Excerpt Page from Craig Koester
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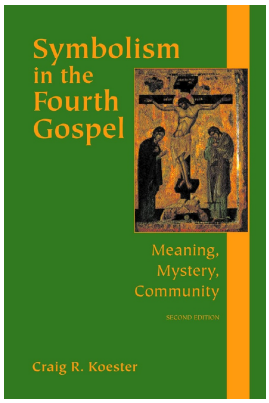
Excerpt from Craig Koester's *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Fortress Press, 2003), pages 109-112, 113, 116.

Koester recognizes that there is no break between John 9 and 10, so he treats the Good Shepherd passage as a continuation of the healing of the man born blind — which begins with the question by the disciples, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" By the end of John 9, Jesus highlights the sin of the Pharisees, rather than the man born blind. His condemnation of their sin continues with the Good Shepherd passage.



The imagery of the good shepherd and the gate in John 10 continues the debates of John 9 without pause. Although the transition seems abrupt, links between the section's main themes — light, water, and shepherding — may have been traditional. Jesus described a scene or "figure" (*paroimia*) with several elements (10:1-5). The setting was a sheepfold, which consisted of a circular wall of stones with a single opening. A fold might be attached to a house or located in open country. A shepherd would bring his flock through the gate and into the fold to protect the sheep from thieves and predators. During the night, someone might remain on watch near the door, and in the morning the gatekeeper would open the gate so that the shepherd could call the sheep out of the fold and take them to pasture. The sheep would recognize the voice of their shepherd and follow along behind him as he walked, but they would not respond in this way to the voice of a stranger. . . .

Jesus first elaborated the imagery by announcing, "I am the gate" of the sheep, which identified him as the sole legitimate means of access to the fold (10:7). When read in context, the gate imagery provides a commentary on the story of the expulsion of the man born blind from the synagogue. In Israel's tradition it was common to speak of God's people as his sheep (Pss 74:1; 79:13; 100:3). Therefore, if Jesus is the gate, one enters God's sheepfold or God's people through him. This reference shapes readers' perceptions of what happened to the man born blind, who would not accept the Pharisee's denunciation of Jesus any more than a sheep would heed the voice of a thief. When the Pharisees finally put the man out of the synagogue, their action appeared to make him an outsider, but John 10 reverses this judgment. If Jesus is the gate, then the beggar's relationship with Jesus actually made the man an insider who belonged to the people of God. Calling Jesus the gate also helps to distinguish the beggar's response to him from the polytheistic currents in the wider Greco-Roman world. The beggar worshiped Jesus only after he had been put out of the synagogue, and religious practices outside the synagogue easily accommodated the veneration of a number of divine figures. According to John's Gospel, however, the man born blind did not leave the synagogue only to fall into paganism by worshiping his healer. He came to faith in the one true source of life with God.

Identifying Jesus as the gate means that those who enter through him "will be saved" (10:9), yet the promise of salvation does not eliminate the threat of danger. The thieves and bandits continue seeking to kill and destroy (10:12), and the blind man who was healed by Jesus was repeatedly questioned and finally expelled from the synagogue, so that he clearly was not exempted from hostile social situations. The prospect of being saved (*sōzein*) through Jesus the gate or destroyed (*apollynai*) through the thieves is theological in character, as are the corresponding possibilities of having abundant life (*zōē*) or being killed (*thyein*, 10:9-10). A person who is saved has life, and in John's Gospel true life comes from a relationship with God. To be saved for life through the gate means coming to faith in God through Jesus the gate, whereas to be destroyed means being separated from God through unbelief. Salvation and abundant life begin in the present, because those who believe in Jesus are in right relationship with the God who sent him, and continue beyond physical death through resurrection into life everlasting. The

life that Jesus offers does not eliminate the threats posed by the thieves and bandits but sustains his followers in the face of those forces.

The identity of the thieves and bandits emerges by way of contrast with Jesus. If Jesus provides his followers with life in relationship with God, the thieves and bandits destroy life by destroying relationships with God. When Jesus says, "All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them" (10:8), his words cast the Pharisees in the role of the thieves and include the man born blind among the sheep, since he refused to listen to their attempts to discredit his healer. Yet Jesus speaks so broadly about "all" who came before him that it is difficult to limit the thieves and bandits to the Pharisees. Some interpreters have proposed widening the circle of bandits to include the insurrectionists in Roman Palestine, who claimed a kind of messianic status, but this is only partially adequate. The imagery is capable of functioning in multiple life situations, including those of Jewish Christians, like the man born blind, and the "other sheep" mentioned in 10:16, who were apparently not of Jewish background. Thieves and bandits seek to destroy God's flock by promoting the unbelief that separates people from the One who created and sustains them. In the immediate context the role is played by the Pharisees, but the imagery also enables readers of various backgrounds to discern similar threats in other contexts.

The second major section of the discourse identifies Jesus as the good shepherd, which is a three-dimensional image that encompasses the main aspects of his identity (10:11-18). We have already seen that the Gospel develops the shepherd imagery in ways that would have evoked and transformed a variety of associations (see pp. 16-18). Here we can build on those observations by considering how the shepherd imagery relates to the facets of Jesus' identity that emerged in the interchanges surrounding the healing of the man born blind; here Jesus was called a rabbi and a man, a prophet and Messiah, and was finally worshiped as the Son of Man (9:1, 11, 17, 22, 35-38).

At a basic human level, shepherding was a metaphor for leadership. In ordinary practice shepherds led their flocks by walking in front of them. Good shepherds protected and cared for their sheep, while bad shepherds neglected and abused the flock. These traits were readily transferred to leaders of human communities in Jewish and Greco-Roman tradition. When Jesus contrasted the good shepherd with the hired hand, who cared nothing for the sheep, he echoed what was said about the leaders or "shepherds" of Israel who were castigated by the prophets (Jer 23:1; Ezek 34:1-6). To speak of Jesus as a good shepherd fits his role as a leader and rabbi (9:1-5). . . .

The people of God find their identity in relation to the gate and the good shepherd. Jesus says that the sheep are those who hear the voice of the shepherd when he calls them by name and follow because they know his voice (10:1-5). In his subsequent comments he repeats that the sheep are those who recognize and listen to the shepherd (10:8, 14-16, 27). Conversely, those who do not listen to the shepherd do not belong to the flock (10:25). The alternatives are to "listen to him" or to reject his words (10:19-21). The question is not whether one is Pharisee or beggar, but whether the word of Christ evokes a response of belief or unbelief. The boundaries between belief and unbelief, and between the community and the world, are real but not static. The gate marks the boundary without sealing the boundary, so that Jesus can say, "Whoever [*tis*] enters by me will be saved" (10:9a). One may move from unbelief to belief, from outsider to insider. The gate distinguishes Christians from outsiders without closing them off from their surroundings, creating a way to envision the Christian community's ongoing distinction from the world and continued engagement with the world. The character of the community is also reflected in the need to bring together all Jesus' sheep, including the "other sheep" that were traditionally not part of Israel (10:16). . . .

So, "Who sinned?" The Pharisees and others concluded that Jesus sinned by healing on the Sabbath and by claiming to be one with God. Jesus argued that from a biblical perspective his words did not need to be taken as blasphemy, for Scripture itself used the word "god" for beings who would die (Ps 82:6; John 10:34-36); but the appeal did not alter his listeners' verdict: Jesus was an opponent of God. The fourth evangelist, however, seeks to disclose that by doing the works of God Jesus shows that he is one with God. In rejecting him, his adversaries reject the God who sent him. In an ironic turn, Jesus' opponents turn out to be the sinners who oppose God.