

ANTI-JUDAISM AND THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Introduction: “You belong to your father, the devil ...”¹

Since Hitler and his Nazi machine systematically annihilated over six million Jews in the protracted mass murder we now call the Holocaust (or *Shoah*) many Christians have re-assessed their attitudes towards Jews and Judaism. The fact that many Europeans who were professing Christians either participated in the genocide or stood idly by while it happened has heightened the sensitivity of many Christians to the issue of Christian anti-Semitism. In the process, they have asked many piercing questions of their own faith and history.

Sadly, the history of Christianity is riddled with varying degrees of anti-Semitism, leading to oppression, marginalization, and – as in the Crusades and the Holocaust – even murder.² From where does this kind of hatred originate? Have Christian pastors and theologians misinterpreted the New Testament Scriptures to suit their own prejudices?³ Or, is there anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism resident in the pages of the New Testament, and subsequently in the theology of the Christian church?⁴

Indeed, when one begins to ask these kinds of questions, a whole complex of related issues arise. When we see passages in the New Testament that may be categorized as “invective” against “the Jews”, do we label them “anti-Semitic” or “anti-Jewish”? What constitutes “anti-Semitism”? What constitutes “anti-Judaism”? Are these terms even helpful? Or, do they serve to distort or ignore the context in which such “invective” was spoken? Do they polarize the discussion, leaving only two options – the passages are either “anti-Jewish” or “pro-Jewish”?

A related series of questions surrounds the usage of the term “the Jews” (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of John. How does the author of this Gospel use this and other related terms? Does the phrase “the Jews” always mean “all Jews present” at a given point in the narrative? Or, does John sometimes nuance his usage of “the Jews”? Similarly, is it appropriate for scholars to speak of “Jews” and “Judaism” in monolithic terms when it comes to the New Testament era? Or, should we speak of Judaisms? How may we differentiate between groups of “Jews” such as Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Jewish “leaders”, “the crowds”?

Another series of questions involves the history of interpretation of such passages. The various methodologies which are employed in the process of interpretation are crucial to our discussion. Redaction, historical, source, form, and “reader” criticisms (to name a few) have been employed by various scholars in this

¹ John 8:44, *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

² For two surveys of Christian anti-Semitism from very different perspectives, see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Crucified Jew: Twenty Centuries of Christian Anti-Semitism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) and Graham Keith, *Hated Without a Cause?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

³ As in Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*, trans. Weaver, Helen. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

⁴ See Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

process. To what degree may these methodologies shape the conclusions that are reached?

What about presuppositions? How does one's view, for example, of the inspiration and authority of the New Testament influence the inferences drawn from such studies? Do personal, social, and cultural factors influence one's interpretations of such passages? How has post-New Testament era Christian anti-Semitism influenced the debate over the presence of "anti-Judaism" in the New Testament? Is it anachronistic to suppose that since Christians have held anti-Semitic views since New Testament times that such views must be derived from an accurate reading of the New Testament?

We will attempt to prove here the rather broad thesis that "anti-Judaism" is not present in the Gospel of John. Before doing so, we must turn our attention to preliminary considerations, many of which we have alluded to here in our introduction. Next, we will examine briefly whether "anti-Judaism" is present in the Gospel of Matthew, Acts, and in the Pauline literature. We will then focus our discussion of the question at hand by surveying and commenting upon some key themes in John's Gospel. Finally, we will attempt to discern whether "anti-Judaism" is present in a very difficult passage, John 8:31-45. Since this is not merely an academic matter, we will conclude with a discussion of how we hope that our conclusions might affect Jewish-Christian relations in the future.

Preliminary Considerations: "Anti-Semitism" and "Anti-Judaism"

As one might expect, some definition of terms will be crucial to our discussion. One need only to briefly survey the literature on Christian anti-Semitism to see the divergent opinions on just what constitutes "anti-Semitism". Heiko Oberman famously distinguished between "anti-Semitism" as racially motivated hatred and "anti-Judaism" as hatred motivated by theological conviction. Yet even he recognized the "crossovers and points of transgression" between the two.⁵ Graham Keith prefers the term "anti-Semitism" to "anti-Judaism" because the distinction is just too simplistic; there is usually a complex of issues leading to hatred of Jews.⁶

While recognizing the validity of Keith's argument, particularly as it applies to post-New Testament Christianity, we believe that it is improper to associate the term "anti-Semitism" with the invective against "the Jews" in the New Testament. Indeed, as our argumentation will show, we believe it is unhelpful to declare as "anti-Jewish" passages in the New Testament where Jesus and "the Jews" clash. In saying this, we do recognize the presence of both anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in later Christian interpretation of such New Testament pericopes.

⁵ *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, trans. James I. Porter (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 22.

⁶ *Hated Without a Cause?*, 6.

