

The Gospel of John and the Jews

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The purpose of this paper is to draw together and review the issues that are basic for any dialogue on the subject of the Gospel of John and the Jews. The substantial body of literature on the subject has identified major issues that remain unresolved and has established standard positions. The general observation that the vilification of *hoi Ioudaioi* in John has contributed to the bloody record of persecution of Jews can hardly be contested. Nevertheless, probing beyond this general observation leads one into areas where meanings are ambiguous and biases influence interpretations and conclusions. Five major issues must be addressed, however cursorily, in a paper such as this one:

1. What does *hoi Ioudaioi* mean in the Gospel of John?
2. How does the group characterized as *hoi Ioudaioi* function in the Gospel of John?
3. How did the Gospel of John function in its historical context?
4. Is John anti-Semitic?
5. What is the task of interpretation and dialogue in the present context?

The sequence of these questions is important. Each assumes discussion of the previous issues, and discussion of the latter issues must be informed by sensitivity to the previous questions.

Referents of *hoi Ioudaioi*

The term *Ioudaios* or *hoi Ioudaioi* occurs seventy times in the Gospel of John. Those studies devoted specifically to identifying the referents of the plural, *hoi Ioudaioi*, in John have typically proposed four or five categories which have either neutral or hostile overtones.¹ First, *hoi Ioudaioi* is used to designate Jews or Judeans in contrast to Samaritans or Gentiles. Such phrases as *heorte tôn Ioudaiôn* (5:1; 6:4; 7:1), *pascha tôn Ioudaiôn* (2:13; 11:55), and *basileus tôn Ioudaiôn* (18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21[twice]) may be placed in this category.

This category has sometimes been divided into more specific usages: the Jews simply as people, the Jews in contrast to Gentiles, the Jews in contrast to Samaritans, the Jews as Jesus' contemporaries, and references to customs of the Jews. Little seems to be gained by such distinctions. Most notable (and problematic) among the neutral references is John 4:22—"Salvation is from the Jews."

Of more particular concern is the hostile or "typically Johannine" use of *hoi Ioudaioi* to refer to those who rejected Jesus and eventually demanded his death. The use of *hoi Ioudaioi* to characterize the willful rejection of Jesus received its classic definition from Rudolf Bultmann:

The term *hoi Ioudaioi*, characteristic of the Evangelist, gives an overall portrayal of the Jews, viewed from the standpoint of Christian faith, as the representatives of unbelief (and thereby, as will appear, of the unbelieving "world" in general).²

In his definitive study of the use of *hoi Ioudaioi*, Urban C. von Wahlde found that ten previous studies agreed unanimously in identifying the following thirty-one passages as instances of this hostile sense: 1:19; 2:18, 20; 5:10, 15, 16, 18; 6:41, 52; 7:1, 11, 13, 15; 8:22, 48, 52, 57; 9:18, 22a, 22b; 10:24, 31, 33; 13:33; 18:14, 31, 36; 19:7, 31, 38; 20:19.³ On the basis of substantial support von Wahlde adds seven other instances: 7:35; 8:31; 11:8; 18:12; 18:38; 9:12, 14. Two or more of the ten studies agree in adding seven other verses to the list: 3:25; 8:31; 10:19; 11:54; 18:20; 19:20, 21a.⁴ After examining these seven verses, von Wahlde concludes that five represent the neutral use; the other two (8:31; 10:19) present a mixture which he ascribes to the work of a redactor.⁵ Beyond identifying the passages that reflect the hostile sense, von Wahlde was concerned to show that with the exception of 6:41 and 6:52, all the other instances of the hostile sense refer to the authorities. While there is widespread agreement as to which instances refer to the authorities, there is no such agreement as to which instances refer to the common people. Only four instances (7:15, 35; 10:31, 33) are interpreted by two or more of the ten studies as referring to the people rather than the authorities. Von Wahlde examines the arguments in each case and finds them unconvincing.⁶ Questions might also be raised about 19:7, 12, and 14, but these are judged to refer to the hostile authorities mentioned elsewhere in the Johannine passion narrative.

The effect of von Wahlde's work is to narrow the scope of John's vilification from the people and the authorities to the authorities only. Even granting von Wahlde's conclusions, however, one must still contend with the fact that John used a general term that elsewhere has a broader referent and is not limited to the authorities.

Another significant thesis has been advanced by Malcolm Lowe. Gathering data from ancient Jewish, Christian, and pagan writings, Lowe argues that while among "Gentiles and Diaspora Jews the word had already a secondary religious meaning," "the primary meaning of *Ioudaioi* was geographical."⁷ The term *Ioudaioi* designated "Judeans" as opposed to people living in other areas, and *Judea* itself could designate (1) Judea in the strict sense, (2) the procurate of Pontius Pilate (including Idumea and Samaria), or (3) the whole kingdom of Herod the Great.⁸ The Gospel of John, Lowe concludes, speaks of Judea "only in the strict sense."⁹

