

Unit 9

The Gospel of John and Anti-Judaism

To what extent is the accusation of anti-Judaism brought against Christianity already rooted in the New Testament, the foundation of the Christian message? Few go so far as to state that documents in the New Testament can be termed anti-Semitic in a racial sense, but some believe that the traces of anti-Judaism within certain texts ultimately gave rise to anti-Semitism. According to many commentators, this anti-Judaism is most fully developed in the Gospel of John. An attempt must therefore be made to ascertain whether anti-Jewish seeds were already sown in this late first-century document.

Supersessory or Replacement Theology

One of the first themes expounded in the Fourth Gospel is that Jesus replaces Jewish institutions and religious themes. This is termed supersessory or replacement theology, pointing to Jesus as one who replaces all that is held dear and sacred by his Jewish contemporaries.

(1) The Torah Consider for a moment the Johannine Jesus' attitude to the Law, the central focus of Jewish life. Already in the Prologue this notion is expressed in terms of Jesus' superiority over Moses the lawgiver: 'For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (1:17). The Torah and Moses, moreover, are described as witnesses to Jesus (e.g., 1:45; 5:39, 45-47). In this sense, they have a positive, but secondary, role in relation to Jesus. The Johannine Jesus often conveys what many view as a sense of detachment from the Torah when he addresses 'the Jews': 'In your law it is written' (8:17); 'It is written in your scriptures' (10:34); 'It is to fulfil the word that is written in their law' (15:28). Similarly Jesus is depicted as publicly overlooking key tenets of the Torah. He is said to have broken the Sabbath laws (9:16), as is graphically illustrated

in the narrative about the healing of the lame man in John 5: 'Jesus said to him: "Rise, take up your pallet and walk"'. And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, it is not lawful for you to carry your pallet"' (5:8-10). Immediately, and in contrast to other gospel traditions, the debate shifts to the issue of Jesus' identity: 'because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God' (5:18). The Jews in John's Gospel are accused of not understanding their own Law (5:45-47) and of not recognizing that the Scriptures point to Jesus (9:28-29).

Moreover, symbols closely associated with the Torah in biblical and Jewish texts are now used to describe Jesus (by means of his signs and 'I am' sayings): living water (4:10-15); life (5:39-40); bread of life (6:25-59) and light (1:4; 3:19; 8:12). On the occasion of his first sign, the turning of water into wine is said to signify that Jesus transforms the water of the Jewish rite of purification. This discloses the supersessory nature of the new revelation made manifest in Jesus. Thus although Jesus stresses the continuity between his mission and the Hebrew Scriptures (5:39; 6:45; 8:56; 10:34), Judaism is portrayed as an incomplete understanding of those Scriptures.

(2) The Temple According to John 2:12-35 the first public action carried out by Jesus involves the cleansing of the Temple. Does not this act imply that the Johannine Jesus, from the outset of his public ministry, presents himself as the replacement of the Jerusalem Temple? The new Temple is said to be Jesus himself, realized by means of his death and resurrection. Jesus is also presented as the Lamb of God, thereby making him the fulfilment of Temple sacrifices. According to Zechariah 14:8 and Ezekiel 47:1, living waters or a river shall flow from the Jerusalem Temple in the age to come, but in John 7:37-39 Jesus declares that these waters will flow from his body: 'If anyone thirst, let him

come to me and drink'. For John, Jesus is a challenge to the essential elements of Jewish religion: the Law of Moses, the Temple and the Jewish leaders.

The Portrayal of 'the Jews'

The most significant factor leading to the accusation of John's anti-Jewish bias is his negative portrayal of 'the Jews'. The term 'the Jews' occurs about 71 times, most often in the evangelist's comments, and this stands in stark contrast with the handful of analogous occurrences found in the Synoptic Gospels where it is Gentiles who primarily use this term. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' opponents are usually identified as particular groups within Judaism (Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests), which gives the impression that whilst certain groups were hostile towards Jesus, this cannot be extended to the nation as a whole. John does admittedly refer on certain occasions to Jesus' opponents as the Pharisees, but these seem to be subsumed under the more general blanket term 'the Jews'. In John 9, for example, the term 'Pharisees' (vv. 13, 15, 16, 40) and 'Jews' (vv. 18, 22) are clearly interchangeable. To what extent is the expression 'the Jews' used in a religious-ethnic sense or does it possess other possible connotations?

