

A REVIEW ESSAY:  
*THE WORD OF LIFE: A THEOLOGY OF JOHN'S GOSPEL*

By Craig R. Koester. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. xiv + 245 pp.  
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## SUMMARY

Craig R. Koester, Professor Emeritus at Luther Seminary, is a prominent Johannine scholar. In this book, he aims to provide a theological reading of the Gospel of John, examining its theology by asking foundational questions such as: “Who is the God about whom Jesus speaks?” (ix). Rather than tracing the theological development of Johannine thought over time, Koester focuses on the Gospel’s present narrative form. The book unfolds thematically through major theological motifs organized by relational framework, which serves as Koester’s primary hermeneutical key. This review will critically engage Koester’s thesis and assess his contribution, particularly in terms of its resonance and its challenge to the African theological context. Additionally, the review evaluates Koester’s dismissal of the substitutionary atonement motif in the fourth gospel. Koester states, “to think theologically is to think relationally” (1). For him, a theological task involves asking questions about God in relation to His creation. Koester challenges an abstract approach to studying God; instead, he argues that a theological reading of the Gospel should involve thinking about God in relation to “people and the earth to which they belong,” and vice versa (1). He explains that the Gospel provides “a way of seeing the world and human beings in relation to God” (8). This relational vision functions as the organizing principle for Koester’s interpretation of God, Christology, and other theological themes through the Gospel.

Koester develops this thesis through key Johannine motifs. Within this framework, he addresses the epistemological question of how people come to know God. The author emphasizes the hiddenness of God apart from Jesus Christ. However, ultimately, “in the crucified and risen Jesus, they (readers) are called to see the face of God” (25). Furthermore, God established His relationship with creation by creating it through His Word. Finally, Koester notes that in the Gospel “Jesus identifies God in relational terms,” calling Him “the Father” or “my Father” (47). Jesus is the only Son (*monogenēs*), and through their relationship with Him, people become children (*tekna*) of God. Accordingly, humanity is defined by its relationship to Jesus. Koester writes, “in John’s Gospel human life is seen in relation to Christ and to the God who sent Him” (53). Hence, sin is primarily opposition to God, which is unbelief. He also highlights John’s unique portrayal of Satan as operating in the shadows through human agents, contributing to their rejection of Jesus.

The Gospel’s rich Christology emphasizes Jesus’s full humanity (“Flesh/sarx”) and unique divine Sonship, establishing the foundation for the relationship between God and humans. As the Word of God made flesh, in him “God addresses the world. God speaks to people by what Jesus says, what Jesus does, and who Jesus is” (98). The climax of God’s addressing the world in Jesus is the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Koester explains the primary purpose of the Crucifixion as demonstrating the love of God to evoke faith and establish a relationship with humanity, not as a substitution or mere example. Moreover, “the resurrection is essential for authentic faith because faith is a relationship with a living being” (123). Koester highlights the Spirit’s role

in evoking people's faith to relate to God by making "Jesus' identity known" (134). True faith, then, is "trusting or believing" in the crucified and risen Jesus, which is "a form of activity, a way of relating" (162, 170). Koester argues that "the call to faith is a call to a way of life" and that to relate to Jesus is "to go with him" (187). He examines various images of discipleship, highlighting love and keeping Jesus's word as marks of true discipleship. The author notes that these believing disciples form a new faith community and are sent out into the world.

## RELEVANCE TO THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

Although *The Word of Life* was first published in 2008, it remains a significant theological contribution to Johannine studies, and its relational insight continues to speak to the African theological and contemporary ecclesial context.

Koester's foundational statement, "to think theologically is to think relationally" (1), resonates naturally in the African context, as it aligns with a relational worldview. In African philosophy, being is defined by relationships rather than Aristotelian ontology. John Mbiti, in *African Religions and Philosophy*, describes African Anthropology writing, "to be human is to belong to the whole community." This demonstrates that the African view of human beings is fundamentally relational. God, in turn, is primarily understood in his relation to human beings as the explanation of their origin. Consequently, Koester's methodological choice to interpret John's theology through the lens of relationship provides a hermeneutical approach that is intuitively accessible for the African readers.