Only the key points of Lowe's case for translating every reference to *Ioudaioi* in John as "Judeans" can be noted. The references to the feasts *tôn Ioudaion* all occur "in references to feasts requiring a pilgrimage to Judea."¹⁰ Wherever it is clear that Jesus (or the subject) was in Jerusalem, "the words *heortê, pascha* (and other feast names) occur *without* any appendage."¹¹ The only exception is John 6:4. While others recognize that *Ioudaioi* refers to Judeans in 11:19, 31, 33, 36, 45, 54; 12:9, 11; 19:20, and possibly also 3:25 and 11:8,¹² Lowe concludes that all the references to *Ioudaioi* in John denote Judeans, with exception of the instances in Samaria (in John 4), where "Jews" has "the correct denotation, but lacks the connotation of Judea."¹³ The only possible exception Lowe allows is John 18:20.¹⁴ The phrase *basileus tôn Ioudaion* means "King of the Judeans."¹⁵ In the hostile instances, therefore, the *Ioudaioi* are Judeans, "either in references to the Judean population in general or (less frequently except after Jesus' arrest) to the Judean authorities."¹⁶

In the most recent study on the subject, John Ashton responds to Lowe's work by first distinguishing three related questions: (1) who are the *Ioudaioi*; (2) what role or function do they fulfill in John; and (3) why did the Evangelist regard them with such hostility?¹⁷ Ashton reviews Lowe's thesis sympathetically, defending its plausibility but withholding final judgment until more historical evidence is adduced.¹⁸ Groups of people were commonly identified by their place of origin or their principal deity.¹⁹ The religious and geographical meanings may, therefore, not have been sharply distinguished. Granting the difficulty of the references in John 6, Ashton accepts that "wherever *Ioudaioi* is used . . . these are natives or inhabitants of Judea. But to say this is to say very little: the nature and significance of the role they play is left undefined, and the reasons for assigning it to them unexplored."²⁰ Ashton perceptively lodges the complaint that neither Lowe nor von Wahlde distinguished between "referent" and "sense." The "referent" of *Ioudaioi* would be "natives or inhabitants of Judea." By "sense" Ashton means the role the *Ioudaioi* play in the Gospel narrative.²¹ The distinction is essential.²² In the Gospel historical persons become characters in a narrative in which they take on varying degrees of symbolic significance and characterize different responses to Jesus.²³ Most previous studies on the identity of the *Ioudaioi* in John suffer from lack of precision because they do not sharply distinguish between semantic and syntactic aspects of meaning, or (using Ashton's terms) referent and sense.

Distinguishing hostile from neutral instances and limiting the referent to Judeans or authorities, or even Judean authorities, does not address the issue of John's characterization of the *Ioudaioi*, their function in the Gospel, or the effect of using the same term to refer to both the hostile authorities and the (neutral) Jews or Judeans. Rather than describe Jesus' opponents as Pharisees, rulers, scribes, or chief priests (as the Synoptics do), John characterizes the opponents with the more general term *Ioudaioi*, thereby coloring all occurrences of the term in the Gospel (at least in retrospect) with the hostile sense.

Parenthetically, it is important to observe that John's characterization of the *Ioudaioi* is no less shaped by theology and historical circumstances than is its characterization of Jesus, which has long been recognized as the product of Johannine theology.

At this point the discussion of "the Jews" in the Gospel of John must move from the issue of historical referent to that of narrative function. Historical investigation and interpretation are related but quite separate endeavors.²⁴ Nevertheless, our review of efforts to define the meaning (referent) of *Ioudaioi* in John focuses four questions for further study: (1) the ambiguity or relationship between "Judeans" and "Jews" in the first-century range of meanings associated with *Ioudaioi*; (2) the role of distinctions in meaning (neutral/hostile, Judeans/Jews, people/authorities) in the reading of John; (3) the relationship between referent and symbol (or historical persons and literary characters); and (4) reasons why those hostile to Jesus are characterized by the generalizing designation *hoi Ioudaioi*, which carries the burden of unbelief and the world's rejection of Jesus.

The Function of *hoi Ioudaioi* in John

Merely distinguishing and classifying neutral and hostile references to the *Ioudaioi* in John is not adequate. We must ask how the neutral and hostile references are related to one another. A full analysis of the characterization, role, and function of the *Ioudaioi* in John cannot be attempted here. Principal issues will be defined, and the parameters of the narrative role of the *Ioudaioi* will be sketched. Concerns more strictly literary than the four issues just defined require attention: (1) how does the Gospel narrative develop the relationship between the *Ioudaioi*, the crowds, the Pharisees, the authorities, and the world; (2) is there progressive development and escalation of hostility throughout the Gospel or within episodes, or is von Wahlde correct in maintaining that "from the time that they appear on the scene, the 'Jews' demonstrate this attitude which neither increases nor diminishes as the gospel progresses";²⁵ and (3) how does John explain (or make plausible to the reader) the hostility of the *Ioudaioi*?

In *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* I argued that *hoi Ioudaioi* are one character—not three, four, or five—and that the level of hostility escalates within each episode and from one episode to another.²⁶ Further precision may be given to this analysis of the role of "the Jews" by tracing the development of the hostility from one episode to the next. *Episode* is used to designate a distinct segment or section of the narrative that contains one or more scenes. The beginning of an episode is usually marked by the phrase "after this" or "after these things," a change of location, and reference to a festival.

