



The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198739982.001.0001>

Published: 2018

Online ISBN: 9780191802881

Print ISBN: 9780198739982

CHAPTER

16 Symbolism and 'Signs' in the Fourth Gospel

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198739982.013.15> Pages 259–273

Published: 10 September 2018

Abstract

This chapter explores the symbolism of the Fourth Gospel. It demonstrates that religious symbol is substantial rather than decorative, containing cognitive meaning as well as affective impact. The metaphors of the gospel are linguistic forms of symbolism, apparent in the seven 'I am' sayings of the Gospel and in the use of the five senses as metaphors of faith. Johannine symbolism is inextricably linked to the narrative out of which it emerges. John's symbols are not of equal value, some playing a core role in the narrative. The 'signs' or miracles of the Gospel are also important, functioning as Johannine symbols in revealing the divine glory in Jesus and summoning the reader to faith. The cross is the greatest of the Johannine 'signs'. Theologically, the incarnation lies at the basis of John's symbolism: the conviction that divine glory is apprehended in and through the flesh.

Keywords: cross, faith, flesh, glory, incarnation, metaphor, 'sign', symbolism

Subject: Religious Studies, Religion

Series: Oxford Handbooks

Collection: Oxford Handbooks Online

Introduction

The Gospel of John is replete with symbols and is, indeed, the most symbolic of all the Gospels. Because John's worldview is essentially a symbolic one, it is necessary to appreciate the symbolism in order to understand the Gospel as a whole. Significant scholarly work has been done in the area of symbolism, as part of wider explorations into John's literary techniques (Culpepper 1983; Frey, van der Watt et al. 2006; Thatcher and Moore 2008). These studies have shown that the symbols of the Gospel are tied in the closest possible way to the narrative to which they belong, not as decorations but to serve a more basic function (Lee 1994). Far from being peripheral, Johannine symbolism has a crucial role in articulating the Gospel's theological purpose and meaning: through its images and metaphors, narrative structures, and miracles ('signs').

In general terms, symbolism is a mode of communication that deals in representation, in art, music, drama, film, and dreams, as well as literary compositions. Such symbols may—and often do—possess a universal appeal that crosses cultures and other divides, but their location within specific communities and traditions is equally important in defining them. Because they appeal to the imagination and the mind, symbols require both an intuitive and an intellectual grasp, speaking equally to the affective and the cognitive. They are by nature multivalent: that is, they are capable of more than one meaning that cannot easily be captured. In literary works, symbols appear as words on a page that appeal to the imagination of the reader to conjure up a corresponding picture in the mind.

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The symbolism found in a religious text such as the Gospel of John is particularly concerned to convey a sense of transcendence, using figurative language drawn from nature and human experience (Tillich 1962: 301–3). These symbols involve truth claims and convey a sense of divine mystery that has the capacity to make sense of human experience. Religious symbols describe a realm that is, by definition, indescribable, beyond the capacity of everyday language to articulate. They seek to make theological connections between the heavenly and the created worlds, so that the one gives meaning to the other: the heavenly embracing the earthly. Because symbolism has the capacity to make connections between divine and human, Rahner argues that all theology is by definition a theology of symbol (1973: 244–5). This perspective captures well the Johannine symbolic worldview.

Symbolism, Image, and Metaphor

In the Gospel of John, the symbolism arises from specific images that communicate theological meaning. The meaning emerges from the influence of the evangelist's background, culture, and context, in interaction with Jewish traditions, the Greco–Roman world, the early church, and the Synoptic Gospels (Anderson 2007). Many of the images in the Fourth Gospel derive from common human experience (bread, water, wine, light, farming, viticulture), while others emerge from the religious experience of the Old Testament and Judaism (Temple, feasts, Law). In each case they take on symbolic value (Lee 2016). Other images are original and unexpected, counter-intuitive in the symbolic quality given them; the cross is perhaps the best example. These Johannine symbols are not separate but closely interconnected like a multi-coloured cloth or tapestry. Their interactions are intuitive rather than logical, and they weave in and out of the Johannine narrative with repetitions, echoes, and ambiguities, in a way that defies linear logic. Zimmermann describes John's imagery as a 'tangled thicket', a metaphor that indicates the complexity and density of the symbolism within the Gospel (2006: 1).

