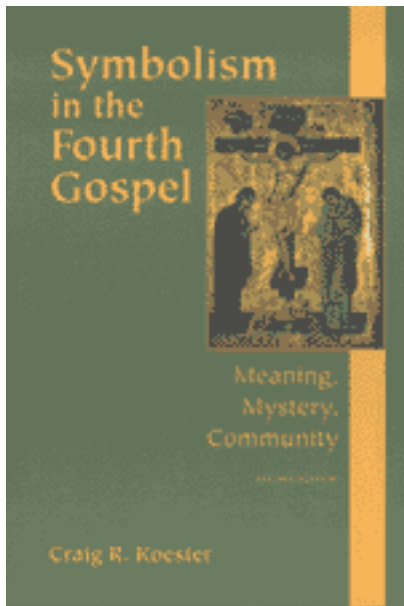


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Koester, Craig R.

Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community

Second edition

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Eric M. Wallace

Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Education
Matteson , IL 60443

Koester's second edition, with moderate success, again tackles the daunting task of understanding the function of Johannine symbols. He examines the literary, sociohistorical, and theological dimensions of these symbols as seen from the possible vantage point of Jewish, Samaritan and non-Jewish Greek readers. In this second edition, as in the first edition, Koester begins by setting the criteria for identifying and understanding Johannine symbolism in chapter 1. He examines the literary context, the cultural context, and the means for determining a valid interpretation versus an invalid one. It is in this chapter that Koester states the problem in theological reflection, which is: "How do people know God? In the language of the Fourth Gospel, God is 'from above' and people are 'from below,' and to ordinary human eyes God's presence is veiled, his activity elusive" (1). Koester's working thesis is that the symbols (earthly images) bear witness to divine realities. Therefore, the "Gospel presents the paradox that the divine is made known through what is earthly and the universal is disclosed through what is particular" (2). Hence, the symbolic language of the Gospel, of which Jesus is central, gives testimony to who God is and helps to illuminate or unveil the "mystery that is God" (3). Understanding these symbols is crucial to properly interpreting John's Gospel. Koester proposes that even those without a Jewish/ Samaritan background can understand

many of the symbols John incorporates, therefore expanding the possible audience of this Gospel outside what has been proposed as an exclusive Johannine community.

In chapter 2 Koester examines representative figures. In this chapter he discusses character portrayal, character portrayal in antiquity, Jesus, people who meet Jesus, and the disciples and friends of Jesus. Although Koester now includes Judas in this section (who was missing from the first edition), separate discussions of Pontius Pilate, the Pharisees, and the Jews are still missing from the litany of Johannine characters. Pilate is mentioned in a later chapter dealing with the crucifixion but not as a character who meets Jesus. The Jews and the Pharisees are scattered throughout the discussion of the crowds and again during the discussion of the crucifixion. I would have like to have seen a separate discussion about these important antagonists of Jesus.

Chapter 3 addresses symbolic actions that cover the signs Jesus performs as well as the cleansing of the temple and the washing of the disciples' feet. Chapter 4 examines the themes of light and darkness, while chapter 5 explores the symbolism of water. Chapter 6 looks at the crucifixion and Jesus' portrayal as "the man," the "Lamb of God," and the Prophet-King. Chapter 7 examines symbol and the community, giving special attention to the image of the vine and its branches. The last chapter, which is a new chapter, examines symbol and the knowledge of God. At the end of each of these chapters, except for his new and last chapter, Koester adds a theological reflection.

