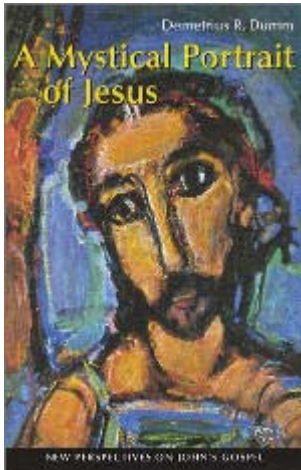


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**Dumm, Demetrius R.**

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

Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001. Pp. xxi + 177, Paperback, \$16.95, ISBN 0814627609.

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As the title suggests, this book "seeks to discover the deeper, spiritual meaning of this [John's] Gospel" (vii). This means that the interpreter must be sensitive to the symbolic dimension of John's Gospel. It is the symbolic meaning of the Gospel that makes it significant and relevant for the present world. In fact, since it is clear that John's Gospel is so intent on expressing the spiritual dimension of Jesus words and deeds, it is not surprising to find that it invites a symbolic or mystical reading of many of its texts. This "symbolic," or "spiritual," or "mystical" reading "is the first and only adequate interpretation of most Johannine texts" (x). Dumm attempts to make clear that he is not downplaying the importance of a scientific or historical-critical interpretation, but rather he is placing it in its proper place in the interpretive enterprise. The results of a scientific interpretation should be the starting point, but this method is simply not adequate to fully engage the symbolic or mystical level of John's texts. Though not clearly distinguished or defined, it appears that for Dumm "symbolic," "spiritual," and "mystical" readings are more or less synonymous. These three terms point beyond a merely "scientific" meaning of the text to the transcendent world or the "mysterious presence of God" which the text is really all about.

Dumm's method then is to draw out the symbolic or mystical dimension of John's Gospel. He accomplishes this by means of a thematic study of John's narrative in which he introduces selected passages and then in turn points out the symbolic/mystical aspects of these passages. This usually takes the form of devotional application of various texts of the Gospel. Dumm's study is not organized according to the actual order of the Gospel but rather according to what he believes was the actual composition of the Gospel. The central event which constituted the "heart and soul" of all divine revelation was the

passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel, then, was in this sense "written backwards" from the vantage point of this central event. Thus, chapters one through four deal with the first stage of the community's reflection on the meaning of Jesus' passion and resurrection. It is here that the early Christians saw that though Jesus was seemingly defeated in death, he ultimately conquered it and revealed his self-giving love for the world. Chapter one concentrates on Jesus' arrest and the meaning of his suffering (John 11:53; 12:13-13:14). Chapters two and three deal with the trial narrative (18:12-19:16a) and the crucifixion (19:16b-42) respectively. And chapter four concerns itself with the resurrection narrative (John 20-21). Chapters five through seven reflect the next stage in the community's reflection in which they now see how this resurrected and glorified Christ and his self-giving love can be a part of their lives through the Spirit. These chapters are concerned with the "Farewell Discourse" (13:31-17:26): chapter five deals with John 13-14; chapter six discusses John 15-16; and chapter seven comments on John 17. Chapters eight through ten deal with the later stages of the community's continued discovery of the meaning of Jesus for them. Now, this reflection begins to take on more formal and ecclesiastical characteristics such as the Christian sacraments—whereby the community experiences the mystical presence of the risen Christ. Chapter eight deals with the experience of "conversion" (John 1:19-2:24); chapter nine is concerned with the sacrament of baptism (John 3:3-5:46); and chapter ten is concerned with the Eucharist (John 6-7). The next discernable stage in the community's experience of Jesus is described by the title of chapter eleven: "Enlightenment." This stage concerns John 8:12-9:39 and is explained by Dumm as follows: "John, in these earlier chapters [John 1-7], simply interweaves the story of Jesus' public ministry with the experience of believers who move through the various stages of Christian initiation. Having reached the climax of this process in reception of the Eucharist, they are now invited to make their religious experience more profound and personal by a mystical enlightenment" (131). The final stage in the process, which began by initial conversion, ends in "full mystical union" (148). Thus, the final chapter, chapter eleven, discusses John 10:1-11:44. Dumm believes that these chapters are intended to lead the believer into eternal life which is really understood as "deep mystical union" with Christ. Dumm leaves John's prologue for the conclusion since he believes that "many assume too readily that it serves only as an introduction to the Gospel." Rather, "it is more a résumé or summary than an introduction" (161).

Dumm's decision to interpret the Gospel narrative in the order of what he believes was the actual process or development of the community's reflection and experience of Christ (from the passion backwards to the prologue) may not be a convincing procedure for many interpreters. To ignore the Gospel's actual narrative structure and order may turn out to be a perilous method for understanding the Gospel on its own terms. In fact, by taking seriously the Gospel's present order, the interpreter may be in a better position to discover the intended symbolic dimension of many Johannine texts.

Dumm's "mystical" or "spiritual" reading of John's Gospel may also produce caution on the part of many interpreters. Dumm states that since this mystical level of the text can only be arrived at by the interpreter attuning him or herself to the transcendent or

divine level of the text, "the deepest meaning of the Bible [or John's Gospel] is found only where there is real faith and personal honesty" (xvii). Dumm recognizes that when he takes this "deepest meaning" of the Gospel ultimately out of the sphere of the historical-critical method, his method of "symbolic/mystical interpretation" could lead to very subjective and even arbitrary interpretations (xii-xiii). His safeguards in this regard are basically two: (1) a proper "spiritual interpretation" will always grow out of the results of scientific methodology; and (2) the teaching ministry of "a living magisterium" which, Dumm argues, "is at least as valid as any relatively isolated guild of scholars" (xiii).

Although many of Dumm's mystical/spiritual interpretations of John's texts can be arrived at by a close contextual reading of the narrative, others seem not to flow from a contextual reading and thus appear somewhat subjective. For example, Dumm follows L.W. Countryman's interpretation of John 14:31: "Rise, let us be on our way" when he states that "mystically, the words can be read as an announcement that Jesus is about to move to a new level of speech" (55). The fact that Jesus' tunic was "seamless, woven in one piece" (19:23) and that the soldiers took great pains to preserve the unity of Jesus' garment after his crucifixion suggests, on the symbolic level, that the garment "would represent the importance of unity among the followers of him who prayed, "that they all be one" (17:21) (27). Mystical and symbolic interpretations such as these will not be so convincing to many interpreters.

Dumm's book will no doubt find great appeal for those who value Catholic spiritual-mystical approaches to faith. It will have less appeal for those who are not from this tradition.