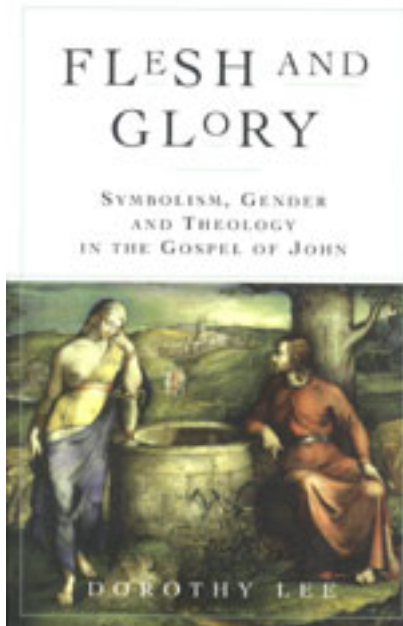


RBL 02/2005



Lee, Dorothy

Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John

New York: Crossroad, 2002. Pp. viii + 296. Paper.
\$27.50. ISBN 0824519817.

Christopher W. Skinner
The Catholic University of America
Washington, D. C. 20064

A balanced feminist reading of the New Testament has the potential to yield valuable exegetical insights and challenge some of the troubling assumptions of traditional interpretations without undermining the authoritative voice(s) of the text. Such an approach does not attempt inappropriately to pit the interests of women against the theologies of the various New Testament authors but shows concern for the presentation and experience of women marginalized in texts largely dominated by masculine language and perspectives. The present volume by Dorothy Lee is an example of this balanced approach to the text. Lee has generated a creative and well-written treatise that combines the interests of theological exegesis and confessional hermeneutics with a concern for the nuances of both the symbolic and feminist reading experiences.

In her introduction, Lee provides a rationale for this study by discussing some of the influential works that have led her to an examination of both symbol and gender in the same volume. At first glance, the topics of symbol and gender seem unrelated and a bit discordant. Lee's rationale, however, for offering such a reading is compelling. Seeing symbols as more than simply adornments of the narrative, Lee endeavors to draw the dominant symbols to the forefront of the discussion while reading from a feminist perspective. She writes, "If interpretation can unveil the hidden contours of female

discipleship and ministry, what can a similar reading do for the Gospel's theology? What happens when women as well as men enter into dialogue, not just with the characters but also with the symbols and metaphors of the Gospel? It is this concern that impels the present study" (4). Lee reveals a skillful grasp of literary-critical reading strategies and seeks to examine symbolism and the interests of gender in the context of a narrative-critical reading of the Fourth Gospel.

The first chapter is concerned with the development of a reading strategy for the purposes of the book. Here Lee provides the reader with a definition of "symbol" in the Fourth Gospel, and she does so in the context of an insightful discussion of biblical and theological hermeneutics, both past and present. It is Lee's profound conviction that there is too much stolid, secularized exegesis that robs the text of meaning. According to Lee, the text and the reading experience are meant to feed the soul committed to spiritual and ecclesial growth. Building on patristic principles of exegesis, Lee makes a persuasive case for reading the Fourth Gospel through confessional lenses. She writes, "The [patristic] interpreter was able to move between the textual and the theological in a way that is alien to modern scholarship, with its strict lines of demarcation between exegesis and dogmatics. All this is to say that the patristic writings read the biblical text from an overtly Christian perspective" (11). In subsequent chapters, Lee also reads the symbols of the Fourth Gospel from an overtly Christian perspective. Another departure in Lee's work from post-Enlightenment scholarship is her move away from anthropocentric readings of the text to a theocentric reading. The careful combination of these hermeneutical factors in the following chapters helps to create a rich and persuasive, feminist reading of Johannine symbolism.

The format of chapters 2–9 follows uniformly throughout. Lee begins each chapter by introducing the symbol in question and then provides an exegesis of each significant occurrence in the text. After an overall consideration of the symbol, Lee follows with a discussion of issues related to gender and how the symbol impacts and touches on the feminine, specifically, feminine discipleship. At the end of these discussions, the author closes each chapter with a detailed conclusion, restating in concrete propositions the major movements of her discussion in preceding pages. Such a methodical and well-organized format will prove to be helpful for the general reader.

In chapter 2 the author explores the symbol of Jesus' flesh—what she perceives to be the central symbolic motif driving John's story of Jesus. The rest of the narrative is driven by the idea that God has drawn near to humanity in the incarnation of Jesus. This core symbol is the starting point for the building of every other symbol in the Gospel. Coverage of this symbol not only extends to the overt incarnational teaching of the Johannine prologue, but also to allusions found in terms such as *σαρξ* and *σωμα*. For Lee,

the “glory” in the story of Jesus is ultimately found in the enfleshment of the Logos, the Son of the Father. Along with an exposition of her own views, Lee ably critiques other feminist authors in this chapter, insightfully picking apart their weaknesses—especially the hermeneutic of suspicion that drives the reading experience of many current feminist readings.

Another prominent symbol—“water”—is covered in chapter 3. Although her discussion extends to other presentations of “water” in the Gospel, Lee is especially concerned with the notion of “living water” as seen in Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). Her exegesis of Jesus’ interaction with the woman at the well makes note of philological and conceptual elements of the narrative in order to draw out the essence of their interaction. Lee points out the fundamental conceptual misunderstanding of the woman at the well as Jesus speaks to her of “living water” (metaphorical water which imparts life) while the Samaritan woman envisions “running water.” This interaction has implications for Christian discipleship, and, because the text depicts a gracious Jesus interacting with a marginalized woman, there are also implications for feminine discipleship and incorporation into ecclesiastical fellowship. For Lee, the symbol of “living water” is ultimately an offer of God’s salvation in Jesus for everyone regardless of gender.

