Dennis Sylva


Dennis Sylva’s book is an in-depth treatment of Thomas as a literary character in the Fourth Gospel. Sylva argues for a nuanced reading of Thomas in which the character exhibits positive and negative attributes. Thomas advocates openly for his views, and seeks to keep the disciples together with Jesus. Yet he refuses to accept the idea of resurrection, and Jesus’ resurrection in particular. He does not believe in Jesus as “the life,” but eventually delivers one of the Gospel’s strongest confessions of faith.

Sylva’s reassessment of Thomas is a good example of how recent scholarship is turning away from the more dualistic character portraits of the mid- to late-twentieth century. As Sylva notes, John’s characters have often been read as defined only by their belief in Jesus, a belief presented as an all-or-nothing phenomenon. In Sylva’s assessment, Thomas does not fit neatly into either side of this dualistic divide. Thomas’s words suggest that in some ways he embodies the virtues of a disciple, yet in other ways he does not believe Jesus’ words.

Sylva organizes the book into four main chapters (plus an introduction and conclusion). The first three chapters center on the verses in which Thomas speaks: 11:16; 14:5; and 20:24-29. Although this is not much material to work with, Sylva fleshes out the meaning of Thomas’s words by situating them within the larger context of the Gospel. He illuminates Thomas’s speech through what has already happened or what is about to take place. Sylva also compares Thomas’s responses to Jesus to those of other characters in the Gospel. Narrative context and comparison with other characters provide Sylva a rich background against which to understand the few verses containing Thomas’s speech.

Chapter 1 deals with Thomas’s response to Jesus’ return to Judea in the wake of Lazarus’s death (John 11:16). Sylva argues that Thomas’s focus on death fails to appreciate Jesus’ life-giving role. Sylva assesses this response as unwillingness to believe in Jesus, in contrast to the usual notion of Johannine misunderstanding. Although Jesus has just pointed to his intention to bring life to Lazarus, Thomas remains fixated on death. Yet even though Thomas does not believe in Jesus as “life,” he strives to keep the disciples together with Jesus, and he displays bravery in the face of what he assumes to be certain death.

Thomas’s bravery is also on display in 14:5, the focus of Chapter 2. Sylva asserts that Thomas again expresses willingness to follow Jesus, even though he does not know where Jesus is going. Sylva briefly surveys other similar points of “misunderstanding” in the Gospel and concludes that in other cases
misapprehension is possible and even likely, but that here Thomas should understand Jesus’ speech. Thus 14:5 is again a statement of disbelief, not simply of misunderstanding.

In Chapter 3, Sylva argues that Thomas’s response to testimony of Jesus’ resurrection is unique and represents the “strongest resistance of any disciple to believing in Jesus’ resurrection” (84). Thomas’s demand to see Jesus’ wounds in 20:25 is an assertion of “the victory of death” (105). Thomas, therefore, represents the world that has rejected Jesus (104). Yet Jesus provides Thomas with what he needs to attain faith.

Chapter 4 departs from the format of the other chapters to assess Thomas’s character in the light of Greco-Roman virtue of open speech or parrhēsia. Sylva interprets Thomas as speaking openly and clearly, even if he is sometimes wrong. Parrhēsia was valued in antiquity as an important element of friendship. Sylva’s analysis adds complexity to Thomas’s character by asserting that even his mistakes or disbelief may simultaneously be considered virtuous for other reasons. This adds weight to Sylva’s assertion that Thomas does not fit a dualistic assessment of character.

Sylva’s work has many virtues. He is an attentive reader and consistently provides a rationale for his interpretive decisions. His approach to a minor character like Thomas proves useful, as he views Thomas as an integral part of the Gospel and situates him within the larger movements of plot and the other characters involved. Sylva’s willingness to retain the complexity of Thomas’s character, rather than to flatten it out into either believer or unbeliever yields a richer view of Thomas and of his importance in the Gospel.

Sylva’s work would be further strengthened by more explicit attention to method. His methodology is strong, but occasionally raises questions that are not addressed. For example, his work rightly assumes that character is created in part by comparison with other characters. His comparison of Thomas’s words in 14:5 with Peter (13:37) or the Jews (7:35) makes sense because of the parallel questions about Jesus’ destination. However, the connection with Caiaphas is weaker. Caiaphas makes a claim about the purpose of the death of one person (11:50), whom the reader understands as Jesus, while Thomas makes a claim about disciples dying with Jesus (11:16). While death is involved in each statement, the singular nature of Jesus’ death might lead the reader to conclude that Caiaphas’s statement would necessarily have a different format and meaning. A discussion of criteria upon which a connection between characters may be assumed would clarify and support Sylva’s claims.

A few relevant perspectives on Thomas are missing from Sylva’s work. For example, Gail O’Day argues in her 1995 commentary (John [NIDB; Nashville, Abingdon], p. 849) that Thomas is no different from the other disciples in John