

Hebrews and Hellenists, Pauline and Petrine Christianity, and so on. But the conflict among Jews over the content of repentance is at least equally significant, revealing the broader world of Luke's discourse more evidently. As studies of conflict have shown, even elements of hostility are often evidence of close, intense social relationships.¹⁹

It may be inevitable that Jews and their Judaism whose identity was forged in the heat of the crisis of the Roman conquest will in time find Luke-Acts to be anti-Jewish. The offense is not the call to repentance, or even the indictment for sin. The whole heritage of Israel is practiced in confessing sin. Nor is the offense in the name-calling, as long as it is remembered that this was a family conflict with many parties contending for the heritage of legitimacy.

But as highly as Luke respects the Pharisees, he regards only those Pharisees who have come to faith in Jesus as repentant, and then they join a host of other Jews and Gentiles in the company of true Israel. This is the "turn to God" that leads to forgiveness of sins and brings "times of refreshing . . . from the presence of the Lord . . . until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:19-21).

In the generations that follow the composition of this narrative, Jews and Christians will agree that God has been at work in history, contending with a willful humanity. They will agree that God's justice and mercy will be wrought through human repentance. In time, however, they will also become two religions, contending with each other and with Islam. At times, the religious and racial bigotry and hatred will almost overwhelm these offspring of Abraham and of Sarah and Hagar with violence, and ancient conflicts will be cited to justify differences.

But perhaps some will remember that those conflicts were about faithfulness and repentance, about how God will bring salvation and restoration. Then Luke's narrative may be read as a quest for the truth (Luke 1:4), and the Scriptures may be examined "to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). Perhaps even Jews and Christians can learn once again to discern true repentance and faithful dependence on the promises of God. Then Luke-Acts would no longer be anti-Jewish.

Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity
eds. C.A. Evans + D.A. Agnew

-6-

Anti-Semitism and the Gospel of John

Robert Kysar

Over twelve years ago Samuel Sandmel correctly observed, "John is widely regarded as either the most anti-Semitic or at least the most overtly anti-Semitic of the gospels."¹ Little has been done to ameliorate that harsh judgment since it was first written.² While efforts have been made to soften the impact of the tone of the Gospel of John when it comes to Jews and Judaism, the fact remains that a reading of the Gospel tends to confirm Sandmel's judgment. Still, recent theories for understanding the historical setting of the writing of the Fourth Gospel do offer some ways of interpreting the harshness with which Jews and Judaism are treated in this document. Such theories do not change the tone of the Gospel but offer a way of explaining that tone. Whether explaining the tone of a literary piece in fact alters the effects of the writing itself is a fundamental question that must be confronted.³

The task of examining the Gospel of John in relationship to anti-Semitism

1. S. Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 101. In his earlier introduction to the New Testament, Sandmel (*A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament* [Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1956] 269) makes much the same observation: "In its utility for later Jew-haters, the Fourth Gospel is preeminent among the New Testament writings."

2. The tendency toward an anti-Judaistic presupposition operative in the tradition of New Testament interpretation is well documented in C. Klein, *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

3. See the persuasive argument of E. V. McKnight (*Post-modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-oriented Criticism* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1988] 58), particularly for what he terms "the contemporary challenge of interpretation." McKnight points out, "Analysis of the various approaches to the Bible uncovers the same basic procedure: Readers make sense of the Bible in the light of their world, which includes not only linguistic and literary tools but also world views that influence

requires several projects. The first is to investigate the surface of the text and its implications for the question before us. The second is to explore the relevance of a theory for the historical origin of the Gospel that impacts upon our consideration. The final, and most difficult, endeavor is then to ask in conclusion if historical theories have any significance for assessing the relationship between this product of early Christianity and anti-Semitism then and now. My major thesis is that the text of the Gospel itself nurtures an anti-Semitism that is properly understood only in the light of the historical origin of the document.

The Surface of the Text of the Fourth Gospel

When we raise the question of how the implied author⁴ of the Gospel of John treats Jews and Judaism, a clear impression is possible, although one with some ambiguity. The effort here will be to observe the ways in which anti-Semitism surfaces in a reading of the text and how it is cast into shades of ambiguity by the strategies of the narrative. However, in this context we can do no more than undertake a summary of the experience of the reader in following the text of the Gospel as it stands before us without recourse to the history behind the text. This chapter will only isolate and articulate a series of impressions one gains from the reading of the text. I believe that this sort of analysis of the text of the Gospel is especially important for the issue under consideration, since it affords a way of understanding how the Johannine story of Jesus is received by careful readers (and hearers). Thus it is a way of comprehending how it is that the lay reader, untrained in biblical criticism or perhaps unsophisticated in theology, will respond to the story. Such a reader-response criticism is an avenue, I suggest, into a more popular and natural understanding of the Gospel story.

