Abstract

Jesus says of himself "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12) and the gospel of John intercepts the meaning of this statement through the motif of symbols and symbolism.

Key Words: symbolism, Gospel of John, symbol of light

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Introduction

The gospel of John as an historical work mediates the encounter between Jesus and the contemporary believer and is an essentially symbolic text in which the historical material itself functions symbolically. Symbolism places the Gospel text in the category of ‘sacrament’ or symbolic mediation of divine reality. In as much as we discuss symbol in the fourth gospel, John the evangelist himself does not use it. The evangelist uses numerous symbolisms throughout the text and it is such symbolism and the symbol of light that will form the core argument in this paper. It is important to state that John uses subordinate symbols like ‘light and darkness’, ‘sight and blindness’ and ‘day and night’ to develop the use of symbols. Such subordinate or coordinate symbols are effective in illustrating the use of the principle symbol of light. We will however, commence by analyzing the biblical meaning of symbolism, followed by general discussion of symbol usage in the gospel and finally explore in detail the symbol of light as used in the gospel.

‘Symbol’ and ‘Sign’ – a definition

Symbolism originates from the Greek word συμβολή. The etymology of the word ‘symbol’ (τοσυμβολή) suggests to ‘put together’. In John, a symbol is “a connecting link between two different spheres”. It is imperative to call to attention the semantic confusion sometimes occasioned by John’s use of the term συμβολή (symbolon), which is usually translated “sign”. John’s choice of συμβολή rather than συμβολος (symbolon) reflects the Septuagint’s use of the συμβολή to translate ‘at’ ‘sign’. However, according to Schneider, symbol can be defined as “a sensible reality which renders present to and involves a person subjectively in a transforming experience of transcendent mystery.” Both sign and symbol are sensible realities. Not only things like bread, wine and water but also words, gestures and combinations of things, words and gestures can constitute the sensible dimension of the symbol. The importance of the sensible element in the symbol is that it renders the transcendent, which is by nature purely spiritual. Unlike symbols, signs more or less arbitrarily stand for or point to something other than themselves, and there is no intrinsic connection between a sign and the thing or person to which it points. The meaning of the sign must be learned and whereas a symbol may point to many things, to be effective, a sign can point to only one.

One central difference between sign and symbol is that a sign stands for or stands in for, something other than itself, whereas a symbol is the way of being present of something in whose reality it participates. The task of symbol is to make that which, by nature, is spiritual or transcendent. For example, speech is a symbolization of inner experience. Equally, the Gospel itself is the symbol of Jesus and Jesus is the symbol of God in the world. Therefore, a symbol does not stand for something; rather, it is the ‘something’
in sensible expression. The reader thus understands that the symbol means or expresses something more or something else than its plain or superficial meaning. As a result, the more skilful and perceptive the reader, the more deeply he will enter into the message and the mystery of symbolic narrative. The gospel of John uses symbolism extensively as illustrated in the following paragraphs.

**Symbolism in the Gospel of John**

Symbols convey not only a message, but are in themselves the messages. It is from this point that scholars have argued that the meaning of symbols may be entirely created by the author and conveyed by context, from earlier sources. Symbols are vehicles of the message because they are drawn from a social, cultural, religious and historical context of the author and his intended readers. Similarly, they exhibit both flexibility and constancy, thus can be adapted to fit changing situations or views. The Fourth Gospel's adaptation of symbols drawn from Judaism suggests that established symbols are being given new meaning in order that they might retain their viability and provide continuity in a context of profound crisis and change. The symbolic dialect of John therefore provides clues to its social and historical context and the kind of change to which it calls the reader.