John's symbolism displays itself frequently through metaphor, which is the linguistic form of symbol. A metaphor, in other words, is a distinct image located within the structure of a sentence; it is a 'figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another' (Soskice 1987: 15). In this sense, metaphors have cognitive content as well as intuitive power, engaging and enlarging the reader's understanding as well as the imagination. A number of different but related metaphors can even combine to form a 'metaphorical field'; van der Watt, for example, explores the metaphor of believers belonging to 'the family of the King' as one such metaphorical field (2000).

As an aspect of symbol, metaphor is created by the bringing together of two different elements to create new meaning, the object itself and the image (Ricoeur 1977: 80–1). For example, in the metaphorical statement, 'I am the bread of life' (6:35), which is the first of the seven metaphorical 'I am' sayings of the Gospel, the Johannine Jesus is the object of the metaphor while 'bread' is the image. The metaphor in this sense possesses both an 'is not' and an 'is' dimension, and the reader needs to acknowledge the first before moving onto the second: Jesus *is not* literally bread but *is* bread in a representative sense. Yet, in order to

p. 261 grasp the metaphor, the reader needs to retain some grasp on the ↳ literal meaning of bread to perceive that Jesus gives spiritual nourishment to believers, just as bread gives nourishment to the body.

This dynamic has been called ‘stereoscopic vision’: that is, the ability to see at the same time both the image and the figurative sense (Ricoeur 1977: 247–56).¹ Thus the implied reader has the capacity to picture ‘Jesus’ and ‘bread’ at the same time, allowing the two pictures to converge. The convergence creates new meaning, a new and vivid understanding of Jesus. The same process is required to grasp the other ‘I am’ sayings of the Gospel (Ball 1996). Here too the implied reader allows the specific image to converge simultaneously with the object, Jesus. The metaphorical focus is on the saving significance of a relationship with the Johannine Jesus. Thus Jesus is metaphorically depicted as the light illuminating the darkness and struggles of believers’ lives (8:12 and 9:5); as the gate leading to pasture and security for the community of faith (10:7); as the protective and life-giving shepherd for this community and for others (10:11, 14); as the sap-bearing vine enabling growth and fecundity in love (15:1, 5); and as the only pathway to God (14:6). In each case, the reader with stereoscopic vision sees clearly both the basic image and its transferral to Jesus, creating a new apprehension of Jesus’ identity and role for believers.

In addition to the ‘I am’ sayings, another feature of Johannine symbolism is the use of images drawn from the senses (Lee 2010a). The senses are overt in the metaphorical structure of the Gospel, and they engage the reader at a physical level. In this case, they act as metaphors to address the religious experience of the reader. The most important are the senses of seeing and hearing, which are frequent Johannine metaphors for believing and the life of faith. To see and hear in the symbolic sense is to apprehend Jesus with the eyes and ears of faith: to recognize and to heed. Characters may see Jesus with physical eyes and ears but only those with faith truly see and hear him, since to see him, in the Gospel, means to encounter the glory of God (12:45; 17:24) and also to heed and obey his word, even on the other side of death (5:25, 28; 10:3, 27; 11:43–44).

Images of taste and touch are also used as metaphors in the Johannine narrative. Taste is present in the symbolic language of eating and drinking, in the sharing of food and the offer of ‘living water’ (6:31–58; 4:10–14; 7:37–39). Jesus nourishes believers with his life (6:51) and his physical touch gives healing (9:6–7). The anointing at Bethany and the Footwashing are further examples (12:3; 13:4–5), pointing metaphorically to cleansing and union. Even the sense of smell is present metaphorically in the Gospel narrative, in the stench of the dead Lazarus (11:39), in the odour of the nard filling the house (12:3b), and in the overpowering smell of a hundredweight of spices at the tomb (20:39). In each case, the metaphors speak of a new life in and beyond death (Lee 1994: 222; O’Day 1998: 299).

p. 262 In addition, imagery of place and movement is used metaphorically in the Gospel narrative. Certain verbs convey a figurative sense of discipleship (Lee 2010b: 133–66), ↳ located in images of abiding (1:38–39, 6:56, 15:4–10) and following (1:43; 12:26; 13:36–37; 21:19–22). It is visible in nouns that evoke a sense of place, destiny, and home—rooms, the path, the way, the door—as well vertical images of ‘above’ and ‘below’. Metaphors of growth are also part of this sense of movement, in the fields ripe for harvest (4:35–38) and the clustering grapes on the vine (15:5). Koester, for example, speaks of four ‘word pictures’ that John uses to depict the restful yet dynamic life of faith: walking in the light, seed falling into the earth, washing one another’s feet, and abiding in the vine (2008: 188–96).