The first impression the reader gains is the way in which the narrator is detached from and consequently distances the implied reader from Judaism.⁵ This is accomplished through such expressions as "the Passover of the Jews" (2:13; 11:55) and "a [the] feast of the Jews" (5:1; 6:4; 7:2). Other examples of

this detachment are found in 2:6 and 3:25. The effect is to align the reader with the perspective of the narrator, who is separated from Judaism. Those who "own" the festivals are "Jews," and the narrator is neither a Jew nor leads the reader to Jewishness.⁶

A second and more complex impression is gained by the portrayal of the "Jews" (*Ioudaioi*) as characters in the narrative. The clearest impression is that these characters are antagonists of the hero of the story. The Jews consistently fail to understand Jesus (e.g., 3:1-4; 6:52; 7:35; 8:57). But most often they are cast in the role of his overt opponents (e.g., 2:18, 20; 6:41; 8:48). Very early in the narrative they are described as those who persecute and seek to kill Jesus (5:16-18; 7:1), and such motives continue to be attributed to them as the narrative proceeds (10:31; 11:8). Their hostility results in fear of the Jews among those who are interested in Jesus or believe in him (7:13; 9:22; 19:38; 20:19).

Furthermore, the Jews are presented in the narrative as untrue to their own faith and tradition. They do not keep the Torah (7:19) and are not truly children of Abraham but of the devil (8:39-44). They do not understand their own Scriptures (5:39-40; 10:31-39), and their leaders abrogate their loyalty to their God for fidelity to Caesar (19:15).

The impression the reader gains of the Jews, however, is blurred with ambiguity by several features of their portrayal. They are sometimes present in the narrative as neutral inquirers or even admirers of Jesus (7:15; 10:24; 11:36; 12:9). One of their leaders, Nicodemus, seeks Jesus out but cannot understand him (3:1-15), defends Jesus against the Pharisees (7:50-52), and eventually assists in the burial of Jesus' body (19:39). Jews are even said to believe in Jesus (8:31; 11:45; 12:11). However, in the first case (8:31), they eventually become opponents of Jesus, and in the second case (11:45), while some believe, others take action that begins the death plot against Jesus. Most confusing to the reader is the fact that at one point in the narrative Jesus himself is identified as a Jew (4:9; see also 4:22).

The reader is further kept off balance by the way in which these characters labeled Jews are distinguished from other groups in the narratives. The narrator leads the reader to think that the Jews are not to be identified with people of Jerusalem (7:25), the crowds (7:13; 12:17), the Pharisees (7:32-35; 9:13, 18), Ephraimites (11:54), Galileans (4:43-45), or other individual characters in the narrative such as the parents of the blind man (9:18), Martha (11:19, 31), Caiaphas (18:14), and Joseph of Arimathea (19:38). The reader is never given any clue that might lead her or him to recognize these groups or individuals as Jews.

4. For definitions of the terms "implied author," "implied reader," and "narrator," as used in the following discussion, see R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (FFNT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 15-18, 205-11; J. L. Staley, *The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* (SBLDS 82; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 27-47; and S. D. Moore, *Literary Criticism of the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989) 71-73.

5. It is interesting that, while arguing against an anti-Jewish character of the Gospel, R. Schnackenburg (*The Gospel according to St. John* [3 vols.; New York: Herder and Herder, 1968] 1.436) observes about 4:22, "The Gospel displays no hatred of the Jewish people, though it regards them with a certain aloofness."

6. Staley (*Print's First Kiss*, 82) points out how the narrator's translation of Aramaic and Hebrew words (e.g., 1:38) makes "the implied reader feel like an outsider: They separate—as nothing else could—the narrator's and characters' world from that of the implied reader." This practice might also be viewed as part of the strategy of the implied author to distance the reader from Judaism.

Out of this ambiguity the reader is led to conceive of Jews as those persons in the narrative who are most often predisposed to unbelief, rejection, and even hostility toward Jesus. The vague name, "Jews," becomes in the reader's mind representative of opposition to Jesus and his mission.⁷

Another of the reader's impressions is that the leaders of Judaism are also, in general, opponents of the Christ figure. The Pharisees are blind (9:40-41) and false leaders who guide the people away from the truth, even as do the Jews (9:40; and the discourse in 10:1-18). The Pharisees along with the council and the chief priests plot the death of Jesus (11:46-53) and seek to have him arrested (11:57), eventually succeeding in doing so (18:3). While not unified in their response to Jesus (9:13-16), the Pharisees are most often presented as opponents of the Christ figure (4:1; 7:32; 8:13; 12:42). Strangely, however, the reader is told not to confuse the Pharisees with the "authorities" (*archontes*), many of whom believe in Jesus (12:42).⁸

The chief priests fare no better in the narrative. As with the Pharisees, the narrator leads the reader to believe they are opponents of Jesus. Since the chief priests are depicted as plotting to have Lazarus killed as a way of diminishing the movement toward Jesus (12:10), cry out for Jesus to be crucified (19:6), and declare that Jesus is not their king (19:15) and that they do not want him labeled as such (19:21), the reader is left with the impression that these characters are hostile adversaries of Jesus.