Episode 1 (John 1:19-2:11). John bears witness to Jesus, and Jesus calls his first followers, among them Nathanael, "An Israelite in whom there is no guile"

(1:47). Jesus' first sign allows the disciples to see his glory, and they respond with belief in him (2:11).

The only reference to "the Jews" in this first episode reports that "the Jews from Jerusalem" (later identified with the Pharisees, 1:19, 24) sent messengers to question John. Opposition or hostility may be foreshadowed, but it is not explicit here. The replacement theme is introduced by the reference to the six water pots which were for "the cleansing of the Jews" (2:6), and from which Jesus provides the new wine.

Episode 2 (John 2:12-3:21). The beginning of a new episode is signaled by three indicators: (1) the phrase "after this" (*meta touto*; 2:12), (2) a change of location (to Capernaum, 2:12; then to Jerusalem, 2:13), and (3) reference to a festival, "the Passover of the Jews" (2:13). Jesus drives out the merchants, then interprets his actions to "the Jews" when they question him. The pattern of Johannine dialogue is established: the Jews ask questions, and Jesus gives metaphorical answers full of double meaning which "the Jews" do not grasp (see 2:18-20). The narrator must explain Jesus' response to the reader (2:21-22). Nicodemus, "a ruler of the Jews" (3:1) and "teacher of Israel" comes to Jesus at night, but cannot understand Jesus because Jesus is from above while he is "earthly" (*epigeia*, 3:12; cf. 3:31). John begins to explore the nature and source of unbelief through the characterization of "the Jews" (see 3:18-20).

Episode 3 (John 3:22-36)—an interlude in Judea. "After these things" (*meta tauta*, 3:22), Jesus and his disciples remain in Judea, where John's disciples debate with "the Jews" about cleansing (3:25).

Episode 4 (John 4:1-54). This episode begins with only the indication of a change in location due to Jesus' knowledge that the Pharisees had heard of his baptizing (4:1). The Samaritan woman identifies Jesus as a Jew, and the narrator explains that "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (4:9, RSV). Later, Jesus declares that "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22), but the hour is coming when the distinction between Jew and Samaritan will be observed no longer: "all true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth" (4:23). Verse 43 marks a scene change, and the episode concludes in Cana of Galilee.

Among the references to "the Jews" in John 1-4 there is little indication of hostility. At most, the inability of "the Jews" to understand Jesus is portrayed. The seeds of conflict are sown, but they have scarcely begun to grow.²⁷

Episode 5 (John 5:1-47). The beginning of a new episode, a major division in the Gospel, is marked by the three common indicators: (1) "after these things" (*meta tauta*), (2) a festival of "the Jews," and (3) travel to Jerusalem (5:1). Hostility against Jesus arises for the first time when Jesus heals on the Sabbath and declares that God is his Father. "The Jews" question the healed man, and the narrator explains that "the Jews" were seeking to kill Jesus because he violated the Sabbath and committed blasphemy (5:16, 18).²⁸ The script unfolds

slowly, however, and the hostility develops step by step. Jesus responds that “the Jews” have not accepted the witnesses on his behalf: John, the signs, the Father, the Scriptures, even Moses himself (5:31-47). “The Jews” do not believe because they do not seek “the glory of the only God” (5:44). Indeed, they are not faithful to their own heritage: if they believed Moses, they would believe Jesus (5:46).

Episode 6 (John 6:1-71). “After these things” (*meta tauta*), Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee (6:1). The Passover, “the festival of the Jews” was at hand (6:4).

While “the Jews” celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, Jesus feeds a multitude in the hills of Galilee and then crosses the Sea. When Jesus will not feed the crowd (6:2, 5, 22, 24) again the next day, “the Jews” begin to “murmur” (6:41) and then to fight with one another (6:52) over Jesus’ explanation that he himself is “the bread of life” (6:48, 51). Jesus’ disciples murmur also (6:61), and many then turn away from him (6:66).

Episode 7 (John 7:1-8:59). “After these things” (*meta tauta*), Jesus went to Galilee (7:1), where his brothers challenge him to go to Jerusalem for the festival of booths (7:2).

From the beginning of this episode the reader is warned again that “the Jews” were seeking to kill Jesus (7:1). The warning raises the level of suspense, while the hostility of the exchanges between Jesus and “the Jews” builds to a climax in this episode. The crowd “murmurs” (7:12), but they fear “the Jews” (7:13). The reasons for unbelief are developed fully in this chapter.²⁹ The authorities seek to arrest Jesus, but he eludes them. Some of the people believe (7:31), whereas the Pharisees “murmur” again (7:32), and “the Jews” question Jesus’ enigmatic responses (7:35; 8:22). Because some of the people believe, there is a division (*schisma*) among them (7:43). Again, Jesus says that “the Jews” are “from below” while he is “from above” (8:23).

