Symbolic Action in Luke and John

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Introduction: symbolism and historicity

At the level of both academic study and ordinary reading, it is the symbolism of the gospel of John which sets it apart from the Synoptic gospels. This is true at every level of reading the text. At the level of words, John's constant use of double meanings gives a particular texture to his writing, and functions as a bearer of ambiguous or multivalent meaning, as well as carrying considerable theological weight.[1] Such double meaning forms the building blocks of what Anderson calls the riddles of John.[2] At the larger level of sentence, paragraph and section, symbolic significance of actions and discourse in John functions to bind units together, something that has particularly been understood in the last 40 years since Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*[3]. We now appreciate the way in which John's literary technique invites us to inhabit his symbolic world. And at the highest level of reading, in our theological interpretation of John, we can see its historic influence on the formulation of Nicean and Chalcedonian orthodoxy.[4]

A good example of this can be found in the few verses immediately preceding Jesus' entering the stage of John's drama.

> The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?" "Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon. (John 1.35–39, TNIV)

Every phrase is bursting with symbolic significance. 'The next day' places it in the symbolic week of this new creation, a new 'beginning.' Jesus 'passes by' offering the opportunity for response.[5] His title highlights his coming death, offered on the night of the Passover sacrifice. There are *two* disciples, the Deuteronomic number of witness (Deut 17.6) which Jesus will himself draw on later in his dispute with 'the Jews' in John 5.31 ('I do not testify on my own behalf…) Jesus sees them following, the term of discipleship, and asks the existential question of their purpose. They want to know where Jesus 'abides', a term which acquires theological significance through the gospel until in John 15 Jesus becomes the place where his followers 'abide.' The question is answered with the invitation to both be disciples and witnesses 'come…and see.' And is the 'tenth hour' a sign of completeness[6], the hour after his death (9th hour) so demonstrating the mission that follows the cross—or perhaps even the end of the Law?[7] It is worth noting that all these interpretative possibilities are not allegories attached to the text by the reader (with the exception of Augustine), but are invited by John's own use and re-use of terminology with increasing layers of symbolic and theological significance.

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[1] Richard, 1985 pp. 96–112.

[2] Anderson, 2011.

[3] Culpepper, 1983.

[4] Note the extensive use of the Fourth Gospel in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, and the importance of Logos Christology, drawing from John 1, in Cyril of Alexandria's *Second Letter to Nestorius*.

[5] On the seven-day temporal structure of this section, see Stibbe, 1993, p 46, and Brant, 2011, p 44.

[6] Barrett, 1987, p 181.

[7] Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 7.10.

But within the post-Kantian, modernist legacy of biblical scholarship, this focus on John's symbolism has pulled the text away from any notion of its historic, or eyewitness reliability—which problem is of course our focus in the 'John, Jesus and History' seminars and publications. This continues to leave a strong legacy in contemporary ordinary reading, where it continues to be the case that John is read as a 'spiritual gospel', and its importance as a historical source (for example, of the idea that Jesus' ministry lasted three years, on account of the three Passovers mentioned in John 2.13, 6.4, and 11.55) is often greeted with surprise.

One consequence of this is to set John's Gospel at a distance from Luke, which, within the broader heading of a first century life or the *bios*, is increasingly being recognised as bearing the marks of first-century historiography.[8] There is some irony to this, given that both Luke and John, in distinction to Matthew and Mark, lean heavily on the concept of reliable eyewitness sources in their self characterisations. Luke's explicit mention of eyewitnesses in his introduction[9] is nicely balanced by John's thematic refrain of witness in his prologue, albeit using a different set of cognates, combined with the two-stage *inclusio* at the end of the gospel, comprising the episode of Thomas the twin and the final statement of the author as eyewitness whose testimony is true (21.24).[10]

So Jesus' symbolic actions in John are frequently read as belonging to John's interpretive scheme rather than reflecting Jesus' own intention or action. This can be seen, for example, in the dialogue that arises by juxtaposing the exegeses of the wedding at Cana in Andrew Lincoln and Craig Blomberg (both of whom have contributed to the JJH volumes). Blomberg addresses a range of objections to the implausibility of the account or its unhistorical character, and identifies a range of features which contribute to what he calls the 'historical verisimilitude' of the episode.[11] But he does this alongside noting the characteristic theological use of the story as a Johannine 'sign.' Lincoln, on the other hand, sees a tension between the symbolic and the historical dimensions of the story: if we remove all the elements that have Johannine symbolic significance, 'then we are left with very little indeed of any underlying incident.'[12] For Lincoln, this points to a 'negative historical evaluation' of the account[13]. I am not convinced that this is an adequate way to evaluate John's symbolism. There is no doubt symbolic significance to Nicodemus' coming to Jesus at night; but because this was symbolic, must it therefore have no historic value?