One cannot read the passion story of the Gospel of John and escape the impression that the Jewish leaders alone are responsible for the arrest, conviction, and death of Jesus (18:3, 12, 19ff.).⁹ In his deliberations Pilate is shown caving in to the desires of the Jewish leaders (18:31, 38-40; 19:4-8, 12-16), even though he declares no less than four times his own judgment that Jesus is innocent (18:38; 19:4, 6, 12). Even the execution itself seems to be carried out by Jewish leaders and/or their representatives (19:16, where the antecedent for "they" appears to be found in the chief priests of 19:15).

Finally the impression gained by the reader is that Judaism in general is degenerate and untrue. A number of the features of the narrative contribute either explicitly or implicitly to this impression. While the Jews and leaders of Judaism are most often opponents to Jesus, the Samaritans readily receive

7. Culpepper (*Anatomy*, 138) suggests that "the burden of unbelief which the Jews are made to carry is relieved in two ways. First, John affirms that belief must be given (6:37, 39)... Second, some of the Jews do believe... so John allows hope that for some at least (i.e., those who are given) belief is possible." But he concludes nonetheless that "the Jews carry the burden of the unbelief of 'the world' in John."

8. Although the antecedent is vague, the reader gains the impression from 12:37-43 that the Pharisees are prevented by God from believing in Jesus. Cf. F. Mussner, *Tractate on the Jews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 206-7.

9. Cf. D. Granskou, "Anti-Judaism in the Passion Accounts of the Fourth Gospel," in P. Richardson and D. Granskou, eds., *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1980) 130-36.

and confess him (4:39-42). Those who believe in Jesus will be put out of the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2).

In contrast to the falsity of Judaism, the message of Jesus is everywhere presented as superior to the religion of the Jews (2:1-10; 4:21; 5:39, 45; 6:58; 8:31, 58). Jesus' relation with the Temple suggests the superiority of his message (2:19-22; 7:14ff., 28). The preface to John's story of Jesus functions to give the reader those essential insights that will lead her or him properly to understand the entire story.¹⁰ The importance of 1:17, therefore, cannot be overemphasized. The "grace and truth" revealed in Christ is superior to the Law of Moses. Consequently the use of the words "true" and "truth" throughout the narrative (e.g., 1:9; 6:32; 14:6; 18:37) causes the reader to infer that Judaism is false. While Jesus is made to stress the continuity between himself and his message and Hebrew Scriptures (5:39; 6:45; 8:56; 10:34), Judaism is depicted as a faulty understanding of those Scriptures. The "true Israelite in whom is no guile" is one who goes on to become Jesus' disciple (1:47).

This summary of impressions drawn from a reading of the Gospel of John is not without shades of ambiguity. But, on the whole, the conclusion is inescapable that the surface of the text (the narrative of the Gospel taken by itself) persuades a reader to cast Jews and Judaism in an unfavorable light. The reader is encouraged to stand detached from Judaism; to take the terms "Jews," "Pharisees," and "chief priests" as referring to Jesus' opponents; to infer that the leaders of Judaism (and perhaps even the Jewish people themselves) alone were responsible for the execution of Jesus; and to believe that Judaism is untrue and that Christ is superior in every way to that religion. The conclusion is inescapable that the text of the narrative nurtures a negative mentality toward Jews and Judaism.

The Historical Origin of the Fourth Gospel

Attention has been paid in the previous section simply to what appears on the surface of the text of the Gospel of John. Now it is necessary to try to move "behind" the text to examine two related questions. The first is the historical identity of the expression "the Jews" in the Johannine Gospel, and the second is the historical occasion for the production of the document.

The effort to identify the historical referent for the term "the Jews" as it is used in the Fourth Gospel has occupied a good deal of Johannine scholarship. *Ioudaioi* occurs some seventy-one times in the Gospel, as compared with only sixteen occurrences in the Synoptic Gospels but more than eighty in the Acts of the Apostles. The Synoptic occurrences of the expression appear most often on the lips of gentile characters, as opposed to the Fourth Gospel where it is

most frequently in the comments of the narrator. In the contemporary reading of John the expression is naturally taken as a reference to the religious-ethnic group we know as modern Jews. But to whom was the evangelist referring when speaking of "the Jews"?