Why do we make such a move? We believe that to use the term “anti-Jewish” of many such passages in the Gospels is to imply that Jesus himself is “anti-Jewish”. Now, we recognize that many scholars do not believe that many of the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels were actually spoken by him. We, however, reject the presupposition that later Christian communities put words such as those in John 8:44 in Jesus’ mouth. It is these sorts of presuppositions that have led many scholars to charge the New Testament writers with “anti-Judaism”. This brings us to our next point of discussion.

The Place of Presuppositions

It is incumbent upon us to state here that no reader of the New Testament is free of biases and presuppositions when approaching a given text. The present writer is no exception. Yet, it is essential that such biases and presuppositions be openly aired and examined in the process of interpretation. Rosemary Ruether, for example, argues that the Pharisees are supposedly injected into the Gospels as a “creation of the Church out of its later conflict with this teaching tradition.”⁷ We reject this assertion on the grounds that it cannot be proven. Similarly, it is our assertion (with Herman Ridderbos) that the argument that the late first century “Johannine community” edited the Gospel of John in such a way as to force its concerns back on the events of Jesus’ life – including the insertion of anti-Jewish invective – is unsupportable.⁸

We also readily admit our own presupposition that the New Testament Scriptures (along with the Old Testament) are the inspired, infallible Word of God. Such a presupposition need not be in conflict with the historical study of the New Testament as a first century Near Eastern document. The theological conviction that the New Testament Scriptures are *not* the inspired, infallible Word of God has in fact led some scholars to a cynical view of these texts that is not in concert with honest historical appraisal. While scholars can do their utmost to remain as objective as possible about the New Testament data, it is impossible to approach this religious book on some fictional neutral ground.

“Anti-Judaism” and the New Testament

Matthew

The charge of anti-Judaism is leveled at the Gospels with varying degrees of force. The Gospel of Matthew is no exception. Samuel Sandmel, for instance, seems to see the “anti-Semitism”⁹ of Matthew as less subtle than that of the Gospel of Luke, but less caustic than that of the Gospel of John.¹⁰ Matthew is trying to convince Jews to

⁷ *Faith and Fratricide*, 58.

⁸ *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 10-11.

⁹ He uses the term conscious of its incorrectness, noting that the term “anti-Judaism” had not “caught on” by the time he wrote his book. *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978) xxi.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

convert to Christianity, the “authentic Judaism”. He highlights Matthew 5:17-19 as the keynote passage supportive of this concept.¹¹

Ulrich Luz takes a different angle on Matthew’s Gospel, making the charge of anti-Judaism more forcefully. He surmises, based partly on the presupposition that Matthew is describing a struggle for Judaism on the part of the Pharisees and the “Jesus movement” that “Matthew’s theology is thoroughly anti-Jewish.” He argues further, based on translating πάντα τα ἔθνη in Matthew 28:19 as “all the Gentiles”, that the Matthean community espouses the view of a *replacement* of the mission to Israel with a mission to the Gentiles.¹²

Norman Beck levels the charge of “anti-Jewish polemic” at Matthew’s Gospel in a manner that is much more thorough than in either Sandmel or Luz. We differ with each of his conclusions, and we will attempt to demonstrate why some of them are false. He concludes four things about the anti-Jewish polemic of Matthew’s Gospel.

First, he concludes that the polemic of “Matthean redactions” heightens the anti-Jewish polemic already present in Mark and “Q” (both of which are Matthew’s primary sources). Secondly, the most “bitter anti-Jewish invective” in Matthew comes from “Q” and his own compositions. Thirdly, he argues that the portrayal of the Jewish Scriptures and the Pharisaical interpretation of them in Matthew’s Gospel are designed solely to show the superiority of Jesus’ interpretation of them. Fourthly, he concludes that the “most vicious anti-Jewish material in Matthew” can be “repudiated” by interpretive translations and a small-print status in the translated text.¹³

In response to Beck, particularly his first and second conclusions, we note first his reliance upon redaction criticism. According to Beck, the polemic of the “Matthean redactions” heightens the anti-Jewish polemic of Mark and “Q”. For our purposes, we will not enter into an extended discussion of Matthew’s sources. While we accept that Matthew may have relied upon Mark’s text in many places, the evidence for a supposed “Q” source is dubious. It is thus highly speculative of Beck to conclude that the most “bitter anti-Jewish invective” in Matthew comes from “Q” and from his own compositions. We believe that discussion of the final form of Matthew’s Gospel is open to less subjectivity than in the redactional approach.

Is Matthew, then “anti-Jewish”? Let us examine one passage as a case study. One place where Beck believes that Matthew reflects an “anti-Jewish” polemic is in Matthew 9:1-8. In this context, Jesus heals a paralytic. In the course of events, a controversy arises between Jesus and some scribes when Jesus not only heals the

¹¹ Ibid., 52, 54, 70.

¹² “Matthew’s anti-Judaism: Its origin and contemporary significance,” *Currents in Theology and Mission*. 19, 408-09.