Symbolism is connected to the history of any particular community and is thus interpreted as understood by that very community. John's use of images arose out of the initiative of the person symbolized (Jesus), who was himself the perfect symbol. Wayne Meeks, emphasizes that the entire gospel has a self-referring quality and depends on a closed system of metaphors which is incomprehensible to readers outside of this perspective. It is vital to emphasize that John's symbols are drawn from everyday life, but derive their significance from the rich associations they have acquired in the Old Testament and apocalyptic literature. There is an integral relationship between the symbol and the reality it presents regardless of where the symbol occurs, in discourse, allegory or historical event. Some authors have also indicated that symbols are related to the gospel's whole metaphorical system and the social, historical and cultural setting in which it was composed.

The potential limits and effects of each symbol on the reader may be classified according to their function within the literary work, for example, transcending and orienting. Therefore, there must be some congruity between the symbol and the reality. When Jesus says “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35) in the context of the discourse on the true bread, the reader is given both the tenor (I) and the vehicle (“the bread of life”). His/her task is to infer the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle and to understand those features of the identity of Jesus which led the author to use these symbols. The relationship inferred here is that Jesus confers and sustains the true life just as bread sustains physical life or that Jesus’ body is symbolized by bread
as is institutionalized in the Eucharist. The relationship may be stated, implied by the context or assumed from the shared background or culture of the writer or reader. The reader's task is to discern the tenor or meaning of the symbol. The reader understands what the symbol means or expresses something more or something else than its plain or superficial meaning.

Similarly, Jesus of Nazareth is portrayed as the great symbol of God in the fourth gospel. John's fundamental affirmation that the "Word became flesh" (1:14) is the basis for regarding the incarnation as genuinely symbolic. Unlike a sign which merely points to or stands for an absent reality that is totally other than itself, the symbol renders present the transcendent because it participates in what it re-presents. Apparently, the symbol renders the transcendent really present, it renders it present in a limited and sensible mode, at the same time revealing and concealing what it re-presents. For example, John writes that the blind see and those who see become blind (9:39). This rightly implied that though everyone present could see Jesus, not everyone could see in him the glory of the only Son in him.

Among the many characteristics, the symbol reveals by involving the person in a subject-to-subject relationship with the transcendent. This means that the symbol leads the person into the unknown by rendering present the multi-faceted mystery of the transcendent. Such involvements (of a person) with the transcendent, renders present the symbol through a transforming experience. The symbol as a consequence demands involvement as a condition of entering into the revelation of which it is the locus. Simply expressed, the symbol does not give objective information, but it initiates one into an experience that is open-ended. John concentrates the mystery of divine revelation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom the evangelist designates as the "Word became flesh". Because of this concept, Jesus is the manifestation of the one who sent him, God, the Father.

Scholars have over-emphasized the importance of the symbol as mediatory in relations with the mystery and the human being. For Schneiders, all the encounter narratives illustrate this characteristic of the symbol as dynamically involving. One can argue convincingly that all symbolism is potentially religious in that the symbolic opens out on personhood and the divine. The symbol mediates the transcendent to some aspect of the transcendent, that is the spiritual or mystery. God was self-symbolized in the human sphere in the incarnation. It was the Word of God that became flesh that constituted the sensible locus of the relationship with God. John's presentation of the incarnation salvation is only possible in terms of symbol. According to Schneider, "the incarnation was the inauguration of a symbolic or sacramental economy of salvific revelation in which the history of Jesus constitutes the symbolic material". From this, we identify Jesus as the foundational symbol, the very revelation
of God, and that his works and the words are his own self-symbolization.

John makes use of core symbols that are central and frequently recur in more important texts. Three such core symbols of the John’s gospel are: light, water and bread. Equally, there is an alliteration and paring of symbols referred to in the gospel. Such symbols include “light and darkness”, “day and night”, “sight and blindness”. These three categories of paired symbols have their root in the principle symbol of light. Phillip Wheelwright observes that “of all archetypal symbols, there is probably none more widespread and more immediately understandable than light, as symbolizing certain mental and spiritual qualities”.17 We now explore in details the use of the symbol of light in the gospel.