In the framework of the evangelist's dualism it is clear that the Jews belong most often (but not with an absolute consistency) to the "world" (*kosmos*). That means that "the Jews" are part of the realm of unbelief, the reality that opposes Jesus and the revelation of God. They are the main constituent of the negative pole of the dualistic scheme of the Gospel, the opposite of which is the Christian believer. As D. Moody Smith has observed, Johannine dualism and the theological use of the expression "the Jews" "mythologizes the distinction between two modes of existence, the believing and authentic over against unbelieving and unauthentic, by identifying them with two historically and empirically distinct communities, the Christian and the Jewish."¹¹

However, when we ask to what existent, historical group the expression refers, the answer is less clear. Few, if any, responsible scholars today would argue that the reference is to the entire Jewish people, for such a view would make no sense given the fact that nearly all of the characters—and certainly Jesus and the other main characters—of the Gospel are themselves Jews. In 9:22, for instance, surely the parents of the blind man are themselves Jews, and in 20:19 it must unquestionably be assumed that the disciples are also Jews. The most frequent nominees for the position as referent of the expression are Judaeans, as opposed to Galilean Jews,¹² and the religious leaders of the Judaism contemporaneous to the fourth evangelist.¹³ The former argument does not prove persuasive, as von Wahlde has shown.¹⁴ His own argument is the more convincing. It is likely that "the Jews" in the Fourth Gospel refers to those leaders who hold some influence over their Jewish constituency in the region known to the fourth evangelist. To summarize again in the words of D. Moody Smith: "The Jews' is, then, a term used of a group of Jewish leaders who exercise great authority among their compatriots and are especially hostile to Jesus and his disciples. . . . It refers to certain authorities rather than to the people as a whole."¹⁵

But our conclusions regarding the use of the expression "the Jews" lead only to a further question: What situation would result in such a slanderous

11. D. M. Smith, "Judaism and the Gospel of John," in J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jews and Christians: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 77.

12. See, e.g., R. T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 310–11; and idem, "Theological Use of Locale in the Fourth Gospel," *ATR* (supp. series 3: *Gospel Studies in Honor of Sherman Elbridge Johnson*) (March 1974) 58–95.

13. See, e.g., U. C. von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews': A Critical Survey," *NTS* 28 (1982) 33–60; and idem, *The Earliest Version of John's Gospel: Recovering the Gospel of Signs* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1989) 31–36.

14. See the previous note.

and stereotypical reference to Jewish leaders—equating them with the force of evil? In what occasion would Jewish leaders have evoked such an attitude as that of the fourth evangelist's? In other words: What was the historical situation in which the fourth evangelist wrote?

Our second issue in the consideration of the historical origin of the Gospel of John, then, leads our inquiry to what might have been the concrete setting of the writing of the Gospel of John. Unfortunately this endeavor is fraught with numerous problems. The most important of these is the obvious fact that we must deal with imaginative historical reconstruction armed only with the explicit text, its implications, and our relatively scant knowledge of the history of the period. Hence, it is with theory that we must now deal—theory that commends itself at best with some degree of probability but never with absolute conclusiveness. Nonetheless, a theory of the historical origin of the Gospel is essential to an effort to assess the relationship between the Gospel of John and anti-Semitism. I shall summarize a theory for the historical setting of the writing of the Gospel of John that holds persuasive credibility for many Johannine scholars today¹⁶ and then attempt to view the anti-Semitic quality of the text in the light of that theory.

Over two decades ago J. Louis Martyn and Raymond E. Brown each proposed that the occasion for the writing of the Fourth Gospel was an experience of expulsion of a Christian community from their synagogue home.¹⁷ While they differed in the details of their proposals, each took the references in the Gospel to expulsion from the synagogue (*apostasy*, 9:22; 12:42; 16:2) as indications that the Christian community of which the fourth evangelist was a part and for which the Gospel was written had been part of a Jewish synagogue but was then expelled from its religious community there. The precise reasons for the expulsion are speculative, and Brown and Martyn offered differing the-

16. The limitations of space do not allow for a consideration of all of the many historical settings that have been proposed for the Gospel of John even in recent years. Therefore, I have chosen here to discuss only the hypothesis that seems to me to be the most widely endorsed and (in my view) the most convincing. Other proposals have been offered in recent years. The reader is directed to my surveys of such proposals in *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975) 147–65; "Community and Gospel: Vectors in Fourth Gospel Criticism," in J. L. Mays, ed., *Interpreting the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 265–67, 273–74; "The Gospel of John in Current Research," *RelSRev* 9 (1983) 316–17; and "The Fourth Gospel: A Report on Recent Research," in H. Temporini and W. Haase, eds., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1985) 2/3.2425–32.

17. J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). Cf. idem, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist, 1978); R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB 29 and 29a; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966). Cf. idem, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979). While Martyn and Brown brought this theory into prominence in recent Johannine studies, they were not the first to make such a proposal. See, e.g., K. L. Carroll, "The Fourth Gospel and the Exclusion of Christians from the Synagogue," *BJRL* 40 (1957) 19–32, and J. Parkes, *The Conflict*

ories.¹⁸ But both understood the Gospel of John (in at least one of its editions) as a response to the experience of the expulsion.