¹³ *Mature Christianity in the 21st Century: The Recognition and Repudiation of the Anti-Jewish Polemic in the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 1994) 197-98. Matthew Cook also argues that Matthew intensifies the “anti-Jewish” rhetoric of Mark’s Gospel. See Cook, “Anti-Judaism in the New Testament”, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 38 No.2: 131.

man, but also forgives him of his sins. The scribes charge Jesus with blasphemy, but Jesus rebukes them, saying

“Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....’ Then he said to the paralytic, ‘Get up, take your mat and go home.’”¹⁴

Beck objects to the phrase, “Why do you *think evil* in your hearts?”, noting that it heightens the anti-Jewish polemic of the Markan and Lukan accounts of this event¹⁵.

Note here that if the controversy is historical, as we believe it is, then what we have here is a genuine theological debate. It is heated indeed. Is Jesus’ answer simply an excoriation of the scribes with the sole purpose of their condemnation? Or, is there something more at work here? Jesus is boldly declaring himself to be the Son of Man. They believe that he is blaspheming by offering to forgive the sins of the paralytic. He is confronting them (and whoever else may have been present) with His own Sonship. They have assumed he is blaspheming because they (presumably) do not accept His Sonship.

Unlike Beck, we do not believe that the controversy with the scribes in 9:3-6 should be omitted from public reading and teaching of the pericope.¹⁶ We believe it is instructive of Jesus’ Sonship, which is no small matter. This is merely one passage to which Beck attributes “anti-Jewish polemic”. It is representative of how he handles many other passages in the Gospels. Is Jesus’ affirmation of his Sonship “anti-Jewish”, or is it a fulfillment of his role as Messiah?

With respect to Beck’s third conclusion – that the Gospel of Matthew’s portrayal of the Pharisaical interpretations of the Jewish Scriptures is solely designed to show the superiority of Jesus’ interpretation of them – we agree essentially with the substance of the conclusion, but ask why this is necessarily “anti-Jewish”. If a Christian pastor or theologian were to enter into a debate with a Jewish rabbi concerning whether Isaiah 53 is a passage prophetic of the coming Messiah and is fulfilled by Jesus in the New Testament, would the Jewish rabbi be arguing in an “anti-Christian” manner to suggest that the passage does not speak about Jesus’ Messiahship but about the role of the nation of Israel as “suffering servant”? We think not.

He would simply be arguing the meaning of the passage from a Jewish perspective. This perspective happens to conflict with the Christian understanding of the passage, but we would hardly deem it “anti-Christian”. The Gospel of Matthew simply strives to argue for an understanding of Jesus’ ministry as a fulfillment of Judaism.

¹⁴ Matthew 9:4b-6, *NIV*.

¹⁵ *Mature Christianity*, 175.

¹⁶ *Mature Christianity*, 175.

Acts

The book of Acts is certainly no stranger to the charge of “anti-Judaism” either. There are certainly some eyebrow-raising passages in this sequel to Luke’s Gospel.¹⁷ The tactic that Sandmel takes with regard to Acts is typical of many scholars who attempt to explain away the phenomenon of the early church’s clashes with the synagogue. “The Jews” in Acts are “villains”, but are they real villains or “puppets of the author?” he asks.¹⁸ Unlike Sandmel, we accept the historicity of the events of the book of Acts, and are thus faced with an “ethical dilemma” regarding some very difficult passages.

Let us examine one of the more difficult passages, Acts 7:51-53. Here Stephen, in the midst of his extended reply to the high priest’s question, “Are these charges true?”¹⁹ excoriates his Jewish audience, calling them “stiffnecked” and “uncircumcised”, charging them with killing the prophets, and finally with deicide. Sandmel has labeled this a “patently anti-Jewish passage”.²⁰ But, is this true? Is Stephen being “patently anti-Jewish” here?

If one assumes that Stephen is an adherent of a new religion – that of Christianity – and is thus an “outsider” to Judaism, then the charge could certainly stand. If one views Stephen not as an outsider but as a Jew who has embraced the One who is the fulfillment – the very embodiment of – true Judaism, a starkly different picture emerges. Thus, Stephen is delivering an *internal* critique of Judaism. He is an “insider” who has embraced the Judaism of the “Jesus Movement”. Notes Witherington, “The quotation from Isa. 66:1-2 shows that Stephen stands in the line of the prophetic critique of a temple theology that neglects or negates the transcendence of God, *and in fact he does not go beyond it.*”²¹ This is certainly not the only passage in Acts that has borne the “anti-Jewish” label, but it is certainly one of the more direct attacks against a Jewish audience in the book.

Paul

What of “anti-Judaism” in the Apostle Paul’s writings? Here, the verdict amongst scholars seems mixed. E.P. Sanders, for example, argues that Paul “styled himself”, and acted like, an “apostle to the Gentiles.”²² His teaching displays several discontinuities with the Palestinian Judaism of his day, including the rejection of the idea of the continuing election of Israel “according to the flesh” and the stress on faith in Christ over against Torah observance.²³ Yet, he was no “outsider”. If he considered himself an “outsider”, he would not have continued in the synagogue. If the synagogue membership considered him an “outsider”, “they would not have punished him.”²⁴

¹⁷ See Sandmel’s discussion of “anti-Semitism” in Acts, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?*, 87-100.

