

Seung-In Song, *Water as an Image of the Spirit in the Johannine Literature*, Studies in Biblical Literature 171 (New York: Peter Lang, 2019). xxii + 167pp. \$99.95 hardcover.

Seung-In Song serves as lecturer of New Testament studies at Chongshin University in Seoul, South Korea, a position he has occupied since 2018. Song earned his ThM in New Testament Studies from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and his PhD in New Testament Studies from Gateway Seminary. This monograph is a revision of his PhD dissertation, completed in 2015 under the supervision of Timothy Wiarda (xv–xvi; cf. Wiarda’s own recent contribution to the field with *Spirit and Word: Dual Testimony in Paul, John and Luke* [New York: T&T Clark, 2017]). Song makes a welcome contribution to the study of Johannine symbolism and pneumatology, particularly where these topics intersect in the question of whether a given instance of water imagery represents the Spirit.

As clarified in the introduction, Song seeks the identification of “a set of indicators” to assist in determining whether water symbolizes the Spirit (1). Clear references to the Spirit via water imagery occur at John 7:37–39 and 1:33, yet scholars lack consensus as to whether water also symbolizes the Spirit in six other passages within the Johannine corpus (see John 3:5; 4:10–14; 6:35; 19:34; 1 John 5:6–8; Rev 22:1–2). Song asserts that “there are no clear indicators for determining whether or not a reference to water symbolizes the Spirit” (1), and this lacuna motivates the search for “valid indicators” that will substantiate one’s interpretation (1–2). Having clarified the goal, the author summarizes subsequent chapters (2–3), explicates his methodology as including grammatical-historical exegesis, the utilization of narrative-critical methodology on John’s Gospel and Revelation, and a comparative approach that juxtaposes John, 1 John, and Revelation (3–5).

Chapter 1, “Water Passages in Johannine Literature,” categorizes every water passage found in the Johannine corpus in accordance with a threefold taxonomy: “Spirit passages” (water symbolizes the Spirit); “non-Spirit passages” (water does not represent the Spirit); and “disputed passages” (scholars express divergent opinions regarding whether water symbolizes the Spirit) (9). Category one (Spirit passages) consists of John 7:37–39 and 1:33. Category three (disputed passages) comprises six passages, including John 3:5; 4:10–14; 6:35; 19:34; 1 John 5:6–8; and Rev 22:1–2 (9). Category two (non-Spirit passages) constitutes the largest group, and here Song evaluates the material in John’s Gospel and the Apocalypse separately due to their distinct genres (10). In John’s Gospel, Song divides the material into two subcategories: purely literal references to water (10); and possibly symbolic usage of water imagery unrelated to the Spirit (11). In Revelation, Song again utilizes two subcategories: occurrences of water as “literal but occur[ring] within a

larger symbolic vision” (11); and water imagery with specific symbolic import (12).

Chapter 2, “Johannine Water Imagery in Ancient and Recent Writers,” provides a brief survey of some interpretations of water imagery from the Apostolic Fathers and contemporary Johannine scholarship. Song concludes that scholars rely upon various exegetical arguments to ground their interpretations of water imagery in Johannine literature, but none of them provides a systematic set of criteria. Consequently, Song seeks to establish “systematic and valid criteria of water imagery in the Johannine literature” (23). The author also observes a propensity within modern scholarship to favor symbolic interpretations of water over literal ones and even to proffer “multiple symbolic meanings for each water reference in the Gospel” (23).

Chapter 3, “A Survey of Water Imagery in the Old Testament and Ancient Jewish Writings,” selectively focuses on “water themes that are closely connected to the water imagery in the Johannine literature” rather than attempting an exhaustive treatment of the vast usage of water imagery (27). Song examines water imagery related to motifs involving the Spirit, the Torah, the temple, wisdom, life and salvation, and purification in key texts from the OT and Second Temple literature. The author notes a close correlation in these texts between water and Spirit, leading one to expect the possible recurrence of just such a tight linkage of water imagery with the Spirit in the six disputed passages in the Johannine corpus (40). At the same time, the diverse usage of water imagery within this background material—coupled with the disparate interpretive proposals that Johannine scholars have constructed from such variegated thematic associations—calls for caution. The exegete should take the various possible backgrounds into consideration, but the literary context of the Johannine passages themselves must remain primary in attempts to elucidate the meaning of a given instance of water imagery (40).

