This book is a revision of the author’s doctoral dissertation written at Asbury Theological Seminary. Akala’s fundamental argument is that the Fourth Evangelist’s presentation of the intimate relationship between Jesus as the Son of God the Father is the core of “the symbolic network of the Gospel of John” (xv). She goes on to assert that this symbolic portrayal of what she coins “the Son–Father relationship (SFR)” is so central that it shapes the entire narrative and literary style, structure, and cohesion of the Gospel. Acknowledging the evangelist’s symbolic presentation of Jesus the Son of God as his primary organizing principle is crucial to understanding how he accomplishes his stated purpose in 20:30–31. To argue this proposal, she structures the book in two parts. In the first part, chapters 1–5 entitled “Symbol and Narrative,” Akala develops a theory of Johannine symbolism and lays out the methodological framework for the resulting study. The second part, chapters 6–10 and identified as “John’s Christological Symbology,” applies this theory to the prologue (John 1:1–18) and Jesus’s prayer (John 17:1–26) before drawing the conclusions and reflecting upon the theological significance of the SFR for the Gospel of John.

Chapter 1 focuses on “John’s Figurative World” and provides both a review of studies of symbolism and the Gospel of John as well as the key questions that serve as the impetus
for the present study. Akala reviews the difficulty of defining the term “symbol” and teasing out the distinction between symbols and metaphors. Upon a review of several key symbol studies, she determines that the “need exists to explore the possibility of a factor (or factors) that unite the diverse spectrum of symbols in the Gospel and explain how they operate as an organized whole.” She postulates that “Jesus the Son, who identifies himself primarily through his relationship with God the Father, is the center of John’s symbolic world” (16, emphasis original). Therefore, the SFR is the crux of John’s united symbolic network. From this point, Akala reviews the work of van der Watt (on metaphor) and Zimmerman (on imagery) as jumping-off points for her own study of the Gospel’s “figurative network.” After defining her terms, including symbol, symbology, and several other cognates, she concludes that the Prologue and the Prayer (capitalization hers) “encapsulate the major symbolic clusters that portray the SFR in the Johannine narrative” (29).

Chapter 2 further reviews “Theories of Symbol” so that in chapter 3 Akala can put forth her own “Theory of Johannine Symbolism.” After a brief review of the history of the symbol as a literary device, she reviews the theories of Urban and Ricoeur. Upon further discussion, Akala asserts the need for a specific theory of Johannine symbolism and that the work of Urban and Ricoeur will serve as the springboard for her development of that theory. Chapter 3 begins with a repetition of Akala’s working definitions of symbol, symbology, and symbolic language. She can then present her theory of Johannine symbolism in four principles (representation, assimilation, association, and transcendence), each with subprinciples. This theory, she suggests, offers “insight into the nature, function, and pattern of Johannine symbols” and can therefore provide a “platform for examining the link between the SFR and symbolism” (77).

Chapter 4 studies “Narrative and Symbol in the Gospel of John” through the lens of the literary theory of narrative. Akala ultimately seeks to answer the question of whether the Gospel’s narrative structure facilitates its symbolism and vice versa. She studies the nature of narrative and focuses on the four elements key to her study of plot, character, time, and rhetoric. After a general overview in which she concludes that “authors can create symbolic meaning through these four narrative elements” (89), Akala explores the meaning produced in the Johannine narrative in terms of the SFR. The resulting analysis provides the basis for “the development of a methodological framework for charting John’s Christological Symbolography” (102).

Chapter 5 lays out this “Methodology” for part 2, in which Akala explores the SFR through the Prologue and the Prayer. She begins by explaining the semantic field of reference for the SFR. The range covers the “lexical paring of Son and Father in the narrative” in terms of names and/or titles as they intersect with actions and/or positions (105). The resulting
semantic analysis provides the data for a character analysis. As the Son–Father characterization develops, the symbolic network expands to encompass five dimensions: equality/unity, sending/coming of the Son, life-giving authority, love, and glorification/revelation. This development begins in the Prologue and reaches its narrative peak in the Prayer. The resulting methodological steps for the remainder of the study are delineated as (1) a theoretical analysis of the Prologue, (2) a narrative analysis of the Prologue, (3) a narrative analysis of the Prayer, (4) a synthesis of “John’s Christological Symbology,” and (5) the theological conclusions of the study.