¹⁸ *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?*, 100.

¹⁹ Acts 7:1, *NIV*.

²⁰ *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?*, 87.

²¹ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 274 (emphasis mine).

²² *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983) 190.

²³ *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 208-10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

In the end, Sanders paints Paul as a man desperately trying to see himself as a Jew while simultaneously on a mission primarily to Gentiles, all the while requiring faith in Christ of both Jew and Gentile.²⁵ While at one point in his career, Sanders viewed Paul as calling for all to have faith in Christ as the *only way* of salvation, when he wrote *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* he believed that Paul was above all *conflicted* about this very thing. He seems to imply that Paul would have eventually espoused a “two-covenantal theology” as the solution to this problem. Thus, for Sanders, Paul is not essentially “anti-Jewish”, but conflicted regarding the manner of their salvation.

W.D. Davies takes a view of Paul and Judaism that is rather curious. He wants to rescue Paul from the charge of anti-Judaism, but must go to great lengths to do so. He argues, for example, that “Paul as minister of the new covenant was not founding a new religion or a new people, and not dismissing the old covenant but revealing a new meaning and character in it.”²⁶ This characterization seems to be at odds with Paul’s own words in I Cor. 10:32.

Davies similarly defends Paul against the charge of anti-Judaism in Romans 9-11, labeling the charge “anachronistic”.²⁷ He balances, correctly we think, Paul’s fierce condemnation of the Law and other “anti-Jewish” condemnations in the book of Romans with his positive portrayals of Torah (Rom. 7) and of the Jews (Rom. 9-11).²⁸ He concludes that Romans 9-11 is a “torturous discussion” that ends in a “paradox”; namely that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek” and yet there is “a continued place for the Jewish people as such.”²⁹

We think that Davies’ reading of Romans 9-11 is unfortunate, noting here only that Paul’s great love for his fellow Jews is so great that it could be mistaken for a “two-covenant theology” only if one ignores clear markers such as 9:6-8 and 9:30-33. There is no “paradox”. Paul desperately loved his own people, but he did not alter the way of salvation – in Christ alone – because of it.

“Anti-Judaism” and the Gospel of John

When one considers the question of whether there is “anti-Judaism” in the New Testament, inevitably the discussion comes to center around what many consider its most blatantly “anti-Jewish” book, the Gospel of John³⁰. Indeed the conflict here between Jesus and the “Jews” is both striking and pervasive. Yet, can a convincing case be made that this conflict reveals an “anti-Jewish” purpose on the part of the

²⁵ Ibid., 199.

²⁶ *Jewish and Pauline Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984) 130.

²⁷ Ibid., 134.

²⁸ *Jewish and Pauline Studies.*, 135.

²⁹ Ibid., 147.

³⁰ Norman Beck considers Acts, rather than John’s Gospel, the most “anti-Jewish” document, calling its polemic “the most devastating and most destructive of Jewish religion and life in all of the New Testament documents.” He seems to be in the minority on this question. *Mature Christianity in the 21st Century*, 242. For the more common view, see Cook, “Anti-Judaism in the New Testament?”, 133 and Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 89.

Gospel's author? We will dedicate the majority of the rest of this work to argue that it does not, giving several arguments to buttress our case. We begin, however, with some considerations about the background of the Gospel.

Author, Audience, Date, and Purpose

While many New Testament scholars have come to speak of the authorship of John's Gospel in terms of a "Johannine community", we find evidence for such an assertion unconvincing. This assertion is often made on the basis of supposed redactional "layers" in the text and on its "advanced" or "high" Christology. There is much counterevidence that would lead us to identify "the beloved disciple" with the apostle John. For the sake of brevity, we will state our position that the author of the Gospel is indeed the apostle John and refer the reader to some convincing arguments for this position.³¹

The audience and purpose of the Gospel are crucial to our discussion. There are at least three possibilities that C.K. Barrett advances for the audience to which John wrote his Gospel. First, he could have been writing to a primarily Hellenistic, non-Christian audience as a sort of "missionary tract". Second, he could have been writing for Christians who were confronting problems of eschatology and Gnosis as the church expanded into new environments. Thirdly, he could have written his Gospel as a "counterattack against the Jews, who were defaming the Christian Messiah", a sort of precursor to Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*.³²

Barrett's conclusion is that the book was composed "in a setting which was partly, but only partly, Jewish." Hellenists and pre-Gnostics, he contends, were also part of the audience and circles in which the author intermingled.³³ He recognizes a "Jewish element" in the language of the Gospel, but sees it as "too weak" to conclude that his audience was either solely or even primarily Jewish.³⁴ C.H. Dodd has a much more nuanced view on audience and purpose, we think.

