

Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l'Évangile selon Jean*. Tome IV, L'heur de la glorification (chapitre 18-21). Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996, ISBN 2-02-030411-2.

Melita Theologica apologizes for this belated review; a string of events which includes the premature death of the would-be original reviewer, the late Rev Dr Joseph Calleja OFM Conv, led to the postponement to such a late date of the presentation and comment of the work under study.

The present volume of Xavier Léon-Dufour is the fourth of what looks like being his *opus magnum*. The three previous volumes were published, always by Seuil, in 1988, 1990, and 1993. And in many ways this last member of the series appears as the conclusion of the entire work. Hence, besides a brief introduction (pp.11-12), a general introduction to the Passion Narrative in the Fourth Gospel(pp.13-24), and five chapters of commentary or *lecture* as the author calls his study of the text: on Jn 18,1-27(pp.25-64); 18,28-19,22(pp.65-124); 19,23-42(pp.125-192);20,1-31(pp.193-264); and 21,1-25(pp.269-304); one finds a 'Postface' (pp.307-331), a kind of *postscript* in which the author discusses some general issues like who the Beloved Disciple in John could have been, and whether one could detect possible Gnostic influences in the Gospel; here the author reviews also some of his methodological options enunciated in his *Liminaire* in the first volume; one finds too a short bibliography of the mostly cited studies in his work (pp.331-332), indexes of abbreviations of reviews and of the biblical books that have been employed in his work(pp.333-338), and, the most important, a thematic index for the four volumes(pp.339-355).

Naturally, the chapters where the author discusses the various units of the text constitute the fruit of his fifteen years of work to finish the whole opus. Thus, his discussion of Jn 18,28-19,22 which narrates the proceedings of Jesus' Roman court case, starts with a translation of the text(pp.65-67); then comes a discussion of the general issues that the text raises(pp.67-73), to be followed by an examination of the various literary segments of this particular text: 18,28-32(pp.73-81); 18,33-38a(pp.81-90); 18,38b-40(pp.90-92); 19,1-3(pp.92-95); 19,4-8 (pp.95-101); 19,9-12a(pp.102-105); 19,12b-16(pp.106-115); 19,17-22(pp.115-120). One should add that the various abstracts of the text to be discussed are reproduced sometimes more than once as the commentary revolves upon them. Once the commentary or better the *lecture* on the pericope comes to an end, the writer offers an *Ouverture*, that is, a pastoral application of the text to Léon-Dufour's social and historical context. One would expect that these 'actualization' exercises be addressed to the sophisticated European cultural context

wherein the writer resides. On pp. 326-330 the author offers the 'last Overture' which takes into account the entire work as a whole.

How should one evaluate this work? On general issues of the method employed by the author during the writing of these four volumes, one should read the retrospective postscript on. 307 -331 and of course the general introduction in volume One. In the postscript he admits that his approach has been 'synchronical' not 'diachronical', that is, he has not attempted to understand the 'text finale' of John's Gospel by reconstructing its pre-textual history thus identifying John's hypothetical sources, as historical-critical research normally does. Léon-Dufour considers such research as not leading to the discovery of the meaning of the text, which discovery "est mon seul objectif" (p.308). On the other hand, he admits that the writer of the Gospel must have used sources and that the final text does entail previous editorial activity. This means that a synchronic investigation may require a diachronic research which would ensure that the text as it stands is a unity. Only after this has been assured one may speak of synchronic or literary or narratological study of the text in order to arrive to its meaning which requires that the text to be studied be established first[cf. René Wellek & Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1949, chapter six]. One should add that as one goes through the text of this last volume of the *lecture*, one notices that Léon-Dufour is constantly aware of the diachronical dimension of the text (cf. his discussion of Jn 21 especially on p.271). His decision to leave out detailed discussions on the possible sources employed by the writer of the Gospel may have been dictated by the target readership to which the work is addressed, to general informed readers and not to NT scholars. And marketing has its value in a successful publication.