Part 2 of the study commences with two chapters on the Prologue. Chapter 6 provides a “Theoretical Analysis,” while chapter 7 gives a “Narrative Analysis.” Akala begins by asserting that, when the theory she has developed is applied to the Prologue, it reveals “a striking literary design” whereby Johannine symbolism indirectly and gradually introduces the two main characters (127, emphasis original). She proceeds to analyze the Prologue along the principles of representation, assimilation, association, and transcendence to show how it facilitates symbolic meaning. She then turns to a narrative analysis along the lines of plot, semantics, character, and time to show how the Prologue simultaneously introduces “the SFR and Johannine symbolism” (146).

In chapter 8 Akala turns her attention to the Prayer and its relationship to the Prologue. She begins with a semantic analysis of John 17 along the field of reference she has established for the SFR, then turns to a character analysis of the Son and the Father in terms of the five dimensions of the symbolic network she introduced in chapter 5. She concludes by correlating the SFR in the Prologue and the Prayer and discussing the strategic role the two passages play in the Gospel’s symbolic presentation.

Chapter 9 brings together “John’s Christological Symbology,” while chapter 10 concludes the study by presenting its “Theological Implications.” Since Akala’s claim is that “John’s Christological Symbology is the overarching network of symbolism in the Fourth Gospel” (193), she now works through the Gospel in seventeen sequences to offer a “synopsis and symbograph” of the SFR in each. She notes that the symbology uses the Prologue to preview the narrative; the SFR then develops in the ensuing plot from different angles in each sequence and peaks at the Prayer. Thereafter, in the final chapter Akala puts forth the theological implications of the symbolic presentation of the SFR. She calls for a theocentric reading of the Gospel that considers (1) subordination of the Son to the Father (and thereby humans to God), (2) gender implications of Son–Father relationship, and (3) the SFR as a model of discipleship for believers. Akala concludes her study by claiming that the “symbolically portrayed SFR not only gives insight into the Son’s transcendent-immanent relationship with the Father, it also draws believers into that divine relationship, and in doing so, fulfills the purpose of the Fourth Gospel” (223).
Akala’s contribution to the study of Johannine symbolism has much to commend it. She offers an intricate analysis of the symbolism of the intersection of Christology and theology. Nonetheless, I have two overarching concerns with the work; one is structural and the other is methodological. The monograph’s overall structure makes great sense: Akala lays the groundwork, then applies it to content. The problem is much more basic than that. The material is so repetitious as to be off-putting. She takes up somewhat lengthy literature reviews to make a simple point, defines terms several times, and seems to put forth a great deal of effort to make simple (although incisive) points. The entire first part could have been streamlined into two or maybe three chapters at most. By the time we get to part 2 we have been told so many times in so many ways the profound insights to be gained, expectations are unnecessarily high. In terms of method, Akala asserts early on in part 1 the importance of narrative structure for interpretation, yet when she finally takes on the Prologue and the Prayer, she neither establishes their structure nor does she discuss how that impacts the SFR. She simply adopts a structure and goes with it. This is especially influential in any study of the Prologue, and the argument suffers for its lack. Likewise, in chapter 9, where the focus is on “seventeen sequences” of the SFR across the Gospel, no mention is made as to how these sequences were determined or what difference this might make. These lacunae open up other questions about the effect of her study, such as her claim of the SFR peaking at the Prayer and declining thereafter. Why is there a decline across the passion narrative? An argument could be made that John 18–19 offers a key moment of Son–Father symbolism. I also have a general concern about using such pop terms as “symbology” and other attempts to coin verbiage, but this is not a weighty criticism.

Despite these concerns, Akala has made a solid contribution to Johannine studies, particularly in terms of symbolism and the intersection of Christology and theology. Her detailed analyses of symbolic language and symbol clusters across the Gospel of John will be great resources for Johannine scholars. Indeed, even her deft distillation of complex issues surrounding the literature on symbolism and its impact is very helpful. Her assessment of the Son–Father relationship adroitly homes in on the core issues of the Gospel and its theological significance. Further, the theological implications she identifies speak to key areas of further research and analysis. I look forward to seeing future work from this scholar as she streamlines her focus and utilizes her skills in other areas of Johannine symbolism, Christology, and beyond.