Dodd argues that the audience to which the Gospel of John is written is steeped in the Hellenistic Judaism of Philo. In short, Philo's Hellenistic Judaism represents a "cross-fertilization of Hebrew and Greek thought."³⁵ He notes a "range of ideas" that are presupposed in the background of John's Gospel that are very similar to Philonic Hellenistic Judaism that are nevertheless treated in a manner that is strikingly different from Philo.³⁶ He also argues that there are significant elements of Rabbinic Judaism present in the Gospel.³⁷ Dodd thus sees the audience of John's Gospel as primarily Jewish, but nonetheless a Jewish audience that is highly familiar with both Philonic and Rabbinic forms of thought.

³¹ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 138-57. See also Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 676-82.

³² Barrett borrows these from van Unnik. *The Gospel of John and Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1975) 8-9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁴ *The Gospel of John and Judaism*, 39.

³⁵ *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1968) 54.

³⁶ *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 73.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 76-96.

Köstenberger posits that Diaspora Jews and Gentiles attracted to Judaism (proselytes) make up the audience of the Gospel. The purpose of the Gospel, then, is to encourage both groups “to turn to Jesus, the Messiah who fulfilled the symbolism embodied in the temple and the Jewish feasts.”³⁸ Assuming a post-70 AD date somewhere in the 80’s, he views the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem as an “opportunity for Jewish evangelism.”³⁹

While there is certainly a strong Jewish flavor to the Gospel, we cannot ignore the interweaving of Jewish and Greek thought-forms and thus think that Köstenberger’s purpose statement leans too far in one direction. Dodd’s assessment seems to handle the Hebrew and Greek trajectories more satisfactorily. We would note briefly here that the dating of the Gospel varies anywhere from 55 to 95A.D. The argumentation is not terribly convincing either way, but it seems most probable that Carson, Moo, and Morris are right to date the Gospel somewhere between 80 and 85 A.D.⁴⁰ We now turn our attention to the recurrence of the phrase “the Jews” in the Gospel of John.

“The Jews” in the Gospel of John

When read through post-Holocaust ears, even a cursory reading of John’s Gospel, replete with references to “the Jews”, can make one shudder. As we noted in our introduction, twenty centuries of Christian anti-Semitism makes the task of interpreting this first century document all the more daunting. Yet, we must do so with the recognition that it was written nearly two thousand years ago in a setting far different from our own. This recognition is basic to a proper hermeneutic and must not be abandoned, even given the sensitivity of our topic. We will return to this contextualization later, but will now survey the particularly pejorative usage of the term “the Jews” (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) in the Gospel.

There are 67 occurrences of the term in John’s Gospel, not all of them being uncomplimentary. Even so, the tension between Jesus and “the Jews” is palpable in a great many of these occurrences. Take, for example, Jesus’ confrontation with “the Jews” over the temple in 2:18-25. “The Jews” in this passage clearly lack the understanding that Jesus wants them to have concerning the Jerusalem temple and His “temple”.

Again, in 5:1-47, Jesus has a confrontation with “the Jews”. Here the tension is heightened, especially in vv. 16 and 18. Now, “the Jews” do not simply lack understanding; they “persecute” him and actively seek to kill him. Beginning in chapter 7, the conflict with “the Jews” is so perilous for Jesus that he has to change his travel plans “because the Jews there were waiting to take his life.”⁴¹ The tension rises until a crescendo is reached in 8:44 where Jesus declares, “You belong to your father, the devil ...” For those who contend that the Gospel of John is “anti-Jewish”, this passage

³⁸ *Encountering John: The Gospel in its Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 25,27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁰ *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 166-68.

⁴¹ John 7:1, *NIV*.

is the very apex – or, perhaps more properly the *abyss* – of the “anti-Judaism” of the book.

While the height of tension between Jesus and “the Jews” is reached in chapter 8, there are still more conflicts in the remainder of the Gospel. In chapter 9, Jesus heals a blind man, then is confronted first by some Pharisees (9:13-17), then by “the Jews” (9:18ff.). There is another controversy with “the Jews” in 10:19-39. Here, Jesus is accused of blasphemy and “the Jews” pick up stones to stone him, and try unsuccessfully to seize him.

In 11:1-54, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. While many of “the Jews” give comfort to Mary at the death of Lazarus (11:19) and many of them also “put their faith” in Jesus (11:45), some of “the Jews” notify the Pharisees of what has transpired, leading to a chain of events that ultimately lead to his trial and death. Because of this evolving plot to kill him, Jesus “no longer moved about publicly among the Jews.”⁴² In John’s Passion narrative, “the Jews” are ubiquitous and sinister. At every turn, despite Pilate’s protestations, “the Jews” are portrayed as insistent upon Jesus’ death.⁴³ We will examine this phenomenon of John’s gospel in more depth later.

Jesus and the Temple in the Gospel of John

To acquire a proper view of the context in which Jesus’ controversy with “the Jews” in John 8 takes place, it would be helpful for us to examine for a moment the portrayal of Jesus’ relationship to the Jerusalem temple in the Fourth Gospel. In 2:13-22, Jesus confronts those who are buying and selling in the temple courts. While Jesus’ disciples gradually come to understand the meaning of the episode⁴⁴, “the Jews” demand a miraculous sign to prove his authority for such a harsh condemnation⁴⁵ and are clearly puzzled by his promised “miraculous sign”; “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”⁴⁶ The explanation given by the author shows Jesus to be a replacement for the temple.

