Webster's "Ingesting Jesus: Eating and Drinking in the Gospel of John" - Book Review

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In a revision of her doctoral dissertation, Jane S. Webster has taken up David Tracy's challenge to reconsider the richness of biblical metaphor as a means of making biblical content accessible. Webster exegetes the "ingesting" metaphors in the Gospel of John: in particular, eating, drinking, and receiving inwardly that which is offered to humanity by God. John's meal settings and eating/drinking imagery are analyzed, bringing fresh insight into how these sensitivities might facilitate the
reader's exercising of faith as a salvific response to God's provision.

Webster performs her analysis over eight chapters by discussing the reference to Jesus as "Lamb of God" by the Baptist (John 1:29, 36), the water-into-wine miracle and Jesus being "consumed with zeal" at the Temple-cleansing (John 2:1-11, 13-25), "living water and dying food" (John 4:4-42; 7:37-39; 12:24), "tasting life and tasting death" (John 6:1-71; 8:51-52), the supper in Bethany (John 12:1-7), the Last Supper (John 13:1-30; 15:1-17), the "first and last drink" (John 19:28-37; 18:11), and the Resurrection Breakfast (John 21:1-25). These are followed by this statement: "This study concludes that the ingesting motif is an effective vehicle for conveying the soteriology of the Gospel and ties this expression of soteriology to the Eucharistic tradition" (p. 153).

The book has many strengths, notably, the clear and lucid writing and the valuable analysis of symbolization and its functions within the Gospel of John. Particularly helpful is the treatment of disciples' reactions, suggesting the way forward for readers in their own responses to Jesus. Webster's study will be a valuable aid to other metaphor analyses in John and elsewhere.

Somewhat questionable are inferences of "ingesting" where it is not explicitly mentioned in the text: especially connecting the "Lamb of God" reference to the Paschal Meal (there is no aspect of the reference that could not apply just as suitably to the Suffering Servant's vicarious suffering and death) and Jesus' being "consumed" by zeal in John 2.

A more severe weakness, though, is Webster's Eucharistic interpretation of John 6 and related passages. Eucharistic associations in John appear to be present, but Webster neither clarifies satisfactorily what is meant by "Eucharistic," nor does she engage the paramount conundrum resultant from a ritualistic interpretation of John 6:53-54—unless one ingests the flesh and blood of Jesus (i.e., participates in a cultic rite?) one has no life. To tie saving faith to a particular religious form, if that is her inference, is not only anachronistic within its first-century situation, but it also threatens to displace the otherwise clear Christocentric soteriology of John's Gospel—the reason Bultmann felt John 6:51c-58 must have been added by another hand. Webster acknowledges the striking absence of the words of institution at the Johannine Last Supper, but if the Eucharistic tradition is here implied, why has the most likely Eucharistic connection gone missing from John 13? Might it imply a critique of such formalizations? Webster does not say.

Webster leaves room for less formal and multivariant aspects of table fellowship and markers of Christian community that may have been part of the Johannine situation. Her study would be helped by addressing further what is meant (and not necessarily meant) by "Eucharistie" in the Johannine tradition, and by considering martyrlogical associations with John 6:51ff. If ingesting the flesh and blood of Jesus is to be willing to share with him in his sufferings and death as a factor of discipleship faithfulness, this "hard saying" is more plausibly the source of the disciples' being scandalized (parallel to Mark 8) rather than a cultic reference.

Webster cites the indirect ways that the ingesting motif is presented in John; the distinction between subtle allusion and explicit reference is far from unimportant. Indeed, Tracy's reference to metaphor helping meanings come alive is furthered successfully here, and this book will be of value to those interested in Johannine literary studies and in the life of the Church. Key, though, will be the ability to distinguish meaningful Eucharistic practice today from what may or may not have been the case in the more primitive Johannine situation.

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