In fact, there is a good a priori reason for believing that Jesus would quite naturally act in deliberately symbolic ways. From Amos' plumb line (Amos 7.7–9) and fruit basket (8.1–2), through Hosea's marriage (Hosea 1.2–9), to Jeremiah's jumping into a well (Jeremiah 38.6) and Ezekiel's model of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 4.1–4), Jesus stands in a long line of prophetic symbolic action. And his appropriation of and reference to this prophetic legacy makes it historically plausible that he would have acted in similar ways, quite deliberately and self-consciously. (It is worth noting that this is a literary and theological legacy, so the historicity or otherwise of these prophetic accounts has no particular bearing on whether or not the historical Jesus might have followed their example.)

Luke and John: connections and contrasts

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[8] The landmark work on the gospels as *bioi* was Burridge, 1992. For a recent critique of aspects of this claim, see Nelson, 2025.

[9] Peters, 2020, argues that Luke's language here specifically fits with historiography which is written in the lifetime of the witnesses, rather than looking to the past.

[10] On John including features that would in the first century be regarded as historiographical, see Bauckham, 2007a, and chapter 14, pp 358 to 383, of Bauckham, 2017.

[11] Blomberg, 2001, p 86.

[12] Lincoln, 2005, p 42.

[13] Op cit, p 41.

It might seem too obvious to note the differences between Luke and John; after all, the observation of the differences between the fourth gospel and the synoptics has a long history. But the differences have always been in danger of overemphasis, and Luke's differences with Mark and Matthew, and points of contact with John, neglected.

Cribbs (1971) notes not only points of contact between Luke and John, but what he interprets as places where Luke and John agree over against Mark and Matthew. He lists nine significant examples, including the depiction of Jesus' ministry beginning in the hill country of Nazareth rather than by the sea (Luke 4.14–16, John 2.1–11), the prediction of Peter's betrayal happening in the upper room rather than on the way to the Mount of Olives (Luke 22.31–34, John 13.36–38), and Jesus' post-resurrection appearances being in Jerusalem rather than Galilee (Luke 24.13ff and John 20.11ff). From this, Cribbs suggests that Luke is later than John (or some form of proto-John), and that part of Luke's goal is to mediate the differences between John and Matthew/Mark.

The methodological question here is, when two texts appear to agree against others, which is the direction of dependency, and how would we know? How would we here judge that Luke is agreeing with John, rather than John is agreeing with Luke? Thus Mark Goodacre draws the opposite conclusion: John has knowledge of and draws on both Luke and Mark-and-Matthew.[14]

Despite these connections, we might still note the distinctives of Luke: its focus on the role of women, so some passages might be called 'gynocentric' texts,[15] and the notable inclusion of male/female pairs;[16] the central role of the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus in Luke and the ministry of the apostles in Acts;[17] the importance of money and finance in the teaching of Jesus;[18] and the significance of the destruction of temple.[19]

Symbolic action in Luke

When thinking about the nature of 'symbolic action', we need to pause to define our terms. Symbols are things that belong to the real, non-textual world, and their corresponding feature in texts is metaphor.[20] The philosopher of language who has done more work than any other on the meaning of metaphor is Paul Ricoeur. He classifies the three elements of metaphor as the subject (what the metaphor is about), the vehicle (the term predicated about the subject), and the tenor (the metaphorical meaning resulting). So in the predicative sentence 'My friend John is an absolute pig', 'John' is the subject, 'pig' is the vehicle, and the 'pigness' of John is the tenor—usually understood either to be meanness or greed, depending on the context. (The very curious thing about many metaphors is that their meaning as understood in context often has little connection with the characteristics of the vehicle; pigs in our culture are not known to be either mean or greedy, yet the tenor of the metaphor is usually one of these two.)