John 8:31 is a notorious difficulty. Jesus addresses “the Jews who had believed in him,” but they no longer believe (see 8:31b). The hostile exchange that follows raises challenges to both the legitimacy of Jesus’ birth and the relationship of “the Jews” to Abraham.³⁰ Jesus claims that their father is the Devil (8:44), so they are not “from God” (8:47). “The Jews” respond that Jesus is a Samaritan and has a demon (8:48, 52). This episode ends with “the Jews” taking up stones to throw at Jesus (8:59). A new peak of hostility has been reached.

Episode 8 (John 9:1-10:42). The conventional markings of the beginning of a new episode fail us here, but the shift from the intensity of chapter 8 to the new structure of seven scenes in John 9, with their escalating conflict, justify the beginning of a new episode at John 9:1.

Jesus’ work brings division even among the Pharisees (*schisma*, 9:16). “The

Jews" do not believe that the man Jesus healed had actually been blind (9:18). His parents are afraid of "the Jews," however, because "the Jews" had agreed to cast out of the synagogue any who confessed that Jesus was the Christ (9:22). "The Jews" then question the man himself and finally cast him out (9:34). John 9, therefore, carries the conflict between Jesus and "the Jews" over into the affairs of those who were associated with Jesus. Exclusion from the synagogue represents a fresh escalation in the conflict.

The point at which this episode ends is also open to debate. John 10:19 reports a division (*schisma*) among "the Jews," with some claiming that Jesus is a demoniac and others defending him. A new festival, Hanukkah, is introduced in John 10:22, so a new episode could begin at that point, but the action in the following verses brings the hostility to a "flash point" again as "the Jews" take up stones once more (10:31, 33) before Jesus withdraws from Jerusalem (10:40).

Episode 9 (John 11:1-54). The beginning of this episode is marked by the introduction of new characters (Lazarus, Mary, and Martha) and their request that Jesus return to Judea, to Bethany.

Suspense is created by the reminder that "the Jews" had recently attempted to stone Jesus (11:8). "Many of the Jews" had come to comfort the sisters, however, and they are portrayed in a positive light (11:19, 31, 33). They even comment, "see how he loved him" (11:36). Following the raising of Lazarus, "many of the Jews" who were present believe in Jesus (11:45); others report him to the Pharisees, who conspire against him. The division between receptive and hostile "Jews" that was noted earlier is now complete. Jesus can therefore no longer move about openly among "the Jews" (11:54), so he withdraws to Ephraim.

Episode 10 (John 11:55-12:50). This episode is closely related to the previous one, but the new episode is introduced by the reference to "the Passover of the Jews" (11:55) and Jesus' return to Bethany (12:1). Surprising as this may be, the first part of the Gospel ends with the Pharisees seeking to arrest Jesus (11:57) while a great crowd of "the Jews" cheers his arrival at Jerusalem (12:9, 11).

The only reference to "the Jews" in the farewell discourse recalls Jesus' words about his departure (13:33; cf. 7:33). Although Jesus warns his disciples of the world's hostility and says they will be put out of the synagogue and killed (16:2), "the Jews" are not named explicitly.

"The Jews" return to the narrative at the arrest of Jesus (compare 18:3 [Pharisees] with 18:12 [Jews]). Caiaphas had counseled "the Jews" that Jesus had to die for the sake of the people (18:14; cf. 11:51). Jesus protests that he had taught openly, in the temple, where "the Jews" gathered (18:20). Pilate questions: "Are you the king of the Jews?" (18:33), and later retorts, "Am I a Jew?" (18:35). Jesus maintains that his kingdom is not of this world. If it were, his

followers would fight to keep him from being handed over to “the Jews” (18:36). Pilate then reports to “the Jews” that he finds Jesus innocent of any wrongdoing. “The Jews” then appeal to the Law (19:7). The Gospel of John renders its final verdict on “the Jews,” however, when they force Pilate to condemn Jesus (19:12) and then respond to his taunts saying, “we have no king but Caesar” (19:14-15). In bitter irony, Jesus is crucified under the inscription, “Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews” (19:19-22).

Fear of “the Jews” follows Jesus’ crucifixion. Joseph of Arimathea was a secret believer “for fear of the Jews” (19:38), and the disciples remain behind closed doors “for fear of the Jews” (20:19). The only other references to “the Jews” following the crucifixion are incidental (19:40, 42).

From this analysis of the role of “the Jews” in the Gospel narrative the following conclusions may be proposed:

1. References to “the Jews” must be studied in their narrative context. Extracting the references from their place in the structure of the narrative and attempting to distinguish various referents (Judeans, authorities, common people) does not explain John’s characterization of “the Jews” or the development of their role in the Gospel.

2. Similarly, Bultmann’s description of the symbolic role of “the Jews” as Jesus’ opponents does not do justice to the division among “the Jews” that is described in John 6-12. “The Jews” are neither a static nor a homogeneous character.

3. “The Jews’ ” hostility toward Jesus is not constant (contra von Wahlde). Instead, we find escalation of conflict within the ten episodes in the first part of the Gospel and progressive development in the plot from one episode of the next.

4. The division between the “Jews” who accept Jesus and those who finally reject him is the most distinctive feature of John’s treatment of “the Jews”—not their uniform hostility toward him. The significance of this division in relation to the social context of the Gospel now requires further attention.

How Did John Function in Its Historical Context?