Chapter 4, “Symbolism in Johannine Literature,” clarifies the author’s definition of symbolism vis-à-vis other scholars and surveys the utilization of symbolism in John’s Gospel and Revelation. Song understands the term *symbol* to denote “an image, a word, an action, or a person that stands for something or someone other than itself” (45–46). He classifies symbols in the Gospel according to five categories, including “symbolic images, symbolic words, symbolic actions, representative figures, and proposals that do not fit any one of the preceding categories” (48). Song makes the important observation, moreover, that literal readings versus symbolic readings often exhibit a tense relationship with each other, concluding that “these tensions between literal and symbolic readings suggest we should be cautious about adding a symbolic level of meaning to narrative details” (57). The author further cautions against “investing random narrative details with an extra level of reference”; he argues that “in order to make a sound

exegetical decision on each of [the] water references in John, especially the six disputed passages, we should not be too hasty in adding a symbolic meaning to it until we have adequate exegetical evidence that supports the symbolic meaning” (58).

Chapter 5, “Identifying Exegetically Significant Indicators Relating to Johannine Water Imagery,” delineates criteria for confirming the Spirit as the intended referent of water imagery. Song develops these criteria based on what he finds in agreed upon passages that either do or do not refer to the Spirit. Additionally, in cases where scholars agree that there is *not* a reference to the Spirit, Song finds six indicators to assist one in determining whether symbolism is present in a passage (cf. the summary on 76–77).

Chapter 6, “Exegesis of the Six Disputed Water Passages,” constitutes by far the longest—and in this reviewer’s estimation, certainly the most useful—chapter in the monograph. Song exegetically probes the six disputed passages and compares his findings with his indicators from chapter 5. With respect to the best interpretation of these passages, Song concludes as follows: 1) water in 1 John 5:6–8 refers to baptism, not the Spirit; 2) water in Rev 22:1–2 refers to the Spirit, not literal water or eternal life; 3) water in John 3:5 refers to the Spirit, not baptism or physiological water; 4) water in John 4:10–14 refers to the Spirit, not Jesus’s teaching/revelation; 5) John 6:35 also points to the Spirit rather than the imagery of drinking in 6:53–56 or Christ’s superiority vis-à-vis wisdom; and 6) water in John 19:34 refers to literal water, not the Spirit or baptism. The analysis throughout this chapter provides helpful and detailed evaluation of the text and reasonably thorough and fair interaction with other scholars. Finally, chapter 7, “Summary and Conclusion,” rounds out the volume.

While this monograph is generally well written and engaging from start to finish, it does consistently exhibit a rather distracting tendency to omit definite and indefinite articles as well as prepositions where correct English usage requires them, not to mention the occasional use of incorrect verb forms (e.g., those that do not agree with their subject). More importantly, as one considers Song’s criteria, some problems surface. For example, it remains less than obvious that Jesus as the source of water constitutes strong confirmation that water symbolizes the Spirit (76). Also questionable is the notion that highlighting supports a symbolic reading of water (77). Furthermore, the attempted application of Song’s criteria in relation to his exegetical analysis of the disputed passages proves methodologically problematic in that it demonstrates just how pliable a tool this set of criteria turns out to be. A comparison of Song’s analyses of Rev 22:1–2 and John 19:34 elucidates this. Some of the supporting criteria for identifying the water in Rev 22:1–2 as the Spirit are: Jesus gives the water, water is linked to the cross, *διψάω* (“to thirst”) occurs in the near context (v. 17), the Spirit is mentioned in the near context (v. 17), and water is highlighted (93–94). Song explains

away the indicators of “coherence when taken literally” and the presence of geographic and chronological detail (92, 94). Conversely, in the case of John 19:34, contextual coherence when taken literally and geographic and chronological detail are more decisive, whereas things like Jesus as the source of the water, linkage to the crucifixion, the presence of διψάω in v. 28 (now regarded as too far away from the reference to water to be considered relevant!), the presence of τὸ πνεῦμα (“the S/spirit”) in v. 30, and highlighting of water are explained away (118–119). It appears that Song can affirm his criteria when they support his interpretation and simply override them when they do not. The point here has nothing to do with whether one agrees with Song’s exegesis (this reviewer tends toward agreement in four out of six passages). Rather, it simply appears that such readily yielding criteria may not contribute much toward the resolution of the interpretive impasse regarding the meaning of disputed water imagery passages.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, *Water as an Image of the Spirit* deserves the consideration of every serious scholar of Johannine pneumatology and symbolism. It certainly provides a rich resource that will assist one in research on the six disputed passages.

Adrian P. Rosen
Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, Baguio, Philippines