Léon-Dufour defines his reading of the text as *lecture symbolique* and refers back to a study he made in the seventies "Pour une lecture symbolique du iv^e évangile" published in *New Testament Studies* 27(1980-1981)439-456. For our writer a 'symbolic operation' moves in two stages: the first stage consists "à reconnaître qu'une correspondance analogique unit deux réalités d'un monde culturel determine"(p.309). In this manner 'bread' in the Bible may also denote spiritual nourishment. "C'est le milieu culturel qui nous permet de préciser le rapport entre les deux nourritures"(ibid), and there is no need for allegorization. In the second stage "l'opération symbolique peut jouer différemment, selon que le lecteur se place au temps des auditeurs de Jésus ou au temps des chrétiens" (ibid). He brings the example of 'living waters' in Jn 4. To the Samaritan woman Jesus first promises

a revelation that was superior to that of the Law; but from the point of view of Christians, the living waters promised by Jesus meant the Holy Spirit (Jn 7, 37).

Because of its Jewish and Christian backgrounds John's text is capable of two interpretations; John expresses this in his reporting Jesus' discussion with the Jews concerning 'this temple' (Jn 2). A symbolic reading of Scripture does not mean attempting to discover hidden meanings in the words or texts, but seeing the link between the various meanings allowed by the historical contexts in which and for which John wrote (p.311). Of course it will always remain a problem finding the exact meaning chosen by the evangelist especially when he offers no explicit statement about what he meant to say. Thus, the reader would have remained mystified by Jesus' statement in 2, 19 has not John intervened to clarify the precise content of his prophecy (2, 21). And even if John is deeply rooted in the OT tradition (cf. p.35) and one may search for the precise meaning of some signs or words or events in his cultural background, the meaning of the falling backward of Jesus' captors in 18,4-6 remains a mystery which the evangelist chooses not to interpret explicitly. Which means that a symbolic reading of the text does not necessarily illuminate the entire text, and dark spots in the text may have to remain mysterious either because the author has chosen to leave them that way or because he was relaying tradition he himself did not understand completely though he does integrate them within the texture of his own narrative.

In view of contributing to eventual further editions of the work under review, one would point out its pluses and the minuses. On the basis of this fourth volume of Léon-Dufour's *Lecture de l'Évangile selon Jean*, it is quite easy to identify its strengths, but not that easy to spot its weaknesses. Its holistic approach to the text is certainly positive as also the author's capability, witnessed to in various parts of the book, of dealing with complex issues and explicating everything in a way that its general though informed readership would be able to appreciate what the evangelist means to communicate. There is Léon-Dufour's mastery of the exegetical art through which he stops to what the text is actually saying and not to what subsequent theological readings have thought to have discovered in the text. His sensitivity then to the symbolic texture of the Gospel opened his mind and heart to the evangelist's rich theological message as he 'paints' the portrait of Jesus; Léon-Dufour often consciously assumes the point of view of the Gospel writer. In his last *Ouverture Ultime* (pp. 326-330) which sounds very much like a spiritual testament, Léon-Dufour confesses: "Ne devrais-je pas modifier ma conception de ce que j'appelle 'historique'? Est-ce que je ne ramène pas ma connaissance des

événements à l'énoncé de ce qui s'est réellement passé? S'il en était ainsi, il me faudrait concéder que, en dehors de quelques remarques adventices, le portrait johannique n'a rien d'historique. Mais si je prend l'optique de Jn, qui est celle d'un peintre, je dois admettre que l'évangéliste a su s'installer au cœur même du personnage. Il a pu le faire parce qu'il s'est placé à son origine éternelle, parce qu'il a discerné dans Jésus de Nazareth le Seigneur glorifié. Loin de moi l'audace d'aplatir sur le niveau 'historique' de comptes rendus ce qui est envahi par la gloire" (pp. 326-327). The author of this touching statement has penned in 1963 the very popular monograph *L'Évangiles et l'Histoire de Jésus* which by 1987 has seen ten editions and which has been translated in several languages. And it needs no further comments.