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[14] Goodacre, 2025. What Goodacre does do is argue for John's knowledge of all three, challenging the dominant view of the last 90 years or more.

[15] Bauckham, 2002, p 47.

[16] See the table in Paul, 2018, and Tönsing, 2023.

[17] See Menzies, 2021.

[18] See Hays, 2010.

[19] 'By this juncture in the Third Gospel, Jerusalem has been vested with monumental significance… divine visitation will be experienced not as redemption but as judgement…Jerusalem, in its failure to recognise the significance of Jesus' advent at its gates, has reached a point of no return.' Green, 1997, pp 681, 690.

[20] So I might light a candle to symbolise the presence of Jesus, but 'Jesus is the light of the world' is a metaphorical predication.

Ricoeur develops two key ideas in relation to how metaphors work.[21] The first is that metaphorical predication include both an 'is not' and and 'is' within its claims. My friend John *is not* a pig, which is what makes the statement metaphorical rather than literal. And yet he *is* a pig in the metaphorical sense; the content of the metaphorical predication is the tenor of the metaphor.

Secondly, and related to that, metaphorical (and therefore symbolic) meaning derives from the 'surplus of meaning' that metaphor provides.[22] So, accounts in the gospels might have a literal sense, and we can read the text in that way. But some will have a surplus of meaning and significance, which arises from the symbolic and metaphorical meaning. Thus in John 8.12, Jesus claims to be 'the light of the world', and this claim (embedded in discourse) is then followed by the narrative of him healing the man born blind in chapter 9. His claim to be the light of the world is repeated again in John 9.5, embedded in this new narrative. Jesus has literally healed the blind man, but the symbolic (metaphorical) surplus of meaning is the demonstration that he is indeed the light, the one who brings spiritual sight.[23]

Although the narrative of Luke is not so obviously heavily laden with symbolic significance as is the narrative in John, we should nevertheless note the frequency of episodes in the third gospel which are freighted with a surplus of symbolic meaning, beyond what we find in Matthew and Mark.

Birth narrative (2.1–7)	"Everything points to poverty, obscurity and even rejection." Morris (1988) p 92. Veracity and uniqueness among the gospels aside, Luke's birth narrative is presented in a manner richly aware of its symbolic power.
Boy Jesus at the Temple (2.41–52)	"The first recorded words of the Messiah are then a recognition of his unique relationship to God and of the necessity (must) of his being in the Father's house." (Morris, pp 101–2) That these first recorded words were spoken in the Temple, Jesus having already amazed the established religious teachers and authorities with the profundity of his understanding, presents the reader with a diorama that symbolically communicates the truth behind Jesus' words, and the upheaval his life and ministry will enact.
Jesus' baptism (3.21–22)	"It is at first sight puzzling that Jesus should have accepted baptism at the hands of John, for this baptism was a baptism of repentance. Since Luke depicts Jesus as without sin it is not obvious why he should have undergone this baptism. But Jesus saw sinners flocking to John's baptism. Clearly he decided to take his place with them. At the outset of his ministry he publicly identified himself with the sinners he came to save." (Morris, p 109)
Rejection at Nazareth (4.14–30)	Jesus' choice of reading, Isa. 61:1 followed by 58:6, suggests careful selection: Jesus' coming fulfils the Day of the Lord, liberation for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. The town and people of Nazareth themselves serve a symbolic purpose: their rejection of their own, in the face of the unpalatable truth he brings, is a microcosm for the fatal rejection Jesus knows he must suffer.

[21] Ricoeur's work is notoriously dense and opaque. His clearest exposition of metaphor can be found in Ricoeur, 1976, pp 45–69 and Ricoeur, 1978, pp 88–98.

[22] Hence the subtitle of Ricoeur, 1976: 'discourse and the surplus of meaning'.

[23] We should note that, just as with other symbolic actions, there is no need to set the literal and the symbolic over against one another; we do not need to posit that actions with a symbolic surplus of meaning did not actually happen, or that they were fabrications of the gospel writer created to make the symbolic point. As Bauckham, 2015, p 200 puts it: 'Jesus' 'symbolic' function, as revelation of God, would be meaningless unless Jesus were also a 'literal' figure. To the extent that the symbolic replaces the literal, it is self-defeating.'

