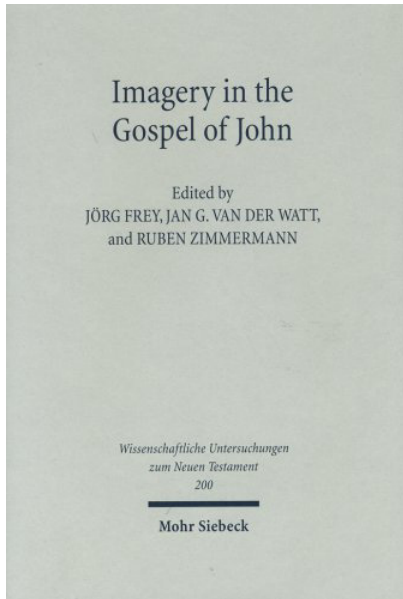


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Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language

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This collection of essays represents the edited papers, in both English and German, of an international conference of Johannine scholars held at Eisenach in Germany in 2005. It consists, for the most part, of various literary issues that have emerged in recent decades on imagery in the Gospel narrative. The relatively new focus on Johannine images opens the world of the Fourth Gospel to new perspectives and challenges, not least of which is the complex question of how they are to be interpreted. Those who have contributed to the collection are major players in literary studies of the Fourth Gospel, whose international status is one of the many strengths of this book. The collection is divided into two sections (although it not always easy to separate these categories): “Terms, Forms, and Methods”; and “Texts, Themes, and Theology.” It has several indices: references, authors quoted, and subjects and key terms.

The opening chapter by Ruben Zimmermann (1–43) gives a brief history of scholarship in the Johannine “search for images” (2–9), beginning from the relative neglect of the topic in the first half of the twentieth century to increased awareness of its importance and ambiguity in the 1970s and the burgeoning of such studies from the 1990s onward. Zimmermann discusses some of the key terms and categories—metaphor, symbol, and narrative imagery—particularly in relation to John’s “cluster technique” (31), the networks

of imagery, and the movement of these images across the whole Johannine narrative. Finally, and most importantly, he discusses the theological meaning of the imagery in relation particularly to John's Christology. He concludes with the quintessential observation that images "can put into words that which cannot be expressed in any other way" (42), emphasizing the substantive rather than decorative nature of Johannine symbolism. This chapter provides an excellent introduction to the collection as a whole.

The ensuing essays pursue different aspects of Johannine imagery. Some, for example, explore the philosophical and culture background of the Gospel. Harold W. Attridge (47–60) argues that the Gospel is a kind of "large cubist image, refracting the cross through other images" (54), a phenomenon that he discerns also in Philo and Plutarch, where images take on a revelatory function. John's technique may not be unique, but his theological focus is, as is apparent in his use of the symbolism of the Good Shepherd, the Son of Man, and the temple. Rainer Hirsch-Luipold (61–102) discusses John's imagery in the context of Middle Platonism, which likewise depicts the divine presence in imagistic terms. John's refinement of this religious milieu brings together Hebrew and Hellenistic ways of thinking, pointing above all to the incarnation that underlines the pictorial images of the Gospel. The imagery is paradoxical, operating at two levels, the perceptible and the transcendent, both of which have their origins in God. Ulrich Busse (279–317) focuses on kingship imagery and royal symbolism throughout the Gospel within the framework of philosophical discussion in the Hellenistic world on the ideal state and the justice to be exercised by the king (or emperor). The royal imagery within this cultural context presents the ideal king as field-marshal, judge, and priest. John is influenced by this picture but also breaks with it, so that his reinterpretation of Hellenistic models of kingship is significantly modified in its universality, its avoidance of military power, and its establishment by God alone.

Most of the essays in the collection, however, deal with individual Johannine images in relation to specific themes or passages. Characteristic of this approach is Jesper Tang Nielsen's discussion of the metaphor of the Lamb of God (217–56). Nielsen interprets this difficult and ambiguous image in relation to the Passover and the Suffering Servant, yoking together two central Johannine concepts: freedom from slavery and freedom from sin. Marianne Meye Thompson (259–77) pursues her recent and very valuable interest in imagery for God in the New Testament and its theological significance, especially in the Fourth Gospel. She concludes that the Johannine symbolism tells the story of God revealed in Jesus, the source of life and salvation, embodying "the various biblical hopes and expectations for the people of the God of Israel" (277). John's imagery for God is thus grounded in the Old Testament and its divine narrative, now polemically refocused in Jesus. Mary L. Coloe (319–32) argues that the imagery of John the Baptist as witness and friend makes sense only in the context of weddings in the ancient world, reinforcing the

