

The Jews murmured about Jesus because he said,
“I am the bread that came down from heaven.”
“When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask
him,

“Who are you?” he admitted and did not deny it . . .”

The phrase “the Jews” comes early in John’s gospel, but John’s habit of speaking of “the Jews” collectively is found throughout his Gospel. By the end of his account, “the Jews” are being held responsible for Jesus’ death. A careful examination, however, shows that these generalizations are both overstated and historically imperfect.

In the first passage above, it would clearly have been impossible for *every Jewish person* in Jerusalem to have “sent priests and Levites” to question Jesus. Instead, this passage must depict a relatively small group of Jews (according to John 1:24 this would have been *Pharisees*, leaders of the Jewish community when the gospel was written and among the strongest opponents of the Jesus movement), who, according to this narrative, wanted to find out what claims Jesus was making about himself. In the second passage, the people Jesus was addressing were a relatively small “crowd” (John 6:22-24) who had come to the city of Capernaum by boat, “looking for Jesus” (John 6:24b), plus any citizens of the city and the surrounding area who may have come in hope of hearing Jesus speak.

Why then were these generalizations about “the Jews” made?

One explanation refers to the time the Gospels were written. Many do not realize that they were authored decades after Jesus’ death, which occurred in about 30 AD/CE. John’s Gospel, the latest, was written in about the year 100. Therefore, these texts are more likely to reflect the friction between the Jewish leaders and the *followers of Jesus* rather than a conflict with *Jesus himself*. Additionally, these texts were written at a time when Jesus’ followers were beginning to separate from the Jewish people and wanted to build their “case” that they had “replaced” the Jews as God’s people.

Tragically, these references to the “the Jews” throughout John’s Gospel have helped to create a portrait of the Jewish people as “Christ-killers.” This portrayal has come down through history, strengthening anti-Semitism, fostering prejudice and discrimination against the Jewish community, giving ammunition to bigots and manipulative politicians, and contributing to the torture and death of millions of Jews by purveyors of hatred. Surely John and the other New Testament writers, along with all the followers of Jesus to come, did not intend to unleash upon the world such defamation and horror.

Call out:

[The Problem of “The Jews” in John’s Gospel](#)

[Translating Hoi Ioudaioi](#)

[What is the Meaning of “The Jews” in the New Testament](#)

[Let Ioudaioi Be Ioudaioi: When Less is Better](#)