

The Gospel of John and Anti-Judaism

1. Introduction

Can an 'anti-Semitic potential' be detected in John's Gospel? Cf. D.M. Smith, *Theology of the Gospel of John*, 169: 'The Gospel of John has proved to be a dangerous document, for although it may not itself be anti-Semitic, it has given aid and comfort to anti-Semites'.

2. Supersessory or Replacement Theology

2.1 The Torah The Prologue of John's Gospel stresses the superiority of the revelation in Jesus over the revelation mediated by Moses: 'For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (1:17). The Torah and Moses are witnesses to Jesus (1:45; 5:39, 45-47). There is also a sense of detachment from the Torah: '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).

Breaking of Sabbath laws (9:16), illustrated by the narrative concerning the healing of the blind man (5:8-10, which shifts from Torah observance to a christological debate).

Symbols associated with the Torah in biblical and Jewish texts are now applied to Jesus (in signs and 'I am' sayings): living water, life, bread of life, light. Note the significance of the transformation of water (Jewish rite of purification) into wine (2:1-10).

Jesus stresses the continuity between himself and the Hebrew Scriptures (5:39; 6:45; 10:34), but Judaism is portrayed as offering an incomplete understanding of those Scriptures.

2.2 The Temple The cleansing of the Temple points to a supersessory theology (2:12-35). Living waters are promised to flow from the Temple in the age to come (cf. Zech. 14:8; Ezek. 47:1) but Jesus declares that these waters will flow from his body (7:37-39).

3. The Portrayal of 'the Jews'

The term 'the Jews' occurs 71x, primarily in comments made by the evangelist. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' opponents are usually identified with specific groups (e.g. Pharisees, Sadducees, chief priests). John does occasionally refer to 'the Pharisees', but it seems to be interchangeable with 'the Jews' (cf. e.g. John 9:13, 15, 16, 40 and 9:18, 22).

3.1 The Hostility and Opposition of 'the Jews' They are often portrayed as the antagonists of Jesus (about 37x). They are 'his own people' (1:10) but they fail to understand him (3:1-4; 7:35; 8:57). They view him with suspicion, persecute him and seek to kill him: 'After this Jesus went about in Galilee; he would not go about in Judaea because 'the Jews' sought to kill him' (7:1). This hostility results in fear of the Jews among those who display an interest in Jesus or believe in him (7:13; 9:22; 19:38; 20:19).

'The Jews' accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan and demon-possessed (8:48), and Jesus states that they will die in their sins unless they believe (8:24): 'You are of the father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires' (8:44).

3.2 'The Jews' and the Johannine Passion Narrative In some respects the role of 'the Jews' is diminished in comparison with the Synoptics: Roman involvement in the arrest of Jesus (18:3, 12) and lack of information about a Jewish trial. But in other respects John heightens the responsibility of those gathered, termed as high priests and 'the Jews'. There is a tendency to transfer guilt from the Romans to 'the Jews'. Pilate asserts Jesus' innocence (18:38; 19:4, 6, 12), whereas 'the Jews' persist, accusing Jesus of blasphemy (19:7). Note in particular 19:16: 'Then he handed him over to them to be crucified'.

4. Evaluation of the Johannine Evidence

4.1 Positive or Neutral References to ‘the Jews’ Affirmation of the Jewish setting of the narrative and its main figures (cf. 4:9). The role of ‘the Jews’ in the divine plan of salvation: ‘for salvation is from the Jews’ (4:21).

Many Jews were eager to find out more about Jesus or believe in him (7:15; 10:24; 11:36; 12:9); it is Jesus’ popularity that prompts the authorities to seek to kill him (11:45-53). Nicodemus defends Jesus against the Pharisees (7:50-52) and assists in his burial (19:38).

4.2 The Identity of ‘the Jews’ as Jesus’ Opponents The term cannot be used to denote the entire nation in an ethnic sense.

i) **Symbols of Unbelief** Allegorical usage to denote the sinfulness of humanity - a symbol for the unbelieving hostile world (Rudolf Bultmann). But note comments of Rosemary Radford Ruether.

ii) **Judaeans** Reference to a geographical identity, contrasted with the Galileans (1:35-51; 2:22; 7:47-52) and the Samaritans (4:39-42). This theory is supported by R.T. Fortna and W.A. Meeks, particularly on the basis of such statements as 7:1. A recognizable religious group that had its origins in Judaea. This can account for a number of examples, but its usage seems to be broader than as a geographical reference (cf. 12:9, 11; 19:20).

iii) **Jewish Religious Authorities** A theory supported by most scholars. The term ‘the Jews’ often alternates with terms for the authorities (1:19-24; 9:13-41; 18:3-14). Those identified as chief priests and Pharisees in 11:46-52 and 18:1-3 are termed as ‘Jews’ in 18:12-14. Those who are Jews in ethnic terms are said to fear ‘the Jews’ (7:13; 19:22).

5. Historical Context

Many attempts are being made to understand the historical setting of the community and the author of John’s Gospel. Clear indications of tensions between believers and the synagogue, tensions that led to the expulsion of the former (cf. 9:22; 16:2).

A painful separation leads the Johannine community to seek a new identity: ‘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’ (Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, lxxii).

The situation of Jewish Christians cast out of the synagogue may account for the ambivalent attitude to ‘the Jews’ in John’s Gospel. This is a community struggling with the reality of its Jewish roots in an attempt to establish its identity outside a predominantly Jewish context.

Bibliography

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