A more serious issue touches the segmentation of the text and Léon-Dufour's evaluation of the literary properties of Jn's gospel. The author of this *Lecture* is aware that John is writing literature and this awareness appears in every page of the book. He could not do otherwise seeing that his approach he describes as being synchronic. In the meantime, the so-called New Literary Criticism of Scripture has developed a branch of studies called 'Biblical narratology' which was originally applied to the narratives of the Hebrew Bible [cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Basic Books, New York 1981; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Almond Press, Sheffield 1983; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative. Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1987; and Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, Almond Press, Sheffield 1989 just to mention a few] but has since over spilled onto the NT. One could mention Jean-Noël Aletti, *L'Art de raconter Jésus-Christ*, Édition du Seuil, Paris 1989 for a work that has entered into this branch of studies [see also J.-N. Aletti, *Bible et Littérature. L'Homme et Dieu mis en intrigue*, Press Universitaire de Namur, Namur 1999]. Léon-Dufour uses such terminology as 'narrateur', 'acte', 'récit' and 'scène' that are normally employed by biblical narratology [cf. Jean Louis Ska, "*Our Fathers Have Told Us*". *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome 1990], but he is not well versed with the methodology of this branch of study and therefore could not make proper use of its insights that such method could have made available to the reader. We shall limit ourselves to just one example.

Where does the 'Garden Scene' ends and where does the 'Jewish Trial Scene' start? And what is the relationship, narratological and content wise, between this latter scene and the narration of Peter's denials?

Unfortunately, Léon-Dufour does not treat the Garden Scene, 18,1-12, as one whole but as three different pieces in the manner traditional exegetical approaches would have done. It is evident from the scene's Exposition (vv.1-3; cf. Ska,21-25 on this important feature of a biblical narrative) that the main characters of this scene are Jesus and Judas the betrayer. Peter, who is not mentioned alone in the Exposition is not considered by the narrator as main character in this scene; he becomes the subject of only part of the action, later on in the scene, action which seems to have been chosen simply in order to throw light upon Jesus' motivation for accepting his passion. But Judas does feature in the Exposition. Notice how Judas is specifically mentioned in v.5 as the narrator tells us what happened when Jesus pronounced his 'I am'. If as Léon-Dufour says on p.35, in biblical tradition in which the author of John was steeped, falling down meant prostration as one comes face to face with God's revelation, or as an act of adoration, it surfaces that the problem with Judas was his lack of faith in Jesus. Of course, John has already intimated that Judas' motivation for betraying Jesus could have been love of money (12, 4-6). Now he presents him among those who came to the garden to capture Jesus and he suffered the same shock as those whom he led. But John does not know for sure what moved Judas to betray the Lord, so he leaves this falling backward of Jesus' enemies unexplained, perhaps hoping that the readers would supply the explanation themselves.

The 'Jewish Trial Scene' (18, 13-27) is more complicated. In the Exposition the narrator first brings 'on scene' the personages, Jesus ('him'), Hannah, who is identified as the father-in-law of Caiaphas the High Priest that year, and Simon Peter together with 'another disciple' who remains unnamed either because there was nothing in tradition about him, or because the narrator was not interested in his role except as a help to have Peter enter the palace of the High Priest. This is surely not because this anonymous disciple is being presented as being superior to Peter (so Léon-Dufour, 55). May be he disappears as soon as he sees danger looming on the horizon! One may conclude that vv.13-15[Léon-Dufour does not consider verse 15 together with the previous two verses but as the opening of the sub-scene, vv.15-18] are not simply 'une transition narrative' as Léon-Dufour describes them(p.43) but as part and parcel of the complicated scene 13-27. In this scene the writer is trying to narrate two separate actions that happen simultaneously, on the one hand the questioning of Jesus by Hannah, on the other Peter's experience at another part of the palace (cf. also Léon-Dufour, 53). In the Exposition, Jesus and Hannah are introduced first, and then Peter. The 'other disciple' is mentioned only in so far he as procured permission for Peter to enter into the scene of action. This explains

why he remains anonymous. But then the narrator focuses first on Peter and his line of action. In order to create the impression of simultaneity the narrator alternates scenic units from the two lines of action: Peter, Jesus and Hannah, Peter. Whether the writer means to intimate any symbolic meaning in this alternation and parallelism needs to be seen.