This passage is often seen as an example of the Johannine community’s hostility towards, or at least superiority to⁴⁷, first-century Judaism. Sanders, in fact, sees this episode as one crucial reason that he is later tried and executed.⁴⁸ Before revealing our conclusions about Jesus and the temple, however, let us examine two other passages that demonstrate this relationship.

In John 4:20 - 23 we have the culmination of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. In astonishing fashion, Jesus tells her that an hour is coming when *true* worship will no longer take place on “this mountain” (in Samaria) or “in Jerusalem” (at the temple), but “in spirit and truth.” As a seeming corollary to his

⁴² John 11:54, *NIV*.

⁴³ John 19:7-18, *NIV*.

⁴⁴ John 2:17, 22, *NIV*.

⁴⁵ John 2:18, *NIV*.

⁴⁶ John 2:19, *NIV*.

⁴⁷ Beck, *Mature Christianity*, 294-95.

⁴⁸ *Jesus and Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987) 293.

declaration in 2:19 (and explained in 2:21), Jesus displaces the Jerusalem temple as the place of true worship.

Another more subtle and ironic portrait of the temple in the Fourth Gospel takes place in 11:47-53. Afraid that Jesus' popularity among the people (especially in light of the miracle of Lazarus' resurrection in 11:38-43) would lead the Romans to take away "our place and our nation", the chief priests and Pharisees call a meeting of the Sanhedrin that leads to the plot to kill Jesus. The irony lies in the fact that "place" (*τοπος*) is an expression for the Jewish temple. In a footnote, Motyer argues that vv. 51-52 reflect the Old Testament prophetic expectation (especially that of Ezekiel) connoting the restoration of the nation into one (*εις εν*) as the "place where they gather."⁴⁹

What, then, can we conclude regarding the portrait of Jesus and the temple in the Fourth Gospel? Motyer's analysis of this topic is very helpful for us here. Rejecting Bultmann's overly symbolic, a-historical approach, along with other unsatisfactory approaches, Motyer argues that we must consider Jesus' relation to the temple in light of "the trauma resulting from the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of its worship."⁵⁰ When we do so, we can see the "deep irony" of the "*destruction and reconstruction*" of the temple in 2:19, the sympathy on the part of the original hearers of John's Gospel for Jesus' rebuke of "unchecked" temple corruption (even at Passover), and the explosion of the myth of the temple's "permanence and invincibility."⁵¹

Finally, we see the *tragic* irony of chapters 2 and 11 – that of "authority-figures confidently exercising their power, unaware of the shaky ground on which they stand" – and the *dramatic* irony of chapter 4, which is a sort of "secret communication" that would have been somewhat unclear to the Samaritan woman, but abundantly clear to the reader of John's Gospel post-70 AD.⁵² Utilizing Motyer's fusion of "historical" and "narrative" methodologies, we are led to a reading of John's Gospel (at least in relation to Jesus and the temple here) that is at a minimum *less* "anti-Jewish" and perhaps not "anti-Jewish" at all.

Jesus and the Law in John 7 - 10

Jesus' relationship to the Law of Moses in John 7 – 10 is also crucial to our understanding of the bigger picture of Jesus' relationship to Judaism, and thus our understanding of John 8:31-45 (which we will examine shortly). Nonetheless, our discussion of this aspect of Jesus' relationship to Judaism will be more limited than our analysis of Jesus and the temple. We contend here, briefly, that this relationship is not nearly as oppositional as some would believe.

First, we note, with George Brooke, that chapters 7 – 10 of John's Gospel interact with the Decalogue in a very intentional manner.⁵³ Most striking for our primary

⁴⁹ *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and 'the Jews'* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997) 41.

⁵⁰ *Your Father the Devil?*, 38.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 41-42.

⁵³ Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?*, 42.

text here is the appearance of five of the Ten Commandments in the immediate context: *murder, adultery, false witness, coveting, and honoring of father and mother.*⁵⁴ Jesus is intentionally lacing his controversial dialogue with “the Jews” with references to Torah. Thus, far from abrogating Torah⁵⁵, Jesus (as does Paul, for example, in Galatians) engages in *midrash*.

