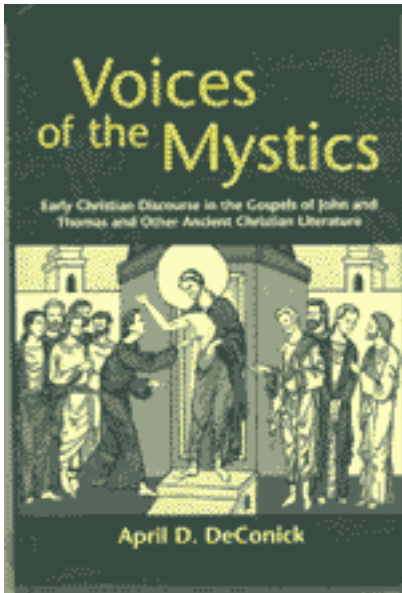


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DeConick, April D.

Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospels of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature

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April DeConick, in *Voices of the Mystics*, offers a contribution “to solving the mystery of the connection between the Johannine and Thomasine communities, a debate that can be viewed in the Gospels of John and *Thomas*” (32). She develops a new method that enables her to examine the discourse of these two communities of the late first and early second centuries, discovering their conflict “over the ‘correct’ understanding of soteriology,” that is, the legitimacy of vision mysticism as a means of salvation. (33) DeConick believes their purpose in articulating this understanding textually was to give “authority to their own peculiar religious ideologies” (32–33). In addition, this approach has the potential, according to DeConick, of providing “a better understanding of the origins and implications of the ideology which the Johannine author articulated in his Gospel text” (33).

Six chapters comprise the book: chapter 1 offers an explanation of the author’s approach and a survey of scholarly work on the Gospels of John and *Thomas*; chapter 2 defines the historical religious context, delineating several forms of vision mysticism in the ancient world; chapter 3 presents the Johannine polemic against vision mysticism; chapter 4 provides Thomasine support for vision mysticism; chapter 5 discusses John’s solution to the soteriological controversy in which he creates his own brand of mystical soteriology, the mysticism of faith; and chapter 6 examines early Syrian literature “in order to

determine whether or not this discourse continued after the composition of the Gospel of John” (33). The author acknowledges that she is offering another vantage point on these questions rather than offering the definitive solution.

In her desire to enter more completely into the textual world of these two Gospels, DeConick combined two previously existing forms of criticism to create traditio-rhetorical criticism. Traditions “express the self-understanding of a community of people: their sense of the past, their systems of religious belief, and their manner of conduct” and include “stories, myths, creeds, liturgical statements, and so on,” which are handed down from generation to generation. DeConick borrows from V. K. Robbins’s work on sociorhetorical interpretation in defining the term “rhetorical” as:

the way in which the language in a text is used as means of *communicating among people*. One of its main concerns is to reconstruct the topics within a text in order to understand the text’s thought, speech, stories, and arguments. Its focus is language that is used by people to establish bonds, to identify opponents, to negotiate shared interests, to pursue self-interests, and to offer a new perspective.
(15)

When these two approaches have been fused, they produce four central questions: (1) Who or what is the author responding to in the creation of his or her stance? (2) What are the religious traditions that the author uses to build his or her ideology? (3) In what ways has the author modified these religious traditions in order to provide new meaning within a traditional structure? (4) What is the most probable reconstruction of the author’s ideology and its meaning, a reconstruction that makes sense given the discourse and the traditions of the people involved (16)?

With a new form of criticism to explain to her audience, DeConick presents three drawings in order to depict the four movements in traditio-rhetorical criticism: (1) to define the three horizons (the religio-historical horizon, the traditio-religious horizons of the author and the opponents); (2) to identify the point of discourse between the two communities; (3) to trace the interpretive trajectory of the point of discourse as the author’s own creative thinking elevates it to new meaning; and (4) to reconstruct the synthetic end point, the author’s newly fashioned ideology (20–21) The formalized names of each of these points, horizons, and trajectories may serve to establish the newly created form of criticism as scholarly discourse, but I found them a bit off-putting and somewhat challenging obstacles that needed to be overcome in order to enter into the argument. As I have spent more time reading DeConick’s text, I am persuaded that her argument would be improved by less “terminologizing,” which would then allow the readers to enter more quickly into her ideas.

DeConick writes that the soteriology of vision mysticism in the New Testament has not received much attention thus far in scholarly discourse. Therefore her work moves this discussion many steps forward. In her chapter on the Johannine polemic against vision mysticism, she studies three major passages—John 14:3–7; 14:20–23; and 20:24–29—in order to identify the author’s point of discourse. From studying these three passages, DeConick notices that Thomas is portrayed as a “fool who misunderstands the path of salvation” (85). This is in stark contrast to the heroic version of Thomas preserved in texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas*. DeConick shows several references in these passages that relate to vision mysticism such as “the way” (ἡ ὁδός), “to manifest” (ἐμφανίζω), and “seeing.” She points out that “a common *topos* in ancient Greek literature is the identification of a character through the exposure of his wounds and the touching of his body,” such as in the *Odyssey* when Eurykleia recognizes the disguised Odysseus as she washes his feet (80). Thus, the desire, perceived by Thomas as normal, to see the wounds of Jesus in order to recognize him and believe is portrayed as a lack of faith by the writer of the Gospel of John.

DeConick’s text provides extremely helpful overviews of vision mysticism in the ancient world, including the explanation of several key aspects such as the soteriological function of the *visio dei*, the transformative power of ascent, the preparations for ascent, and the *hekhalot* or celestial temple traditions. Vision mysticism is presented as a phenomenon that arose in Hellenistic circles that was adapted by others. DeConick elucidates the conflict that developed over vision mysticism in early Jewish Christianity when the person of Jesus became understood as “the Temple and the historical embodiment of God on earth” (131). No longer was salvation to be achieved by personal ascent into heaven and the attainment of the *visio dei* but rather “through faith in Jesus as God’s manifestation in the experience of the Paraclete and the sharing of divine love” (131). DeConick demonstrates the plausibility that the author of the Johannine Gospel sought to argue against vision mysticism while presenting the call to faith mysticism. She then reflects the ongoing nature of this discussion in several early Syrian Christian and Coptic texts written after the Gospels of *Thomas* and *John*, including the *Preachings of John*, *Gospel of the Savior*, *Apocryphon of James*, *Ascension of Isaiah*, and *Dialogue of the Savior*. DeConick displays thorough knowledge of the related scholarly literature throughout her discussion.