Some of these insights and remarks are to be found in Léon-Dufour's reading of the text; but the analysis of these narratological aspects is not constantly and coherently carried out so that the reading of the texts risks becoming somehow subjective. A narratological approach does not focus only on the vocabulary chosen but also on the narrative strategies adopted by the narrator as he tells his story. Léon-Dufour's *lecture* is historical and theological. Unfortunately, this approach does not account for some of the details in the text. For instance, the choice of Hannah as the interrogating agent, instead of Caiaphas, the High Priest, the legitimate authority, a detail which does not feature in tradition. As Léon-Dufour explains very well, this has always constituted an insoluble enigma since. But the narrator's reasoning could have been another. The cue is given in the qualification of Caiaphas in verses 13-14. Not only is he described as the High Priest of that year, something which is redundant information because we have known it already from Jn 11, 49, but also as the one who advised the Jews that it would be better if one man died for the people, an information that has been given too in the same episode (18, 50) together with the narrator's commentary (vv.51-52). So why is the narrator repeating such information at this junction in the narrative? This question needs to be answer especially because Caiaphas as such does not to enter the scene at all. Instead we meet Hannah about whom the narrator adds nothing except that he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas and that he somehow carried the title 'High Priest'. What is the narrator's strategy here? I think the answer to these queries lies in what the narrator says, or reminds us of, about Caiaphas, and in Jesus' reply to Hannah as he asks him about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus' answer implies, as Léon-Dufour says, that the Priesthood and the Jewish leadership in general has not accepted his teaching and himself. They are accused of unbelief, and this Jesus confirms it as the truth when he retorts to the bystander who struck him (v.23). Jesus' answer actually characterises Hannah and the people for whom he stood including the current High Priest. But the narrator tries to avoid implicating the High Priest Caiaphas in this accusation by Jesus since he was **the** High Priest that year and as such he has been used by the Holy Spirit to pronounce the prophecy about the need of the death of Jesus (11, 49-52). John is not interested in Hannah as a historical figure but as the type of the Jewish leadership which in mass refuses to believe in

Jesus. Cf. the authors cited above as developing the study of biblical narratives for the role of characters in narratives.

There are here and there in this fourth volume, details where the author's judgement could have been slightly different. And some of these are listed and shortly discussed not to diminish the value of Léon-Dufour's work, rather to enhance it and to help prepare it for subsequent editions. Our author suggests (on p.39) that Peter's attack on Malchus may have symbolized an attack upon Jewish priesthood. But does John's failure to narrate the healing by Jesus of Malchus' ear that had been injured by Peter fit within this interpretative framework? Is John in controversy with the Jewish priesthood at a time when this priesthood had no longer any social or political function within Judaism? Rather, the subject-matter here is the theme of violence vis-à-vis the carrying out of God's will entrusted to Jesus. Another small detail concerns a reference: as he was speaking about Jesus' motivation for undergoing his passion, Léon-Dufour refers to Jn 14, 28 which does not seem to have anything to do with the subject-matter. Instead, he possibly meant Jn 14, 31. The present reviewer was not convinced by Léon-Dufour's suggestion that the time indication in 18, 28 could have a symbolic meaning (p.75); also the explanations for the Jewish considering the houses of the Romans 'impure' (p. 75 note 27). Léon-Dufour was not completely clear on pp.78-79 about the Jews' motivation for handing Jesus to the Romans and by the hypothesis made by others to which Léon-Dufour seems to subscribe, that Pilate's *ecce homo* in 19, 5 echoes I Sam 9,17 (on p.98). Léon-Dufour's translation of Jn 20,27b on p. 247-248 is slightly subtle but it accords with the picture of Thomas the Gospel as a whole.

This is a well written 'reading' of John and the present reviewer is sure it has helped and will help its readers to understand John not only by giving adequate information, but also by offering a balanced evaluation of the 'facts of the text'. The book received also excellent editorial attention; the present reviewer could remember of having detected only one typo: on p. 195(Acts).

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