

**Christina Petterson, *From Tomb to Text:
The Body of Jesus in the Book of John*
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[T]he book of John is precisely claiming *to be* the presence of Christ, understood as the necessary mediator of the pleromatic presence of the glorified Christ, who is directly accessible to the community of the gospel text (Petterson 2017, 113, her emphasis).

There is a scene in Italo Calvino's novelistic assemblage of story fragments, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* (Calvino 1981), in which two reader-lovers "read" each other's bodies, interpreting them with caresses and kisses. On the other hand, there is a character in China Miéville's urban fantasy novel, *Un Lun Dun* (Miéville 2007), who is called "the book" and who is indeed a living, conscious book. This large Bible-like codex not only talks voluminously, but it argues readily with anyone who seeks to interpret the meanings of its written words, including swarms of scholarly "Propheseers" who surround it.

Christina Petterson's book does not go so far as either of these two, and indeed one might argue that it goes in an entirely different direction, but I could not help thinking of them both while I was reading *From Tomb to Text*. Through a subtle but impressive series of arguments, she pursues the idea that the gospel of John maintains throughout that it is, itself, the resurrected Christ -- that John's Jesus has in effect become this book, and the "pleromatic presence" of "the Word" appears in the written words themselves. In other words, as her subtitle almost says, the body of Jesus (is) in the book of John.

Petterson's book consists of acknowledgments, an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion, along with numerous footnotes, an extensive bibliography, and indices of references and of authors. Most of the chapters end with a convenient conclusion. The introduction presents the book's central issue - why, but especially how, the Word became writing - and draws attention to the topics to be addressed later: Gnosticism, the question of the body (*sōma*, as opposed to *sarx*, flesh), the concept of "pleromatic presence" (a phrase that she attributes to Werner Kelber), the problematic relationship between orality and writing, and the idea of "text as an animate object" (xxi). Petterson rejects the category of "poststructuralism" for her work, and she denies that the term "logocentric" can be usefully applied to John. However, statements such as "the comprehension gained post-glorification is ... of connections that were already there in the larger scheme of things" (111, emphasis added), sound pretty logocentric to me.

Chapter one focuses heavily on Kelber's work on orality, read in tension with Jacques Derrida and others. Petterson expresses reservations about the presence/absence dichotomy as "a strategy of containment" (16). Chapter two discusses Docetism and the question of the humanity of John's Jesus, with special attention to the importance of the body, which then becomes attention to the role of writing ("Scripture") in John, and the two self-referential endings of John. She

focuses especially on Ernst Käsemann's work and those who oppose it, as well as the relation between John and the Christian canon. In chapter three, Petterson discusses John 6 and explores further the terminology of *sōma* and *sarx*. She also examines and criticizes the often-used traditional categories of Christology and Eucharist as applied to John.

Chapter four begins Petterson's analysis of John 2:18-22 and introduces the intriguing and important concept of "timespace" (following upon the work of Erich Auerbach and Jörg Frey) as an alternative to the linear temporal model that characterizes modern consciousness, and with it many studies of John. This also requires further understanding of the relation between John and apocalyptic. In chapter five she continues her analysis of John two and returns to the question of body, with special reference to the body or corpse of John's Jesus as the temple. It is here that the role of John's written text as the "mediator" or narrator comes to the fore (see the epigraph above). Chapter six focuses more heavily on John's last two chapters and synthesizes the arguments of the previous five chapters of Petterson's book to argue that John presents itself as "the vehicle of Jesus' pleromatic presence" (xxvi). She draws here on Louis Marin's brilliant 2001 essay on the gospels' stories of the women at the tomb, as well as the work of Patrick Counet (Marn 2001; Counet 2000).

The brief conclusion of *From Tomb to Text* is not really a conclusion at all (that appears in chapters five and six), but rather a splash of cold water in the reader's face. Petterson argues forcefully that John as "a gospel for the bourgeoisie" (138) is among the "foundational texts of Western culture" (137, following Marin). Nevertheless, although she tries to show how the chapters of her book have led up to this conclusion, I felt some disconnection with the foregoing, and I would have preferred that these connections had been more forcefully drawn as the arguments had unfolded. More specifically, it remains unclear whether the idea that John is the incarnational inscription of the pleromatic presence of Jesus has itself contributed to the re-inscription of reality, or whether John's readers (including many scholars) have instead contributed to this re-inscription by generally ignoring or discrediting John's text at these points.

In the introduction, Petterson states that her book is "not an analysis of metaphor" (xxiv), but she draws upon metaphor repeatedly in her analyses, often to challenge the metaphorical readings of John by others. Her treatment of metaphor as an opposition between "literal" and "figurative" (e.g., 66) seems quaint in contrast (perhaps even contradiction) to the sophistication of her thought in other areas, and especially in regard to her discussions of pleromatic presence, timespace, and "the spiritual gospel." She does this in order to criticize the use of metaphor by others, but the reasons for her critique are not clear, since she offers no analysis of metaphor. She seems to privilege the immanent ("literal," "text") over against the transcendent ("figurative," but by extension also "spiritual"), and there might be good reasons for this (indeed, I think that there are), but this absence of analysis impedes the larger argument.

It has been my own experience that metaphor, as part of the much larger semiotic arena of connotation, plays a crucial role in the ideological "reinscription of reality" upon which Petterson focuses the entirety of her book's conclusion. I also think that connotation (including metaphor) plays an inevitable part in any reading of any gospel, and this may be clearest in the case of John. Petterson states that her focus is on the text and not on the reader (is this again the immanent

versus the transcendent?), but that choice also seems quite problematic. Can there be a text without a reader?

My concerns notwithstanding, *From Tomb to Text* is a well-written, powerfully argued analysis of significant parts of John's gospel that should serve as a strong caution to those who follow the prevailing tendencies in John scholarship (noted at numerous points by Petterson) to use metaphor, irony, or the concept of "spiritual" as ways to domesticate the gospel of John and contain it within an all-too-comfortable ideology, and perhaps an encouragement to those who seek other ways to read John. Indeed, after having read Petterson's book, I find myself wondering if she may have opened a door to a very different reading of John, and indeed each of the gospels, as well as many other biblical texts. Would it be possible to turn much conventional John scholarship upside-down, to "stand it on its head" as Marx was said to stand Hegel on his head, not to remove the "spiritual" from John (that won't be done without drastically changing the text) but to find a very different understanding of "spiritual"? My point here may not be all that different from that of Stephen Moore's work on John 4, which Petterson cites with approval several times (Moore 2003).

To return to my opening references to stories of talking books and the reading of bodies, Miéville is undoubtedly a Marxist, and Calvino was one until he was lured away to the heresies of postmodernism. Following their lead, could we imagine a gospel of John in which "spirit" might once again mean something more like "breath" or "wind" -- that is, something not at all transcendent, but quite immanent and even physical? (Petterson approaches this in her early comments on Moore and Christina von Braun, 21). Then perhaps even the forlorn John 8:2-11, so often ignored by scholars (Petterson notes it only in passing, xxii n.31), might be of some value, and along with other Johannine texts such as "my kingship is not of this world" (18:36), it might take on a quite different meaning. This might even result in a sensual or erotic John, for which the incarnate Word could be any word, or any body.

Bibliography

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