The symbols of “love” and “friendship” are presented in chapter 4. Lee looks at the enigmatic language of “abiding” (μενω) in Jesus and the synonymous terms for love (φιλεω, αγαπαω, and their cognates). The images evoked by these symbols, Lee argues, communicate the multifarious ways in which the incarnate Jesus draws all humanity into deeper communion with himself and with one another. In this regard, Lee comments, “The Johannine symbolism of abiding and friendship opens the way to a new sense of personhood, grounded in the love of the Spirit. It signifies participation in the trinitarian life of God and in the communion of the saints, both within and beyond the visible world” (109). The fact of the incarnation leads to salvation, which in turn leads to life-sustaining communion with God and humanity. To this point in her presentation, the elements of Lee’s symbolic reading build upon one another, creating a unified whole.

The Fourth Gospel contains an overt presentation of God as “Father.” Examining this symbol is the focus of chapter 5. While Lee offers nothing new in this chapter, she does lay a foundation to counter common feministic arguments in a section entitled “Fatherhood and the Gender of God.” She argues that divinity in itself is beyond all human attempts to be encapsulated by or identified with metaphors that are a natural part of human conceptual and linguistic parameters. In other words, “[t]he symbol of divine fatherhood is a concrete symbol that is familiar to human life, regardless of the irregularities of people’s individual experience” (132). This not only shows insight into

the symbol of God's divine fatherhood in the Fourth Gospel but goes further in anticipating the objection of "gender inequity" in the notion of a "Father" God. Lee's "feminist" reading is surely not a one-sided approach.

Following on the heels of the symbol of "fatherhood," chapter 6 examines the symbols of "motherhood" in John. As the author admits, this symbol is not as prominent nor as recognizable as those covered previously. However, she makes a good case in examining the role of Jesus' mother as a true believer (something previous narrative critics have demonstrated). Lee also points to the "birthing" and "nourishing" references throughout the Gospel to strengthen her argument. While complex and subtle, the symbol of motherhood is, for Lee, a feminine symbol overlapping and complementing other masculine symbols throughout the Gospel.

In chapter 7 the author explores Johannine symbols related to sin and evil. While these symbols are somewhat out of place in the "glorious" discussion of salvation, communion, life, fatherhood, and motherhood, they do help to provide a "literary and rhetorical dualism" (166) for the reader. Darkness, "the world" (κοσμος), and sin are ultimately those things that, in the Johannine economy, have separated humanity from the God who has drawn near in Jesus Christ. The most incisive portion of this chapter is where Lee examines some traditional interpretations of sin that either ascribe sinfulness to women or directly link women to the origin of sin. She concludes that sin, evil, and their many permutations are, in the Johannine worldview, rooted in a complex web that is common to all of humanity.

Chapter 8 is the only portion of the book that deals with one selected pericope. It is entitled "Costly Self-Giving: The Symbol of Anointing" and touches directly on Mary Magdalene's anointing of Jesus. The discussion in this section represents the most gratuitous reach of the book. Here Lee strains a bit at trying to find in Mary's anointing a prominent symbol. While the discussion ultimately fails to convince, Lee's interaction with the text is substantive.

The final symbols, resurrection and life, are presented in chapter 9. In examining these "symbols of Easter," Lee looks at two specific contexts in the narrative: the raising of Lazarus in John 11:1–12:11 and the resurrection of Jesus in John 20–21. While the symbols of life and incarnation stretch across the breadth of the Gospel, the symbol of resurrection appears only in these two sections. The grave clothes of Lazarus and the empty tomb of Jesus serve as powerful images of the power of God to vivify and revivify. Finding these symbols to be the most complex in the narrative, Lee is careful not to say too much about their symbolic or metaphorical value. She allows the mysterious of resurrection to maintain its symbolic mystique. Concluding her study of

resurrection, Lee takes a final look at feminine roles by examining the unique place women play in both “resurrection” narratives. Martha of Bethany plays a prominent role in John 11–12, as does Mary Magdalene in John 20–21. Regarding these two women, she writes, “In the dramatic experience of both women, the fourth evangelist lays before us Easter symbols that need to be recaptured. Mistaken turnings, confused demands, inadequate understanding, and unfocused longings are all a part of the Easter journey. . . . The characterization of both women draws the reader onto the path of faith and witness” (232). With this Lee concludes her consideration in the same way she began—with a focus upon the universal nature of discipleship, based upon the fact that God has drawn near in Christ.

The concluding chapter of the book, entitled “Reading For Transformation,” encourages the reader to utilize the hermeneutic displayed in the book to experience the richness of the reading process where both text and reader are involved in the exchange. In the end, Lee shows how the rich symbolism of the Fourth Gospel is more than just narrative window-dressing. It is, in fact, the skeletal framework upon which the characters, their interactions, and their (mis)perceptions are hung. The starting point for an appreciation of this framework is found in acknowledging how the “Father” has uniquely acted in the incarnation of Christ—facilitating transformation in the reader. For the willing and available reader of the Fourth Gospel, the transformation process will be ably facilitated through the reading strategy set forth in this volume.