Other metaphors, grounded in sensory experience, are apparent in the arena of human relationships: birth as a metaphor of new life (1:12–13; 3:3–8), the relationship between brothers and sisters signifying the deep bonds of connection within the household of faith (19:20:17), the profound link between parent and child (1:14–18; 5:18–23; 14:8–13; 17:1–5, 25–26; 19:25–27), the intimacy among friends (15:13–15). These become metaphors of affiliation and society in the community of faith. Here too traditional kinship imagery is employed to depict the connection between Jesus and disciples (van der Watt 2000). Other, more public, relationships are employed metaphorically, often in a deconstructive sense that re-shapes basic power

relationships: the affinity between monarch and citizens (1:49; 6:1–15; 10:11–15; 12:13–15; 18:37; 19:19–20), master and servants (15:12–17, 20; 20:16), teacher and students (1:38–39; 13:12–16).

Symbolism and Narrative

In the Gospel, the symbolism is closely tied to the narrative and operates on two levels. The first is the literal level of the image, while the second level is the symbolic level which the evangelist entices the reader to grasp. In some narratives, the main character grasps the symbolism and achieves a distinct level of faith and understanding. For example, the Samaritan woman moves through initial misunderstanding and cynicism to a deep level of faith and understanding through her conversation with Jesus—in the process, bringing an entire village to Jesus (4:1–42). The key image, around which the narrative turns, is that of the water of the well which takes on symbolic value, pointing to the gift of the Spirit which Jesus bestows (7:37–39). In other narratives, the symbolism is opaque and the character remains frozen, unable to choose between belief and unbelief. Nicodemus, for example, fades from the narrative, since (at this stage in the Gospel) he is unable to grasp the symbolism of birth which Jesus presents to him (3:1–21). In still other narratives, the symbolism is misunderstood by the main character or group, leading to rejection. The long feeding narrative, for example, depicts an initial burgeoning of faith, around the symbolism of bread, but ends up with the crowd's defiant rejection of Jesus as the 'Bread of life' (6:1–71).

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In most examples, this movement to and from faith occurs in direct dialogue with Jesus. The movement from misunderstanding to understanding takes place in a number of narrative stages, generally involving misunderstanding on the part of the main character (or group) and clarification on the part of Jesus (Lee 1994). The debate moves in one direction or another as Jesus unfolds the meaning through the narrative. A notable exception is the story of the man born blind, whose rise to faith occurs mostly in Jesus' absence and under interrogation by increasingly hostile authorities. In this painful process, the man's whole life, as well as his body, becomes 'illuminated' by Jesus until he finally encounters him and sees him with the eyes of faith (9:1–41). The stages in this and other narratives represent the movement, in literary terms, from the literal to the symbolic meaning which, for John, signifies the movement from unbelief or ignorance to faith.

Many of these Johannine characters have their own, complex characterization, a feature of John's Gospel that has led to considerable investigation (Skinner 2013; Hunt et al. 2013; Bennema 2014).² The characters of the Fourth Gospel may also serve a representative function in relation to the Johannine narrative and its key themes. In this sense, the characters take on a symbolic role in addition to the specific shape and form of their characterization. To take one example, Martha and Mary of Bethany are portrayed as distinct characters in the central Johannine narrative of Jesus raising their brother, Lazarus, to life (11:1–12:11): the older sister an outgoing personality of initiation and courage, and the younger woman portrayed as quiet, intense, and introspective. At the same time, each woman plays a symbolic role in the Gospel, acclaiming the identity and destiny of Jesus on behalf of the believing community in both word (Martha) and deed (Mary). They symbolize the authentic response of faith.

John's symbolic worldview thus interacts with the narrative and its characters who shape its form, broaden its content, and deepen its meaning. The symbolism is not easily extracted from its narrative context and from the characters of the Gospel and the roles they play. Together they create a sense of dynamic movement and engagement, in which the implied reader is invited to participate. To understand the symbolism requires the narrative which forms it and is in turn formed by it. In the end, although some of the narratives of the Gospel display most markedly this interdependence of symbol and narrative, John's entire Gospel from beginning to end can be deemed, in the deepest sense, a 'symbolic narrative'.

