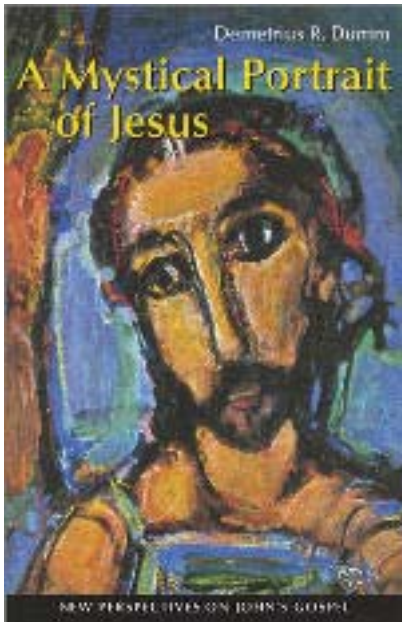


RBL 07/2003



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.

Thomas F. Johnson
George Fox University
Newberg, Oregon 97132

This work is best used according to the author's intention, which is "to offer a book that benefits from ... scientific study but which seeks to discover the deeper, spiritual meaning in this Gospel" (vii). Dumm wants "to plumb the depths of a faith-guided understanding" (vii), and this approach is deemed appropriate because John's Gospel is "so sensitive to the spiritual, symbolic dimension of biblical revelation" (vii). The historical-critical method alone is inadequate to the "quest for the fullest and richest meaning of Scripture" (vii). Only symbolic interpretation is able to get at the inner, divine meaning of these stories and make them significant for our world (ix-x). In fact, it takes "the charism of faith" that attunes one to the transcendent world (x) and a personal "affinity with what the text is saying" (xv) in order to understand what is really going on in the Fourth Gospel. As in some older hermeneutical methods, the author takes the historical and literary levels as foundational for the higher, mystical and spiritual, levels of meaning that are discerned primarily through the interpretation of symbol by those whose faith is authentic (x).

For guidance in his interpretation and method, Dumm relies on several teachers and authorities who are cited throughout the book. His principal historical-critical guide is the late Raymond E. Brown's two-volume Anchor Bible commentary on the Fourth Gospel (New York: Doubleday, 1966, 1970) and Brown's *Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979). Many of Dumm's insights into the Gospel's symbolic meaning and the key to how he treats John 1:19–11:44 (88) are directed by L. William Countryman's *The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). Sandra Schneiders's *The Revelatory Text* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) and *Written That You May Believe* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) have helped Dumm develop the rationale for his symbolic method (ix–x, xii). Finally, the Vatican's instruction in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) offers both the parameters for using historical-critical methods and the authoritative theological guidance, sensitive to scholarly and pastoral concerns, that is "at least as valid as any relatively isolated guild of scholars" (xiii). All of these teachers the author gratefully and freely acknowledges.

The central theme is the Gospel of John is expressed variously as: "Jesus is the eternal Word who became flesh so that he might bring us the truth about his heavenly Father" (x); "an attempt to warn against a superficial Christianity, that knows all the right theological words and performs all the right ritual actions but which has not discovered the rich personal and mystical union with God in Christ ... a personal mystical experience of the presence of God, centered in Christ and nurtured by the Spirit" (xx). Or again later: "The primary purpose of John's Gospel will be to reveal the power of this love, which Jesus brings from the Father and offers to us" (xxi); "'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (20:21) ... is almost a summary of John's whole Gospel ... to reveal the love that the Father prizes more than anything else" (40); "John's Gospel is about the revelation of ultimate truth," and "we are invited to participate in this truth, not simply by hearing about it, but by *experiencing* the love of the Father and thus becoming one with Jesus" (50, emphasis original); "if there is one thing that is of overriding importance in John's Gospel, it is the desire to lead us from a merely verbal and superficial form of faith to a deeply personal experience of the love of God" (102); and, finally, "throughout the Gospel of John ... Jesus is presented as the one in whom the Father reveals to us his hidden nature as the One who loves" (162). It would not be amiss to conclude that Dumm believes that the two main interwoven themes of the Fourth Gospel are truth and love, the same subjects that dominate the Johannine Epistles.

Dumm does not structure his book as the Fourth Evangelist chose to put together his Gospel, following the order of the career of Jesus, from eternal communion with God to his resurrection. Rather, he lays out the sequence of his chapters according to "the actual process by which the community of John grew toward a deep mystical awareness of their union with Christ" (89). Their experience of Christ unfolded in five stages.

First, the community discovered the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, Dumm's first four chapters deal with Jesus' "hour" having come (John 11:53–13:30), his trial in seven chiastically structured scenes (John 18:12–19:16a), his crucifixion also in seven chiastically structured scenes (John 19:16b–42), and his resurrection (John 20–21). "At a second stage these first Christians deepened their understanding of how the love of Jesus could become part of their own loving" (90). The Farewell Discourses (John 13:31–17:26) provide the content of their learning during this time: chapter 5, "Love One Another" (John 13:31–14:31); chapter 6, "Abide in Me As I in You" (John 15–16); and chapter 7, "That They May Be One" (John 17). The life and love of Christ is mediated to them through the Spirit. "At the third stage, in the fifty plus years that separated the death of Jesus from the composition of this Gospel, they have been discovering the meaning of Jesus in their lives through the more formal and ecclesiastical medium of the Christian sacraments" (90). Thus, chapters 8–10 concern "Conversion" (John 1:19–2:25), "Baptism" (John 3–5), and "Eucharist" (John 6–7). The fourth stage "to an ever deeper mystical union with God in Christ" is "Enlightenment," the subject of Dumm's chapter 11 (John 8:12–9:39). At this stage, like the man born blind, "we can claim to be truly enlightened as we begin to see things as they really are ... and know that truth about our human existence that Jesus came to reveal" (145). The final stage is "fullness of life," or "full mystical communion" with God (148). Dumm treats this theme in chapter 12, "Eternal Life" (John 10–11). Union with God is not the exclusive experience of an elite few. Rather, "The Johannine community is convinced that God is calling us all to a union with him, in Jesus, which is far deeper and more personal than we can imagine" (152). Mary and Martha may represent the Johannine community and "the other Christian communities," respectively. Martha knows all the proper titles for Jesus, just as some Christians have "their clear doctrine, ritual correctness, and ecclesiastical structure" (158). But Mary, like the Johannine Christians, enjoys "the mystical and contemplative relationship with Jesus" (158).

Finally, Dumm ends his spiritual interpretation of the Gospel of John by taking up the Prologue (John 1:1–18) in the "Conclusion." He sees the Prologue not as

an introduction to the Gospel but as a summary or a résumé, “a sketch of the career of the divine Word” (161). Thus, the last chapter is a fitting way to end the book. Dumm also gives us a brief bibliography of works cited and indices of authors and Scripture.

The devotional, mystical ambience of this book will not attract a wide readership among those trained in and preferring to analyze the Fourth Gospel with the tools of biblical criticism. Nor will it find a happy home among those who will see here too much churchly and eucharistic theology. But a postmodern predilection for perspectival readings of the text should permit one who is so sensitive to the spiritual symbolism of John a place at the seminar table. We have much to learn from both hemispheres of our God-given brain.