The thrust of Koester's work is to argue that the readers of John's Gospel are much more diverse than has been portrayed by others in the past (see Meeks, Lindars, Käsemann, Segovia). Though I am in agreement with Koester in principle, I differ in practice. I feel that in an attempt to show an eclectic audience Koester has gone beyond the intent of the author(s) by focusing too much attention on possible readers and how they may have interpreted the symbols. Because of this focus on possible non-Jewish readers, Koester tends to diminish the significance of the Jewishness of the text. He points out, correctly, the Old Testament parallels to the Johannine symbols as background for understanding these symbols. Yet Koester continues to try to find Hellenistic parallels that would give credence to the idea that Greeks were able to identify and understand the Johannine symbolism. I feel this is unnecessary. The many parallels to the Old Testament indicate that the author(s) wrote the Gospel with a particular audience in mind, an audience who was familiar with the Old Testament. The Greeks who appear in the Gospel have come to Jerusalem during the Passover to worship (12:20). It remains to be seen whether these are Hellenistic Jews or proselytes, but they have come to worship, so it is safe to assume that they know something of the Jewish scriptures. This does not mean that everyone in the Johannine community was a converted Jew, but it does give further credence to the fact that the symbolism in John has Jewish roots, not Hellenistic ones. Therefore, to fully

understand the symbolism and the message of John's Gospel, one must look to the Old Testament, to Moses and the prophets who wrote about Jesus (1:45; 5:46–47). Otherwise we begin to see Jesus in light of gnostic redeemer myths (Bultmann) or the Gospel paralleled in light of Hermetic literature (Dodd). John clearly borrows from Israel's salvation history to explain who Jesus is. If the Gospel says that Moses and the prophets wrote of him, why do we look to Homer, Plato, or Seneca for enlightenment? Except for the elements of the Gospel that are clearly Gentile, such as crucifixion and other Roman customs and practices, the theology of the Gospel and the symbols employed by the Gospel writer should be located in the Old Testament.

This brings me to another point. Because of this preoccupation with the universality of a symbol, Koester never speaks of the symbol in terms of the major motif and how that motif may change how that symbol is viewed or how it functions within authorial intent. A number of scholars have pointed out that Deut 18 is crucial to understanding the Gospel of John (P. Anderson, Boismard, Meeks). The prophet-like-Moses motif has major import for John's Gospel, yet Koester spends little time at all with this motif. In light of this motif, how does one see the signs of Jesus? How does this motif alter the perception of the other symbols? For example, the crucifixion is the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy in 2:19 about the destruction and raising of his body (temple). This validates Jesus as the prophet like Moses. According to Deut 18:22, the people will know that a prophet is from God if the thing that the prophet speaks, in the name of God, comes to fruition. Therefore, everything that Jesus has spoken about himself and God is truly from the mouth of God. The crucifixion serves, among other things, to validate all of Jesus' claims.

Another major motif, related to the prophet-like-Moses motif, is the motif of "witness" or "trial" (A. Lincoln, A. Trites, J. Beutler). How are the symbols to be understood in light of the trial motif in which Jesus is on trial before the Jewish leadership as a false prophet? Koester does not suggest a major motif in which these symbols are situated but does propose that to understand these symbols one must take them in the context they are found. But is it not also important to take the symbols in the context of the author's argument? Focusing on authorial intent, which is not always harmonious with reader perception, is clearly not the heart of Koester's concern.

Koester's work is well written and provocative. He makes us take a fresh look at the symbols of John's Gospel and question how they function in the narrative, which invites the question: To whom do they speak? I believe that Koester is on track in recognizing that the symbols of John are vital for understanding the Gospel in total. I also agree with Koester that some of these symbols have some universal import. However, I firmly believe that even the astute reader must have some knowledge of the Old Testament to

comprehend the deep theological implications of this Gospel, without which the reader would be lost. I also agree with Koester that the readers of John's Gospel, or his community, are not some exclusive community seeking to shut others out. The Gospel seeks to distinguish between those who believe and those who do not, at the same time opening the door ("gate"; John 10:7-10) for all who are drawn by the Spirit to enter in and become a part of the community. The author also assumes some level of Old Testament competency. Koester's own examination of Old Testament parallels validates this point. Even with these points in mind, this monograph is a valuable tool in interpreting the Gospel of John.