Core Johannine Symbols

p. 264 It is important to note that not all symbols have equal weight in the Gospel of John. Culpepper, whose pioneering work on the literary qualities of the Gospel is unparalleled, draws a careful distinction between different types of images (1983: 189–97; van der Watt 2000: 101). Some symbols have core status within the Gospel, he argues, while others have only peripheral significance. The core symbols expand throughout the narrative and take on added meanings. Koester also distinguishes between ‘core’ and ‘supporting’ images in the Johannine narrative, using the example of the water which becomes wine at the wedding at Cana as opposed to the stone jars in which it is contained: the one a core Johannine symbol, the other a supporting symbol that does not appear elsewhere in the Gospel (2003: 3–15).

The two main personal symbols of the Gospel are that of Father and Son (Akala 2014: 127–213), and flesh and glory (Lee 2002: 29–64). Both are christological, unfolding Jesus’ complex identity, the unique relationship he shares with God, and his self-revelation in the incarnation. The Father–Son symbolism arises from the language of the prologue which is initially somewhat abstract and bewildering (Lee 2010c: 713). Here ‘word’ and ‘God’ exist in a complex web of identity and difference in which the Word is described as being both ‘with God’ and also ‘God’ (1:1–2). The inter-relationship becomes comprehensible only in the symbol of Father and Son (1:14) where it becomes clear that the Son is in communion with the Father while also sharing the divine nature. The symbol is further clarified in the picture of a son working as an apprentice in his father’s workshop (Dodd 1968: 30–40), in one of the clearest statements of the authority and life donated from Father to Son (5:19–30). The symbolism also has an additional function in that it expands to include the community of believers: they regain their status as ‘children of God’ through relationship and identification with the Son, entering into his filiation, his relationship with God as Father (17:20–24; 20:17). This is the symbolic sense in which divine glory is shared by the community of faith (17:22).

The second core personal symbol is that of flesh and glory which expresses John’s understanding of the incarnation: the Word revealed in and through material flesh (Schnelle 2009: 599–676). Flesh becomes the symbol of God’s radiant, life-giving presence. The two are oppositional by nature: spiritual and material, divine and human, heaven and earth. But the latter become symbolic of the former, conveying celestial reality in and through the terrestrial, portraying the divine word, revealed in the Old Testament (in creation, Torah, prophets, and wisdom), now crossing the gulf between Creator and creation. Within the Prologue there is a careful distinction drawn between the flesh which is ineffective and the flesh which is effective, mending the tear in creation and revealing divine glory (Bauckham 2015: 43–62). The first reference is to flesh that cannot bring about new birth: ‘who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God’ (1:13). The second reference to flesh is the incarnation: what mortal flesh cannot achieve, the creative power of the enfleshed Word can (1:14), a statement that is ‘the key to the twenty-one chapters that follow’ (Hengel 2008: 268). A similar contrast is drawn in the dialogue on the bread of life, where Jesus compares the two different kinds of flesh. Jesus’ flesh and blood are, on the one hand, necessary — ‘unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (6:53)—yet flesh, on the other hand, is of no avail compared to the Spirit: ‘It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless’ (6:63). Of itself, flesh cannot cross the abyss or mend the broken links that connect Creator to creation; only the flesh of the Son is capable of this role.

p. 265 In addition to these personal symbols, two of the core impersonal symbols throughout the Gospel also emerge from the Prologue: light and witness. Light is the primary symbol of life, recalling the first account of creation where light is created on the first day (Gen. 1:3) before the sun and moon (Gen. 1:14–19), and revealing the close link between creation and the Johannine Prologue (Endo 2002: 182–248; Coloe 2011). Light will become a major symbol throughout the Fourth Gospel. The imagery takes on symbolic meaning for the evangelist almost at once, with darkness symbolizing unbelief, rejection, and death, and standing

over against the life and goodness of God and God's creation. Later in the Gospel, darkness and light will connect to the symbolic opposition of blindness and sight (9:1–6, 39–41). More fundamental for John is that light signifies the Word himself (1:9), a major christological symbol that emerges again in the Gospel narrative (8:12; 9:3).

