



Webster, Jane S.

Ingesting Jesus: Eating and Drinking in the Gospel of John

Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; Leiden: Brill, 2003. Pp. xi +184. Paper/cloth. \$27.95/\$95.00. ISBN 1589830466/9004127119.

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Ingesting Jesus, the published version of Jane S. Webster's doctoral dissertation, written under the supervision of Adele Reinhartz, attempts to arrive at a better understanding of the Gospel of John, especially of its soteriology (3–5) by analyzing the way in which the Evangelist uses “ingesting language” (i.e., language associated with the consumption of foodstuffs and potable liquids) on the level of real eating and drinking as well as on the levels of symbolic and metaphorical use of foodstuffs and ingesting language. The starting point of this enterprise is the observation that John makes use of the motif of ingesting throughout his Gospel but that this has, simultaneously, scarcely been investigated beyond the main textual complexes: 2:1–11, 4:1–26, 6:1–71 and 7:37–39 (cf. the survey on 22–26). In addition, the core hermeneutical consideration behind the study is, in the footsteps of David Tracy, that “the study of metaphor may well provide a central clue to a better understanding of that elusive and perplexing phenomenon our culture calls religion” (1, quoting David Tracy), thereby situating the present study in the tradition of interest in symbols in John (survey given on 14–22).

The texts discussed in *Ingesting Jesus*, mostly synchronically and following the structure of John, are subdivided by Webster into two main categories: a first group of texts includes “specific references pertaining to food and drink and to the acts of eating,

drinking and feeding” (1). A second group of texts consists of meals, defined by Webster as “gatherings in which eating and drinking ostensibly occur” (2). This subdivision plays a minor role in what follows, however, as the body of the study follows the flow of the John narrative, consciously (5) locating itself in the sphere of “the larger framework of literary and . . . narrative criticism.” This orientation, however, implies for Webster also the bracketing of historical, sociological, or source-critical questions, which immediately raises the question whether a more eclectic approach would not have been more successful. Especially relating the text to the social circumstance in which it originated it would seem to have contributed to the depth of the results now presented in *Ingesting Jesus*, though Webster shows awareness of this problem (5–6, esp. n. 8). Something that would have been avoided is, for example, the omission of a discussion of the possible eucharistic references in the chapter discussing John 6, on the basis of the fact that, due to the lack of a “narrative of institution,” there is no intertextual relationship within John that would make this connection possible. These methodological considerations are followed by a clarification of Webster’s understanding of various terms: sign, symbol, metaphor, motif, and the like (5–13), to which she returns explicitly in the conclusions (147–54), where the five-step definition of a motif, presented in the introduction, is used to analyze the importance of ingesting language as a motif in John

The introduction is followed by chapters on the following subjects: (1) “Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36)”; (2) “Water to Wine and Consumed with Zeal (John 2:1–11, 13–25)”; (3) “Living Water and Dying Food (John 4:4–42; 7:37–39; 12:24)”; (4) “Tasting Life and Tasting Death (John 6:1–71; 8:51–52)”; (5) “Supper in Bethany (John 12:1–8)”; (6) “The Last Supper (John 13:1–30; 15:1–17)”; (7) “First and Last Drink (John 19:28–37; 18:11)”; and (8) “Resurrection Breakfast (John 21:1–25).” The whole is summed up in a conclusion of eight pages, a bibliography, and indices of modern and ancient authors (references only to works contained in the canons of the Tanak and LXX; additional books are referred to as “apocrypha”)

The first chapter, on Jesus the Lamb of God, raises more questions than it gives answers; in the first place, there is the question what exactly it is doing in a study that is interested in ingesting language in John and whether 1:29, 36 merit the conclusion that “the Gospel of John thus introduces the ingesting motif in a suggestive, hesitant way, its significance becomes only apparent in retrospect.” Webster’s argument is clear: John 1:29, 36 contain ingesting language, if they are read from the point of view of John 6 and 19: in the latter text, it becomes clear that Jesus is the Lamb of God in that he is sacrificed at the same time as the Passover lambs in the temple; in the former text, the point that believing equals eating is made strongly. Still, whether or not it is justified to read John 1:29, 36 for these reasons as a subtle introduction of the ingesting motif remains questionable.