Both the social factors that influenced the formation of the Fourth Gospel and the functions of the Gospel in that context are important. Specifically, (1) what influenced John’s use of the generalization, “the Jews,” (2) why does the Gospel describe division among “the Jews,” and (3) how might these aspects of the Gospel have been understood by its first readers?

Wolfgang Iser and other reader response critics have recently helped us to appreciate the importance of a narrative’s reflection of values and social codes and norms. By means of commentary, characterization, irony, stereotype, caricature, and conflict a narrative has the ability to call into question a reader’s

perceptions and commitments and undermine or defend rival value systems. Familiar values may be “defamiliarized” in the narrative world by portraying them in a new context. Consequently, new configurations of distance and intimacy between the reader, the characters, and the represented values are created. The Gospel of John in particular handles these dynamics in a masterful way.⁸¹ For example, a change in the reader’s attitude toward the Law may be confirmed by the last reference to *nomos* in the Gospel, where the *Ioudaioi* answer Pilate: “We have a law, and by that law he ought to die . . .” (19:7).

The complementary proposals of J. Louis Martyn and Raymond E. Brown (though they differ at points) have been widely accepted as the most useful analyses of the specific historical context of the composition of the Fourth Gospel.⁸² Relying heavily upon their work, we may sketch the general contours of the Gospel’s historical setting.

The Johannine community originated in a group of Jews who found the fulfillment of their messianic expectations in Jesus. The teachings of the Beloved Disciple were shaped into homilies for fellow Jews, so the Johannine tradition is deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and their interpretation (especially in the wisdom tradition).

For reasons that are not entirely clear the synagogue began to identify and expel the Jesus-believing Jews from its fellowship. The process was probably similar to the use of the *Birkath ha-Minim* or twelfth benediction but prior to its adoption at Jamnia. This traumatic event is reflected in John 9:22; 12:42; and 16:2.

While the majority of the believers began to form a new community, “secret believers” remained within the synagogue and some of the Johannine Christians may have considered returning to the synagogue. Relying on written sources composed under the influence of the Beloved Disciple, the Gospel was composed and edited over a period of years. Eventually, the Johannine community itself split, and the Johannine Epistles were written to encourage and defend the remnant community from the Christological innovations of those who left the community.

The Gospel, therefore, was written to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish expectations and that those who received him were faithful to the Law while those who rejected Jesus turned away from their own heritage.⁸³ Martyn has convincingly shown how the Gospel develops two levels of meaning.⁸⁴ It recalls (1) Jesus’ conflict with the authorities, but it also clarifies (2) the issues in the conflict between the Johannine community and the synagogue. Within this context the Gospel functioned primarily to encourage the Johannine community, to interpret why the synagogue had rejected them and their messianic beliefs, and to provide the community with a clearer identity as true “children of God.”⁸⁵ The Gospel confirmed that the community was being faithful to Jesus’

revelation as it was mediated to them by the Paraclete or Spirit of Truth and interpreted by the Beloved Disciple. Secondly, the Gospel probably also served to encourage the "secret believers," who were caught between the Johannine community and the synagogue, to declare their faith publicly, to sever ties to the synagogue, and to join the community. By the time of the final editing of the Gospel other (intra church) functions are evident also, but these are not relevant for discussion of the Gospel of John and the Jews.

On the basis of this understanding of the setting of the Gospel, several observations are possible.

1. Both the pervasive Jewishness of the Gospel and its sharp polemic against "the Jews" can be explained on the basis of the setting described above.

2. The division among "the Jews" in chapters 6-12, which is peculiar to John, developing as it does from "murmuring" to the belief of some of "the Jews" and the efforts of others to seize Jesus, reflects the division that had occurred within the synagogue.

3. The Johannine Christians believed that they were faithful to the Law while their opponents had shown that they themselves did not understand Moses or the Scriptures (5:39, 46).

4. The Fourth Gospel stereotypes Jesus' opponents as "the Jews" because the decisive break between Judaism and Christianity had already occurred, at least in the Johannine setting, and the Jews of the synagogue were persecuting the Christian community. "The Jews," therefore, becomes a term by which the Gospel characterizes both Jesus' opponents and the community's opponents. Through this characterization, the Gospel offers various explanations for why Jesus was rejected by his own people.³⁶

Is John Anti-Semitic?

Sometimes shading distinctions is merely an academic exercise in obscuring an issue or hedging on a response. When answering the question whether John is anti-Semitic, however, clarity of definition is essential.

J. N. Sevenster, in *The Roots of Pagan Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World* (1975), established several points that are relevant for our discussion. He traced the earliest evidence of pagan anti-Semitism back as far as the Elphantine papyri, fifth century B.C.E. Ancient anti-Semitism, however, pre-dated modern theories of racial distinctions. Sevenster found not a single indication "that anti-Semitism in the ancient world used the theory of race as a weapon of attack."³⁷ Instead, the basis for pagan anti-Semitism was the contempt of Jews for pagan religious practices, the autonomy and separation of Jewish communities, and the peculiarities of their religious practices (sabbath observance, circumcision, and food laws).³⁸

Although some (e.g., Edward Flannery)³⁹ regard pagan anti-Semitism as

the source of Christian anti-Semitism, Sevenster does not link the two. Douglas Hare's observation is persuasive: "Since gentile converts to Christianity were drawn primarily from those attracted by Judaism, it is not at all likely that Christian anti-Semitism is to be explained on the basis of pagan hostility toward the Jews."⁴⁰ Little is gained by attempting to trace the roots of Christian opposition to Judaism to pagan anti-Semitism. The two phenomena were generally independent and motivated by different concerns.