But both Brown and Martyn further understood that the present Gospel reflects the ongoing dialogue between Jews and Christians after their separation. Martyn asserts that the Gospel "seems to reflect experiences in the dramatic interaction between the synagogue and the Johannine church."¹⁹ The central focus of that interaction appears to have been the identity of Jesus and in particular the high christological claims made by the Johannine Christians.²⁰

In the years since the proposal was offered by Brown and Martyn there have been numerous studies that embraced and attempted further to confirm and expand the theory. These have come from disparate types of works on various Johannine themes.²¹ Their effect has been to offer impressive demonstration of the plausibility of what Brown and Martyn had hypothesized.

An increasingly clear picture emerges from all these studies grounded in the hypothesis that the Gospel was written in response to the exclusion of the Johannine church from the synagogue and the subsequent dialogue between these two religious parties. The subject of the picture is a defensive and threatened Christian community, attempting to reshape its identity isolated from the synagogue and its Jewish roots. The picture is trimmed in vigorous debate over issues central to both Jews and Christians. It is shaded with hostility toward the Jewish parents of this Christian offspring, hostility highlighted with sometimes violent language.²² The center of the picture, however, seems to be the subject

18. Martyn's earlier contention that the expulsion should be related to the "Twelfth Benediction" (the *Birkat Ha-Minim*) and the conference of rabbis at Jamnia was countered vigorously and effectively by historical investigations. Martyn himself has modified his earlier statements in this regard, and most Johannine interpreters deny any direct link between the expulsion of the Johannine Christians and the Twelfth Benediction. See S. T. Katz, "Issues in the Separation of Judaism and Christianity after 70 C.E.," *JBL* 103 (1984) 43-76, and R. Kimmelman, "*Birkat Ha-Minim* and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity," in E. P. Sanders, ed., *Jewish and Christian Self-definition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 1.226-44. Smith ("Judaism and the Gospel of John," 84-87) is helpful in summarizing the value of Martyn's first proposal, although he assesses it more highly than I would be inclined to do. J. Koenig regrettably makes the Twelfth Benediction the basis of his approach to the Fourth Gospel in *Jews and Christians in Dialogue: New Testament Foundations* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 122-23, as also does N. A. Beck, *Mature Christianity: The Recognition and Repudiation of the Anti-Jewish Polemic of the New Testament* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna Univ. Press, 1985) 250-51.

19. Martyn, *History and Theology*, 37.

20. For my own brief statement of the historical setting for the writing of the Gospel, see *John* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 13-15.

21. Examples include the following: W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967); J. Beutler, *Martyria* (Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1972); E. Grässer, "Die Antijüdische Polemik im Johannesevangelium," *NTS* 10 (1964-65) 74-90; S. Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity according to John* (Leiden: Brill, 1975); J. H. Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); R. A. Whitacre, *Johannine Polemic: The Role of Tradition and Theology* (SBLDS 67; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982); Fortna, *Predecessor*; and von Wahlde, *Earliest Version*.

22. Paul S. Minear argues that the Gospel was set within the context of a realistic fear of

of Christian identity. Who are the Johannine Christians now that they can no longer claim the synagogue as their home? In the background of the picture, I propose, we may dimly perceive a synagogue in which there is a not dissimilar identity crisis. It may be that the Jewish brothers and sisters who found it necessary to separate themselves from the Christians in their midst were struggling to understand themselves amid the trauma of the destruction of their Jerusalem Temple and what that might mean for the future nature of their faith. In other words, the expulsion of the Christians from the synagogue may have been an effort to declare what Judaism was when stripped of its cultic center. The picture, then, is of two sibling religious communities, each with its own identity issues.

Armed with this imaginative reconstruction of the setting for the writing of the Gospel, one returns to the text enabled to see many of its features in a new light. Foremost it is the polemic tone of the Gospel that is suddenly made understandable, and to which we shall return for more extensive discussion. But also illumined by the light of the proposed setting for the Gospel is its concentration on the identity of Christ. Since that was doubtless the primary issue under consideration in the dialogue with the synagogue, it is clear why the document would seek to clarify and stubbornly insist on its community's affirmations concerning Christ. Also illumined is the danger-fraught dualistic thought of the fourth evangelist. If basic Christian identity is at stake, in order to clarify that identity the evangelist resorts to a drastic either/or schema to define the distinction between the Christian and the Jew.

But most important for our purposes is how this hypothesis for the historical origin of the Gospel informs the anti-Jewish tone of the text. First of all, it makes clear that the language regarding Jews and Judaism is polemical in nature and typical of classical polemic. If the very existence of the Christian community is threatened by its expulsion from the synagogue, it is natural that the stance toward Judaism be polemical. It is sometimes proposed that the Gospel implies the existence of "crypto-Christians" who had renounced their Christian allegiance and remained in the synagogue. Apostasy may also have threatened the Johannine church. Consequently, the tone of the writing is hostile and argumentative.

