

History and Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel

There are few Johannine problems which have had a longer or more checkered history than that of the relationship between history and symbolism in the Fourth Gospel.¹ But there are two factors in contemporary scholarship which give this ancient problem renewed actuality. The first is the much more positive judgment on the historicity of the Fourth Gospel that has resulted not only from advances in the literary aspects of exegesis but also from the new evidence supplied by archaeology and recent manuscript discoveries.² The second is the increasing awareness that the Scriptures are, after all, literature and that the categories, such as structure and symbolism, which are relevant to the analysis of literature in general are therefore relevant to the interpretation of Scripture.³

Despite this latter fact, some of the better contemporary Johannine scholars tend to be extremely reserved about the symbolic dimension of the Fourth Gospel. There seem to be at least two major reasons for this reserve. 1) There is the common assumption of an inverse proportion between the historical and the symbolic, that is, the more historical an account is, the less symbolic, and vice-versa.⁴ Consequently, as the fundamental historical reliability of the Fourth Gospel becomes more

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2. R. E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John* vol. I (Anchor Bible, 29), Garden City, 1966, pp. xlii-xliii and bibliography on p. li.

3. See the excellent article, including bibliography, of J. BARR, *Reading the Bible as Literature*, in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 56 (1973) 10-33.

4. An example of the operation of this assumption is the discussion between D. MOLLAT and R. E. BROWN, recorded in *Resurrexit: Actes du Symposium International sur la Résurrection de Jésus, Rome 1970* (ed. E. DHANIS), Città del Vaticano, 1974, p. 204, over whether it really was dark when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb (Jn 20:1) or whether this is a symbolic detail in the Fourth Gospel. Both seemed to think one had to choose between an historical intention on the part of the evangelist and a symbolic one.

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evident the symbolic interpretation appears less necessary and even less valid. 2) Since there do not seem to be any reliable or generally accepted criteria for the interpretation of symbols, any symbolic interpretation remains undemonstrable if not arbitrary. Therefore, since the primary business of the exegete is to discover the literal meaning of the text, he or she had best confine his or her efforts to the historical and theological and leave the slippery terrain of the symbolic to the spiritual writers and homilists.

If, however, a text is essentially symbolic, then there is no literal meaning of that text apart from the symbolic meaning. In other words, a non-symbolic interpretation of a symbolic text is not a literal interpretation. It is an inadequate interpretation. It would like to propose, and briefly explore the consequences of the hypothesis that John's Gospel is essentially symbolic.

First of all, it is necessary to be precise about the term "symbol." There is growing consensus among scholars concerned with language in general and religious language in particular that symbol and sign are not equivalent terms.⁵ A sign is something which stands for an absent reality. Its task is to refer the observer to something other than itself. A billboard, for example, is a sign. A symbol, on the contrary, is the sensible expression of a present reality. Its task is to make the transcendent, or some aspect of the Transcendent, intersubjectively available and to mediate the participation of the observer in that which it reveals. The human body is the primary symbol of the personality. Speech is a symbol of inner experience. Art symbolizes the beautiful. The Church is the symbol of Christ. Most importantly, Jesus is the symbol of God. In short, a symbol never stands for something. It is the sensible expression of the transcendent, that is, it is the locus of revelation (human or divine) and of participation in that which is revealed.

The most characteristic specific difference of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is its conviction that God revealed himself and was encountered in history. History, in other words, is symbolic within this tradition. This realization of the symbolic dimension of history was implicit and operative rather than reflectively explicit among the Old Testament and most of the New Testament writers. They dealt with salvation history, as we see, for example, in Wisdom 10-19 and most clearly in the Gospel of Luke, but they did not call it that.

5. For an excellent brief introduction to this subject, see G. DURAND, *L'imagination symbolique* (Initiation philosophique, 66), Paris, 1968, or T. FAWCETT, *The Symbolic Language of Religion: An Introductory Study*, London, 1970, especially p. 18 on the present topic. A comprehensive review of current work in the field is found in C. BERNARD's *Panorama des études symboliques*, in *Gregorianum* 55 (1974) 379-392.

In the Fourth Gospel, however, the notion of symbolic revelation becomes fully explicit⁶. The Johannine concentration of all revelation and all response to revelation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth whom he designates as the Word *become* flesh (1, 14), that is, as the symbolization of God, is the clearest indication of this fact and the principle of all its consequences.

