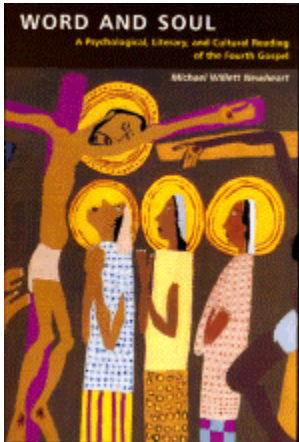


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Newheart, Michael Willett

Word and Soul: A Psychological, Literary, and Cultural Reading of the Fourth Gospel

Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001. Pp. xxviii + 165, Paperback, \$19.95, ISBN 0814659241.

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This reading of the Fourth Gospel is not a commentary in the traditional critical scholarship sense of commentary. Instead, the book is a “soul” reading of John’s Gospel, one that invites readers, whether scholars, pastors, students, or general public to “soulfully” play with the text along with the author. In light of that invitation, this reading called into question the reviewer’s ability to play with the text and allow it to affect her soul. Did she succumb? Read on and see how it affected her, which will also describe how it will probably affect each reader as they pick up this soul reading of the gospel.

The introduction provides readers with an understanding of this soul hermeneutic. It is a Jungian treatment of the soul as the birthplace of all action, containing within itself a relationship to God and, thus, always pushing humankind to transcend their consciousness. This soul hermeneutic is also literary in its use of reader-response criticism as the way of connecting the gospel to the individual reader’s soul. Lastly, it is cultural, for the author chooses to compare the gospel to African-American poetry, allowing himself to transcend his own experience of whiteness and to identify with the experience of blackness.

The soul hermeneutic described above gives the reader an introduction into Willett’s methodology as well. Each chapter consists of four parts. First is Willett’s own translation of the text. A section that plays with the images in the text follows this translation. The author then explores likenesses of the text within African-American poetry. Lastly, he personalizes his reading of the text by exploring likenesses of the text within his own soul. His revelation of his own personal experience forced me, as reader,

to think about the experiences within myself that resonated with the text. In that sense, the book was a personal journey into my own soul. Yes, I did succumb.

Before readers can allow the book to become a personal journey, however, they will have to deal with the strangeness of Willett's ability to play with the images in the text. Why did the *play with the text* section consist of phrases instead of sentences, words that ran together and words that were elongated? An example on page 5 clarifies the type of writing used in the first major section:

Worddddd. It is a beginning word, a worded beginning. An archaic Word, a ruling WORD. *Archē logos*. The poet goes on an 'archeological' dig. (You dig?) What 'arty facts' will be uncovered?"

To understand my uncomfortable feelings with how the author wrote, I went to my African-American source—Herman is a colleague in the Doctor of Ministry program—to find out why this writing was so peculiarly written. Without even looking at the book, Herman resonated with my description of the text. He said that way of writing emphasizes rhythm, melodic beat and poetic flow. Herman said I needed to hear it instead of read it. Immediately, I remembered Herman's preaching in class. I loved his use of rhythm and melodic lines. If I was going to appreciate this section, I realized that I needed to take the poetry off the written page and put it into the voice. Thus, I concluded, this section of each chapter needs to be read aloud from beginning to end, which would allow readers to feel the melodic poetry that Willett feels in his soul as he encounters the Fourth Gospel.

Nevertheless, Willett is still a scholar of the biblical text as well as an artist of soul hermeneutic. He very carefully documents and references his *play* in order to assist people in their study. He provides footnotes that refer people to other scholarly sources for questions they might have. This shows the discipline as well as the *play* of his work.

Three important metaphors that recur in Jesus' speech throughout the gospel have been drawing points for the author: the father/son image, the "I Am" sayings, and the "not of this world" image. These descriptions parallel the chronicle of Willett's life, beginning with his public profession of faith at a Billy Graham crusade and leading him into the Southern Baptist Seminary. He loved study, was schooled by Johannine professors and felt that one even fathered him. Since Willett lost his father in death two days after his 16th birthday, he resonated with the father/son phrases of the gospel. While reading these father/son images, however, Willett came in touch with the pain of the father who loved the son, but not always in the way the son wanted.

Prompting from others led Willett into Ph.D. studies, with his dissertation on *Wisdom Christology of the Fourth Gospel*. During this time and in subsequent teaching positions, Willett hoped to ground his own "I am" to the "I Am" of Jesus. That confident "I am" would be shared with students, who would then find their own "I am." He also realized that the struggle to remain in the world but not be part of the world was also his struggle. When he was dismissed by the Foreign Mission Board for "doctrinal ambiguity," Willett knew that the "not of this world" matched his own alienation.

Willett's grasp of twentieth-century African-American poetry is clear and profound. In order to become comfortable at Howard University, primarily an African-American school, he diligently studied the poetry of the dominant culture within which he found himself and used that poetry in order to teach his students the variety of themes in the Fourth Gospel. While speaking of the black artist, Willett states that these artists draw out the correct images of the world and use these images to describe the nature of both world and soul, thus banding together their brothers and sisters in a common unity. The Johannine poet matches this African-American world by drawing an image of a world that is dark and does not know the word or receive the word. The poet Mari Evans calls for celebration of black flesh that has received the word when she says: "Who can be born black and not exult!" (Willett, 17).

The book stands among those precious books I have read, which assist readers to get inside the skin of a culture foreign to their own. In that sense, Willett is both clear about his purpose and follows it through with precision. He concludes with the hope that readers have journeyed into their own souls as well as his soul and the African-American soul. Willett surely caught this reviewer's journey into soul and will probably do so for others as well. Isn't it true that when we expand ourselves by including more than we could be by ourselves, we invite richness into our lives that we never had before?

Willett suggests correctly that the proof of what the book accomplished is in the *wordplay*. The style of writing makes the content and the content makes the style of writing. And the content was a challenge of Johannine rhetoric and what it has done to/for the community of faith. Willett writes in order to free the Johannine literature from being used for dehumanization and fragmentation, for oppression and disempowerment. He writes with *wordplay* in order to liberate the literature for empowerment, humanization and community. That is the strength of the book and the reason for its existence.

What other reason would one have that could do more for the development of the human community? No other reason is so noble and so strong and Willett gives his best effort toward that goal. He assists readers in finding truth and light in the outcast and the marginalized. This rendering of John's Gospel moves readers to return to those whom they have ostracized and learn from them. Other books may do the same, but this author has done it superbly and is to be commended for laying his soul open for others to criticize or to emulate. The latter would be preferred by Willett and by the reviewer. There is very little to criticize in this reader-response effort of reading John's Gospel.