The Jewish-Christian relationship standing within the shadows of history behind the Fourth Gospel was as much a social phenomenon as a religious one.²³ The issue at stake was the social repositioning of the Christian community. By being expelled from the synagogue they had experienced the trauma of social

Pilgrim, 1984) 26-27. I doubt that that conclusion is warranted on the basis of the evidence of the Gospel, although the vigorous interaction of Jews and Christians may well have involved violence.

23. Increasingly more is being written regarding the sociological setting for the Gospel of John, much of it premised on the Martyn-Brown hypothesis for the origin of the Gospel. Among the most important and influential of the published works to this date are the following: W. A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972) 44-72; B. J. Malina, "The Gospel of John in Sociolinguistic Perspective," *Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern*

dislocation. Their task was now one of making a new place for themselves in a society that appeared to them to be hostile and unaccommodating of their views. The tendency was to conceive of themselves as the in-group defending itself against the out-group. Hence, so much of the tone and language of the Gospel suggest this insider-versus-outsider perspective (e.g., the negative use of the word "world" [*kosmos*] in the Gospel at such places as chap. 17).

In summary, the posture of the church was that of defensiveness amid the self-doubt of uncertain identity. The polemical quality of the Gospel of John tells the interpreter more about the evangelist and the Johannine community than it witnesses to the ontological status of the Jews or Judaism. The view of the Gospel as the result of Jewish-Christian dialogue following the expulsion of the Christians from the synagogue explains why Judaism is painted in such unfortunate colors and why Christian faith is presented as superior to Judaism. If our hypothesis is sound, the Johannine Christians occupied a precarious position. They had been *Christian Jews* who understood themselves as part of the ancient people of God. Their messianic affirmations concerning Jesus of Nazareth were made in the context of the faith of Israel. But now with their expulsion from the synagogue they were trying to affirm and express that they did not need Judaism. Their Christian faith could stand on its own without the support of Judaism, even while it appealed to the Jewish Scriptures as evidence of its truthfulness. It was a formidable (and perhaps impossible) task.²⁴ The approach taken to the task was to argue that Judaism was in error, degenerate, and unfaithful to its God. Christ offered the true revelation of that God, and hence Christianity apart from Judaism was the truth. The leaders of Judaism had beguiled the people into falsehood; they were the "hirelings" and "robbers" of the sheepfold (10:1-15). When confronted with the true revelation of their own God—a revelation anticipated in their own Scriptures—they executed the revealer. The vitriolic attack on Judaism is nothing more nor less than the desperate attempt of the Johannine Christians to find a rationale for their existence in isolation from Judaism.

The proposal for the historical origin of the Gospel of John advocated here makes at least two additional facts somewhat more comprehensible. These two each have to do with the reality that characteristics usually associated with Judaism before the advent of Christianity are notably absent from or diminished in importance in the form of Christian thought advocated by the fourth evangelist. First among these is the absence of any central role assigned to Torah. While Torah is invoked in the argument that Jesus' message is truth and he himself is the Son of God (e.g., 5:39), the authority of Torah plays no role in the life of the believer.²⁵ Its moral teachings are in no way employed as a basis for

24. L. Gaston ("Retrospect," in S. G. Wilson, ed., *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity* [Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1986] 2.174) correctly observes, "[The Fourth Gospel] is sectarian, even paranoiac, but it does not deny the central self-affirmation of Judaism."

25. In this way the response of John to the Christian community's self-affirmation of Judaism is

the believer's behavior. The absence of a covenantal theology is another feature of the Fourth Gospel's thought that might be considered "un-Jewish." The word "covenant" (*diathēkē*) is entirely absent from the Gospel.²⁶

But in spite of the best efforts of the fourth evangelist the basic Jewishness of the perspective of the Johannine community is visible between and behind the lines of the text.²⁷ Hence, an older tradition in which Jesus clearly identifies himself as a Jew and affirms Judaism as the source of salvation (4:22) slips past the watchful eye of the evangelist-redactor to confuse the reader.²⁸ Hence, the fundamental christological statement of the Gospel (1:1-18) is modeled on the Jewish understanding of wisdom.²⁹ This is to say that even in their desperate need to understand themselves over against Judaism, the Johannine Christians were not able to speak of their faith without recourse to its Jewish roots.

Finally, this hypothesis for the origin of the Fourth Gospel helps us understand the role it assigns to the Jews and the leaders of Judaism. A literary observation is needed in the midst of this discussion of the historical origin of the Gospel. An effective narrative needs an antagonist as much as it needs a hero figure. The fourth evangelist could tell the story of Jesus most powerfully only with a negative figure set over against the Christ figure in the dynamics of the narrative. The situation of the Johannine community provided such an antagonist ready at hand in the figure of the Jews. Since the opponents of the fourth evangelist's own community were members of the synagogue, it was easy to make Jews, and in particular the leaders of the synagogue, the opponents of Jesus in the narrative.³⁰ Martyn's insight that the Gospel of John presents a two-level drama is helpful at this point. It is Martyn's contention that, while the evangelist told the story of Jesus, the opponents of Jesus in the narrative were only thinly disguised opponents of the writer's own contemporary Christian community. Hence, the character

in the Gospel of Matthew, which might also have been written out of an effort to define Christian faith in relationship to Judaism. See, e.g., N. Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) 169-75.