A second interpretation relieves the Christian Scriptures in general, and the Gospel of John in particular, of the onus of anti-Semitism by arguing that the Christian Scriptures express a prophetic critique voiced from within Judaism, prior to the separation of Christianity from its Jewish origins.⁴¹ Although such a solution does not finally succeed, it has the merit of taking seriously the differences in context between modern readings of the Christian Scriptures and the social context in which they were written. While it is true that Christianity and Judaism were not clearly distinct until at least very late in the first century, the Gospel of John—as we have seen—was written at the point of separation (in one locality) and probably contributed to the ultimate separation between the two. It is far more difficult to interpret John as prophetic critique from within Judaism than it is to view Paul in this way. John serves to harden a breach that had already occurred.

A third line of argument builds on both the symbolic use of "the Jews" as representing the world's rejection of Jesus (Bultmann) and the view that the hostile references to "the Jews" designate the authorities, not the common people (von Wahlde). The following statements are representative and show that leading Johannine scholars have advanced this view:

R. E. Brown: "John is not anti-Semitic; the evangelist is condemning not race or people but opposition to Jesus."⁴²

Robert T. Fortna: "Whatever animus John may have felt and expressed against the synagogue, it is not in any racial sense anti-semitic. He does not set Jew and Gentile against each other. Rather he sees two views of revelation—we would say two religions—in contradiction. . . ."⁴³

U. C. von Wahlde: ". . . the context of intra-Jewish debate remains a possibility. . . . If the term ["the Jews"] refers only to authorities, it hardly provides evidence that the gospel is an attack on the attitudes of all Jews."⁴⁴

Other scholars have now begun to distinguish anti-Judaism from anti-Semitism and to recognize varieties of one or the other in John. *Anti-Judaism* has been defined as "that attitude which produces a clean break with Judaism theologically, either by thoroughly discrediting the Jewish tradition, as in Marcion's case, or by usurping the Jewish Bible and turning it against the Jews, as in the *Epistle of Barnabas*."⁴⁵

Edward H. Flannery accepts the distinction between *anti-Semitism* “which must include a note of hatred or contempt of the *Jewish people as such*”⁴⁶ and *anti-Judaism*, which “is purely a theological reality; it rejects Judaism as a way of salvation but not Jews as people.”⁴⁷ By anti-Judaism Flannery designates, “those oppositions intellectual in nature, whether theological or apologetical, which are bereft of hatred or stereotyping of Jews as persons or as a people.”⁴⁸

In response to efforts to exonerate the Gospel of John of the charge of being anti-Semitic, Eldon J. Epp and Janis Leibig, while recognizing the legitimacy of the distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, have both concluded that the milder term does not adequately describe John. Epp concludes, “It is difficult to apply to the Fourth Gospel’s anti-Jewish attitudes and to their impact upon the reader any term other than *anti-Semitic*.”⁴⁹ Leibig nuances her position by using the terms “the antisemitic potential of the Fourth Gospel”⁵⁰ and “theological anti-Semitism.” The latter, which she derives from Rosemary Ruether,⁵¹ distinguishes John “both from the later racial Antisemitism and from the milder ‘anti-Judaic’ attitude.”⁵²

The range of judgments on the issue of anti-Semitism in John makes clear definition and precise judgments important. The basis for the anti-Jewish tone and language of the Fourth Gospel is both theological (or more precisely Christological) and social. Confession of Jesus as the Messiah led to a relativizing of the authority of Torah that the Jewish community found unacceptable. Expulsion of the Johannine Christians from the synagogue sharpened the conflict and probably contributed to the dualistic thinking of the Johannine community. The dualism evident in Johannine thought—that distinguished sharply between those who belonged to the light, the truth, and the life from above and those who did not—resulted in a severe condemnation of all who did not accept Jesus as the Christ, the ultimate revelation of God.⁵³

The conflict, however, sprang from within Judaism, from hostility between Jews and Christian Jews.⁵⁴ It involved theological, not racial, differences. While the term *theological anti-Semitism* retains a certain “shock value” applauded by Leibig,⁵⁵ it also retains overtones of racial anti-Semitism. Still, the “prophetic critique” or “intra-Jewish debate” positions do not recognize the extent of the breach with Judaism that is already reflected in John. During the process of the development of the Johannine tradition and the composition of the Gospel, the bearers of that tradition found themselves displaced from participation in Jewish life.

