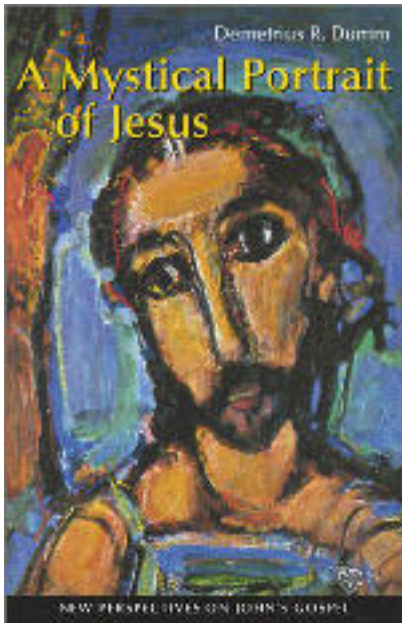


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Dumm, Demetrius R.

A Mystical Portrait of Jesus: New Perspectives on John's Gospel

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001. Pp. xxi + 177. Paper. \$16.95. ISBN 0814627609.

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At the very outset Dumm points to the perspective that drives this entire book: that the historical-critical method alone is inadequate to develop the meaning of the Fourth Gospel. While Dumm wants to claim that the historical-critical method is an important tool in the process, he nonetheless asserts that a spiritual approach is preferable for interpreting John's Gospel. The focus, he claims, should be on discerning the *symbolic meaning* of the Gospel. But for Dumm the search for the symbolic meaning is something that is somewhat antithetical to the historical-critical process. The search for the meaning of John involves locating the "mystery" of the Gospel, which is a mystical quality only accessible by faith. But this means that for him symbolism is not explicable using normal means of scholarly analysis. And in keeping with his assertion, Dumm never advances any carefully argued analyses of his mystical understanding of the symbols in John. In contrast to Dumm's approach, I would suggest that symbolism in the Fourth Gospel does allow for critical evaluation, as Craig Koester's work so ably demonstrates..

Dumm does, however, use some conclusions from critical scholarship as the support of some very crucial presuppositions and the starting point for his perspective. Dumm begins with the relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the community of the beloved disciple as suggested by Raymond Brown. Thus the Gospel is, for Dumm, as

much a reflection of the situation in the early community as it is an interpretation of Jesus' life. Dumm also assumes that the author of the Fourth Gospel was in possession of the Synoptic Gospels and thus used them as a source to a certain extent. Finally, the author of the Fourth Gospel is reacting to problems in other Christian communities and so is writing in reaction to trends that he or she perceives as dangerous.

But Dumm uses these presuppositions (1) as fact and (2) then draws an almost direct connection between the Johannine community and the current church. Thus, for instance, Dumm asserts that the Pilate trial scene is a theological interpretation of events (since it obviously differs from the Synoptics sequence) and that the theological sequence reinforces the Johannine community's emphasis—the importance of the power of unselfish love—which should be the emphasis adopted by the modern reader. Thus, the true understanding of Jesus being scourged and then presented to the crowd is purely theological, as opposed to historical: to demonstrate the power of unselfish love.

The Pilate trial, and the passion generally, stand at the center of John's presentation. And Dumm not only places them centrally but also sees in the Pilate trial and in the crucifixion/death scenes a carefully constructed chiasmic development. Again, based on his view of how John is developed from the Synoptics and for a church that has become overly enamored with sacramental religion, Dumm is able to perceive meaning in the construction of the passage. I frankly was unable to see the value of the chiasmic construction nor that Dumm had actually argued for the basis of his chiasmic construction or its usefulness in interpreting the Gospel text.

The plan of Dumm's book is interesting and is helpful in some ways in interpreting the Fourth Gospel. He starts with the passion story as the "center" of John's Gospel (chs. 1–3) and then works out from there. From the passion story he moves to the resurrection account (ch. 4), and then slowly works back to the beginning of the Gospel by way of the Farewell Discourse (chs. 5–7). The main body of the Gospel story (John 2–11) is presented by means of a scheme that this section demonstrates the stages of Christian growth: conversion, baptism, Eucharist, enlightenment, and eternal life (his chs. 8–12). Dumm finally gets to the prologue of the Gospel in the conclusion of his book.

Given the central role of the passion, this starting point actually makes some real sense and allows for major themes to be developed in chapters that lead up to it. This plan of presentation disrupts, of course, the narrative flow of the Gospel. But given that Dumm's pressing concern is to present a mystical interpretation of the Gospel, the literal narrative flow is relatively unimportant. But this backward progression seems strained at times, not because it is antinarrative but because of the way various units of text are forced into a model that seems to have little relationship to the way the text is presented. For instance,

chapters 3–5 in John all pertain to baptism because of the recurrence of water imagery (baptism in ch. 3, the living water with the woman of Samaria in ch. 4, and the man who is healed at the pool of Bethesda in ch. 5). Dumm comes to this conclusion based on Countryman’s work on a mystical interpretation of John. But the variety of ways water is used makes it hard to connect them all to baptism, and without extensive argumentation this whole approach seems to be a stretch.

Ultimately, Dumm’s book should be taken instead as an extended series of sermons that allow Dumm to make connections that he sees or to interpret the text with little argumentation. It is the lack of argumentation that tends to move Dumm’s book out of the “academic” category and into something very different: one person’s opinion.

An example of the sermonizing or use of simple assertions that is presented throughout the book can be seen in Dumm’s discussion of John 15 (57), the vine and branches passage. With no effort to examine possible ways of interpreting this passage or its central thrust, Dumm focuses on the issue of pruning. Pruning is, of course, one way to increase fruitfulness of a vine. For Dumm, this “painful pruning” of the vine is immediately interpreted as suffering that comes upon believers through loving unselfishly. But of course the text of John refers to two actions that could be interpreted as pruning: removing unproductive branches, and “cleaning” productive ones. And the audience of the metaphor are told they are “already clean” by the word spoken by Jesus. So while the text seems to focus on the dichotomy of two kinds of branches, one to be pruned away, the other already made productive, Dumm asserts his own view with little interaction to the text. He just knows it.

In the same way that Dumm moves to a rather idiosyncratic interpretation of the vine and branches, he also knows that the “obvious lesson” of the feeding of the five thousand is “that we must trust God’s goodness and understand that God enables us to initiate good works even if our resources seem meager” (47). And similarly, he knows that the reason the Fourth Gospel devotes so much space to Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Jesus in chapter 20 is because John sees in her a model for all Christians (39). Precisely how Dumm arrives at these conclusions is never stated, since they are never argued, but simply asserted. No attempt is ever made to show that this narrative unit is claiming to be exemplary or to demonstrate particularly exemplary characteristics in Mary.

In the end, Dumm has some interesting views about John, but these views rarely interact with the plain meaning of John. Dumm begins his book by suggesting that somehow scholarly approaches to John are the problem. But it would seem to me that Dumm’s bigger problem is not with scholars, but with anyone who reads the text of the Gospel for its relatively literal meaning.