Miraculous catch of fish (5.1–11)	There are deep and programmatic symbolic significances to this episode, which have close contact with the later episode in John 21, on which see below.
Rejection' of mother and brothers (8.19–21)	Jesus' 'rejection' of his mother and brothers is arguably symbolic, in as much as his implicit refusal to be distracted to meet with them is not 'merely' a disavowal of the primacy of family ties, but points beyond itself to the deeper truth that Jesus' mother and brother are "those who hear the word of God and do it."
Feeding of 5000 (9.12–17)	Luke's version of this event, narrated in all four gospels, has a distinctive focus on the Twelve, symbolising the restoration of Israel, explicit focus on the invitation to the wilderness and the teaching of Jesus as the new Moses, and strong parallels with Jesus' action in the Last Supper.
Samaritan opposition (9.51–56)	Jesus' passing through Samaria, with his face set to Jerusalem, serves a dual symbolic purpose: it is made clear that the Incarnation is for all people, not only Gentiles, while at the same time continuity with the faith and God of Israel is affirmed.
Last supper (22.19–20)	Luke treats the meal in the upper room as the institution of a new liturgy, in distinction from the other gospels. While the Passover meal symbolises deliverance, it does not evoke vicarious sacrifice, as does the language Jesus uses here, which is the basis of many contemporary eucharistic liturgies. "Jesus is interpreting his death in a Passover context and making it clear that it has saving significance." (Morris, p 334)

Thus we see in Luke a series of symbolic actions of Jesus, though which are perhaps not classified as such since we do not see in them the multi-dimensional explicit symbolism that we find in John.

Points of contact and comparison: three examples

To explore the differences between symbolism in Luke and John in details, I will take three examples: the accounts of the baptism of Jesus; the characterisation of Mary and Martha; and the miraculous catch of fish.

a. Jesus' baptism

One of the early points of comparison between Luke and John comes at the start of Jesus' ministry, at his baptism in the Jordan by John.

Luke 3.21–22:

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

John 1.32–33:
Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'

From a source-critical perspective, there is so little in common between these accounts that they could hardly be said to come from the same source. However, within the variety of the gospel accounts, they have much in common. They both lack Matthew's developed account of the dialogue with John the Baptist, and the inclusion by Matthew of the episode with a concern for 'righteousness.' They lack the directness and drama of Mark's rending of the heavens.[24] And they share a similar brevity.

[24] Though Luke still has apocalyptic imagery very much in mind. See Green, 1997, p 185.

Luke's short statement seems to emphasise the bodily nature of the Spirit's form,[25] and includes the same divine affirmation as the other synoptics. John's account is fundamentally different, in that rather than forming part of the testifying narrative of the gospel text itself, it is located in the account of the testimony of John the Baptist—so it is in fact testimony about testimony, rather than simply being testimony itself. Strikingly, John the Baptist's words even omit to mention baptism at all; is the gospel here assuming we have already read Luke, or Mark, and so know where it comes? But the most striking difference from Luke is the addition, in otherwise similar language, of the highly significant *meno*—twice we are told that the Spirit 'abided' on Jesus.[26]

In fact, this double mention forms the introduction of this significant term. In doing so, it forms part of the developed pro-trinitarian Christology typical of John's gospel.[27] And yet this has strong resonance with the theology of Luke, who (amongst the Synoptics) emphasises the importance of the Spirit in Jesus' life and ministry and in the ministry of the apostles.[28] Where Luke links the role of the Spirit with the ministry of testimony through his narrative construction, John links the Spirit and testimony through juxtaposition and symbolic use of key vocabulary.

b. The characterisation of Martha and Mary

In this case we are not dealing with an comparison with symbolic actions, but the interplay between symbolic action and the characterisation of what appear to be significant named people in the respective gospel accounts, which are not found in Matthew and Mark.[29]

