

Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*. Second Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.

The Fourth Gospel is filled with symbolic actions and images. The very use by the Fourth Evangelist of the word “signs” is a clear indication of the importance that symbolism plays in the gospel. Koester thus addresses a critical issue in the Fourth Gospel. The continued relevance of this topic seems to warrant a second edition of Koester’s work, which is an expanded and reworked version of his earlier book.

For Koester, a symbol is a term, action, or a person that in some way points to a transcendent meaning. Most importantly this transcendent meaning should help the reader span the chasm between God and the human situation, that is the distance between that which is “from above” and that which is “from below.” Symbolic actions, often called signs by the evangelist, are pregnant with a meaning that is greater than the simple actions themselves. Similarly key terms in John, like light or water, also point to concepts that are deeper and polyvalent than the simple words might suggest. Koester helpfully tries to distinguish between “core” symbols, which are most important for the overall symbolic thrust of the gospel, and supporting symbols. For Koester, the “core” symbols are the key metaphors or images that explain Jesus’ relationship with God and with the disciples and these core symbols are often supplemented with other supporting symbols. While I think this limitation of core symbols tends to diminish the importance of the symbolic actions (i.e. not metaphors or images), which the evangelist himself has called signs and singled out for attention, still Koester helpfully tries to establish some categories and prioritization of symbols in the gospel.

Following an opening chapter that attempts to clarify and classify the basic concept of symbols in John, Koester deals with representative characters, symbolic actions, and then in turn focuses on a series of key metaphors that are highly significant for the overall message of John: light and darkness, water, and the crucifixion. In two chapters of synthesis, Koester then brings these symbols into a consideration of how they work within and engender the community of faith, and how these symbols communicate a knowledge of God. A final appendix addresses some additional areas of symbolism that are found in the gospel: sacramental symbolism, geographical symbolism, and numerical symbolism.

In the main chapters, Koester engages in a careful engagement with the Johannine text. At the very least this book is useful for a host of insights into the gospel. But Koester does more than simply provide another commentary on various segments of the gospel; he continually frames the discussion in a fairly comprehensive way based on the polyvalence of the actions and dialogues that make up the gospel story.

In dealing with representative characters, Koester rightfully begins with the person of Jesus and how he is portrayed in the gospel. Here Koester emphasizes the way Jesus is portrayed in terms that resonate with Jewish ideas: prophet, messiah, Son of God. At the same time, however, Jesus’ character is developed in a more universal tone that suggests a meaning greater than that understood within the particular expression of Judaism.

Other characters, and groups of characters, include Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the disciples, and even the crowds. Interestingly, the key character group in the gospel, “the Jews” is not treated as such, perhaps because of the notorious difficulty of defining who the evangelist is portraying: is a people defined in terms of religion, a geographical reference, the leaders, or a literary composite figure that is deliberately vague?

The symbolic actions that Koester addresses are the primary “signs” that have been the staple of most treatments of John’s gospel. An example might be Koester’s treatment of the temple incident, noting correctly that the primary meaning of this symbolic action in the Fourth Gospel must be the anticipation of an order of worship and community life that would focus on the relationship with Jesus. Interestingly, much of Koester’s discussion about the symbolic nature of the various actions or signs actually focuses on the discourses connected to the actions. Thus the signs themselves become more the entry point for more extensive “symbolic” discussions. But this is a reflection of the gospel itself, where the signs themselves must be interpreted and often give rise to controversy and discourse between Jesus and opponents or questioners. Thus much of the symbolic content of the “symbolic actions” is actually found in the nature of dialogue and misunderstanding that arises from different perceptions of the signs and, as a result, of Jesus.

The real strength of Koester’s book, though, is found in the three chapters that deal with some of the “core” symbols in the gospel, those that have a pervasive and recurring presence in the gospel narrative. These symbols are: Light and Darkness, Water, and Crucifixion. Koester’s in-depth treatment of these arch-symbols allows him to read the gospel text both synthetically, seeing interconnections between narrative units, and with a strong theological understanding. For instance, Koester notes that the baptism imagery in the Fourth Gospel, with its linkage of water to the Holy Spirit, is then further developed or at least alluded to in the Nicodemus dialogue, references to Jesus as the source of Living Water, and finally to the stream of blood and water that streams for Jesus’ side on the cross. Each instance of water reinforces, and yet allows for a new dimension to accrue, so that water becomes a polyvalent symbol that nonetheless refers to the life-giving quality of Jesus’ life and death.

Final chapters on Symbol and Community and Symbol and the Knowledge of God allow Koester to reinforce some of the themes he develops earlier in the book. In Symbol and Community, Koester notes that the various symbols, while primarily focusing on Jesus, also deal with how Jesus’ followers should conduct their lives as a consequence. Similarly, the final chapter, new in the second edition, allows Koester to address a bit more explicitly the theological nature of the symbols. If symbols address the transcendent, and this would ultimately be God, what do they say about the nature of God? Though this chapter is brief, perhaps overly brief, it at least draws some conclusions about what Jesus’ life and actions say about God.

Koester operates throughout with a perspective of the origination of the Fourth Gospel that is largely shaped by J. Louis Martyn and Raymond Brown: that the gospel arose within and for a community of believers, probably in successive stages. This community

emphasis certainly shapes much of his perspective, although Koester notes that the rhetoric of the gospel actually imagines readers from a broad perspective. While certain images, indeed most, are rooted in Jewish practices and narrative history (as for instance the central role Tabernacles celebration plays in chapters 7-9), nonetheless the gospel also has a perspective directed to others. From my perspective, I wondered whether the heavy emphasis on the Johannine Community was warranted. Chapter 7, Symbol and Community, assumes the Johannine Community as the locus for much of the narrative's emphasis. Yet notwithstanding much of Koester's analysis, couldn't a general readership of potential believers, and thus potential followers, explain as well many or most of the community-oriented dialogue of Jesus? For instance, Jesus' emphasis on unity is understood by Koester to be a reflection of disunity within the church at the time the gospel was written. And yet, could it not just as well be an extension and reflection of the kind of tensions between Jesus and "the Jews" that might suggest a universal need for unity? Perhaps Koester's initial willingness to consider a broad intended readership could have been profitably expanded.

One issue with which I struggled in this book is the use of representative characters as symbols. Leaving aside the issue that most of the characters do not necessarily point to some transcendent meaning, for me the bigger issue is whether characters of a narrative are best described under the rubric of symbols. The use of this term would suggest a certain objective nature to the characters – categorizing them as symbols suggests that the characters stand for something. But characters in plotted narratives often, instead, present various points of view from which to interpret the story. Granted, many characters portray deficient perspectives or reactions to the hero of the story. But their purpose in John would seem to be more one of involving the reader to see various ways of seeing and reacting to Jesus, not representing some objective concept. All this is to say that perhaps narrative criticism might offer a significantly different way of understanding the characters in the story than as symbols.

One area that I would have liked explored is the symbolic nature of the narrative plot itself. Koester deals very well with the units of the gospel: characters, signs and their related discourse. But there is in the Fourth Gospel a large plot that carries the whole story. It is the increasing opposition on the part of "the Jews" to the person of Jesus. Each new sign or discourse seems to drive the story toward a new and increased level of opposition, which is ultimately completed in the prosecution and execution of Jesus. Is this not master plot itself symbolic?

Koester's second edition of *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* is very easy to read and will be useful for a broad range of readers. From the scholar to the seminary student, all will find much to gain from reading this book. It should be on the bookshelf of every student of the Gospel of John.

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