Simultaneously, however, Koester's framework offers a critical theocentric correction to a potential anthropocentric drift in the African worldview. As Mbiti observes in the previously mentioned work, in traditional African thought, "it is as if God exists for the sake of man." In contrast, Koester's relational framework firmly places God at the center. God is the initiator of relationship through creation and incarnation; humanity and everything else are defined by their response and relationship to God, not the other way around. Thus, while resonating deeply with the African relational thinking, Koester's model also challenges it to shift its primary orientation from human-centered to a God-centered relational paradigm.

This theocentric relational paradigm, in turn, has direct implications for the church. Koester's treatment of community relationships in the last chapter invites African Evangelical Churches, especially the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), to reflect on the theological foundations of ecclesial unity amid the challenges of disunity. His highlighting of the Evangelist's description of Christian community as family, friendship, and flock is particularly meaningful in the African context, where community life is deeply valued, as expressed in the ubuntu philosophy: "I am because we are." The familial image, seen in Jesus's uniting of his mother and the beloved disciple, "whose common bond is their relationship to him" (198), introduces a new communal identity established on shared faith in Christ rather than on biological or tribal bonds. These Johannine motifs resonate with Ethiopian social realities while also challenging us to embrace this new communal identity more than any earthly ties highly esteemed in Africa.

## CRITIQUE OF KOESTER'S TREATMENT OF THE ATONEMENT

Beyond its contextual relevance, Koester's work also invites critical engagement, particularly regarding his treatment of the atonement motif. Koester's keen observation of the new imagery associated with the title "the Lamb of God" in the Gospel of John is insightful. However, his rejection of any substitutionary element

in the expression is questionable when he states that John's "understanding of atonement differs from the idea that Jesus's death is the sacrifice that pays the penalty for human sin" (115). Although Koester acknowledges that the "lamb" (ἀμνός) in Isaiah 53:7 lies behind John's language, he gives insufficient attention to the broader context of the passage, in which the suffering servant bears the sins of many. Substitutionary atonement is therefore implicit in the use of the term itself. As D. A. Carson observes in his commentary on John, "It is hard to imagine that he (John) could use an expression such as 'Lamb of God' without thinking of the atoning sacrifice of his resurrected and ascended Savior."

Koester's emphasis on the relational nature of the Gospel also seems to affect his interpretation of the verb αἴρω, which he limits to the sense of "taking away or removing" (114), without acknowledging its nuance of "bearing." Yet Johannine usage frequently carries this connotation. The verb appears in contexts where something is taken away by being carried or lifted—such as the removal of animals from the temple (2:16), the carrying of the mat by the healed man (5:8–12), or the Jews lifting of stones (8:59). This pattern suggests that "taking away the sin of the world" (1:29) involves bearing it. In this light, the Andemta commentary rightly connects John 1:29 to the priest's laying on of hands in the Old Testament sin offering (Lev 4:4). Although those sacrifices often involved bulls or goats, the act of bearing sin provides the theological background for John's imagery.

This interpretation also aligns with patristic readings of the text. Cyril of Alexandria, for instance, in his commentary on John, understands John 1:29 as an allusion to Isaiah 53:7 and relates it to Galatians 3:13, where Paul writes that Christ became a curse on our behalf. Furthermore, Jesus's statements about giving his flesh "for the life of the world" (6:51) and laying down his life "for the sheep" (10:11) clearly imply substitutionary elements.

While the removal of sin through faith is central to John's Gospel, it is not mutually exclusive with substitutionary atonement. A more balanced reading integrates both aspects, recognizing that Jesus's sacrificial death takes away sin by bearing it on the cross and by overcoming unbelief through the revelation of divine love.

## CONCLUSION

Koester's work highlights the richness of John's Gospel while also inviting critical engagement. Though I find his dismissal of substitutionary atonement problematic, his relational approach to the Gospel remains both enriching and deeply challenging for the African theological and ecclesial context. Scholars, pastors, seminarians, and thoughtful laypeople would benefit from Koester's insightful treatment of the theology of the fourth Gospel.