26. This is true in spite of Brown's efforts (e.g., *John*, 2.614) to explicate the message of the Gospel in covenantal categories.

27. Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, 144-46.

28. My proposal that 4:22 represents part of an older tradition is not the most common understanding of this verse. R. Bultmann (*The Gospel of John* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971] 189) is an example of those who insist it was an "editorial gloss." Both Brown (*John*, 1.172) and Schnackenburg (*John*, 1.436), among others, deny that, the latter saying, "Jesus had to overcome the woman's repugnance to the 'Jews.'" Neither Fortna (*Predecessor and The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel* [SNTSMS 11; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970]) nor von Wahlde (*Earliest Version*) argues that 4:22 was an early tradition. While I cannot make a case here for the claim that it was, it does seem to me that for some of the reasons implied above it may very well represent a part of the narrative of chap. 4 that originated among the Johannine Christians while they were still part of the synagogue.

29. Brown, *John*, 1.25-36.

30. In *John*, the *Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 57. I suggest the Jews in the Fourth

of the Pharisees in 9:13-17 could so easily become the Jews in 9:18.³¹ The first readers of the Gospel were thereby enabled to identify their own struggles with the struggle of their Master. The Gospel supplied them sanction to understand their own conflict with members of the synagogue as conflict with the forces that had been responsible for the death of their Lord. It was a powerful literary tool in that historical setting, however unfortunate the consequences have become for succeeding generations of Christians and Jews.

The puzzling and perplexing portrayal of the Jews as the opponents of Jesus in the Gospel of John, therefore, owes its existence to a literary necessity and a historical accident. The fourth evangelist, I suggest, had no intention of issuing a universal indictment against Jews and Judaism (note the use of the words "Israel" and "Israelite," e.g., in 1:31, 49; and 12:13). The author was attempting to be as effective as possible in aiding the community for which the writing was intended. To insure the continued existence of the Johannine church there may have seemed no alternative to indicting the Jews. To give expression to the loss and hurt of the Christian community there may have seemed no alternative than to strike out at their former religious brothers and sisters of the synagogue. Oddly enough, the community that was founded on the sacrifice of an innocent person for their salvation now sacrificed their former Jewish brothers and sisters for the sake of their self-identity.

Conclusions

The persuasiveness of the argument that the Gospel of John was written in the wake of the expulsion from the synagogue and in the backwash of a lively dialogue between the Christian and Jewish communities is impressive. Yet it remains a theory—at best a hypothesis that commends itself to us in a number of ways. Weighed against the evidence of the experience of reading the text itself, however, the theory of the historical origin of that text is seriously weakened. The evidence we have is the facticity of the text, on the one hand, and the plausibility of a historical theory, on the other. And the latter looks rather puny when compared with the former. Furthermore, a fundamental question lurks in the background.

Does historical contingency count for anything when dealing with the issue of the posture of a Christian document in relationship to Judaism? The answer must surely be yes in one sense but no in another. The historical origin of the Gospel of John makes its anti-Semitic tone understandable, perhaps even excusable. But it does not alter the basic reality of that tone as the Gospel is read and heard. In other words, contingency may count for something in the

classroom but for little in the place of worship and even less in the privacy of the individual layperson's reading of the Gospel.³²

The reality is that an occasional writing has become canonical literature. The document we know as the Gospel of John was written within, out of, and for a very concrete and specific situation involving a particular Christian community in a given time and place. It may have served an admirable purpose in its origin. We might even conclude that this document made possible the continued existence of Christianity in a certain locale. Out of that community have come invaluable resources, woven together with others to produce the rich tapestry we know today as the Christian church and its faith. Without the preservation of the Johannine community and without its heritage to later generations of Christians there is little doubt that the church today and perhaps even the world would be the lesser. We can, therefore, be grateful to that individual (or group) who produced the Gospel.

But that occasional piece designed for a particular situation and to meet certain needs has become part of the canon of the Christian church. That means that it is read and interpreted outside of its original situation and beyond its original purpose. With the passing of centuries the historical origin becomes more and more remote, less and less known or knowable. The result is that the Fourth Gospel stands on its own in isolation from the situation that occasioned its writing. Its canonization as Holy Scripture means that the divine truth is spoken through its words regardless of the historical setting or time in which it is read. However valuable it may be as a vehicle of divine truth, canonization means that the shortsightedness as well as the insight of its author and its message may now be taken as divinely sanctioned. It is now most often read and understood without reference to its first purpose. With those results comes a dreadful danger!