The witness theme in the Fourth Gospel is also a dominant metaphorical construct (Lincoln 2000: 21–35, 57–138). John the Baptist is the first such witness (1:7, 15, 19) and the Beloved Disciple is the last (19:35–21:24), the two standing in parallel at the beginning and end of the Gospel (Lee 2013: 1–17). Although there is no literal trial until the end of the Gospel in the Passion Narrative, the court-room symbolism emerges throughout the preceding narrative. John reveals that the 'world' puts Jesus on 'trial' during his ministry, a trial that becomes actual in the confrontation with Pilate (18:28–19:16a), and continues in the post-Easter experience of the disciples (15:18–16:4a). At a deeper level it is really God who puts the world on trial, overturning the hostile world's attempts to deny the light of truth. The courtroom imagery is also linked to the symbolism of light: Jesus as Light of the world is also its judge, shining the light of truth onto the injustice and untruthfulness of the world, uncovering its evil and throwing its darkness into relief (3:19–21). In the end, for John, the revelation embodied in the Light of the world displays the truth about God and about the unbelieving world which lies under the power of 'the ruler of this world' (12:31; 14:30; 16:11).³ In this realm, the authentic witness testifies to the truth, and truth lies at the heart of the witness symbolism.

Symbolism and Signs

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Strange as it may seem, the miracles also act as symbols in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel (Lee 1994). John calls these miracles 'signs' but does so in a distinctive sense. In the general understanding, we distinguish between signs and symbols. Whereas a sign is only a signpost pointing us in the right direction, a symbol does more than that: it is both the signpost and the vehicle that takes us there. Signs, in common parlance, do not have the capacity to communicate a transcendent reality as symbols can (Schneiders 1999: 65–9). In the Johannine sense the miracles are much closer to symbols and function in a similar way. This is an important distinction in the discussion which follows.

The 'signs' (*sēmeia*) of the Fourth Gospel are evident in the miracles stories which form the backbone of Jesus' public ministry. John has fewer but longer miracles than the Synoptic Gospels and they include nature episodes (2:1–11; 6:1–13; 16–21; 21:1–14), healings of the sick and disabled (4:45–54; 5:1–9; 9:1–7), and raising of the dead (11:1–44). These Johannine miracles are remarkably dramatic in scope, particularly compared with the Synoptic miracles (Lee 2015): over 150 gallons of water turned into wine at a wedding (2:6); someone disabled for 38 years made whole (5:5), or healed after being born blind (9:1–3), or raised after being dead for four days (11:17); loaves made from the poorest quality bread (barley) to feed 5,000 people, with twelve baskets of leftovers; and a spectacular number of fish caught in a net after a night of fruitless toil (21:11). Apart from one accusation of Jesus being demon-possessed (John 8:48), John's narrative includes no exorcisms. The Johannine 'signs' are connected to images or feasts and sometimes involve extended dialogue with a specific character or group, a dialogue that discloses their true meaning and significance.

There are two distinctive features of John's accounts that make his narrative unique. In the first place, while the evangelist invariably uses the term 'sign' (*sēmeion*) of the miracles, Jesus himself has a preference for the synonymous term 'work' (*ergon*), a noun that has links to the verb, *ergazomai* ('I work').⁴ Behind this lies John's christological understanding of Jesus as carrying out the work of God, the uniquely divine work of giving life and exercising judgement: 'My Father is working until now and I also am working' (5:17; Lee 2002: 116–18). The Johannine Jesus sees his ministry, including the 'signs', as fulfilling the mission of God for which he has been uniquely sent and has been given the Father's authority (5:19–30). Both the *sēmeia*

and the *erga*, the ‘signs’ and works, are ways of describing the miracles, but the latter term sets them within the mission of God and the ethical work which Jesus is called to do (Karakolis 2012: 196–200). This sense of mission contrasts with the one ‘work’ which human beings are called to perform: that of faith (6:28–29).

Secondly, in John’s use of the word *sēmeion* something more than the miracle itself is indicated. In the dialogue with the crowds following the feeding, Jesus makes a distinction between the miracle itself and its true meaning as ‘sign’, *sēmeion*: ‘you are looking for me’, he says, ‘not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves’ (6:26). This redirection of the crowds’ seeking parallels Jesus’ unexpected rebuke of the royal official in his request for healing for his son: ‘unless you [plural] see signs and wonders [*sēmeia kai terata*], you will not believe’ (4:48). Faith in Jesus’ identity is more important for the Johannine evangelist than belief in Jesus’ ability to produce spectacular wonders. John uses the ‘signs’ symbolically to unfold an understanding of Jesus’ identity and the meaning of discipleship. The point of the hyperbole apparent in the miracles is ↴ not so much to stress the power of action but rather to disclose more fulsomely the identity of Jesus.

