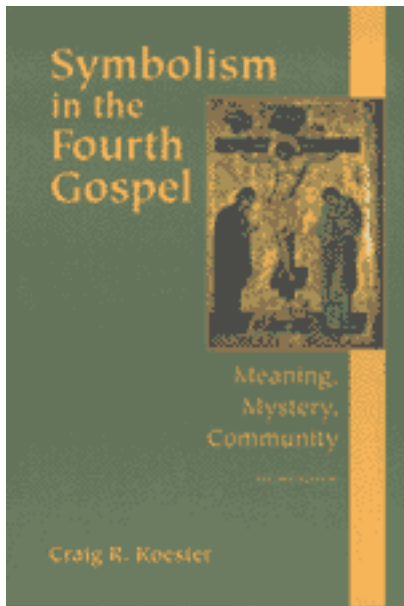


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**Koester, Craig R.**

*Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*

Second edition

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Just before Nicodemus stumbled over Jesus' symbol of being "born again," the Evangelist informed the reader that the Pharisee came to see Jesus at "night" (John 3:2–4). Did the Evangelist intend something symbolic in that notice? Are we prone to stumble over such details when we read John? More importantly, are we more like Nicodemus than we care to imagine?

In this exceedingly well-written, perceptively argued volume, Koester proposes to lead the reader through John's remarkable narrative showing how his symbols, those "earthly images that bear witness to transcendent realities," make it possible for "readers 'from below' to know and believe what is 'from above' " (xi).

Koester maintains that the very imagery that captures the imagination of readers is also what makes the Gospel so difficult to interpret. Indeed, some moderns have despaired, arguing that the opaque and ambiguous symbolism must belong to the historical but now-lost "Johannine community" and that, consequently, the meaning of that language must forever remain unintelligible. Koester argues rather that the difficulty reflects the fact that the Johannine symbols are simply multifaceted and convey "multiple meanings simultaneously" (xiii). (For more on Koester's understanding of the Johannine community, which tends to follow R. E. Brown's reconstruction, see 18–24; 247–86.)

Chapter 1 begins with the significant theological problem concerning how humankind comes to know God. The Fourth Gospel asserts, on the one hand, that God is “from above” while people are “from below” and that “no one has ever seen God,” but, on the other, that Jesus, the Word made flesh, has made God known. Tied to the latter assertion, however, is the idea that humankind did not know or accept Jesus either. How is this tension to be explained? According to Koester, through the mediating power of symbols, earthly images. He writes, “Jesus called upon things that could be heard, seen, touched, and tasted to bear witness to the unseen God who sent him, so that the commonplace—bread made from barley meal, streams of cool water, and a glimmer of light—became vehicles of revelation. . . . the only Son ‘has made him known’ (1:18) by using images from the creation to bear witness to the Creator” (2).

Having thus set the stage for the importance of his investigation, Koester defines symbols in John: they are images (things or persons) and actions that “span the chasm” between the eternal and the temporal (4). They “convey something of transcendent significance through something accessible to the senses” (5). He then wisely distinguishes between “core” and “supporting symbols” (5). An example suffices to get at his distinction: “light/darkness” by their frequent use, and critical placement in the narrative, are clearly core symbols, but the related terms “day/night” and “sight/blindness” clearly play a supporting role.

After defining symbolic metaphors and showing how to recognize symbols in John, Koester turns to the structure of Johannine symbolism, a structure that is basically two-fold: “the primary level of meaning concerns Christ; the secondary level concerns discipleship” (13). The “I am” sayings make this structure clear: when Jesus says, “I am the vine,” he follows with, “you are the branches” (15:5). “In each case the image itself refers to Jesus, and a particular aspect or effect of the image is applied to his followers” (13). The “from below” symbol teaches about Jesus the revealer of the Father but does so in such a way that the disciple gains that knowledge only in relationship to Jesus. Vine and branches go together. The chasm, God “above” and humankind “below,” is thus bridged in the person of Jesus.

In chapter 2, “Representative Figures,” Koester works through the symbolism associated with many of the principal characters in John. He begins with Jesus, “whose identity is three-dimensional: He is a human being, he is the prophet and Messiah promised in Israel’s Scriptures, and he is God incarnate” (39). Koester’s treatment emphasizes the “interplay” of the three dimensions as the only way to come to a proper understanding of Jesus and also demonstrates the routine progression from the first to the second to the third of those dimensions in several different narratives. At the Feast of Booths, for example, the debate between Jesus and the Jews focuses first on his status as a teacher

(7:14–24); it proceeds to his status as the messiah (7:25–52); and finally, with deliberate intensification, it moves to his claim to be the divine “I Am” (8:12–59). Koester shows how this rather tendentious pattern plays out also in the story of Samaritan woman (John 4) and again in the story of the man born blind (John 9). “In short,” writes Koester, “the evangelist wanted readers to believe that the man Jesus is also the Christ and the divine Son of God (20:31)” (41).