nuptial symbolism of the opening chapters. Petrus Maritz and Gilbert Van Belle (333–52) explore imagery for eating and drinking in the Bread of Life discourse, specifically the addition of “drinking” at 6:35, setting it within a sacramental and wisdom context. D. Francois Tolmie (353–67) studies the characterization of Simon Peter and its development throughout the Gospel, especially in regard to the shepherd imagery. Peter begins well, takes a downward plunge at the Last Supper, but is positively portrayed in the resurrection story as the shepherd who will willingly die for Jesus. Taking John 21 to be integral to the Johannine narrative, R. Alan Culpepper, who effectively began the literary and narrative study of John’s Gospel in his important monograph in 1983 (*Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. A Study in Literary Design* [Philadelphia: Fortress], examines ecclesial imagery in John 21:1–14 (369–402). He sets out the different genres in which this story has been understood and explores the ecclesial nature of the imagery, arguing that it is entirely consistent with other images in the Fourth Gospel. Culpepper discerns church symbolism in the fishing imagery, the fire, the fish, the meal, and the untorn net, the overall narrative pointing to the unity of the church and the centrality of the Eucharist.

A more thematic approach is taken in several articles. For example, Uta Poplutz (103–20) discusses “proverb” and “parable” in John, with particular attention to the “picture speeches” of John 10:1–18 and 15:1–8. Alongside the revelation is the disciples’ misunderstanding, demonstrating that full understanding for the disciples is possible only after Easter. Silke Petersen (121–38) explores those “I am” sayings that have predicates, treating them as metaphors and using the particular example of John 8:12: “I am the light of the world.” The light metaphor is “christologized” and is in this sense demythologized by being bound to the figure of Jesus. Jean Zumstein (139–56) examines the imagery of the vine and the branches in John 15:1–17, showing how the Johannine commentary is embedded within the “metaphorical network” of the imagery (141) and interprets it as it develops. Craig R. Koester, whose expertise is in Johannine symbolism, outlines the shape of John’s anthropology (403–20): according to the Evangelist, to be human means, on the one hand, to be made for life with God and yet, on the other hand, to be alienated from God through the forces of sin and death. There is thus “an abiding tension in the human condition, in which people are both estranged from and attracted to God” (416). Using images of thirst, hunger, and darkness, Koester shows how God alone can cross the divide in the lives of the characters in the Fourth Gospel. Finally, Jan G. Van der Watt (421–48) explores how imagery and ethics work together in the Johannine world, on the basis of service, right behavior, relationship and obedience. Van der Watt is concerned to understand the imagery in its “sociocultural ecology” (423) and tends to emphasize message/content over form. For him, the rhetorical function of the Johannine imagery, which is paramount, is geared toward moral transformation in the lives of believers.

Two other essays move in a rather different direction. Folker Siegert (195–215) is concerned not so much with literary questions (in the contemporary sense) as the layering of composition in the creation of the Gospel. He uses the image of the overpainted picture being restored in order to locate the original. The first level is pre-Johannine, non-Synoptic traditions that have had subsequent contact with Synoptic traditions and then been overwritten and rearranged by the Fourth Evangelist. Paul N. Anderson's article (157–94) questions the limits of symbolism and provides something of a corrective to the imagistic approach in general. Not everything, he argues, should be interpreted symbolically, as those who take a negative view of John's historicity tend to imply. Anderson sees what he calls an "interfluentiality" (173) between the Johannine and Synoptic traditions, giving greater stress to the originality of John's traditions. Anderson's argument is perhaps overstated—and somewhat skeptical when it comes to discerning symbolism—but it is a salutary reminder to those who revel in John's rich symbolism that not everything in the Johannine world need be symbolic.

This is, on the whole, a very fine collection of essays. Quite apart from important points made about individual images in the Gospel—and quite apart from whether or not one agrees with the conclusions drawn—the book itself reinforces the fact that images are not decorative additions but part of the very core of the Johannine text. They are not dispensable nor able to be discarded in favor of abstract discourse but are part of the fundamentally symbolic and narratological nature of the Gospel. Johannine commentary is thus, by definition, a paraphrasing of images and symbols that continually resist definition and can never be adequately expressed outside poetic discourse. The bottom line is that to understand John aright means taking seriously his symbolic and narrative structures and his careful use of imagery. Hopefully this study will encourage further work on the imagistic nature of this most symbolic Gospel, opening new avenues for a wider understanding of the theological message of the Fourth Gospel.