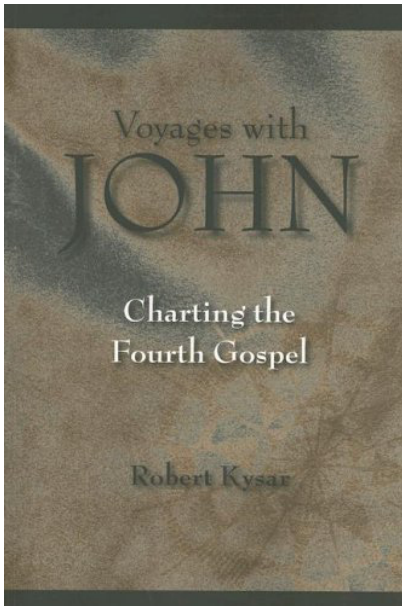


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**Kysar, Robert**

*Voyages with John: Charting the Fourth Gospel*

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Those who have followed Robert Kysar's storied career as a Johannine scholar are aware of his notable pilgrimage from historical criticism to postmodernity. *Voyages with John* traces the evolution of Kysar's thought by reprinting, in roughly chronological order, sixteen papers that represent major currents in his research. Kysar opens and closes the collection with autobiographical reviews of his own ideological development and organizes the essays into the major stages of his career (which has now spanned four decades). The book includes a number of Kysar's most recent papers that have not yet appeared in print elsewhere, along with a thorough bibliography and helpful indexes.

In the introductory essay—written in a conversational and, indeed, at times confessional tone—Kysar identifies four methodological phases in his own work: historical criticism; theological criticism; “the so-called new literary criticism”; and, finally, “what some call postmodernism” (1). These four phases serve as the outline for the remainder of the book, which includes six “historical” essays (including two of Kysar's valuable surveys of trends in Johannine studies), two essays reflecting Kysar's theological interests, four on literary criticism, and four advancing Kysar's current postmodern perspective. In a brief introduction to each section, Kysar outlines the issues he was attempting to address at

each stage of his career. A brief review of these introductory sections will indicate the overall logic of the collection.

The essays in part 1 derive from the early phase of Kysar's career (ca. 1970–1985), an era when Johannine scholars were preoccupied with the historical-critical approach. In Kysar's view, historical criticism is grounded in the premise of authorial intention and insists that the Fourth Gospel is only meaningful when understood against its historical backdrop. This backdrop includes both "the original setting and meaning" of the text and also "the development of the document itself"—that is, the editorial history of the text (7–8). The two essays in part 2 reflect Kysar's ongoing interest in "theological criticism," which he defines as "the investigation of the biblical texts for constructing a statement of the text's views of faith and life for the sake of the church" (109). Theological criticism is thus concerned not only with major theological themes in the Fourth Gospel but also with the appropriation of these themes by modern religious communities, an emphasis that explicitly reflects Kysar's work as an ordained pastor (110). Over time, however, Kysar became aware of "a nearly unconscious dissatisfaction with historical studies," an unrest driven by a growing suspicion that Johannine scholars had become too speculative in their reconstructions of community history (145–46). Part 3 includes a number of essays reflecting Kysar's gradual shift toward the premises and conclusions of "narrative, reader-response, structural, [and] rhetorical" criticism (143). These methods counter historical criticism by locating the "meaning" of the Fourth Gospel in the text itself and/or in the experience of reading that text (145). The essays in part 4 reflect the final evolution of Kysar's thought, which is grounded on three premises: that "texts arise from the author's own assumptions and perspectives" and seek to "sustain social structures" and power relations; that "most historical reconstructions" of the Fourth Gospel's background history "are excessively speculative and beyond probability"; and that language is unstable, making every text "hopelessly multidimensional" (217–18). Three of the four short papers in part 4 are explicit commentary on commentary, as Kysar seeks to dismantle many of the foundational assumptions of his own previous research.

The evolution of Kysar's thought may be illustrated by comparing three essays in *Voyages* that focus on John 6—the story of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand and subsequent dialogue with the Jews about his identity as "the bread from Heaven." Like most scholars, Kysar is struck by the theological aporias in this passage, particularly its apparently self-contradictory soteriological and eschatological statements. On the former problem, it is clear that "some sections [of John 6] seem to presuppose an act of free will in accepting Christ, while others suggest that faith is a divine act" (45, 203–5); on the latter, Kysar notes the "commonly recognized polarity of realized and futuristic eschatology" in the chapter (48). These tensions may be resolved in a variety of ways, as evident from Kysar's various readings of the passage.