Sanders, in fact, buttresses this view of Jesus and Torah, denying that he opposed or rejected Torah.⁵⁶ Motyer presents ample support for the argument that Jesus utilizes rabbinic, midrashic techniques.⁵⁷ So, the picture of Jesus in John 8 is not that of an “outsider” seeking to overturn Torah, but that of a prophet, a rabbi, deep-rooted in his understanding of and love for Torah. He, of course, also claims to be Messiah, the One who is one with the Father. It is this claim, above any other, that leads to increasing conflict with “the Jews”, and ultimately to his death. *“Philo-Judaism” in John’s Gospel?*

While much has been made of “anti-Judaism” in the Gospel of John, what of “philo-Judaism”? Some dismiss offhand passages that speak positively of Jews in John’s Gospel as later redactions. We regard such argumentation as faulty.⁵⁸

John 4:22 quotes the Samaritan woman at the well as saying, “...salvation is of the Jews.” In 8:31, Jews who “had believed Him” are present with Jesus. In 11:19, Jews come to comfort Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus. In 11:45, many Jews “put their faith in Him” (i.e., Jesus). In 12:11, again “many” Jews believe in Jesus. This is only a brief sampling, but it demonstrates that the portrayal of “the Jews” in the Gospel of John is not singularly negative.

“Anti-Judaism” in John 8:31-45?

We have thus far 1.) framed our discussion of “anti-Judaism” in the Gospel of John with some important considerations, 2.) examined the question of “anti-Judaism” in the broad context of the New Testament, and 3.) considered the possibility of its presence in the Gospel of John. Before we discuss our conclusions, we will examine more closely the one pericope that has garnered more attention with respect to “anti-Judaism” than perhaps any other in the New Testament, John 8:31-45. We begin with a brief summary of its contents.

The Controversy of John 8:31-45

Jesus here makes the claim that he is the one who is the truth, and can grant true freedom.⁵⁹ “The Jews” are defiant at this point and insist that, being Abraham’s

⁵⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁵ See Matthew 5:17-19, *NIV*.

⁵⁶ *Jesus and Judaism*, 269.

⁵⁷ *Your Father the Devil?*, 43.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John*, 162-63.

⁵⁹ John 8:31,32, *NIV*.

seed, they have never been enslaved to anyone.⁶⁰ Jesus attempts to show them their enslavement to sin, reiterates that He is the way to true freedom, then insinuates on the basis of their desire to kill him that God is not their Father.⁶¹ After they claim God as their Father, Jesus rebuts their claim on the basis that He is sent from God the Father and they have rejected Him.⁶² At this point, he utters the stinging rebuke, “You belong to your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”⁶³

John 8:31-45: Historical Context and “the Jews”

We noted earlier that the context of John’s Gospel is that of a devastated first-century Judaism in search of answers in light of the sacking of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans. While it is difficult to reconstruct exactly the historical situation, we can say that if we are correct that the destruction of Jerusalem takes place between the events described in the Gospel and the hearing of the final form of its text, the series of ironies for the original reader of which Motyer speaks makes a great deal of sense.

Returning to an earlier point of discussion, just who are “the Jews” here in John 8? Answering this question is fundamental to either a rebuttal or an affirmation of the “anti-Judaism” charge. Are “the Jews” of John 8 (and in the rest of John’s Gospel for that matter) merely a symbol of what it means to be an unbeliever?

This view holds some attraction in that it at least seemingly exonerates the author of the Gospel of disparaging of the Jewish people *en masse*. Yet it fails to answer the question of historicity. We have argued that John’s Gospel is a theological history of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As such, while it is not primarily concerned with a detailed life of Christ, the facts that it does provide are historically accurate. Thus, the view of “the Jews” as symbols of unbelief – while it may suggest a helpful *literary* analysis – fails to answer a very central *historical* concern and thus does not provide us with a satisfactory answer.

Another view of “the Jews” in particular reference to John 8:31 regards them as Jews who have “believed” in Jesus (cf. 8:30) but have not necessarily become his “disciples” in the sense that Jesus explains in 8:31. Taking a cue from John 6:60 and 6:66, Ridderbos surmises that these Jews are those who have followed Jesus, but have not regarded him as the Son of God and have begun to turn away from him. He summarizes that the “Jewish leaders and large groups of Jewish people” ultimately deny Jesus’ “self-revelation as the Christ and Son of God.”⁶⁴ In John’s Gospel more generally, Ridderbos notes that the phrase “the Jews” has different referents in different

⁶⁰ John 8:33, *NIV*.

⁶¹ John 8:34-40, *NIV*.

⁶² John 8:41-43, *NIV*.

⁶³ John 8:44, *NIV*.

⁶⁴ *The Gospel of John*, 306-07.

texts – but he seems to lean towards the view that oftentimes Jewish *leaders* are meant.⁶⁵

The most persuasive view, however, recognizes some often overlooked factors, and answers the most questions, both historical and literary. “The view, in essence, is that ‘the Jews’ with whom Jesus clashes are a *party within Judaism*, the supremely religious ...”, a group that is primarily located geographically in Judea.⁶⁶ Motyer cites as evidence the *religious* nature of the disputes in John, the highly diverse nature of first century Judaism (thus, Jewish festival-goers fear “the Jews”(!) in 7:13)⁶⁷, and the geographical “sense” of “*Ἰουδαίους*”.⁶⁸

When we view the Fourth Gospel in its desperate post-70AD Jewish context, and see its antagonists “the Jews” neither as stock a-historical characters nor as representative of all first century Jews but as primarily Judean Jews in a sea of diverse Judaism who strongly opposed Jesus’ claims, the charge of “anti-Judaism” seems unsustainable.

