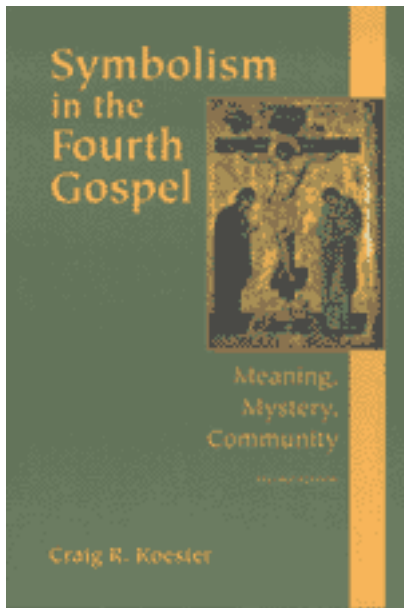


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Koester, Craig R.

Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community

2nd edition

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In recent years, various debates on the language in the Fourth Gospel have regained more immediate attention. These debates have taken place between theologians and classical philologists, theologians and linguists, theologians and historians, and theologians and theologians. Through *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, Craig Koester is participating in a debate between theologians on the relation between language, theology, the written word, and its reception, while drawing on theoretic insights from modern literary theory and read against the social and historic context of the early readers, with a question pertinent to current readers: “How do people know God?” In sequence to the first edition, published in 1995, the second edition is referred to as a significant contribution to understanding the relation between language and theology in the Fourth Gospel.

Koester has elected to approach the language of the Fourth Gospel by looking at it closer from the angle of symbolism and to how the language of the Fourth Gospel contributes toward forming our perception of who God is. He has a broader understanding of symbolism, and in an unforced and systematized style he has made a most complex phenomenon of the Fourth Gospel more accessible. There is a fine balance between theory, textual analysis, theology, and research. While Koester does not impose a denominationally determined theological framework on the book, his theoretical

orientation is based on wider research, including the works of sociologists, psychologists, linguists, literary critics, theologians, and some of his colleagues and associates. He engages critically with these without burdening his perspective and line of thought.

The book is divided into eight chapters. It also includes appendixes on special topics and prefaces to the first and second Editions. The idea is created that through the additions made to the second edition, Koester is continuously revising his position, thus being an active participant in the debate on language and theology. The references in his footnotes to recent literary theorists and publications on the language in John are testimony to his awareness of the different positions. Chapter 8, "Symbol and the Knowledge of God," provides a concluding answer to the question posed in chapter 1, "Symbol, Meaning and Mystery." Chapter 1 presents a theoretical base for considering symbolism in the Fourth Gospel, and the subsequent chapters provide substantial examples of the integration of theoretic approach, close reading of the text, and theological understanding of symbolism. Thus, chapter 2 looks at "Representative Figures" in the Fourth Gospel, chapter 3 ponders "Symbolic Actions," chapters 4 and 5 look at "Light and Darkness" and "Water," and chapter 6 beholds "The Crucifixion." Chapter 7 provides further theoretical contemplation in light of "Symbol and Community." It is thus evident that the book is as noteworthy for its coherent and progressive development as it is for the autonomy of its individual chapters.

What is the relation between metaphor and symbol in the Gospel of John? To this question there is no easy answer, especially in the light of the history of interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. In his first chapter, "Symbol, Meaning and Mystery" (1–32), Koester justifiably does not venture too deeply into this tangled web. Rather, he commences with a general definition of symbolism and moves toward an understanding of Johannine symbolism, distinguishing between core and supporting symbols, discussing how to identify symbols, and, importantly, providing a "fundamental structure of Johannine symbolism" (13), which is very broad. Koester distinguishes between two levels of meaning, the primary concerning Christ, the secondary, discipleship. The theological orientation of the book is evident. Thus, debaters and linguists who have a sole literary interest in the Fourth Gospel are taken slightly out of the equation. However, the chapter's next section on "Johannine Symbolism in its Cultural Context" is relevant not only for studies on religious symbolism but also for exegesis in general. Koester appears to be more reader oriented, where he considers "our interpretive work" in light of the "spectrum of readers" envisioned in the Fourth Gospel (24). In drawing the chapter to a conclusion after discussing valid and invalid interpretations, he states, "The symbols in John's Gospel refer to Jesus and through Jesus to God, making claims that readers cannot verify by embarking on their own ascent into heaven or by appealing to canons of historical, social, or literary criticism. Verification can only come from God's side of the

divide. A symbol's truth is confirmed when people are drawn through its witness into the faith in Jesus that brings knowledge of God" (32).