In his 1985 essay “Pursuing the Paradoxes of Johannine Thought” (ch. 4 of *Voyages*), Kysar proposes that the tensions in John 6 can be readily explained by distinguishing “between tradition and redaction” (43). In the traditions and sources behind the Fourth Gospel—including here Robert Fortna’s reconstructed Signs Gospel—faith was portrayed as a free-will response to stories about Jesus’ miraculous signs. But after their expulsion from the synagogue and failure to convert a significant number of fellow Jews, the Johannine Christians became more pessimistic and gradually concluded that faith must be a divine gift; this perspective was superimposed onto the earlier tradition, producing the problems evident in the current text (46–47). Similarly, the earlier Johannine tradition most likely espoused “a Jewish view” of eschatology, one with an essentially futuristic orientation. But as time and experience led the Johannine Christians to distinguish their beliefs from those of the synagogue, they began to long for “a more meaningful present,” taking comfort in the belief that God’s future blessings are immediately available (47–48). Viewed in historical-critical perspective, the tensions in John 6 may be explained as a natural byproduct of the Johannine community’s attempt both to preserve and to revise their Jesus tradition in light of new experiences (50).

While this developmental reading offers a coherent explanation for the tensions in John 6, by 1997 Kysar could no longer affirm his earlier approach. His essay “Dismantling Decisional Faith” (ch. 12 in *Voyages*) rejects redactional and developmental models categorically in an attempt to highlight “the general function of the language of the passage [John 6:25–71] on and in readers” (199). Specifically, Kysar now wishes to achieve “a greater self-consciousness in the reading of the text”; in pursuit of this goal, he proceeds to offer an “intensely personal” reader-response analysis of ways that one reader (Kysar himself) experiences the tensions in John 6 (199–205). The narrative confuses the reader by selectively manipulating the reader’s identification with various characters, all of whom are ultimately shown to possess a deficient perception of Jesus (204–5, 209–10). By subverting the reader’s expectations, the text suggests that faith in Jesus, though prerequisite to eternal life, cannot be achieved by one’s own volition. Hence, while John 6 may have functioned in its original context “to account for why it is some believe while others do not,” Kysar can only say for certain that “the work of the text for this reader has undermined any confidence and certainty in the human will alone to believe” (214).

If the above reading reflects a remarkable shift in Kysar’s methodology, his previously unpublished paper “The Sacraments and Johannine Ambiguity,” delivered at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, reveals that he is now completely disillusioned with historical-critical models (see ch. 16 in *Voyages*). Johannine scholars have long debated whether John 6:53–58 (“you must eat my flesh and drink my blood”) should be viewed as an allusion to the Eucharist and, possibly, as a redactional addition to the text. Kysar opens his analysis of Raymond Brown’s commentary on the passage by

candidly noting that attempts to distinguish between tradition, source, and redaction “are now tiresome, exhausted, and largely irrelevant” (247). Indeed, “there can be no purely objective and scientific interpretation of Scripture” simply because the whole notion of “the author’s intention” is a fiction, an “appeal to the *interpreter’s intention for the passage*” (248; emphasis original). All this being the case, Kysar must now admit that his previous efforts were vain: John 6 is “hopelessly ambiguous and no amount of research or study will (or even should) finally resolve that ambiguity” (249).

The tone of the immediately preceding quote reveals the overall objective of Kysar’s collection. The title of the book and the division of his career into four hermeneutical journeys is entirely appropriate, inasmuch as it is everywhere clear that *Voyages* is Kysar’s appeal to Caesar on behalf of postmodernity. While some readers—particularly those who remain invested in historical issues and developmental models—will feel uncomfortable with this dimension of the volume, *Voyages* is in fact a microcosm of hermeneutical trends in Johannine Studies over the past thirty-five years. Robert Kysar has always been nothing if not current, and *Voyages* serves as an excellent introduction to recent research in the Johannine literature and, indeed, to the last quarter century of biblical studies. Veteran scholars will find the book to be a useful reference tool for citing Kysar’s essays, which are essential to any history of recent research; students will find *Voyages* to be an accessible introduction to historical, literary, and postmodern approaches to the New Testament.