

Willis Hedley Salier. *The Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia in the Gospel of John*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/186. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004. Pp. ix + 234. 49 Euro.

This book is a slightly revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation written under Graham Stanton at Cambridge University. Its purpose is to provide an integrated presentation of the Johannine "signs" as they function within the final form of the Gospel, in contrast to previous studies that focused on source-critical issues such as the alleged Johannine "signs source." The author seeks to move, first, from the text to the audience by analyzing the context of the "signs narratives" in the Gospel; and, second, from the audience to the text by way of a socio-historical investigation of the presumed audience of the Fourth Gospel.

The strategic importance of the "signs" within the literary framework and theological presentation of John's Gospel is not in serious dispute. In light of the fact that Bultmann's classic "signs source" theory has been convincingly refuted on the basis of the pervasive literary unity of the Gospel, Salier sets out to explore the narrative function of the "signs" in John. After briefly surveying the state of research and setting forth his methodology, the author provides a treatment of *sēmeia* terminology in the Septuagint, Graeco-Roman literature, and early Christianity. The bulk of the work is then devoted to a study of the signs narratives in John's Gospel.

The scope of this review does not allow for a thorough critique of this work. A few salient points must suffice. On the positive side, Salier is generally discerning as to the internal structure of the Gospel and the flow of the Johannine narrative and well-conversant with recent scholarship on the subject. His conclusions are generally conservative and on the whole break little new ground. The author's conservatism, however, at times seems to get in the way of more serious interaction with alternative proposals and a more thorough engagement with the text.

A case in point is Salier's treatment of "signs" references in John 1–4, which does not adequately consider the possibility that the temple clearing constitutes a Johannine sign (cf. 2:18). Salier's discussion here is rather confusing. At one point, he refers to "the destruction and rebuilding of the temple" as a sign; later in the same paragraph, he says the sign is "the complex event that is the death and resurrection of Jesus." Which is it? More likely in my view, the "sign" is Jesus' prophetic action of clearing the temple, which presages the temple's destruction as God's judgment on the nation of Israel. Jesus' death and resurrection constitute, not a "sign" of something other than themselves, but the reality to which the signs point.

A second instance where Salier's conservatism seems to have precluded a fresh assessment of the evidence is his identification of Jesus' walking on the water as a "sign" by implication, with only the barest of substantiations (see p. 84).

A third area of concern is the treatment of "signs" in John 13–21, where the author, at the very outset, calls Jesus' death and resurrection the "sign of signs," despite the fact that the only reference to *sēmeion* in the second half of John's Gospel is found in the purpose statement in 20:30–31. Salier's assertion is far from unassailable that "[t]his final reference suggests that the death and resurrection of Jesus, together, constitute both a sign and the culmination of the signs presented throughout the Gospel" (p. 143). More plausibly, the reference in 20:30–31 is to Jesus' messianic "signs" in John 1–12 which met with Jewish unbelief and issued in the crucifixion (12:37). It is illegitimate to blur the distinction between "signs" and "works" terminology in John's Gospel, as Salier does, by treating the instances of *erga* in the second half of John's

Gospel as if the word used were *sēmeia*. Only the latter, but not the former, terminology invokes the symbolic dimension of Jesus' works, and this distinction should not be diminished.

Arguably, Salier's argument that Jesus' death and resurrection are symbolic of Jesus' sonship fails to provide a satisfactory answer to Barrett's classic objection that the cross "is not a σημειον and . . . is not called a σημειον, because it is not merely a token of something other than itself; this event is the thing it signifies." Salier's rebuttal here stretches the meaning of "symbolism." To be sure, Jesus' death and resurrection indeed *validate* his divine sonship, but do they *symbolize* it? Salier's view also has the (doubtless unintended) effect of diminishing the reality of the crucifixion and resurrection in their own right.

Beyond these concerns related to the author's treatment of specific events in John's Gospel as "signs," two additional criticisms may be noted. The first is a lack of thoroughness. The entire work is only 178 pages long (compared to the 350 pages of Christian Welck's recent work on the same subject in the same series), and footnote material is comparatively minimal.

Also, the form of presentation of this work is rather complicated, a feature not uncommon for dissertations. The signs in a given section are discussed, first, from text to reader, then from reader to text. This is followed by a discussion of the signs narratives under the rubrics "writing the sign" and "reading the sign," again *seriatim*. While no doubt well-intended, the cumulative effect of this methodology is confusion and repetitiveness rather than clarity and force of argument. A more unified, compact form of presentation would have served to lend greater persuasiveness to the author's argument.

The fairly critical nature of this review should not diminish the value of Salier's contribution to the field of Johannine studies in general and of the study of the Johannine signs in particular. Salier's textual focus and his close attention to narrative context make his work more satisfying in many ways than previous monographs that relied too heavily on source or redaction-critical methodologies or on precarious background reconstructions.

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