Elsewhere, John makes the same point about the limitations of a faith based on ‘signs’ without symbolic understanding of their significance. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, impressed by the signs which attest to God’s presence, yet fails to reach a deeper apprehension of them (3:2). The evangelist sets the coming of Nicodemus in the context of Jesus’ own scepticism about a faith based on ‘signs’: a faith that is impressed by them without grasping their theological significance (2:23–25). In the same way, people at times request a ‘sign’ as proof of Jesus’ authority and claims, but they reject what they are given or they fail entirely to perceive it (2:18; 6:30).

In John’s Gospel, the ‘signs’ are symbolic, revealing glory in the unfolding of Jesus’ identity (Schnackenburg 1968: vol.1, 521–5). The narratives of Jesus’ ministry, particularly in the first half of the Gospel, enable the ‘signs’ to take on symbolic value, unfolding divine glory and giving rise to faith. Brown names the first half of the Gospel, ‘the Book of Signs’, in order to draw out their significance (1966). The *sēmeia* point to the central Johannine theology of glory revealed in the flesh, and they lead to faith. While the category of ‘symbol’ seems most apt for understanding John’s images and metaphors, it is equally applicable to the ‘signs’ of the narrative which take on symbolic value in their narrative context.

John makes this point clear at the end of the first sign, the wedding at Cana (2:1–12). The imagery draws on powerful Old Testament associations of the messianic reign and the abundance and quality of wine as a feature of the final, eschatological banquet (e.g. Isa. 25:6). It also draws on Jewish cleansing practices, with the reference to ‘stone jars of purification for the Jews’, a water that is transfigured into wine, symbolizing both the advent and superiority of the new order. The real focus, however, emerges as christological: the ‘good wine until now’ turns out to be Jesus himself (2:10), and the transfigured wine symbolizes his messianic, eschatological presence in the revelation of glory. For the evangelist, the appropriate response of the disciples to the revealing of this glory is faith (2:11).

The healing of the royal official’s son parallels the wedding miracle within the ‘Cana-to-Cana’ cycle (2:1–4:54), and is likewise designated a *sēmeion* (4:45–54). Sharing some of the characteristics of the wedding story, this healing also has links with that of the disabled man (5:1–11). Though the healing of the man at the pool is designated a ‘work’ rather than a ‘sign’, it shares the same characteristics and, in particular, the same emphasis on Jesus’ identity which is unfolded in the ensuing dialogue. Significantly, the man himself displays little, if any, faith (5:19–47), which perhaps explains Jesus’ stern rebuke at their second meeting (5:14), a rebuke that is confirmed by the man’s divulging of Jesus’ identity to the hostile authorities (5:15).

The story of the feeding is set within the context of the ‘signs’ ministry of Jesus and the Passover festival (6:2, 4). The long and meandering conversation between Jesus and the crowds over the meaning of the ‘sign’ (6:22–59) seems at first to represent a movement towards faith, but it soon turns in the opposite

direction with increasing levels of alienation and finally rejection (6:66). Yet in and through the dialogue, whether sympathetic ↵ or hostile, John unfolds the inner meaning of the 'sign' as christological: Jesus is the Bread of life, the giver of the bread and the food itself (6:35, 48, 51). In the end, Jesus is left with the twelve who alone show faith (6:66, except Judas Iscariot). This is, ultimately, a tragic narrative (Lee 1994: 126–60).

The narrative of the man blind has a number of parallels with the healing of the disabled man at the pool (Schneiders 1999: 149–70), not least of which is the explicit language of works rather than 'signs' (9:3–4). The inner meaning of the 'sign' is once more christological, embodied in the second of the 'I am' sayings of the Gospel, 'I am the light of the world' (8:12; 9:6), with its background in the feast of Tabernacles. The miracle itself is far more than a healing; the man has never had sight to be restored, but rather his sight is created for the first time. This aspect of the narrative is underlined in Jesus' use of dust to create a paste recalling, as Irenaeus points out, the creation of Adam (9:6; see Gen. 2:7; Elowsky 2006: 324). A particular feature, as we have noted, is that Jesus himself is absent for the middle scenes of the narrative and the man's movement from ignorance to faith occurs mostly through alienating interrogations by the authorities who unwittingly push the man towards faith (9:13–34). Christology and faith work together in this 'sign', the symbolic meaning arising from the water, the clay, and the physical access to sight and light: the bodily restoration symbolically conveying an inner and spiritual wholeness which the man finally achieves in his second encounter with Jesus (9:35–38). Conversely, lack of faith and rejection are embodied in the harsh and unbelieving response of the authorities, who are erroneously convinced they possess sight (9:39–41).