Whereas in chapter 1 Koester illustrates how metaphors are used symbolically in the Fourth Gospel (9), he indicates in chapter 2 how what is traditionally understood as characterization can be understood under symbolism as "Representative Figures" (33–77). The characters portrayed in the Gospel, or representative figures, "present a spectrum of possible responses to Jesus, helping to attract readers to positive exemplars of faith, move them beyond inadequate faith responses, and alienate them from characters who reject Jesus" (33). After presenting a theoretical framework for his understanding of character portrayal in the Fourth Gospel, Koester organizes selected characters in a framework that illustrates how the characters have more than historical importance, where they have particular literary and theological significance. He thus starts with the central character, Jesus (39), and immediately casts him in a christological light. He then moves on to "people who meet Jesus"(45), where he draws particular attention to the pairing of characters "that enable[s] us to discern how individuals and groups function in a representative way" (45). He considers the most distinctive traits of the characters and studies them through comparison and contrast. Chapter 2 concludes with a consideration on "The Word of God and the Human Condition" (76). In this conclusion Koester points out how "the theological movement comes full circle.... as Jesus reveals who God is, he also reveals who human beings are. When Jesus evokes positive and negative responses from people, he enables readers to see them not only as unique individuals and members of communities but as people who do or do not believe in Jesus and the God who sent him" (76).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to "Symbolic Actions" in the Fourth Gospel (79–140). Koester structures the Johannine account of Jesus' ministry around a series of symbolic actions. He organizes these around "the seven miracles or 'signs' that Jesus performed during his public ministry." Koester is extremely cautious not to take a position on the debate on the "signs source." He states in a carefully composed footnote, after presenting references to different positions in the debate, "Our study does not assume or preclude the existence of a signs source" (79). He is thus more concerned about the significance of these signs for Johannine theology, focusing on the senses, hearing and believing, that accompany the signs that lead to faith or the rejection of faith. In 20:30–31 the Evangelist states that "these signs were written down in order that readers might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Koester uses this important reference to anchor the development of his argument on symbolism, where he places the representative figures within the symbolic actions. He mentions that "it is initially surprising that the figures in the Gospel who exhibit genuine faith do so after an experience of hearing rather than seeing" (138). While the chapter focuses on hearing and seeing, Koester could have developed a further

sense; “touch” is not as well developed. This could have been done in his “Anointing and Washing Feet” (127) and the absent Thomas’s insistence on touching besides seeing Jesus’ wounds (20:24–25) and with Mary Magdalene, “Do not touch me” (20:17). Still, a further sense, “smell,” which Koester mentions, certainly adds a humorous touch (66): Koester claims that the character of Martha “provides a model for the readers, who are among those who ‘have not seen’ the dead rise (20,29), but who are called to believe.... Martha’s faith, to be sure, does not entail a fully adequate understanding of Jesus, since she would advise Jesus not to open Lazarus’s tomb because of the stench (11:39).” While adding color to the narrative, Koester could have added emphasis to Jesus’ claim that “he is dead” (11:14).

Chapters 4, “Light and Darkness” (141–73), and 5, “Water” (175–206), could as well have been titled “Symbolic Imagery” in line with the titles of his previous chapters. Koester sees the images of light and darkness as probably the Gospel’s most striking motif. Chapter 4 is possibly the best example of his balancing of history of research, textual references and commentary, thematic development, and elaboration on his point of view concerning symbolism. The chapter is also significant “for readers because the interplay between light and darkness is a fundamental feature of human existence” (141), underlining Koester’s endeavor to indicate John’s relevance to contemporary readers. The chapter first presents a theoretical framework, followed by a thematic selection of images, and concludes with “God and Evil in Johannine Theology” (171). Koester illustrates the significance of the Johannine imagery with a paragraph on “Light and Darkness in 1 John.” The examples of the imagery are: “The True Light That Enlightens Everyone” (142), based on 1:1–13, with two subheadings, “The Light Shines in the Darkness (1:1–5)” and “True Light and Enlightenment (1:1–6)”; “One Who Came by Night” (150); “The Light of the World” (152), which includes “Jesus as Teacher (7:14–24),” “Jesus as Prophet and Messiah (7:25–52),” “Jesus’ Unity with God (8:12–30),” “Light and Discipleship (8:12–30 cont.)”; and “The Light Is with You a Little Longer” (160). Koester places particular emphasis on “Light and Darkness in the Passion Narrative” (166). He draws attention to the connection between light and darkness and glory, and the manifestation of God: “The familiar imagery [of light and darkness] would have helped to communicate with a broad spectrum of readers ... the reality of unbelief and its relationship to sin, evil, and death” and the “light for a world, a radiance that enlightens everyone” (168).