(1) The Hostility and Opposition of 'the Jews' Despite many examples of the neutral usage of the term 'the Jews' in John's Gospel, they are primarily remembered for their portrayal as a group hostile to Jesus, as the antagonists of Jesus within the story (about 37 times). They are 'his own people' (1:10), but they fail to understand him (3:1-4; 7:35; 8:57) and ultimately reject him. They view Jesus with suspicion, persecute him and quite early in his ministry seek to kill him (7:1: 'After this Jesus went about in Galilee; he would not go about in Judaea because the Jews sought to kill him'), and they are predominantly portrayed as his major opponents (cf. 2:18, 20; 6:41; 8:48). It is particularly interesting, moreover, that the bulk of references to the hostility of the Jews occur in John 5-12 and 18-19, the most vitriolic of which occurs in 8:31-59. Their hostility results in fear of the Jews

among those who display an interest in Jesus or who believe in him (7:13; 9:22; 19:38; 20:19). ‘The Jews’ of John’s Gospel treat Jesus with scepticism and unbelief, accusing him of being a Samaritan and demon-possessed (8:48). Jesus then tells them that they will die in their sins unless they believe in his identity as ‘I AM’ (8:24). He declares to his opponents that they are not of God but belong to the devil: ‘You are of the father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires’ (8:44).

(2) The Jews and the Johannine Passion Narrative John’s negative portrayal of ‘the Jews’ reaches its climax in the Passion narrative. In certain respects, the role of ‘the Jews’ is diminished in comparison with the Synoptics; John alone mentions Roman involvement in the arrest of Jesus (18:3, 12), while very little is said about a Jewish trial. But in other respects, John heightens the responsibility of those gathered together to oppose Jesus, people termed as the high priests and ‘the Jews’. Indeed, the narrative tends to transfer guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus from the Romans to the Jews. Pilate repeatedly proclaims Jesus’ innocence (18:38; 19:4, 6, 12), whereas it is ‘the Jews’ who persist and wish to condemn him to death: ‘Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law”. The Jews said to him, “It is not lawful for us to put any man to death” (18:31). And yet they charge him with blasphemy: ‘We have a law and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God’ (19:7). This reaches most irony in 19:15 where the opponents are even willing to compromise their monotheistic beliefs in order to secure a verdict: ‘We have no king but Caesar’ (19:15). Upon hearing this, Pilate must concede and John states: ‘Then he handed him over to them [i.e. ‘the Jews’] to be crucified’ (19:16).

Evaluation of the Johannine Evidence

The issue of John’s so-called anti-Judaism is not as straightforward as it might initially appear. The negative use of the term ‘the Jews’ must not be isolated from the remaining

evidence in the Fourth Gospel and, many would argue, from the fourth evangelist's own historical circumstances.

(1) Positive References Certain pro-Jewish elements within the Fourth Gospel must be taken into account. John does not hesitate to affirm the Jewish setting of his narrative and he readily acknowledges that Jesus is a Jew (4:9: 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'). In addition, the Johannine Jesus proclaims that the Jews have an important role to play in God's plan for salvation: 'for salvation is from the Jews' (4:21). The election of Israel was in order that, at a time appointed by God, salvation might proceed from Israel to the world.

Moreover, the more neutral usage of the term 'the Jews' must be taken into account. The Gospel attests frequently that many Jews were eager to find out more about Jesus or even to believe in him (7:15; 10:24; 11:36; 12:9). According to 11:45-53 it is precisely because of Jesus' popularity among his people that the decision is taken to put him to death. Even some of the Jewish leaders are said to believe secretly in Jesus, 'but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it' (12:42). One such leader, Nicodemus, seeks Jesus but cannot understand him (3:1-15), although he defends Jesus against the Pharisees (7:50-52) and eventually assists in the burial of his body (19:38-42).

(2) The Identity of 'the Jews' John's use of the term 'the Jews' has received a great deal of attention. Particular effort has been made to emphasize that the term is not always used negatively, and to demonstrate that it cannot refer to the entire Jewish people since nearly all the characters in John's Gospel are themselves Jews.