Fascinating also is the way the Evangelist has paired many of these representative figures throughout the narrative. So, for example, the deliberate juxtaposition of Nicodemus in John 3 and the Samaritan woman in John 4 provides attentive readers the opportunity to compare and contrast their stories. (See also the pairing of the royal official in John 4 and the paralytic in John 5). But Koester does not limit the study to individuals: the crowd in Galilee in John 6 mirrors the crowd in Jerusalem in John 7–8.

Chapter 3 provides a substantial investigation into the symbolic actions of Jesus, both the “seven signs” and his other nonmiraculous actions. For Koester, “The Johannine account of Jesus’ ministry is structured around a series of symbolic actions . . . [and these] are woven together in the narrative and reveal facets of Jesus’ identity in a manner perceptible to the senses” (79). But the reader should not assume that Koester assumes a one-to-one correspondence between symbolic action and meaning; quite to the contrary, the symbolic actions are polyvalent, integrating “several levels of meaning into a coherent whole” (81). Readers must use the Evangelist’s clues to arrive at “appropriate levels of meaning while excluding some possible misinterpretations” (81). The first and most important clue to the meaning, of course, is the discourse that attends the symbolic action.

As with the representative figures, so also with the symbolic actions: the narrator carefully pairs them. Koester begins by noting the pairing of Jesus’ turning the water into wine and his cleansing of the temple in John 2. After discussing the relationship between the healing of the official’s son in John 4 and the invalid in John 5, Koester proceeds to the integrally related feeding of the five thousand and the walking on the water in John 6. Koester takes up the question “Who sinned?” as he discusses the healing of the man born blind in John 9 and its complementary discourse in John 10 regarding Jesus the good shepherd. The raising of Lazarus (John 11) provides the symbol for a discussion of Jesus’ glorification as the resurrection and the life but also sets the stage for the symbol of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem in John 12. The symbolic anointing of Jesus and Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet are the final pair. Together the symbols mark the end of Jesus’ public ministry and the beginning of his passion. In sum, the symbolic actions intend to “direct the readers’ reflections on the meaning of Jesus’ work and death” (127).

Koester's discussion of them rightly emphasizes the way in which the Evangelist effortlessly forces readers to focus on issues of Christology and discipleship.

Chapters 4–5 take up the issue of two primary motifs at length: “light and darkness” and “water.” Both pervade the Gospel, and any analysis of the symbolism in John would be remiss without an extended discussion of their features. Koester does not disappoint. Regarding light, his patient review culminates with a discussion of the theme in the passion, where, rather unexpectedly, the theme virtually disappears with the departure of Judas into the “night” (13:30). In what remains, there are perhaps glimpses of light—the guards and their torches, Peter by the fire in the high priest's courtyard—but showing his characteristic restraint and good sense, Koester does not read much into them.

“Images of water,” argues Koester, “create another rich and variegated motif” in the Gospel (175). Jesus' offer of living water to the Samaritan woman (4:10) presents one aspect of that motif, whereas his healing of an invalid at the pool at Bethzatha (5:7) presents another. A highlight in this chapter is Koester's balanced assessment of the water that flowed from Jesus' side at his crucifixion (19:34). In one sense, the water fulfills Jesus' promise in 7:38 that rivers of living water would flow from his κοιλίας (Koester discusses the seeming *deliberate* grammatical ambiguity in this text on page 14), but in another sense, the water relates to the “cleansing effect of Jesus' death” (201). Koester proceeds to explain how the symbolism here works at two more levels for the Evangelist, thereby underscoring the polyvalence of these symbols in John.

Chapter 6 discusses lucidly and at length the symbolism found in the passion narrative, while chapter 7 pursues the role symbols play in the formation and maintenance of the Johannine community as it can be discerned from the Gospel and Johannine Epistles. Issues of unity, discipleship, and separation from and engagement with the world are all thoroughly addressed. Chapter 8 returns once again to the primary theological question with which the study began: How does one know God? The chapter then focuses on John 14:6 and three themes raised therein: God the Father, humankind's estrangement from the Father, and Jesus as the way to the Father.

Three appendices follow. First Koester addresses the hotly contested issue of sacramental symbolism in the text. He argues, among other things, that John 6:51c–58 should not be read sacramentally. Next he briefly discusses geographical symbolism. Koester focuses not on the etymology of any given place name but on the narrative itself and the possible allusions therein that might relate to traditions associated with particular places. Finally, he delves into the world of numerical symbolism. Here he walks a fine line between reading too much into the text and letting an overtly symbolic reference have its due. So, for example, the *five* former husbands of the Samaritan woman might be significant but

the catch of *153* fish is probably not (despite early church interpretations suggesting otherwise).

This significantly expanded second edition is very clean, easy to read, and not overly weighted down with scholarly jargon or footnotes. His deft handling of the text is always judicious, as is his interaction with others in the field. The volume would make an ideal supplemental text for either an undergraduate or graduate course in Johannine literature.