Both dimensions of the symbol, that is, its revelatory and its mediatory dimensions, are emphasized in John's characteristic treatment of Jesus. First, Jesus is the revelation of the Father. He is the sensible expression of the glory of God (1, 14). His words and works are *σημεία* revealing that glory (2, 11). The Father dwells in him doing his works (5, 36; 14, 10). In short, to see Jesus is to see the Father (14, 9) for Jesus and the Father are one (10, 30). Secondly, Jesus is the locus of the disciples' participation in the glory of God. Jesus is the Temple where God and his people meet (2, 19-21) and where true worship will be offered (4, 21-24). He is the way to the Father (14, 6). To be in the hand of Jesus is to be in the Father's hand (10, 28-29). To be possessed by Jesus is to belong to the Father (17, 10). To receive Jesus is to become a child of the Father (1, 12).

Although in the Synoptics Jesus is the center and highpoint of a history of salvation which is implicitly recognized as symbolic it is only in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus himself is presented as the unique and totally adequate symbol of God. The exclusive centrality of the person of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, which virtually all Johannine scholars recognize, ⁷ is due precisely to John's reflectively explicit consciousness of Jesus as the symbol of God, totally relativizing all other revelation, even that of the Old Testament which can only be truly revelatory to one who has come to Jesus (5, 39-40).

According to the conclusion of the Fourth Gospel (20, 30-31) John intended what he wrote to have the same revelatory function for his readers that the *σημεία*, that is, the symbolic activity of Jesus, had for the first disciples.⁸ In other words, the Fourth Gospel is not simply a record of symbolic revelation but is itself symbolic revelation. "These things are written that you may believe." This, it seems to me, is the

6. Since this paper was given in Aug. 1975 an excellent article, making precisely this point, has appeared: P. J. CAHILL, "The Johannine *Logos* as Center", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (Jan. 1976) 54-72. See esp. note 5, p. 55.

7. See, for example, B. LINDARS, *The Fourth Gospel an Act of Contemplation*, in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. L. Cross), London, 1957, 23-35, especially p. 23.

8. In contemporary discourse the Johannine *σημεία* would have to be called "symbols" rather than "signs". John's use of *σημείον* rather than *σύμβολον* was perhaps dictated by the Septuagint's translation of **אִי** by *σημείον* (e.g., Ex 10, 1-2; Num. 26,10; Deut 34,11) However, the "mighty deeds" of God in the Old Testament were symbolic revelation, not signs in the contemporary sense of the word.

key to the relation between history and symbol in the written Gospel. The Gospel is a literary icon of Jesus.

The essence of the artistic symbol is not that it copies the natural symbol. John does not copy the historical Jesus. The essence of the artistic symbol is to be *another* symbol of that which the natural symbol revealed. The Gospel is *another* symbol of the Word of God. This new symbol has been called the "Johannine Jesus."⁹ The question is, what is the relation between the historical Jesus (i.e., the natural symbol) and the Johannine Jesus (i.e., the artistic symbol)? The relation is that both are true symbolic expressions of the same person, the Word of the Father. They are two symbols of one reality.

The artistic symbol is always, in some way, influenced by the material of the natural symbol. The physical elements of the face of the person influence the artist's choice of color, use of line and so on. But what the artist does is to liberate the symbolized transcendent from its over-particularization in the natural symbol. The artist releases the transcendent by selecting only certain elements of the material of the natural symbol, and modifying even those, so that the glory of the symbolized subsumes the material of the artistic symbol making it exist with such fullness of being that it is literally transfigured.¹⁰ John tells his readers that he has selected only some of Jesus' symbolic activity (20, 30). And it is obvious, from the few parallels that we have between John and the Synoptics, that he has substantially transformed even these few.¹¹ More exactly, he has used them in such a way that the glory which the historical events originally revealed has now totally transfigured the historical material. To ask how the Johannine account corresponds to what "actually happened" is like asking how Van Gogh's self-portrait corresponds to his historical face. The question is misplaced. The significant question is how does the self-portrait of Van Gogh correspond to the person of Van Gogh. Any amateur on Montmartre could have copied Van Gogh's face. Only the artist could create a new symbolic expression of his person.

However, if we were to meet Van Gogh today, and if we were sufficiently perceptive to read his soul in his face, we would recognize him from the self-portrait, not because the portrait resembles the face but

9. The expression is frequently encountered. An excellent treatment of the meaning of the term is F. Mussner's *Die johanneische Scheweise und die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus* (Questiones Disputatae, 28), Freiburg, 1965.

10. A good treatment of this subject is J. M. Tézé's *La gloire du sensible*, in *Christus* 17 (1970) 380-391.

11. For example, the cure of the official's son in Jn 4,46-54 seems to be a genuine parallel of Mt 8,5-13 and Lk 7,1-10 but the introduction of the seeing-believing problematic in Jn 4,48 and the sign theme in 4,54 substantially modifies the Johannine account.

because that face is the natural symbol of the same person we know from the artistic symbol. The marvel is that the artistic symbol is, in fact, more immediately and totally revelatory than the face because of art's peculiar power to release the transcendent. This is exactly what is meant by the beauty of the work of art.