The Symbol of ‘Light’ in Detail

In the prologue, Jesus announces; “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 1:9), completing the identification of the symbol with Jesus. It can now be used to depict his works as giver of the “light of life” (8:12; 9:5; 1:4). This reference is followed by the miracle of Jesus giving sight to a man who was born blind (9:1-41) which is indicative of the significance of the symbol of light in the gospel of John.18 The prologue links the logos, life and light so powerfully that it dominates the symbolic system of the entire narrative. The logos incarnate in Jesus is described as “the light of men” (1:14) and where there is light there is truth. Thus, from the beginning, John points out that the logos is and always was the exclusive source of light. For example, John the Baptist was not the light but bore witness to the light (1:8), for “the true light” which enlightens every person was coming into the world (1:9). The gospel of John presumes that believing in Jesus is walking in the “light” for Jesus is “the light” (12:26).

One thematic significance of the symbol of light is the explicit connection between witness and judgment; “the light has come into the world (1:9) and men loved darkness rather than the light” (3:19). Apparently, some exegetes think this expression was added by the evangelist in anticipation of the darkness of unbelief (8:12; 3:19; 12:35, 46).19 This simply means those who reject Jesus do so because their works are evil and the light exposes their innate tendency toward evil, because they love darkness (3:20). Those who follow the truth on the other hand, come to the light with the result that it discloses that his works are of God (3:21). The allusion made is the constant conflict of light and darkness which evokes a universal and primordial response.20 Thus, light is not only the revelation of the logos, but it reveals the nature of all who come in contact with it, and the judgment upon each person is determined by his/her response to it.

Similarly, John uses sight and blindness to intercept the meaning of light. The miracle of the man born blind is indicative of a transition from
faithlessness to attaining faith (9:1-41). This miracle makes the symbolism of Jesus as light clear and point to the approach of the hour when that light will depart.21 The gospel states that those who had sight yet didn’t know him were ‘blind’. Ignorance of Jesus was a sign of being in the dark, a sign of blindness, as shown by the Pharisees when they said to Jesus, “So we are blind, are we”? The light motif returns as Jesus’ coming has divided those who truly see from those like the Pharisees who claim to see but are blind.22 The evangelist wants to show that Jesus is the light and that he gives the light to others, as proclaimed in 8:12, “I am the light of the world” (8:12). The ever-increasing in sight of the blind man is contrasted with the ever-hardening blindness of the Pharisees.

Lack of faith in the Messiah was an indication of darkness. In this passage, sight and blindness, seeing and believing are used to expand further the symbolic value of light and to provide an index to the value of various characters.23 The blind man moves from his natural condition of his past to sight upon encounter with Jesus. Sight becomes insight into the identity of Jesus, a willingness to believe and finally faith. In contradiction, the Pharisees move from physical sight with its attendant implications of understanding to ignorance and rejection of Jesus. Sin is shown to reside not in the blindness of the one who has not been confronted by the light but in the blindness of those who have seen the light and rejected it. They have chosen to live in darkness because they love it (3:19). It is also important to note that this miracle takes places on the feast of Tabernacles, the feast of light.24 This thus brings out the symbol of light as used in the gospel of John. “The light of the world” motif (9:5) provides a loose relationship with the Tabernacles feast that has evidently kept Jesus in Jerusalem.

Jesus warns his hearers that the light will be among them only “a little” longer (12:35) and that they should take advantage of his physical presence while it remained available. As he himself had walked in the light to avoid stumbling (9:4-5; 11:9-10), now he summons others to do the same. He employs language familiar to readers of the Gospel, about walking in light (8:12) and about darkness proving unable to overtake those who were of the light (1:5).25 The conflict between the forces of light and darkness envisioned here fits the language of sectarian Palestinian Judaism which also spoke of the “children of light” (12:26) versus the “children of darkness”.

