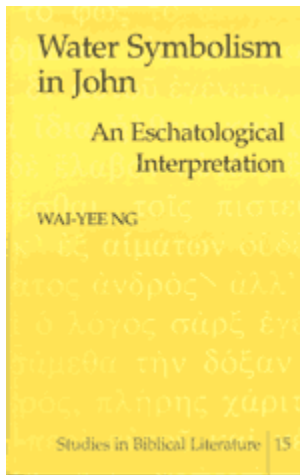


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**Ng, Wai-Yee**

***Water Symbolism in John: An Eschatological Interpretation***

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*Water Symbolism in John: An Eschatological Interpretation* is the published version of Wai-Yee Ng's doctoral dissertation written under the direction of Moisés Silva at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Ng seeks to clarify Johannine eschatology through an investigation of the literary, historical, and theological character of the use of water as a symbol in the Fourth Gospel. She argues that, in John's early chapters, water symbolizes anticipation of the eschatological blessings that Jesus brings; then beginning in the dialogue with the Samaritan woman, water becomes a symbol of eschatological and soteriological blessing. While her conclusions merit consideration, her arguments strain to arrive at them, in part because of a want of method, in part because of presuppositions that stand outside the consensus of Johannine scholarship and, consequently, require more support than Ng offers.

Ng begins with a chapter defining what symbolism in the Fourth Gospel is by examining how Johannine scholars have used the term. In doing so, she exposes the lack of consistency and methodological clarity from which discussions of symbolism suffer. Based upon this review, Ng concludes that symbolism belongs on a continuum with

metaphors, *semeia* or narrative symbols, irony, and literary motifs and proceeds to treat the term *symbol* as comprehending the entire continuum, thereby perpetuating the confusion rather than bringing more methodological rigor. Ng ends this first chapter by commenting upon the inadequacy of critical method to arrive at the meaning of a symbol. She avoids the use of critical theory by arguing that symbolism is a way of knowing, an epistemology, beyond the confines of empiricism and that one should not expect the precision of criticism and should accept multiple meanings as well as inconclusive investigations (46). However, in a scholarly treatment of symbolism one expects some critical theory to rein in free association and to determine when water is a symbol or a literary device and when it is just H<sub>2</sub>O. Failure to differentiate various functions of water and its references and a lack of delineation of factors controlling interpretation of possible symbolic uses characterize most of her book.

Ng describes her method as “an open investigation” (45) and proceeds by distinguishing three approaches to which she dedicates separate chapters. Chapter 2 pursues a study of the development of literary patterns within the Gospel. Chapter 3 provides an exegesis of John 4 in which she argues that the symbol of water provides a bridge from Samaritan to Jewish theology. Chapter 4 is a catalogue of the uses of water as a symbol in the Old and New Testaments. Given that the scope of meaning to which she attributes symbolic meaning rests upon the prophetic tradition from which the New Testament derives its eschatology, the order of her chapters seems odd. She presents the range of meanings that the canon offers in her fourth chapter, when the arguments of her second and third chapter depend upon this search. By severing the literary analysis from historical considerations, she delays provision of the proof that the associations she makes are possible. When she links the references to water in the scene at the wedding at Cana and by the Baptist to eschatology through the tradition of the eschatological wedding, she provides no basis for this association in Jewish or biblical tradition.

The clearest contribution of Ng’s work comes in her second chapter when she presents a literary analysis of the use of water in the first five chapters of the Gospel. She notes a consistent pattern in which water is juxtaposed with Jesus’ actions. Instead of

positing a replacement motif, she argues that Jesus fulfills what the symbol of water anticipates (62). In her attempt to find a pattern beyond chapter 5 and a unified principle governing the use of water throughout the Gospel, she presupposes the centrality of an atonement Christology to the Gospel. When the narrator invites symbolic treatment but provides no boundary in the discourse or narrative to contain meaning, Ng takes advantage of the open horizon by taking atonement as her heading. For example, when the narrator opens up the possibility of symbolic interpretation by mentioning that the name Siloam means “sent,” Ng moves through a series of associations: washing in water equals “salvific bath” equals the “fountain of cleansing water at Calvary” equals Christ (65).

The broad treatment of water as a symbol and the failure to differentiate between symbolic and other functions facilitates the easy association of water with eschatology. For example, she treats water baptism and the washing of feet as symbols of purification rather than rituals of purification. As a result, she does not differentiate between the idea that the act of washing feet can symbolize Jesus’ humility, an interpretation that is invited by the dialogue in which the act is embedded, and her own interpretation of the footwashing as a symbol of purification that points to purification offered through Jesus’ humiliating and atoning death (81–82). In her exegesis of John 4, she presents the reconstruction of the Samaritan tradition of the *Taheb*, the prophet like Moses, and Gerizim to make clear that the woman refers to eschatological expectations, but then Ng takes this datum and applies it to a broad symbolic interpretation of more than the phrase “living water.” Finding no precedent in Old Testament, Jewish, or Samaritan writings, she speculates that the well is a monument to Jacob’s greatness and symbolizes both the “trustworthiness of traditional Samaritan doctrines” and the hope in salvation history. The water jug the woman leaves behind then symbolizes “renunciation of her former faith” (135).

The significance of Ng’s work lies in the illumination of the recurring presence of water in the topography of the Gospel and as an element within much of its action and many of its discourses and in her attention to this oft-neglected device. By focusing upon

the place of water within Johannine eschatology, she also moves the discussion of symbolism in a direction toward which the Gospel beckons but which scholars find foreboding. Her work underscores the ongoing difficulty of contending with the possible significance of the ubiquitous presence of water. The Gospel writer provides invitations to treat water symbolically but few evocations to direct or limit that interpretation. Thus readers are left to impose their own limits or horizons.