Daniel Frayer-Griggs
Carlow University/Duquesne University
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

This book, a revision of Sebastian A. Carnazzo’s doctoral dissertation submitted to the Catholic University of America, presents itself as the first narrative-critical study of the blood and water imagery in John 19:34. The work is written clearly, its arguments are developed logically and programmatically, and Carnazzo goes about his task with admirable concision and lucidity. While my comments are for the most part summative and appreciative, at the end of this review I will offer two points of what I hope will be received as constructive criticism.

Carnazzo begins with the history of interpretation of John 19:34 before proceeding to outline his methodology. Offering concise treatments of exegetes ranging from Tertullian and Origen to Luther and Calvin to Bultmann and Heil, the author lays out the main lines of interpretation over the centuries. While some of the offerings from earlier generations are left by the wayside, not to be returned to, the suggestions that the blood and water point toward the wilderness rock, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the Passover lamb will resurface later in Carnazzo’s study. Regarding methodology, Carnazzo abandons any significant attempt to uncover the real author or real audience in favor of analyzing the narrator and the implied audience one encounters through the narrative. He does, to be sure, make clear that he
favors the view that the authors of John’s Gospel were at the very least “close associates” of the Beloved Disciple, if not the Beloved Disciple himself, whom Carnazzo identifies with John the son of Zebedee (15).

Preliminary matters aside, Carnazzo goes on to analyze the literary and cultural contexts of John 19:34. With regard to the literary context, he provides a textual analysis, translation, and structural analysis of the surrounding pericope (John 19:31–37). More significantly, regarding the cultural context, Carnazzo discusses the images of blood and water in the wider cultural milieu of John’s Gospel. He demonstrates that both are associated with life, blood being the seat of life (Gen 9:4; Lev 17:11, 14; Deut 12:23) and water providing sustenance for life, and that both are likewise associated with purification. However, whereas blood purifies from sin, water purifies from uncleanness. Carnazzo calls special attention to two particular phrases in the Hebrew Bible: חטאת דם (Exod 30:10, Lev 4:25, 34; 5:9; Ezek 45:19), which is often translated “sin offering” but is literally rendered “blood of sin,” and נדה מי, which is literally rendered “water of uncleanness” (Num 19:9; 13, 17, 20, 21; 31:23). These will prove to be two central themes of his thesis.

Each of these symbols—blood and water—receives its own chapter wherein Carnazzo examines every symbolic occurrence of the word in the Gospel of John prior to 19:34. Blood appears in only two passages before 19:34. The first is 1:13, where it relates to natural childbirth and thus, according to Carnazzo’s reading, to the life-giving quality of blood. In this passage, however, being born “of blood” is set up as parallel to being born “of the flesh or of the will of man” and in contrast to being born “of God.” It is therefore uncertain that in this instance blood carries the positive, life-giving connotations Carnazzo finds here. Surely the image points to natural childbirth, but, I would argue, the gospel writer depicts this negatively. In the second passage, the word “blood” appears four times in an extended discourse on eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man (6:53–56). While affirming the continued connection between blood and life, Carnazzo also observes that in this context the image of “blood” points primarily to Jesus’s death. This can be seen in the association between the consumption of Jesus’s flesh and blood and the eating of the Passover lamb and the smearing of its blood on the doorposts. Implicit here are the life-giving and purifying qualities of blood as it is associated with that sacrificial death; this passage therefore contributes more substance to Carnazzo’s thesis.

The discussion of water symbolism receives greater attention on account of the more numerous texts associated with water in this gospel. The relevant references to water and their possible significance include the following:
water associated with John’s baptism of ritual purification (1:26, 31, 33), in which the water is symbolic of salvific cleansing

water that Jesus turns into wine at Cana, water that had been placed in stone jars for rituals of purification (2:7–9)

Jesus’s statement that one must be “born of water and Spirit” in order to enter the kingdom (3:5); Carnazzo suggests that Christian readers would have associated this water with baptism and hence with purification and new birth

another reference to John’s baptism (3:23), which echoes the theme of purification in the previously discussed texts relating to John’s baptism

the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (4:7–15), particularly Jesus’s reference to “living water,” which may be a reference to the purifying quality of water insofar as living, or moving, water was required for ritual purification, but which on a deeper level points to the life-sustaining and life-giving quality of water as well as to the “living water” that flows from the eschatological temple (Zech 14:8; Joel 4:18; Ezek 47:1, 8–9)

the citation of the unidentified scripture passage, “Rivers of living water shall flow from his belly” (7:38) and its surrounding verses, which Carnazzo links to both the wilderness rock and the river that will flow from the eschatological temple

and Jesus’s washing of his disciples’ feet (13:5), which carries obvious purifying connotations.

