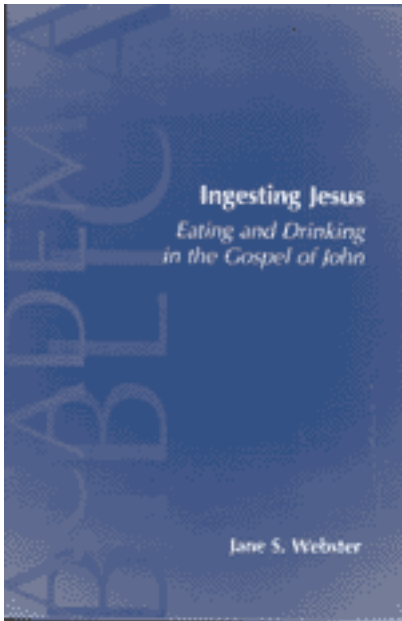


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**Webster, Jane S.**

***Ingesting Jesus: Eating and Drinking in the Gospel of John***

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In response to David Tracey's challenge to analyze the root metaphors of religion in order better to understand our culture, Jane Webster undertakes to describe the literary motif of ingesting language as found in the Gospel of John (1). Webster notes that ingesting language falls into two categories in the Gospel. The first category contains references to food or drink or to eating or drinking. In the second category are references to meals. Webster notes that while previous studies have examined isolated instances of ingestion metaphors and symbols, her study is the first to analyze the literary motif of ingestion as a whole. Such a study makes it possible to understand the relationship of the individual instances of ingestion language to the motif as a whole and to understand the relationship of the motif to its literary context (2). Webster understands the ingesting motif to function as a vehicle for Johannine soteriology in that it describes the roles of both Jesus and of disciples (3).

Webster utilizes literary and narrative criticism to describe the literary motif of ingesting language (5). Her study is therefore focused on the story of John and how it is narrated. She brackets traditional historical-critical questions. In her method chapter she defines such literary terms as figurative language, symbolic language, simile, metaphor, symbols, and motif. She discusses these terms' importance for reading religious texts.

The goal of the study is to describe the literary motif of ingesting language as it unfolds in the narrative. The method chapter concludes with an overview of modern scholarship on Johannine symbolism (15–22) and of studies on ingesting themes in John (22–26). In the remainder of the book Webster examines each narrative that contains ingesting language or narratives that happen during a meal (25).

In chapter 1 she examines the title “Lamb of God” given to Jesus by John the Baptist (1:29, 36). She concludes that Jesus is identified with the Passover lamb and is related in some sense to the idea of atonement for sin (35).

In chapter 2 Webster examines the wedding at Cana (2:1–11) and the rather cryptic statement, “zeal for your house will consume me” (2:17). She concludes that the wedding recalls the messianic banquet and that Jesus fulfills messianic expectations as the provider of salvific wine. The disciples show the appropriate response by believing in Jesus and by remaining with him. In 2:17 the Gospel connects Jesus and substitutes the body of Jesus for the sacrifice and for the place of worship. The role of believers is to consume Jesus, who is himself salvific food (51). In chapter 2 the Gospel advances the soteriology through the ingesting motif.

In chapter 3 Webster examines two stories connected to Jesus’ ministry in Samaria. The themes of living water (4:42; 7:37–39) and dying food (4:32–38; 12:24) exemplify the ingesting motif. The text portrays Jesus as the provider and substance of living water and as the one who must die to fulfill the Father’s will. The emerging picture of discipleship includes belief, testimony, and action (64).

In chapter 4 Webster analyzes two opposite ideas. In the sixth chapter of John the feeding of five thousand men is followed by a series of dialogues (6:1–71). Jesus is described as the bread of life that must be eaten. When one tastes Jesus, one also tastes life (65). In John 8 the Jews accuse Jesus of stating that those who keep Jesus’ words will not taste death (8:51–52). Webster concludes that life is associated with keeping the word of Jesus. Those who keep Jesus’ word taste life; those who do not keep Jesus’ word taste death.

In chapter 5 Webster examines the ingesting motif in the supper at Bethany (12:1–8). Even though there is no mention of eating or drinking during the episode, the action happens during a meal. The anointing of Jesus by Mary anticipates the remaining events of Jesus’ life and serves to contrast Judas and his love of money with Mary’s extravagant service (98–99).

The focus of chapter 6 is the Last Supper, including the footwashing and the discussion of the vine and the branches (13:1–30; 15:1–17). Webster concludes that the footwashing

is symbolic of Jesus laying down his life and taking it back up again (121). The metaphor of the vine and the branches shows that Jesus provides food through the disciples. The role of the disciples is to remain in Jesus (124).

In chapter 7 Webster illustrates how the ingesting motif functions during the climax of John. Webster notes that Jesus' thirst reflects the desire of Jesus to do the will of God by laying down his life (130). Irony is also present, for the one who thirsts is both the provider and substance of life-giving water. The role of the disciples in regard to the death is to serve as witnesses to the death and offer testimony so that others may believe.

Chapter 8 addresses the final narrative unit of John. The miraculous catch of fish emphasizes that Jesus is the substance and provider of food that gives eternal life (139). The drawing of the fish suggests that the role of the disciples is to draw people to Jesus. Jesus charges Peter with the responsibility to "feed my sheep" within the broader context provided by the ingestion motif. This charge is for Peter to lead others to believe in the efficacy of Jesus' death. The Beloved Disciple, on the other hand, follows Jesus by testifying about what he has seen.

In the conclusion Webster reviews factors that make literary motifs effective, as delineated by William Freedman. She notes that the ingesting motif as presented in John is effective. The ingesting motif is used to convey the soteriology of the John and to describe the roles of the disciples in disseminating the gospel.

Webster's monograph is engaging. She provides a sound methodological and theoretical basis for her study and then effectively describes the literary motif of ingestion language in John. *Ingesting Jesus* could serve as a textbook in either a course on the Johannine literature or on narrative criticism of the Gospels.

The study has two weaknesses. While Webster does a fine job of establishing her method, it would have been helpful if she had signaled more explicitly in her application chapters how she was utilizing her method. For instance, she says little concerning metaphor after her introductory chapter. Second, in her conclusion she links the ingestion language of John to the practice of the Eucharist (153). Her method is well suited to describe literary phenomena, but it is not designed to answer historical questions. The relationship of John to historical practice is better left to more historically oriented methods. In spite of these criticisms, *Ingesting Jesus* is groundbreaking and well worth reading.