Chapter 2 (37–51) is divided into two portions: a section dealing with John 2:1–11 (37–45) and one dealing with 2:13–25 (45–51). Whereas the inclusion of the former narrative of the gift miracle in Cana is obvious, the inclusion of the latter is not. In this case, however, Webster takes the (metaphorical) expression ὁ ζῆλος τοῦ οἴκου σου καταφάγεται με (John 2:17) as the reason for its inclusion into her study (37). In her discussion of John 2:1–11, Webster draws heavily on (possible) inter- and intratextual connections, without, however, making too much of them (e.g., the marriage in Cana is only reminiscent of the HB/OT wedding imagery used in the context of a restored covenant; the wedding in Cana remains a different kind, cf. 39–40). Not all aspects of the text can be done justice to, however, in the space that Webster allows herself for this narrative: the apparent brusqueness of Jesus’ answer to his mother in John 2:4 remains, for example, unmentioned, and so does the possibility of a Dionysiac background of the whole. One of the concluding observations that Jesus’ role shifts from that of a guest to that of a host is certainly illuminating; less is this the case with the suggestion that the wine of Cana is related to Jesus’ death; rather, Jesus’ signs are all related to his future glorification, but not necessarily their “substance.” Wine has little theological relevance for the passion in John, though bread of course does (on the basis of John 6).

In the section on John 2:13–25 Webster suggests that the ζῆλος, which consumes Jesus (John 2:17), is to be identified with true worshipers (47), as they are zealous for true worship, which, on the basis of the replacement of the Jerusalem temple with Jesus’ body as the focus of true worship and the necessity of the acceptance (= consumption on the basis of John 6) of the latter’s crucifixion, consists indeed of “consuming” Jesus. Interesting as this intertextual construction may be, what remains unconvincing (and hardly argued) is its cornerstone: the interpretation of ζῆλος in terms of true devotees, something that can hardly be done on the basis of the Gospel of John, in which the word does not play any substantial role at all, let alone in John’s theology of discipleship.

The chapters that follow, chapter 3 on John 4:4–42; 7:37–39; and 12:24 and chapter 4 on 6:1–71 and 8:51–52, should, in view of the centrality of ingesting language in at least John 4:4–42 and 6:1–15, 22–71, constitute the core of Webster’s thesis, as they deal with two of the main narratives/discourses in John concerning foodstuffs (water of life in John 4:4–26, bread of life in John 6:1–15, 22–71). Webster discusses 4:4–26 commendably as a revelatory discourse, revealing Jesus’ true identity in that he reveals the true identity of his conversation partner, the Samaritan woman (57). Webster observes helpfully that Jesus in this narrative, as in 2:1–11, shifts from guest to host (59); she might, however, overemphasize the degree of identity between Jesus and the living water, as the latter is identified with the Spirit in 7:37–39. A discussion of 4:31–38, with 12:24, and partially read from the perspective of the latter text (hence the title of the chapter, “Living Water and Dying Food”), follows. Webster not only emphasizes Jesus’ ingesting language when

he speaks of his relationship with the Father, but she also identifies the sower (4:36) with Jesus, suggesting, on the basis of 12:24, that the seed is Jesus' body, both in 12:24 as well as in 4:31–38 (61–62). The latter brings out a new way of reading, but the intertextual connections may be weaker than Webster suggests: the emphasis in 4:31–38 is on reaping, John 12:24 on the seed. Certainly helpful is the observation that throughout John 4 there is an emphasis on Jesus' reversal of roles, especially that of guest and host (see 63–64).

The discussion of John 6:1–71 (not quite including 6:16–21, however) is paired with that of 8:51–52 under the heading “Tasting Life and Tasting Death” (65). Reading synchronically, Webster focuses on intertextual symbolism, opening many different doors in many different directions, though not always indicating how probable an intertextual connection is. For example, the possibility that the fish in 6:1–15 are in one way or the other related to Leviathan and Behemoth (hardly two herrings to go with a piece of bread!) could have received a more cautious discussion (cf. 69–70). Other elements are more convincing, such as the relationship between gathering bread and gathering people (see 71–72), the underlining of the theme of (misunderstood) kingship in John 6:15, and the focus on the dynamics of the discussions taking place in these verses and the development of the narrative throughout John

A discussion of the possibility of a eucharistic interpretation of John 6:51–58 at this point, rather than at the very end of the book (151–54), would have been most helpful, however. John 8:51–52 is read in relationship with John 6 (89–90), suggesting that believing, that is, the way to avoid tasting death, is eating the bread of life.

Chapter 5 (91–99) concentrates on one text, John 12:1–8, focusing on the banquet setting and especially on the significance of Mary's anointing of Jesus, drawing out its relationship both with Jesus' identity as anointed one (94–95), his own table service (13:1–11, cf. pp. 92–94), and the anointing of his body after his death (19:39–40; cf. pp. 93–94). The connection with the eschatological banquet (96–97) seems to be unlikely, however: there is neither a meal fellowship taking place in the end time, nor is there an abundance of foodstuffs; the only excess is indeed that of ointment (John 12:3; cf. p. 97), which hardly suffices to make a connection even with a text such as 2 Bar 29:1–8.

