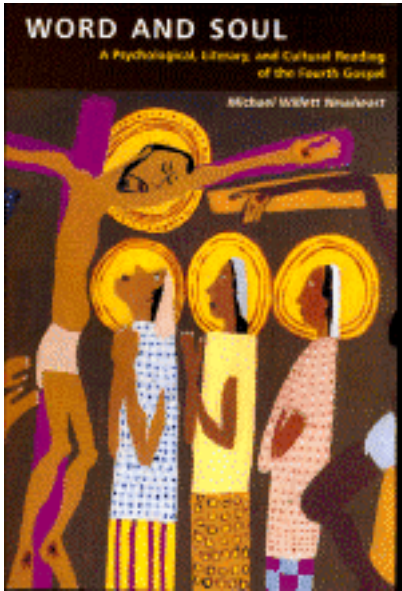


RBL 04/2003



Newheart, Michael Willett

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

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001. Pp. xxviii + 165. Paper. \$19.95, ISBN 0814659241.

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Newheart begins his book with this statement: “This book is probably different from any book you have read” (xi). This is likely true for those unfamiliar with reader-response criticism and specifically for those unfamiliar with projects of writers such as Stephen D. Moore (*Post-Structuralism and the New Testament*) and especially Jeffrey L. Staley (*Reading with a Passion: Rhetoric, Autobiography, and the American West in the Gospel of John*, 1995). The latter author, according to Newheart, clearly represents the foundation of the approach he takes in this “reading” of the Gospel of John. On page xix, Newheart writes: “With my soul hermeneutic I am solidly in the camp of those reader-response critics working in the reader-dominant mode, for I am concerned about the soul of the reader and not the soulless, textually bound ‘implied reader.’” Because of this approach, additional words of explanation are needed better to understand and appreciate Newheart’s contribution.

The subtitle of the book, *A Psychological, Literary, and Cultural Reading of the Fourth Gospel*, with some explanation, is the true outline of the author’s approach to the Fourth Gospel. First, “psychological” in this text may be better stated as “therapeutic,” since each segment of John’s Gospel addressed in this work includes a section on the “likenesses” to the author’s “own soul” (his words). In these sections the reader learns much about the “journey” of Michael Newheart (including the fact that “Newheart” is the

name he and his wife chose at their wedding as a new surname for both of them; before this, “Willett” was Michael’s surname, under which he wrote the more analytical Johannine monograph entitled *Wisdom Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, 1992). This journey includes his being fired from the Southern Baptist Mission Board, his struggle to find a new teaching post, his marriage, his hiring at Howard University School of Divinity, the death of his own father, the birth of his children, and his being granted tenure at Howard (which he compares to the raising of Lazarus in John 11).

The “literary” element of this book describes both his use of “poetic” language and (more specifically) his utilization of elements of African American poetry in connection with the Gospel of John. Each section of his reading of John contains ways in which a particular portion of the text in John interacts with African American poetry. This kind of interaction also speaks to the reference to “cultural” reading described in subtitle. Here “cultural” not only involves what Newheart knows of African American culture but also addresses his perspective as an Anglo-American teaching at a predominately African American school (Howard).

Finally, newcomers to this kind of work must take seriously the term “reading” in the subtitle. The “soul hermeneutic” referred to by Newheart is his way of expressing the interaction between the reader and the words of the text. He calls this section of each chapter “Playing with the Images” of the text. This “play” often means “word play,” and the wordplay is plentiful in this book. Newheart’s word choices often seem to call more for an out-loud reading of his work rather than just a traditional analysis. Consider, for example a section from page 58, which contains wordplays from John 6:22–59: “Jesus tells them not to wilderness-bread grumble. He adds that a to-him comer must be father-drawn as well as father-given (cf., 6:37), and this father (not Joseph but God) is a Jesus-sender (in order to be a world-savior, 3:17). Jesus last-day-resurrects the father-drawn Jesus-comer, as well as the father-given Jesus-believer (cf. 6:39–40).”

This kind of “reading” of the Fourth Gospel is characteristic of the “commentary” sections of this book. At times it is playful and evocative. At other times (especially for those of us not as accustomed to this approach) it may be a bit distracting and may stretch the Greek meanings of the words further than intended. This, however, is part of the point of Newheart’s writing: the “intent” is something that is best perceived by the reader himself or herself. Therefore, the performed reading of the text is in the context of the “soulful” reflection of the reader.

Adding to his “soulful reading” of John is his apparently broad knowledge of Black poetry. Newheart demonstrates this familiarity by weaving in Black poetry pertinent to the sections of John he discusses in each chapter. These include well-known poets such

as Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes as well as lesser-known names. One can see the influence of these poets in his approach to “playfully reading” the Johannine text, as evidenced by this example from Lucille Clifton’s poem: “at the cemetery, /walnut grove plantation, south caroline, / 1989” (see 14). Certain structural elements of this poem, for example, can be seen in Newheart’s reading of John: “tell me your names for mothers, brothers, tell me your dishonored names. here lies/here lies/here lies/here lies/hear.” Compare this to a portion from Newheart’s “playful reading” of an event in John 13:34–35: “Before going Jesus new-commands them lovingly ... and then tells Simon that he will peter out” (95).

Here there is no attempt at scholarly shortcutting. To use comparable Newheart-phrasing, the footnotes (especially in the introductory and concluding chapters) and the bibliography leave no doubt that in the traditional scholarly sense Newheart is a scholarly-Johannine-literature-knower! At its best, this book demonstrates the work of an author who has sought at once to plumb the depths of the Johannine text, his own journey, and the journeys of the African American community in which he (an Anglo-American) works and lives. Newheart encourages his audience to “play with the passages as well, to find poetry, to draw, to dance, to write your own poetry,” thereby avoiding the “ponderous and pretentious” sounding attempts to discuss the contemporary significance of the gospel in some closed, removed scholarly fashion (see 135). As a pastor, I see some good in this call for people to find their own “voice” or “soul” in the text of Scripture. Newheart says, “In some ways, there is no point to this project” (135). I disagree. I believe this project has some good points and uses: apparently for Newheart himself and in ways for his readers. However, there is a danger here as well. At its worst, this book trivializes the dangers I believe (as a pastor and a scholar) that are inherent in such an existential reading of any text, including the Bible. At times, for example, there is the risk of trivializing the full potential of the text, as I believe he does in John 11 by comparing his receiving tenure to the resuscitation of Lazarus! There are obvious parallels, granted. However, the text simply “means” more than that. At other times, one tends to learn more about Michael Willett Newheart than one actually learns about the Johannine text. This does not matter to Willett, given that this is part of his purpose in writing the book. However, those buying this text should be aware of this so that they know what they are getting into. Having said this, for what it is intended to be by the author, it is an engaging and at times a very moving work that (in most places anyway) does an admirable job of taking the reader on an unconventional ride through the Johannine text.