The account of Martha and Mary comes near the start of the 'Travel Narrative' that occupies the central part of Luke's gospel.[30] Because of this, we cannot separate this episode from its narrative frame. The start of the chapter describes Jesus' commission of the 72 using similar words to his previous commission of the 12, these two missions seeming to anticipate the mission to the gentiles and to the Jews respectively. A major theme here is whether those to whom they are sent will indeed receive them, and this flows into Jesus' condemnation of the towns that have rejected Jesus and his message of the kingdom. This suggests that the traditional reading of Martha and Mary—that Mary rightly responds to Jesus, whilst Martha is distracted with other things—starts on the wrong assumption. The explicit language that Martha 'welcomed' Jesus (Μάρθα ὑπεδέξατο αὐτόν) sets her up as someone who responds rightly to Jesus and the kingdom.[31]

In John 11.1–44, the encounter with Martha and Mary occurs within a typically extended Johannine narrative which forms part of a climactic sign, the raising of Lazarus, pointing forwards in the narrative to Jesus' own resurrection but also beyond to the theological truth about resurrection life (eternal life) in Jesus. The roles of Mary and Martha are closely parallel, so that they even share some of the same

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[25] It is 'ekphrastic language, intended to appeal to the eye and not adjust to the ear'. Parsons, 2015, p 69.

[26] On the theological importance of *menein* for the whole of the Fourth Gospel, see Gorman, 2018.

[27] 'Once more the question is intelligible as it stands; but the use of *menein* is so characteristic of John's theology, e.g. 15.4) that a deeper meaning may be intended. Nothing is more important than to know where Jesus abides and may be found.' Barrett, 1987, p 181.

[28] 'Jesus' baptism as traditionally understood has been cast by the narrator as Jesus' anointing by the Spirit… It is the event that determines his understanding of his divine mission and empowers him to perform accordingly.' Green, 1997, p 186.

[29] Mary and Martha are 'crucial' to the plot of John 11, according to Stibbe, 1993, p 125. 'Jesus' encounter with Martha and Mary clarifies the nature of the welcome Jesus seeks not only for himself but also for his messengers —that is, for all who participate in the drawing near of God's dominion.' Green, 1997, p 433.

[30] North, 2015) p 130 gives a survey of the literature using this term.

[31] For a detailed reading of this passage, see Paul, 2025.

words.[32] It is striking that their encounters with Jesus are one by one, so that there is the characteristic focus of the response of each one separately to the person of Jesus. And in common with other sequential person encounters, they offer prototypical templates of possible responses to Jesus within the narrative, offering an implicit choice for the reader in terms of personal identification.[33]

In their 2008 essay North and Koet explore the connections between the characterisation of Martha and Mary in the two accounts.[34] Just as in John 11, in Luke 10 the two figures are closely related.

> The fact that their names begin in the same way (*Mar*tha and *Mar*y) suggest that the sisters are to be understood in close relation to one another… [T]he attitude they seem to represent are not to be opposed but to be seen as complimentary. (North, 2015, p132)

They note the context in Luke of the mission of the 72, and Martha's hospitable welcome of Jesus. Martha, in effect, functions as the 'person of peace' in Luke 10.6. Her name means 'mistress' in the sense of the one in charge of the domestic household, and this is significant given that Luke often draws on the meaning of names to reinforce his stories.[35] North and Koet offer an important additional perspective: far from connoting 'lowly service,' it signifies a spiritually significant ministry in Luke-Acts. It is used to describe the support by wealthy women of Jesus and his group in Luke 8.3; it is the work of Jesus himself in Luke 22.27; and in Acts 6.1 and 4 it is used of the ministry of the Seven, including Stephen. This is an honoured aspect of following Jesus and imitating his example.

> We can interpret the position of Martha in Luke 10.40 as one of important social status and her work as comparable to the work done by the apostles. (North, 2015, p 139)

They similarly challenge the idea that, in John 11, Martha's apparently 'orthodox' response to Jesus' promise that Lazarus will rise again in verses 24 to 27 should not be underestimated.

> There is nothing in the remainder of verse 27, where she enlarges on her answer, with the most comprehensive confessional statement in the entire Gospel, to suggest that she has not grasped Jesus' meaning (North, 2015, p 145).

Thus, in both accounts, the sisters are closely related, though with Martha taking the slightly more dominant position. In each story, they offer complementary responses to Jesus, and within the symbolic worlds of each gospel, offer archetypal possibilities for personal response to the person and ministry of Jesus.