Parts of the longest banqueting scene in the New Testament, John 13–17, are discussed in chapter 6 (John 13:1–30; 15:1–17 [101–24]). After discussing some of the realia belonging to the Last Supper (e.g., seating order), Webster proceeds to interpret John 13–17 in terms of a testament-giving scene, in which a leading figure gives last instructions to his followers, which is certainly illuminating, in view of the importance of this genre both in biblical (Gen 48–49; Deut 33; Josh 23–24) and extrabiblical (e.g., *Testament of*

the Twelve Patriarchs; Testament of Abraham; Testament of Isaac; Testament of Jacob) literature. In this text Jesus performs the symbolical action of washing his disciples feet, interpreting it as a gesture pointing toward Jesus' death (106–16). It may be asked, however, whether or not the outlook of 13:1–23 is not primarily ecclesiological, which would avoid many of the (interesting and critical) exegetical troubles Webster is prepared to take to sustain her own interpretation (109–16), even if these two cannot be separated entirely, of course. As in all chapters, Webster pays special attention to the role of the disciples here also (116–21). John 15:1–17 receives a comparably short treatment in which it is proposed that “by referring to Jesus, the metaphor of the ‘true vine’ in John 15 suggests that Jesus replaces Israel as the beloved focus of God and as the locus of salvation” (124).

Before moving to the “resurrection breakfast” (John 21:1–25), Webster discusses 19:28–30 in intertextual relationship to 18:11 (“Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?”), exploring the possible significance both of Jesus' request for a drink in 19:28 as well as of the water flowing from his side in 19:34, showing again the broad range of interpretative options that thus emerge.

One of the few meals in which something is actually eaten, the “resurrection breakfast” in 21:1–25, is, as one would expect, the final text using ingesting language that Webster discusses (133–46). After noting its genre as a miracle story (133), Webster addresses the exegetical difficulties caused when the text is interpreted in the light of John 6. She suggests, however, that on the basis of the singular used in John 21:9, 13, when referring to the bread, Jesus is to be identified with the foodstuffs consumed in John 21, just as he is in John 6, and thus interprets it soteriologically (146). In addition, Webster includes a discussion of the respective roles of the disciples in general and especially those of Peter and the Beloved Disciple, presenting them as representatives of two ways of following Jesus (140–46).

In her conclusions (147–54) Webster summarizes her findings, stating that the ingesting motif in John is an effective motif, as it has a high recurrency rate, is unavoidable in many contexts, and is used at climatic points in John. The various instances of its occurrence cohere (one group focusing on Jesus' role in providing food for others, the other on Jesus' identification of himself with foodstuffs, the responses of the disciples and others are also communicated in terms of consuming Jesus). Finally, the ingesting motif is appropriate to what it symbolizes. It is only here that Webster comes to a discussion of a possible relationship of ingesting language, especially, of course, in John 6, with the John community's celebration of the Eucharist, which turns out to be likely (153), thereby adding to the appropriateness of the motif in John.

This discussion can be concluded with some general remarks, beginning with some points of general critique and ending with an appreciation of Webster's work. First, Webster places a strong emphasis on the relevance of ingesting language for John's soteriology, often interpreting texts (solely) in this direction. It would be worth exploring other dimensions as well, for example to what extent John 13:1–23 is not only a characterization of Jesus as the servant par excellence, who is about to lay down his life for his beloved, but also an ethically and ecclesiologicaly prescriptive narrative—part of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this text, it is for sure.

Second, the study contains a few paragraphs that make one wonder why they are there at all, and, at the end of these paragraphs, Webster seems to share this question as she concludes more than once that texts that might be thought to be relevant for Webster's enterprise turn out not to be. It would have been clearer if this "chaff" were separated from the "corn" in an introductory paragraph.

Third, Webster makes sparse use of secondary literature, and the use made seems to be out of balance: nearly the complete German literature on John is missing, even though quite a few studies have come forward in recent years. On top of this, Webster manages to have read more French titles than German ones, which hardly reflects the current state of the debate accurately. This is probably less a criticism toward Webster than it is a general observation about the persistent gap that exists between non-English writing European scholars and (non-European) English writing scholars.

An appreciation of Webster's work is probably most to the point, when reading it in terms of her source of inspiration: "David Tracy challenges literary critics to re-open the exploration of biblical metaphors" (153–54). This, indeed, Webster has done. That this is, in the view taken here, not always entirely convincing need not be a problem, as reopening and trying out new perspectives and, especially, intertextual relationships is certainly thought-provoking and therefore a considerable scholarly contribution. Paying attention to the theme that Webster addresses certainly shows that "the ingesting motif is found to be dynamic, creative, and provocative" (154).