Conclusion

We have attempted to show here that the Gospel of John is *not guilty* of the charge of “anti-Judaism”. We have done so with five essential arguments. We will pause for a moment to recapitulate them here.

First, having shown that the Gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus as a fulfillment of Torah, we are necessarily arguing that the moniker “anti-Judaism” reflects an unfair assessment of Matthew’s intention. Since the Gospel of John does much the same in demonstrating Jesus to be the embodiment of a new Temple, we believe the fulfillment language applies to the Fourth Gospel as well. It is our contention that the “anti-Judaism” label is unnecessarily pejorative to the Christian understanding of John’s Gospel.

In the Gospel of John, Christ is defining Himself as the very embodiment of the Temple. This word, spoken to a diverse and broken Jewish people in the first century, is simply his call to Jews to follow and worship Him. One need not read any hateful, vengeful tone into Jesus’ words – even his harshest words.⁶⁹

Secondly, just as Stephen, in the spirit of a Jewish Old Testament prophet, bluntly condemns his Jewish audience for their sins in Acts, so Jesus lambastes “the Jews” in the Gospel of John. He is not coming as an outsider, wantonly attacking those

⁶⁵ Ibid., 62-63.

⁶⁶ Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?*, 54-55.

⁶⁷ *The Gospel of John*, 63.

⁶⁸ *Your Father the Devil?*, 55.

⁶⁹ Such as John 8:44.

he doesn't even understand. He *is* a Jewish prophet (*navi*) calling the ancient people of God to repentance and to faith in Him as both Son of God and *moschiach*.

Thirdly, to indict the Gospel of John of “anti-Judaism” while ignoring the many “pro-Jewish” passages and implicitly “pro-Jewish” concepts is untenable. As we have shown, it is a Jew that writes this Gospel about a Jewish Messiah and His Jewish disciples. The several explicitly “pro-Jewish” passages reveal that the moniker “the Jews” is not used indiscriminately in John’s Gospel.

Fourthly, the desperate post-70AD situation of a diverse Jewish community looking for answers – especially regarding the now-defunct temple – is a context that explains well the message that Jesus has for “the Jews”. He has replaced the Temple. To be sure, he sometimes communicates his message in puzzling and controversial ways. Even so, his love and compassion for them is evident.⁷⁰

Fifthly, the phrase “the Jews” in John’s Gospel is not a slander of all Jews everywhere. It is not even meant as a slander of all first century Jewish hearers of Jesus’ words. As we have shown, it is oftentimes used of Jewish *leaders*, and even more so of “religious Jews from Judea”. Even given the horrors of Auschwitz and Treblinka, we mustn’t force our post-Holocaust sensitivities upon these ancient texts. We will have more to say shortly about some proposed solutions to the dilemma of “hearing” John’s Gospel through twenty-first century ears.

We have some caveats to make with respect to our arguments. With respect to our first argument, it is one thing to refute the charge of “anti-Judaism” in the Gospel of John. It is quite another to deny that denigration of Judaism is and has been present in much Christian preaching and teaching. This we do not wish to do here. We in fact lament the manner in which such preaching and teaching seems to take for granted that the New Testament picture of Judaism is one of denigration. We do not believe this to be the case. We simply believe that Jesus is indeed the Messiah of both Jew and Gentile and is the embodiment of a faith that builds upon the foundations of Judaism.

Secondly, in suggesting that Jesus came as an internal critic of Judaism, we do not deny the *dissimilarity* of many of his teachings with that of the Judaism of his time. The idea that Jesus himself replaces the Jerusalem Temple as the locus of worship is certainly radical. Had Jesus’ message been so palatable to his primarily Jewish audience, their reaction certainly would have been less visceral and more enthusiastic! Even so, Jewish reliance upon the invincibility of the Temple is something that even the Old Testament Jewish prophets confronted.⁷¹

Thirdly, and lastly, in stressing the first century Jewish context of the Fourth Gospel, we do not flippantly dismiss the reality of post-Holocaust sensitivity in *hearing* John. We recognize the heinousness of the Shoah, and grieve that many professed

⁷⁰ John 11:33-36.

⁷¹ See, e.g., the “Temple Sermon” of Jeremiah 7.

Christians were either sympathetic or apathetic towards the Nazi program. We also shudder to think of the egregious nature of twenty centuries of Christian anti-Semitism.

Yet, our undertaking here is one of New Testament scholarship. Our task here is to assess as best as we can the historical and literary context of John's Gospel to see if the charge of "anti-Judaism" holds water. Based upon our argumentation, we contend that it does not. Having said all of this, it is our sincere hope and prayer that Christian pastors and teachers will handle such difficult passages (whether in John's Gospel or elsewhere) with great care. Recognition of historical Christian anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism is essential to both Christian preaching and to honest Jewish-Christian dialogue.

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