In defense and explanation of these events, the Fourth Gospel stereotypes the rejection of Jesus as the response of “the Jews.”⁵⁶ Even if *hoi Ioudaioi* once denoted “the Judeans” or the Jewish authorities, the Gospel of John generalized and stereotyped those who rejected Jesus by its use of this term. Fuller succinctly attributed to the Evangelist three critical developments:

1. He altered the designation of Jesus' opponents in many places to "the *Ioudaioi*" and introduced this new designation into his own composition.
2. He reinterpreted the issues between Jesus and his opponents in explicitly christological terms.
3. He gave the hostility between Jesus and his opponents a previously unparalleled bitterness.⁶⁷

Perhaps even more importantly, the Gospel is the first document to draw a connection between "the Jews" who condemned Jesus and Jews known to the Christian community at a later time. By means of this transfer of hostility, effected by the two levels of meaning Martyn has found in the Gospel, the Gospel creates a dangerous potential for anti-Semitism.

Leibig and those who distinguish between the Gospel's intent and its effect are therefore entirely correct in speaking of the "anti-Semitic potential of the Fourth Gospel."⁶⁸ Not only has the Gospel been read as supporting anti-Semitism, it has contributed to the development of anti-Semitism.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the nuanced terms "theological anti-Judaism" and "anti-Semitic potential" provide the most accurate descriptions of the Fourth Gospel's language, tone, and attitude toward Jews and Judaism.

The Gospel of John, we conclude, develops an anti-Jewish polemic motivated by theological concerns. The anti-Semitic potential of this polemic, however, fed hostility toward Jews when it erupted with brutal consequences in later centuries.

The Task of Interpretation and Dialogue

No one's hands are clean. Dialogue between Jews and Christians requires that we each confess the guilt of our own contributions and those of our respective religious traditions to the sharpening of theological differences into the outrage of anti-Semitism in all its subtle and violent forms. Theological differences have led to the violation of the ethical principles of both Judaism and Christianity.

Dialogue requires further that both shared affirmations and conflicting views be recognized. At issue for Christians is the relationship between their affirmation of the continuing authority of the Hebrew Scriptures and their confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31). When the two are held in common, tension results and the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures is relativized. The Old Covenant is displaced by the New, resulting in the rejection of Judaism.

How can we establish a Christian interpretation of a Gospel that proclaims love for the world while fostering hatred for Jews? Sensitivity to the tension in the Fourth Gospel between the values it teaches and the stereotypes it uses can bring constructive reevaluation among both Jews and Christians. Neutralizing

the "anti-Semitic potential" of the Fourth Gospel, however, will require concerted effort on six fronts: (1) sensitive interpretation of the origin and setting of the Fourth Gospel; (2) theological critique of the Fourth Gospel's anti-Jewish elements; (3) development of a Christology that affirms Jesus' role in relation to both Judaism and the Kingdom of God; (4) reaffirmation of the importance of Judaism and its continuing contributions to the Christian faith; (5) reaffirmation of the importance of the Hebrew Scriptures as a part of Christian Scripture, including affirmation of their teachings in their own right rather than as a foil for Gospel teachings; and (6) critique and repudiation of any effort to use the Fourth Gospel to support anti-Semitic sentiments. These efforts, moreover, while based on serious theological discussion, must be communicated through sermons, popular commentaries, and religious curriculum at all levels so that they will have an impact on all confessing Christians.

Ironically, at least part of the task before us is to find ways for Christians to hold firm to their confession of Jesus as the Christ and fulfill their mission as the Church while also bringing fulfillment to the prophecy of Caiaphas, "that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:51-52, RSV).

This article is dedicated to Professor W. D. Davies, who shared with his students both his Christian devotion and his appreciation for Jewish piety and scholarship. With all, he has shared his devout concern for understanding and peace between Jews and Christians. *Shalom wbarakah*.

¹ See Erich Grässer, "Die Antijüdische Polemik im Johannesevangelium," *New Testament Studies*, 11 (1964-65), 74-90; Robert G. Bratcher, "The Jews' in the Gospel of John," *Bible Translator*, 26 (1975), 401-409; Reginald Fuller, "The 'Jews' in the Fourth Gospel," *Dialog*, 16 (1977), 31-37; Urban C. von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews': A Critical Survey," *New Testament Studies*, 28 (1982), 33-60.

² Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 86.

³ von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews,'" p. 41. The ten previous studies reviewed by von Wahlde are: Grässer, "Die Antijüdische Polemik im Johannesevangelium"; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, trans. K. Smyth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), pp. 286-287; Robert Fortna, "Theological Use of Locale in the Fourth Gospel," *Anglican Theological Review*, Supplementary Series, 3 (1974), 58-94; Bratcher, "The Jews' in the Gospel of John"; Fuller, "The 'Jews' in the Fourth Gospel"; G. J. Cuming, "The Jews in the Fourth Gospel," *Expository Times*, 60 (1948-49), 290-292; G. Baum, *Is the New Testament Anti-Semitic?* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1965); Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), pp. lxx-lxxiii; M.C. White, *The Identity and Function of Jews and Related Terms in the Fourth Gospel* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1972); R. Leistner, *Antijudaismus im Johannesevangelium*, Theologie und Wirklichkeit, 3 (Bern: H. Lang, 1974).