In Luke, the full symbolic force of their positions is suppressed, in that we need to read carefully within the gospel (and Acts) as a whole, to see the significance of their positions. By contrast, in John, the symbolic significance of their responses and engagement is set out quite explicitly within the narrative unit. John wears his symbolism on his sleeve, where Luke wraps it in his narrative and historiographic detail.

c. The miraculous catch of fish

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[32] The argument of Schrader, 2016, that Martha was a later addition to an earlier narrative in John 11 that included Lazarus and Mary only is not persuasive.

[33] For depth reflection on the two characters as presented in the Fourth Gospel, see the essays in Hunt, Tolmie, and Zimmermann, 2013, pp 473–503.

[34] The 20028 essay was reprinted in North, 2015, and it is from this volume that I take the citations.

[35] From this it might be inferred that Luke has invented to the name in order to make the point about the relationship between the two figures. But, whilst Mary (Μαριάμ) is the most popular name in the region in the first century, Martha is also well known, as fourth most common in inscriptions. Bauckham, 2017, p 89.

The two accounts of the miraculous catch of fish, in Luke 5.1–11 and John 21.1–14, offer a final, fascinating comparison, since the two accounts share so many features, and yet illustrate most starkly the difference in the symbolic register of the two gospels. The similarities are striking: the men have had a fruitless night's work; Jesus gives a surprising instruction; there is a miraculous superabundance of catch; there is a recognition of (who) Jesus (is); Peter is central to both accounts; and the result is a (re)commissioning for ministry. Because of these points of contact, older commentators have argued on source-critical grounds that the two are creative narrations by each gospel writer based on a single event.[36]

More recent commentators note specific interaction between the accounts, with either Luke writing his knowing John's, or vice versa. Again we are faced with the methodological question of, when two texts share similarities, how we determine which direction the influence flows. And the differences between the accounts are as striking as the similarities:

	Luke 5:1–11	**John 21:1–14**
Description of the body of water	Lake (λίμνη)	Sea (θάλασσα)
Those present	Only (Simon) Peter named	Other disciples named and numbered
The location of Jesus	In the boat	On the shore
The command of Jesus	Put out your into the deep and let down your nets' (ἐπανάγαγε, χαλάσατε)	Cast your nets on the right side' (βάλετε, δεξιὰ μέρη)
Result of the action	The nets were breaking (διερρήγνυτο)	They were not strong enough (οὐκ ἐσχίσθη)
Reaction	'I am a sinful man' (ἡμαρτωλός εἰμι)	'It is the Lord!' (ὁ κύριός ἐστιν)
Title for Jesus	ἐπιστάτα	κύριος
Commission	'You will be catching (ζωγρῶν) men'	(none)
Meal	(none)	Bread and fish (ἄρτος καὶ ὀψάριον)
Fish count	(None)	153

Noting these differences leads us to see the difference in the 'surplus of meaning' of the main event, the symbolic significance of the miraculous catch.

In Luke, the primary sense of the story is that the command of Jesus has led to a miracle—and it is this which then elicits the response of wonder and submission from Peter. To understand this fully, we need to recognise Luke's description as a 'use of a type scene familiar to readers of the LXX'.[37] It mirrors the shape of the epiphany of God in Isaiah 6.1–10: epiphany; reaction; reassurance; commission.

> [This] encourages the view that Peter recognises in Jesus the agency of God. As a consequence, Peter, aware of the profound status of this teacher-prophet, responds by falling at Jesus knees in humility and refer to himself as a sinner.[38]

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[36] 'It is often viewed as a post resurrection story (cf John 21.1–11) that has been retrojected into Jesus' public ministry…' Parsons, 2015, p 87. For a modest summary of these claims, see Barrett (1987) p 578. For a detailed comparison of the accounts, see Abogunrin, 1985.

[37] Green, 1997, p 233.

[38] Ibid

The recognition of Jesus as Lord, the meaning of 'sinner', and issues of power are then developed throughout this gospel. But what is striking is how little is done with the symbolic significance of the catch itself. It is clearly connected with the ministry to which Peter (and the others) are called, by means of Jesus (apocalyptic) image of his followers 'catching' people.

But just as the large catch is landed, and then simply left there for others to deal with (since Peter and his 'partners' leave everything), so Luke leaves this image lying around for others to work on.