By the same token, if we were to find ourselves suddenly transplanted to first century Palestine, and if we were sufficiently spiritually perceptive, we would recognize the historical Jesus from our contemplation of the Johannine Jesus, not because the Gospel has reproduced the history but because both history and Gospel are symbolic expressions of the same person, the Son the God.

In summary, the history of Jesus, in John, has become artistic material. That is why, on the one hand, there are such surprisingly accurate historical details in the Fourth Gospel. In those details John encountered symbolically the very revelation he wished to express symbolically. Undoubtedly it was the strange, vibrant blue of Van Gogh's eyes that most clearly revealed to him that volatile mixture of genius, religion, and madness that was his innermost self. He gives us that very blue, liberated and purified, as the revelation of his being. John likewise seizes upon certain details of the history of Jesus because of their remarkably revelatory, that is, symbolic potential. But John's use of history as artistic material is, on the other hand, the reason why his Gospel is so difficult to use in the quest of the historical Jesus. What history revealed to John was the identity of Jesus as Son of God and it is that whole Christology which he pours back into the few historical events he has selected as artistic material. Into two drops of blue pigment Van Gogh has poured what was diffusely expressed in his life by words and gestures, by thought and creation. The result is that the eyes in the portrait, probably the color of the historical eyes, are infinitely more than (and thus different from) the historical eyes of the painter. Similarly, into the spare outline of the Johannine Jesus the fourth evangelist has poured the entire revelation of the Son. Exactly how this figure corresponds to the historical Jesus we will never know. Nor is this a loss. On the contrary, John has performed the service of the artist. He has given us in the intensity of artistic liberation the transcendent beauty of the Word of God as it transfigured the face of Jesus.

It is not possible to explore in detail all the consequence of this hypothesis. I would, however, like simply to list a few of the more important ones:

First, there is not an inverse proportion between the historical and the symbolic in the Fourth Gospel. On the contrary, because history is used by John as symbolic material, the more historical it is seen to be, the more symbolic it will be seen to be.

Second, symbolism in John is not an element in the Gospel but a dimension of the Gospel as a whole, namely, its characteristic revelatory mode.

Third, because the Fourth Gospel is genuinely and thoroughly symbolic the individual parts have to be understood in function of the whole rather than the whole in function of the parts.

Fourth, Johannine symbolism has nothing in common with allegorism, nor valid symbolic interpretation with allegorizing.¹²

Fifth, symbolism is not a slippery terrain where all interpretation is equally arbitrary and equally undemonstrable. The symbolic character of the Fourth Gospel does mean that it is literature, and, as Leon Howard says in his introduction to the great American novel *Moby Dick*, one of the marks of true literature is its potentiality to enrich itself endlessly by the interpretations of successive generations.¹³ The genuine symbol is polyvalent by nature. But this does not mean that all interpretations are valid. Anyone who thinks, for example, that the whiteness of the whale in *Moby Dick* is a symbolic reference to its angelic innocence is simply mistaken. But the significance of the whiteness is susceptible of a thousand valid interpretations, not all equally adequate to be sure. There are no rules for the decoding of symbols because symbols are not signs. But there are criteria for the valid interpretation of symbolic works.¹⁴ In this domain the Johannine exegete has much to learn from artistic criticism in general and especially from literary criticism, from comparative religion's study of symbolic expression, and from the sciences of language in general and of religious language in particular.

All of these consequences, and others that could be listed, are merely explicitations of the hypothesis with which this paper began, namely, that the Fourth Gospel is essentially symbolic and that taking this fact into account in its exegesis is not an optional exercise but a condition of validity.

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12. As H. DE LUBAC in *Sens spirituel*, in *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 36 (1949) 563-565, points out, the allegorical method of reading Scripture can be as sterile as an exclusively critical method. Allegorizing involves imposing upon the text a meaning it does not have. Symbolism, on the contrary, is intrinsic to the text. The confusion between symbol and allegory, such as we find, for example, in D. WEAD's *The Literary Devices in John's Gospel* (Theologische Dissertationen, Basel, 1970, pp. 27-28, and elsewhere, is perhaps responsible for some of the distrust of the symbolic among exegetes.

13. H. MELVILLE, *Moby Dick* or, *The Whale*, introduction by L. Howard, New York, 1950, p. xii.

14. An excellent start in developing criteria for the handling of Johannine symbolism was made by J. LEAL, *El simbolismo histórico del IV evangelio*, in *Estudios Bíblicos* 19 (1960) 329-348.