The last 'sign', the raising of Lazarus, concludes Jesus' public ministry, bringing it to a climax and setting in motion the second half of the Gospel, with its focus on Jesus' departure (11:1–12:11). This, the greatest of the Johannine 'signs', symbolizes Jesus' identity as 'resurrection and life' (11:25–26). Following Lazarus' emergence from the tomb, explicit sign language is used of this event (11:47; 12:8). The narrative is tied to Jesus' own paschal story, and he is depicted as the one who brings life from death, precisely through his own journey through life and death (Byrne 2014: 183–206). The faith in this story is shown by Martha and Mary, as has already been noted, the sisters confessing their faith in word and deed (Sturdevant 2015: 133–55). In this climactic Johannine 'sign', believers find life in connection to the one who is life, beyond the bounds of death. In each case, the Johannine 'signs' point to the identity of Jesus and the life bestowed in relationship with him.

Readers have traditionally spoken of seven signs in the Gospel of John, but the numbering is difficult to define. It is not clear, for example, that Jesus' epiphany on the Sea of Galilee qualifies as a Johannine 'sign' (6:16–21), apart from the feeding of the 5,000. The disciples' large catch of fish in the second resurrection story, though not designated a 'sign' or work, is indeed miraculous in nature and would bring the number to seven, but many dispute the place of John 21 in the original Gospel and see it as additional or as an epilogue (Moloney 2008).

An alternative is that the final chapters of the Gospel constitute the last, and seventh, of the Johannine 'signs'. The summary at the end of the first resurrection narrative makes reference to the 'many other *sēmeia*' of Jesus' public ministry, suggesting a connection ↵ between the resurrection and the earlier miracles of the Gospel (20:31). Furthermore, the appearance narratives have a similarly sensual quality to the earlier 'signs' (Schnelle 1998: 310–13). On the other hand, the dramatic high point of the Gospel narrative is the crucifixion rather than the resurrection, where the glory of God in Jesus most fully and paradoxically shines, but which is not by itself a Johannine 'sign'. If the death and resurrection, however, are taken together as the one theological event, the cross itself surely belongs among the 'signs' (Salier 2004: 142–70). In this sense, the cross, meaning Jesus' death and implying also his resurrection, is a major symbol of the Gospel (Wright 1994: 34–5), the most unlikely and paradoxical of all the Johannine symbols.

It is not merely a counter-cultural 'sign', but more importantly the fulfilment of all the 'signs' in the revelation of glory and the summons to faith (Moloney 1998: 544; Barrett 1978: 78).

Symbolism and Theology

Within its symbolic framework and the portrayal of the 'signs' of Jesus' ministry, the theology of the Gospel emerges. Because they possess substantial content, the Johannine symbols are rich in theological meaning. At the heart of this theology lies the Johannine belief in the incarnation, symbolizing God's advent in the world, not as an external (if heavenly) visitor, but rather as intrinsic to the world itself: in the same shape and form, made of the same substance, sharing the same ingredients. In this advent, God enters flesh, becomes flesh, and redeems flesh by flesh. On this theological point, the symbolism of the Gospel turns (Lee 2010c: 709). As a consequence of the incarnation, creation itself, already the work of God, is now able to symbolize God's glory within its own framework: 'God can no longer be conceived apart from the incarnation of the Logos' (Weder 1996: 331). This is the theological basis of the Gospel, explicit in Prologue and implicit in the symbolism and 'signs' of Jesus' ministry. John uses symbols because of the incarnation, because flesh now has the capability of symbolizing God. The incarnate Symbol makes possible the symbols (Schneiders 1999: 70–1).

The goal of the Fourth Gospel is that, in grasping the symbolism in its narrative context, the reader will enter imaginatively into the symbolic world of the text and so come face-to-face with divine glory. The symbols enable this movement, not just at an affective level but also cognitively. The images take on symbolic meaning as they draw readers into their dynamic through the progress of the narrative, based on shared experience and common human need. The symbolism enables the implied reader to be transformed, a transformation that is grounded in love, a major theme of the Fourth Gospel that underlies all the symbols and 'signs' of the narrative (Moloney 2013).

p. 270 In the Johannine worldview, the potential for symbolic meaning already exists intrinsically in creation, since 'all things came into being through him' (1:3). In the Johannine sense, 'every finite phenomenon is at some level a carrier of divine significance' (Williams 2014: 120). The incarnation does not give 'flesh' its symbolic meaning, for John; rather, it draws out a meaning that is already implicit. When John speaks of 'flesh' that 'profits nothing' (6:63), he is speaking of the incapacity of human beings to recognise the Creator in all things and their inability to repair the blindness (1:10). This incapacity is what the Word comes to remedy—to reignite the capacity to connect, communicate, recognize through the imagination. To know Jesus and to know God, in Johannine terms, means to enter into the 'imaginary' world of the text, apprehending its symbolism by faith.

