. Anyone working in those areas would benefit greatly from her concise writing and keen insight, even those who are not working in the Johannine corpus.