Water symbolism in John’s Gospel is indeed rich, and Carnazzo ably demonstrates how its roles as life-giving sustenance and as a means of purification contribute to its function in 19:34.

In his penultimate chapter Carnazzo draws together all the various strands he has developed throughout, arguing that the issue of blood and water in 19:34 is meant to recall both the life-giving and purifying functions of these symbols that were present earlier in the Gospel. Particularly, the blood is linked to the “blood of sin,” and the water is linked to the “water of uncleanness” mentioned above. This allows Carnazzo to develop his thesis that, just as 19:37 cites Zech 12:10 (“They shall look at him whom they have pierced), 19:34 recalls Zech 13:1: “On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem to purify from sin and uncleanness.” The blood is thus meant to purify from sin, the water from uncleanness. Carnazzo sees a further link to Zech 14:8, which prophesies a stream of living water flowing from Jerusalem, namely, the river that proceeds from the eschatological temple.

I am largely appreciative of Carnazzo’s work. As stated above, he presents his thesis parsimoniously and clearly. I do, however, have two points of criticism to offer, the first
of which may slightly complicate Carnazzo’s thesis, and the second of which suggests ways in which his thesis could have been extended and enhanced.

First, as noted above, Carnazzo somewhat overstates the positive associations of blood in John 1:13, where the author contrasts being “born of blood or of the will of the flesh” with being “born of God.” As this is the first of only two texts pertaining to blood that Carnazzo examines (excluding 19:34), it raises questions regarding how consistently the Johannine author uses this image. This criticism would not be so substantial if it were not for the fact that being “born of blood” appears here in a negative light, whereas being “born of water and of Spirit” is used in a clearly positive sense in 3:5. Is there an implicit contrast between being “born of blood or of the will of the flesh” (1:13) with “being born of water and of Spirit” (3:5)? It would seem so. Further, if blood and water appear in opposition in these passages, what bearing does this have on the interpretation of 19:34 where they appear in tandem?

Second, it seems to me that, while Carnazzo has made a strong case for the intertextual allusions to Zechariah, he has at the same time downplayed other potential intertextual links that could contribute positively to his thesis. The most substantial of these is 19:34’s apparent allusion to Ezek 47:1. While Carnazzo occasionally cites this text parenthetically, along with Joel 3:18 and Zech 14:8, when he speaks of the river that flows from the eschatological temple (see 28, 53, 56, 91), he fails to develop its significance for the interpretation of 19:34. I have been persuaded that behind 19:34’s reference to the blood and water that flows from Jesus’s side stands a very literal translation of Ezek 47:1’s prophecy that water will flow “from below the right-hand shoulder [כתף] of the temple” and a belief that Jesus here, as foreshadowed in 2:21, represents the eschatological temple (see Richard Bauckham, The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 280). Further, it may be to Ezek 47:1 that John 7:38 alludes when it states, “As the scripture has said, ‘Out of his belly will flow rivers of living water,’ ” which is another significant text for Carnazzo’s thesis. Even if Carnazzo rejects the potential allusions to Ezek 47:1 in these Johannine verses, he should not ignore them to the extent that he does. There is no need to see them as competing with the potential allusions to Zechariah (see, for instance, t. Sukkah 3, where Ezek 47:1 and Zech 13:1 are brought together), and acknowledging them would add to, not detract from, Carnazzo’s overall thesis.

It would be wrong to conclude with a note of criticism. This is, on the whole, a very fine work and a notable contribution to Johannine studies. Readers interested in symbolism and intertextuality in the Fourth Gospel will benefit greatly.