The danger of which we speak is the risk of the canonization of historically contingent literature. It is a danger that is not exclusive to the Gospel of John but endemic to the principle of canon. Much of what we have said about the Gospel of John might be said of certain other documents of the Christian canon, say the "tables of household duties" found in Col 3:18-4:1, Eph 5:21-6:9, and

32. Various remedies to the predicament occasioned by the anti-Semitic quality of the Fourth Gospel have been proposed. Beck (e.g., *Mature Christianity*, 267-68) argues for a new translation that reflects the theory of the historical origin of the Gospel of John espoused in this article and his chapter on the Gospel. Smith ("Judaism and the Gospel of John," 96 n. 24) responds to Beck's strategy by saying, "My conviction is that we cannot resolve these issues by removing offensive aspects of Scripture occasioned by the concrete circumstances of historical origins." With Smith, I have grave reservations about such a proposal. To base a translation on a hypothesis for the origin of the Fourth Gospel is risky business, the result of which would necessitate a new translation every time a new theory gained prominence in scholarly circles. But furthermore, such a proposal amounts to an effort to deceive the lay hearers and readers and would result in more difficulty than it avoids. I find more helpful the suggestion of R. Fuller ("The Jews in the Fourth Gospel," *Dialog* 16 [1977] 37) that the problem necessitates "careful teaching" of the laity. However, I think the

31. Martyn, *History and Theology*, esp. 24-36.

1 Pet 2:13–3:7. Those passages written within one cultural setting were perhaps helpful and liberating for their first readers but now are an embarrassment and oppressive in a culture that tries to correct the sins of a tradition of slavery and subjugation of women.

In its canonical status the Gospel of John has nurtured (if not conceived) repugnant attitudes and evoked abhorrent actions on the part of Christians toward their Jewish colleagues. Shall we blame those readers who used the document to sanction their own prejudices and ignorant hatreds? Shall we blame the interpreters who know better but still allow the Gospel to speak its devilish words to others who are willing to hear them as truth? Shall we blame the principle of canon that may expect more and attribute more authority to individual pieces than is reasonable or possible? Or, shall we blame the document itself and its producers for having been so parochial in their views as not to have imagined the use to which their work might be put?

Fortunately ours is not the awesome task of placing blame. But it cannot go unstated that the Christian church and Western culture have been amiss in not understanding the dangers inherent in the process of positing universal authority in documents that were never intended to carry such weighty importance. Responsibility for a misunderstanding of the nature of canon must rest at the doorstep of those in the past and the present commissioned with the duty to nurture a proper sense of canon and the interpretation of Scripture. Rather than placing blame, perhaps, the task is to issue a challenge to those of us who would read, interpret, and place authority in the Gospel of John. That challenge is simply that its authoritative value must be seriously and carefully defined and its use meticulously controlled. The challenge is to conceive and foster a new and more precise understanding of canonical authority. But it is also to advocate that canonical authority resides only within an interpretative context.³³

The issue and the challenge have been stated with precision by J. Christiaan Beker. He argues that we must formulate what constitutes the “coherence” of the New Testament and confess that to be the normative content of its message. The “contingent situational factors” interwoven with that normative message must be clearly and explicitly distinguished, so that we are able to differentiate between the normative and the situational.

For Christians today, the crucial question is whether, in their present theological reflections on Judaism, they shall accord normative canonical status to those contingent factors . . . , thus elevating [them] to a normative canonical status In other words, a sensible Jewish-Christian dialogue depends on a crucial *theological* decision: Where do we locate the authority of scripture? . . . Thus the task of the Christian theologian with respect to “the Jewish question” is a foundational task.³⁴

Beker's challenge is, to be sure, fraught with risks and difficulties. Not least among those risks is the delicate question of distinguishing between the normative and the contingent. It also risks all that is involved in the classical issue of “a canon within the canon.” Most certainly too the challenge can be addressed not alone in the rarefied atmosphere of scholarly discussion. It must reach the congregations and the classrooms where the Fourth Gospel is read and valued. Still, the risks and the difficulties are worthwhile. It is only in precisely the program that Beker proffers that we can find our way to a new understanding of the issue of anti-Semitism in the Gospel of John and in the New Testament as a whole, while in the process bringing new clarity to the troublesome question of the authority of Scripture for Christianity. In other words, it is in addressing the issue of anti-Semitism in the New Testament that we are forced to deal with a question on which Christian self-identity hinges. Ironically, but appropriately, wrestling with the Johannine effort to define Christian identity compels us to address the issue most fundamental to our own Christian identity.

Only in a creative and diligent response to this challenge to define more sharply and interpret more effectively the doctrine of Christian canon is there the possibility of overcoming the tragic burden of the anti-Semitic tone experienced in the reading of the Gospel of John.

33. The challenge, I believe, is being addressed in such efforts as those of D. Jodock, *The Church's Bible: Its Contemporary Authority* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

34. J. C. Beker, “The New Testament View of Judaism,” in Charlesworth, ed., *Jews and*