

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." Little has been done to ameliorate that harsh judgment since it was first written. While efforts have been made to soften the tone of the Gospel of John when it comes to Jews and Judaism, a reading of the Gospel tends to confirm Sandmel's judgment.

My major thesis is that although the Gospel itself is not anti-Semitic, the text nurtures anti-Semitism in the church today. A surface reading of the text encourages the reader to cast Jews and Judaism in an unfavorable light. The narrator is detached from and consequently distances the reader from Judaism. As characters in the narrative, the "Jews" (*Ioudaioi*) are antagonists of the hero of the story. They misunderstand Jesus, they oppose him, they persecute him, and they seek to kill him.

Furthermore, they are unfaithful to their own faith and tradition. One cannot read the passion story of the Gospel and escape the impression that the Jewish leaders alone are responsible for the arrest, conviction, and death of Jesus (18:3, 12, 19ff.).

The impression gained by the reader is that Judaism in general is degenerate and untrue. 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). The "grace and truth" revealed in Christ is superior to the Law of Moses (1:17). The conclusion is inescapable that the text of the narrative nurtures a negative mentality toward Jews and Judaism.

So far we have looked at the surface of the text. Now we must move "behind" the text to ask two related questions: What, exactly, is meant by "the Jews" (*Ioudaioi*) in John's Gospel? And what historical situation could possibly have led to such slanderous and stereotypical references?

*Ioudaioi* occurs some seventy-one times in the Gospel. "The Jews" are part of the realm of unbelief. Although the term *Ioudaioi* is used to refer to many different groups in the Gospel and from varying perspectives, the negative characterization inherent in the term serves the dualistic scheme of the Gospel, the opposite of which is the Christian believer.

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 Jesus and nearly all of the main characters of the Gospel are themselves Jews.

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The most frequent nominees for the position as referent of the expression are Judeans, as opposed to Galilean Jews, and the religious leaders of the Judaism contemporaneous to the Fourth Evangelist. It is most 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.

But what occasion would have evoked such an attitude toward Jewish leaders as that of the Fourth Evangelist’s? In other words, what was the historical situation in which the Fourth Evangelist wrote?

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. Each concluded that the Johannine community had been part of a Jewish synagogue but was then expelled from its religious community there.

Most scholars now agree 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. The picture is of two sibling religious communities, each with its own identity issues.

How does this hypothesis for the historical origin of the Gospel inform the anti-Jewish tone of the text? First, it makes clear that the language regarding Jews and Judaism is polemical in nature and typical of classical polemic.

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 dislocation. Their task was now one of making a new place for themselves in a society which appeared to them to be hostile and unaccommodating of their views. Hence the pervasive insider-outsider language of the Gospel.

This 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.

The Johannine Christians occupied a precarious position. They had been *Christian Jews* who understood themselves as part of the ancient people of God. With their abortion from the bosom of the synagogue, they were trying to affirm that they did not need Judaism. The vitriolic attack on Judaism is nothing more nor less than the desperate—and perhaps impossible—attempt of the Johannine Christians to find a rationale for their existence in isolation from Judaism. This may explain why Torah plays no role in

the life of the believer, according to the Gospel, and why the Gospel reflects no covenantal theology.

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. 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.

This historical hypothesis also helps us understand the Gospel's portrayal of the Jewish leaders. An effective narrative needs an antagonist as much as it needs a hero figure. The situation of the Johannine community provided such an antagonist ready at hand in the figure of the Jews. The Gospel gave its first readers 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.

Although the historical origin of the Gospel of John makes its anti-Semitic tone understandable, it does not alter the basic reality of that tone as the Gospel is read and heard. The reality is that an occasional writing has become canonical literature. Herein lies a dreadful danger! It is now 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 present task is to issue a challenge to those who would read, interpret, and place authority in the Gospel of John. The challenge is simply that its authoritative value must be seriously and carefully defined and its use meticulously controlled. It is to advocate that canonical authority resides only within an interpretative context. We must differentiate between the normative and the situational.

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.

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