Symbols of Unbelief Rudolf Bultmann opts for the theory that the term 'the Jews' is used by John in an allegorical way to denote the sinfulness of humanity, a symbol for the unbelieving hostile world. It is certainly the case that a number of statements concerning 'the Jews' form part of the Gospel's dualistic structure in which they belong with the world

(*kosmos*). On such grounds, it could be argued that John is not anti-Jewish in any specific sense. But scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether claim that the opposite is true, for the use of the term 'the Jews' makes them not only the opponents of Jesus, but, if one follows Bultmann's view, the epitome of all the evil in the world.

Judaeans One suggestion that has received particular prominence in recent scholarship is that the term *Ioudaioi* primarily denotes a geographical identity and should be translated as 'Judaeans', contrasted with the Galileans (Jn 1:35-51; 2:22; 7:47-52) and the Samaritans (4:39-42). This theory is supported by Robert Fortna (*The Fourth Gospel and its Predecessor*, 310-314) and by Wayne Meeks on the grounds that there is no distinction in John's Gospel between Jew and Judaeans. This is certainly supported by such statements as 7:1: 'After this Jesus went about in Galilee; he would not go about in Judaea because the *Ioudaioi* sought to kill him'. Hence according to Meeks the term denotes a recognizable religious group that had its origins in Judaea. This theory can, however, only be applied to a handful of passages in John's Gospel. And although it may be that the terms 'Galilean' and 'Samaritan' are used as symbolic designations for a positive response to Jesus, the use of *Ioudaioi* seems to be broader than a geographical one (e.g., in phrases like 'festivals of the Jews' in 12:9, 11; 19:20).

The Jewish Religious Authorities Others suggest that 'the Jews' denotes a limited group within Judaism, namely the religious authorities. One finds, for example, that the term 'the Jews' often alternates with other terms for authorities (1:19-24; 9:13-41; 18:3-14), so that those identified as chief priests and Pharisees in 11:46-52 and 18:1-3 are termed as 'Jews' in 18:12-14. People who are Jews in ethnic terms are said to fear 'the Jews' (7:13; 19:22) and such people are said to report to 'the Jews' as people in authority (5:15).

This view is adopted by many commentators who stress that John has in mind his own experiences of the religious leaders: "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'

(D.M. Smith, 'Judaism and the Gospel of John', 82). According to J.T. Townsend, John writes from a Gentile viewpoint (similar to Acts 9-12) and refers to Jews without distinction. But why would his experience of Jews now lead him to view them as 'the others' and himself as an outsider? This brings us to a discussion on the possible historical context of the composition of John's Gospel.

(Possible) Historical Context

It is often claimed that an attempt to understand the historical setting of John's Gospel can offer some ways of interpreting the harshness with which Jews and Judaism are treated. There are indications in the narrative of a great deal of tension between the Johannine community and the synagogue, a tension that led to the expulsion of the Johannine Christians. It is claimed that this expulsion took place before the Gospel was completed, for it is stated: 'the Jews had *already agreed* that if anyone should confess him to be the Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue' (9:22; cf. 16:2). This painful separation from the synagogue meant that the Johannine community had to seek a new identity, and this happened within a framework of opposition to Judaism. Raymond E. Brown is among those who focus on the historical setting: 'In an era when there were ill feelings between the Church and the synagogue, "the Jews" was a term used with a connotation of hostility to Christians..... This does not mean that the evangelist has forgotten the true circumstances of Jesus' ministry in the anachronistic use of "the Jews". By this term he indicates his belief that the Jews of his own time are the spiritual descendants of the Jewish authorities who were hostile to Jesus during the ministry' (*John*, lxxii). If one understands the Johannine community as comprising of Jewish Christians who have been cast out of the synagogue, one is in a better position to appreciate the evangelist's apparently ambivalent view towards Judaism. One encounters a community and evangelist who are struggling with their Jewish roots and their attempt to establish their identity outside a predominantly Jewish context. No specific salvific role is attributed to the Torah, and yet

every passage is steeped in allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures; Jesus is the Messiah, the prophet awaited by Israel, and yet he goes beyond the confines of traditional Jewish monotheism by claiming that he is the incarnate Logos and the personal Son of God.

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