⁴ von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews,'" pp. 41, 49-53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

⁷ Malcolm Lowe, "Who were the *Ioudaioi*?" *Novum Testamentum*, 18 (1976), 106-107.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

- ⁹ Ibid., p. 112.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 116.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Bratcher, " 'The Jews' in the Gospel of John" p. 409; von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews,' " p. 46.
- ¹³ Lowe, "Who were the *Ioudaioi*?" p. 126.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 126 n. 79.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 119.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 128.
- ¹⁷ John Ashton, "The Identity and Function of the *Ioudaioi* in the Fourth Gospel," *Novum Testamentum*, 27 (1985), 40.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 69.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 45; Wayne A. Meeks, " 'Am I a Jew?' Johannine Christianity and Judaism," *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults*, ed. Jacob Neusner, *Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity*, vol. 12, part 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), p. 182.
- ²⁰ Ashton, "The Identity and Function of the *Ioudaioi* in the Fourth Gospel," p. 55.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 57.
- ²² See R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 125-26.
- ²³ See Eva Krafft, "Die Personen des Johannesevangeliums," *Evangelische Theologie*, 16 (1956), 18-32; Raymond F. Collins, "The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel," *Downside Review*, 94 (1976), 26-46; 95 (1976), 118-132; Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 101-148.
- ²⁴ See R. Alan Culpepper, "Story and History in the Gospels," *Review and Expositor*, 81 (1984), 473.
- ²⁵ von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews,' " p. 35.
- ²⁶ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 125-132.
- ²⁷ Ibid., pp. 91, 126.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 127; see also A. E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial: A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), pp. 67-81.
- ²⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 129-130.
- ³⁰ See R. Alan Culpepper, "The Pivot of John's Prologue," *New Testament Studies*, 27 (1980), 27-28.
- ³¹ See Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 164, 209-210.
- ³² J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979); idem, *The Gospel of John in Christian History* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).
- ³³ Severino Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel*, *Supplements to Novum Testamentum*, 42 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975).
- ³⁴ Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 30.
- ³⁵ See Culpepper, "The Pivot of John's Prologue," pp. 25-31.
- ³⁶ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 129-30; John Painter, *John: Witness and Theologian*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1979), pp. 71-76.
- ³⁷ J. N. Sevenster, *The Roots of Pagan Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World*, *Supplements to Novum Testamentum*, 41 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), p. 56; cited by Douglas R. A. Hare, "Review of Three Recent Works on Anti-Semitism," *Religious Studies Review*, 21 (1976), 16.
- ³⁸ Sevenster, *The Roots of Pagan Anti-Semitism*, pp. 89-144; Hare, "Review" p. 16.
- ³⁹ Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 60-61; cited by Janis E. Leibig, "John and 'the Jews': Theological Anti-Semitism in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20 (1983), 211 n. 8.
- ⁴⁰ Hare, "Review," p. 16.
- ⁴¹ Bruce Vawter, "Are the Gospels Anti-Semitic?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 5 (1968), 473, 483, W. D. Davies, "Paul and the People of Israel," *New Testament Studies*, 24 (1977), 19, 21, 37.

- ^a Brown, *John*, 1:lxix-lxxii.
- ^a Fortna, "Theological Locale," p. 94.
- ^a von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews,'" p. 33; see also S. Wilson, "Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel? Some Considerations," *Irish Biblical Studies*, 1 (1979), 46.
- ^a Hare, "Review," p. 16.
- ^a Edward H. Flannery, "Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism: A Necessary Distinction," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 10 (1973), 583.
- ^a Ibid., p. 582, quoting from his *The Anguish of the Jews*, p. 60.
- ^a Flannery, "Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism," p. 583.
- ^a Eldon Jay Epp, "Anti-Semitism and the Popularity of the Fourth Gospel in Christianity," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal*, 22 (1975), 49.
- ^a Leibig, "John and 'the Jews,'" pp. 224-234 *passim*.
- ^a Rosemary Ruether, "Theological Anti-Semitism in the New Testament," *Christian Century*, 85 (1968), 191-196.
- ^a Leibig, "John and 'the Jews,'" p. 226. See also Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. xix-xx.
- ^a James H. Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in 1QS 3:13-4:26 and the 'Dualism' Contained in the Gospel of John," in *John and Qumran*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972), pp. 76, 96.
- ^a J. Louis Martyn, "Glimpses into the History of the Johannine Community," in *The Gospel of John in Christian History* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 102, 107, 119-121.
- ^a Leibig, "John and 'the Jews,'" p. 227.
- ^a See Richard Lowry, "The Rejected-Suitor Syndrome: Human Sources of New Testament 'Antisemitism,'" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 14 (1977), 229-30.
- ^a Fuller, "The 'Jews' in the Fourth Gospel," p. 35.
- ^a Ibid., p. 36: "It is unfortunate that . . . the Johannine redactor did not remove all the evangelist's hostile references to the Jews. For transplanted into a new *Sitz im Leben* they acquired potentiality for a meaning which the evangelist had never and could never have intended, since he was writing for a Jewish-Christian community, the meaning of anti-Semitism."
- ^a See Epp's graphic description of the effect of John's use of "the Jews," "Anti-Semitism and the Popularity of the Fourth Gospel in Christianity," p. 41.

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