An important question in interpreting the Gospel theologically is the question of the limits of symbolism in interpreting the text (Anderson 2006: 157–94). How far can we go and what, if any, are the restraints on symbolic interpretation? For example, is the garden image at the beginning and end of the passion narrative a symbol of Eden restored or is it only a geographical reference without deeper significance (18:1; 19:41; Zimmermann 2008: 221–35)? Given that symbolism is multivalent, with more than one meaning, it is hard to draw boundaries around it. Awareness of the Old Testament and the Jewish and Roman-Hellenistic contexts of the Fourth Gospel are helpful in unveiling the meaning, but they can be in themselves ambiguous. More important is the theological unity of the text itself. Symbolism may be multiple in its associations but it is not infinite and, while interpreters need to leave open the extent of the meaning, there are interpretations that can be excluded by reading the text as a whole. For example, a reading that is used to support antisemitism would be an illegitimate use of the term 'the Jews' and its symbolic significance in this gospel (Motyer 2008: 143–67; Lieu 2008: 168–82).⁵

Conclusion

The symbolism of the Fourth Gospel is not primarily decorative or ornamental, but seeks to communicate what John sees as religious truth; it is concerned, in other words, with salvation. This perspective is essential in reading the Gospel with its explicitly symbolic framework. In the act of reading, the implied reader engages with another and deeper level of reality. Within this context, the symbols of the Gospel are not signposts pointing elsewhere, but vehicles of the revelation. The core Johannine symbols function to bridge the gulf between heaven and earth. In the Gospel of John, the symbolism functions to give imaginative entry for the reader into the realm of life, eternal life as John understands it: a rich quality of life in the present moment that ultimately transcends death (10:10). It is the only way, for John, in which the transcendent God can be apprehended (Hirsch-Luipold 2006).

p. 271 In the biblical imagery of the four living creatures around the throne of God (Ezek. 1:4–10; Rev. 4:6–8), the symbol for the Fourth Gospel has traditionally been that of the eagle, soaring high above the earth into the heavens (Burridge 2005: 132–63). This powerful image reinforces the symbolic nature of this Gospel, where the symbolism displays its theological understanding, not in a series of abstract propositions, but in the literary language of image, metaphor, and narrative. The Gospel of John employs its symbolism to speak both christologically and eschatologically of the re-creating presence of God revealed in the Johannine Jesus. The ‘signs’ of the Gospel also share this symbolic quality, pointing to another order of reality (‘from above’) invading and transfiguring the present (‘from below’). For John, the symbols and signs of the narrative communicate the identity of Jesus as Word and Son, who possesses unique authority over life and death, and whose life and ministry demonstrate divine love and glory.

Suggested Reading

The most basic study in the Gospel of John from a literary perspective is Culpepper (1983), on which key works by Lee (2002), Koester (2003), and Burridge (2005) draw, developing further understandings of John’s symbolism. Two further studies provide excellent introductions to the Gospel from a narrative and thematic viewpoint: Schneiders (1999) on the Gospel’s Christology and Moloney (2013) on love. A good, accessible commentary on John’s Gospel is Byrne (2014).

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Notes

- 1 A substantial simile operates in the same way as metaphor; it too takes on symbolic meaning within the Fourth Gospel (e.g. 1:14; 3:14).
- 2 On character, see also Chapter 12, Jo-Ann Brant, 'The Fourth Gospel as Narrative and Drama'.
- 3 The term 'world' is ambiguous in the Gospel, mostly positive but at other times signifying the realm of sin and death (e.g. 3:16–17; 17:14–16; Moloney 2013: 207–9).
- 4 The word *sēmeion* appears in the Gospel at 2:11, 18, 23; 3:2; 4:48, 54; 6:2, 14, 26, 30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 20:30. The word group *ergon* appears at 4:34; 5:17, 20, 36; 6:27–30; 7:3, 21; 9:3–4; 10:25, 32, 37–38; 14:10–11; 15:24; 17:4.
- 5 See Chapter 8, Adele Reinhartz, 'The Jews of the Fourth Gospel'.