It appears again as if Jesus does not trust the crowds (2:23-25) for their misunderstandings (12:29, 34) and has proven them unreliable, by continuing to walk in the darkness, becoming ignorant of where they are going (12:35). They show that they have rejected the light of the world (12:46) whereas those who are of light know where their origin and where they are going (3:8; 8:14).26 Jesus hides himself just as he did when they sought to kill him (8:59) because they had failed to believe the light whilst he was still with them.
(12:36). However, his final words to them remained as an invitation, they could still become children (1:12) of light through faith (12:36).

**Subordinate Symbols of Light**

Added on to the core symbols of light, are subordinate symbols for example, lamps, fires, torches, lanterns, day (and night), healing the blind and regaining sight. For instance, on the third day of his death, Mary Magdalene visits the tomb whilst “it was still dark” (20:1). Mary reports, “I have seen the Lord”. To see the Lord means a new beginning in light. The evangelist might have added darkness to incorporate the scene into the light symbolism of the gospel. The gospel also uses notable dualism in his use of symbols. For example, John the Baptist was not the light but a burning and shining lamp (5:35). The subordinate image of the lamp symbolizes the role of the Baptist and the superiority of Jesus. Similarly, when Judas left the supper room to betray Jesus, “it was night” (13:30), meaning there was no light.

John equally uses so many double-edged expressions that it can hardly be doubted that he does so intentionally, and this is so in regard to symbols. ‘Day and night’ are used as subordinate symbols which revoke the core symbols or ‘light and darkness’ (9:4-5; 11:9-10). Retrospectively, night functions as a reference to the character of Nicodemus (3:2), the member of the Sanhedrin who comes to Jesus “at night” because he does not yet belong to the light.27 We read also that Judas Iscariot left “at night” to betray Jesus. Thus, the reader is admonished to walk in the light (12:35-36). For the reader thus, torches and lanterns (18:3) are a pathetic substitute for the light of the world and a charcoal fire (18:18) is a miserable alternative on a cold dark night and a painful reminder in the bright light of a new day (21:9).28 The core symbols and the subordinate symbols in the Gospel of John function to illustrate and point to Jesus, who is himself a symbolic revelation of God.

**Conclusion**

It is imperative to state that Jesus is the symbolic temple where people come to meet God (2:19-21) and where true worship will be offered (4:21-24). The gospel of John categorically shows the fundamental characteristic of the symbol as dynamically involving. Such involvement of a person with the transcendent renders present the symbol through a transforming experience. Jesus draws attention to himself as the revealer and redeemer who descends as the light. He speaks in parables and he enacts signs to draw people to the light, to himself and to the Father. This paper has thus analyzed and demonstrated the usage of symbols in the gospel of John. We have also explored the symbol of light and other light subordinate symbols in showing the track from darkness to light, from blindness to sight and from night to day. We have also shown that symbols are related to the gospel's whole
metaphorical system and the social setting in which it was composed. It has also been observed that Jesus himself is the principal symbol of the Fourth Gospel, the sacrament of the Father, for he reveals God in the world.

Endnotes
4 Schneiders, pg. 70.
5 Barrett, pg. 68.
6 Culpepper, pg. 184.
7 Ibid, 186.
8 Barrett, pg. 45.
9 Orienting – at times it is recognized that a single instance of symbolism reflects or gives rise to a series of possible extensions of meaning in elements of the action which do not in themselves suggest symbolic implications. Transcending – when a series of symbols are recognized as mutually related, as helping to explain each other.
10 Culpepper, pg. 181.
11 Schneiders, pg. 67.
12 Ibid, 67.
14 Ibid, 67.
15 Schneiders, pg. 68.
16 Culpepper, Anatomy of Fourth Gospel, pg. 190.
17 Brown, New Jerome Biblical Commentary, pg. 948.
18 Brown, New Jerome Biblical Commentary, pg. 951.
19 Barrett, pg. 57.
20 Brown, New Jerome Biblical Commentary, pg. 967.
21 Brown, New Jerome Biblical Commentary, pg. 968.
22 Culpepper, pg. 191.
23 Class notes.
25 Keener, pg. 883.
27 Culpepper, pg. 192.