In chapter 6, “The Crucifixion” (207–46), Koester focuses on the glory of God, which “was revealed most fully in the suffering and death of Jesus the Christ” (207). This chapter is more theological than the previous ones, but Koester provides a clear social, historical, and literary foundation for understanding the significance of the crucifixion. The chapter is structured around invitations, answers, and an overview of Christ’s

mission from the perspective of symbolism, and instead of focusing on only the “passion narrative” indicates effectively how the Gospel as a whole bears on the crucifixion. “The crucifixion functions as a core symbol in the narrative” (208), and while having meaning for its believing readers, it “remained a public and brutal part of life in the ancient Mediterranean region” (208). The first invitation is to “Behold the Man” (210), derived from Pilate’s statement (19:5). The answer by the crowd is given, “Crucify him, crucify him” (210), as is Pilate’s response, “I find no crime in him” (214). Under each heading Koester discusses the significance of different aspects of the events before the crucifixion. In the next invitation, or imperative, “Behold the Lamb of God” (216), Koester discusses the crucifixion against its social background, where it “was widely regarded as a degrading form of execution.” He then interprets briefly some metaphors relating to the crucifixion in the gospel under the adverbial clause, “That the Scripture Might Be Fulfilled” (217). Under “The Cross and Sacrifice” (219), Koester offers a more extensive commentary on the citations from scripture that connect the death of Jesus and the practice of sacrifice. The third invitation, “Behold Your King” (224), explains the irony of Jesus’ death, which shows “that crucifixion did not negate his being messiah, but actually demonstrated it and revealed its true character” (224). The two headings used to elaborate on this irony are “Enthronement of the Prophet-King” (224) and “Death of the Prophet-King” (227). Koester’s ability to interweave a narrative command over the subject is evident in the answer to the third invitation: “We Beheld His Glory” (230). The focus on community is thus maintained and is intensified in the next section, “Behold Your Son, Behold Your Mother” (239). Koester pays attention to intention with and interpretation of symbolism and illustrates how this functions diversely in the Gospel. He mentions different symbols relating to the crucifixion, such as the imagery of the lifting up of the snake in 3:14–15 (235), which is at once a sign of life and death and an allusion to Num 21:49. The network of symbolism is related to the glory motif in the Gospel, and Koester sees 17:4 as a summary of Jesus’ ministry (238), his work of salvation (237). Koester closes chapter 6 with a theological question, “Why did Jesus die?” where he contemplates the death of Jesus in Johannine theology (244).

Chapter 7 presents a further elaboration on “Symbol and Community” (247–86). Koester provides a theoretical base for his broad understanding of “community,” which has a historical, cultural, and hermeneutical orientation, includes the implied reader in the narrative, and extends to the modern reader. Here he addresses one of the problems in contemporary exegesis that has a social orientation as basis. One cannot reconstruct the community through symbolism (247). The same symbols are used differently in the Gospel of John and are intended differently. For example, he discusses the imagery of light, or “the light of the world” (comparing 8:12–13; 11:35–36; 12:35–36), and the symbolism of the cross (12:31–32; 12:23–26).

Chapter 8, “Symbol and the Knowledge of God” (287–99), serves as a conclusion and answers the questions posed in the introduction. These theological questions also reveal Koester’s theological framework. He does not present this as the only correct model. This is indicated in his footnotes and extensive bibliography, where he mentions authors who hold alternative views. Throughout the work, Koester is in constant debate with his contemporaries and reveals a thorough knowledge of recent and ancient literature. His “Appendixes on Special Topics” (301–16), namely, “Sacramental Symbolism” (301), “Geographical Symbolism” (309), and “Numerical Symbolism” (311), not only offer interesting reading or material that does not fit into his framework but add a further dimension into a kaleidoscope of further perspectives on symbolism in the Gospel of John.

I have found *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* an engaging read. Craig Koester offers a particular and easily followed perspective to a complex array of literary and theological questions on the Fourth Gospel. Instead of discussing literature on the Gospel, he presents his arguments based on an understanding of the Gospel. His point of departure is not the origins of symbolism but how it functions in the text, without elaborate textual analysis, and how it has been received by the Christian community.