> Numerous attempts have been made to find symbolic, allegorical, and mythological meaning in this episode with reference to the size of the catch, the boats, and so on. Impetus for such views tends to originate from outside the text.[39]

In a dramatic contrast, John tells us the number of fish that were caught—153 large fish. The shape of the narrative draws our attention to this number, since the report of the miraculous catch, and the mention of the number that Peter hauls ashore, form an *inclusio* around the recognition of and encounter with Jesus. Where Luke leaves his fish to sink without trace in his narrative, John hauls these fish up under our nose, and invites us to 'cast our net into the deep', fishing for as much symbolic meaning as we can find—and many have taken up the invitation.[40]

The most comprehensive exploration of the number 153 can be found in Richard Bauckham's essay on its role in demonstrating the unity of the Fourth Gospel.[41] Following his work on numerology in the Book of Revelation, Bauckham observes that 153 is a 'triangular' number, that is, it is the sum of all integers from 1 to 17, so that 153 pebbles can be arranged in an equilateral triangle of side 17. This connects with the vision in Ezekiel 47 of the life-giving stream that pours from the side of the eschatologically restored temple; fishermen will spread their nets from En-Gedi to En-Eglaim, and the gematria values of the names Gedi and Eglaim (גֶּדִי and עֶגְלַיִם) respectively are 17 and 153. Thus this episode offers a theological connection with vision of Ezekiel which we would not have guessed from the plain reading of the narrative itself. And this connection is one that John has already made in recording Jesus' claim that 'streams of living water will flow from his [Jesus'] side' in John 7.38, and the blood *and water* flowing from his crucified body in John 19.34.[42]

Conclusion

Despite the assumption of the significant differences between Luke and John, there are many more connections that are often unrecognised. And we can see that Luke tells key parts of his narrative in such a way as to offer a 'surplus of meaning', so that, historiographical elements notwithstanding, they offer a symbolic significance.

But in both Luke and John, symbolisation leaves the events intact. Whether or not an action is symbolic is not something inherent in the action itself, but is a question which relates to the significance given to that action within the interpretive framework in which it is recalled. Symbolic acts do not find their symbolism primarily in their action, but in the interface between action, context, and interpretation. Was Jesus involved in action which had a wider significance beyond the immediate context in which it happened? Of course he was. Luke highlights such significance by means of placing such actions in a particular narrative framework and context. John highlights their significance by juxtaposing action with

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[39] Green, 1997, p 232.

[40] For a list of the seven other ways in which the 153 have been interpreted, see Paul, 2019.

[41] 'The 153 Fish and the Unity of the Fourth Gospel' in Bauckham, 2007b, pp 271–284.

[42] There is a further, curious, connection with Luke-Acts in this numerology: the number of groups of Jews, by place and kind, listed in Acts 2.9–11, turns out to be 17. Thus Luke appears to be drawing on the same Ezekiel vision as John is in his account of the miraculous catch—though Luke does not make use of this in his account of the incident.

dialogue and by using vocabulary with double meanings in such a way as to present these actions as what we would call 'symbolic.'

But there is a clear difference in the way in which the texts of the Third and Fourth Gospel effect their symbolic meaning. As Dunn comments:

> John may have concluded that to bring out the full significance of Jesus' mission he had to retell the tradition in bolder ways that brought out that significance more clearly.[43]

To borrow another set of metaphors: in reading Luke, and understanding the symbolic meaning of his text, we often need to dig deep and drill down to narrative structures, use of vocabulary, and wider canonical resonances. By contrast, the symbolism of John is lying on the surface. It needs to be dug out and made use of, but this feels like open-cast mining in comparison with the deep shafts needed to bring Luke's symbolic meanings to the surface.

This, in turn, offers us an important insight into the relationship between historicity and symbolism in the two gospels. For Luke, historical questions encountered across the text, marked out by the historiographical elements and language throughout the gospel. The symbolic significance of the text only comes to the fore as a result of this task of literary excavation, of exploring beneath the surface.

For John, the invitation to read symbolically is plain to see. But these symbolic invitations are closely juxtaposed with 'reality effects', elements that support the notion that John is writing on the basis of reliable eyewitness testimony. If the layering of history and symbolism is horizontal in Luke, then it is vertical in John, offering us a variegated pattern of symbol and history as we move through the text.

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[43] Dunn, 2013, p 183.

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