Stereotyping Exegesis: The Gospel of John and "the Jews" in Ancient and Modern Commentary

Undoubtedly, there is much in the Christian past that warrants recognition and repudiation in the service of rectifying Jewish-Christian relations. The history of interpretation of John assuredly will not reveal many irenic readings. But to assume that the entire reception history—especially the early history that was so formative for Christianity—uniformly bears the same hostility of more recent periods oversteps the evidence (whether or not such hostility fairly characterizes the vast majority of the tradition). When closely examined, there is much in the early reception of John's gospel that reveals significant problems in the way that that reception is so often portrayed and dismissed.

See Also: Exegeting the Jews: The Early Reception of the Johannine Jews (Brill, 2016).

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In the years following the Second World War, a variety of Christian and Jewish scholars attempted to make sense of the recent and unprecedented expressions of antisemitism. In so doing, these scholars—motivated by a diverse blend of ethical, philosophical, religious, and political inspirations—began to do what only a handful of scholars had done previously: They investigated carefully and critically Christianity's historical, often internecine views toward Judaism. In attempting to understand the origins and sources of the antisemitism that had so recently enveloped Europe, many of these scholars, particularly after the 1970s (in the aftermath of key religious, political, and scholarly developments), discovered likely culprits within the history and literature of early Christianity. A scholarly consensus arose that, though the Nazi project itself was not religiously based, it could not have spread as it did without the anti-Jewish foundations that were laid in Christianity's earliest literature and theology.

Among the many sources that scholars found at least partly responsible for the perpetuation of antisemitism was the Fourth Gospel, chiefly for two reasons. First is John's infamously unique totalizing and ostensibly hostile portrayal of "the Jews" as the antagonists of the story. Whereas the Synoptic Gospels typically speak of Jesus's opponents as "Pharisees" or "Sadducees" for example, the Gospel of John more often than not speaks of "the Jews" *in toto.* In other words, on the surface, it appears that Jesus's strife in John is not with *a specific group of* Jews, but *the* Jews themselves. (This uncomfortable portrayal has led the Roman Catholic Church to remove nearly all of John's antagonistic references to Jews in the modern lectionary.)

Second, perhaps more concerning than John's actual portrayal of "the Jews," is the supposed *impact* of that portrayal—that is, how did the Christian faithful themselves, in the decades and centuries following the composition of John's gospel, think of and treat Jews *as a result of* John's portrayal? How did the reception history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of this immensely popular gospel contribute to early-Christian anti-Judaism and later antisemitism? With regard to the effect of the gospel's *Wirkungsgeschichte* on Christian views of Jews, Eldon Jay Epp, in 1975, concisely summarized a thesis that has won widespread scholarly acceptance:

> [The] attitude toward the Jews that finds expression in the Fourth Gospel…coacted with the extraordinary popularity of that gospel so as to encourage and to buttress anti-Semitic sentiments among Christians from the second century C.E. until the present time. This leads to the conclusion that the Fourth Gospel, more than any other book in the canonical body of Christian writings, is responsible for the frequent anti-Semitic expressions by Christians during the past eighteen or nineteen centuries…. (Epp 1975, 35)

Scholarship in the years since has shared Epp's implication here that the Fourth Gospel's reception history among Gentiles has been uniformly anti-Jewish, and as such, modern awareness of the gospel's virulent reception history has often served as a sort of rally cry, a motivation for scholars now to undo the sins of the past by more carefully investigating the Johannine Jews in both their historical and post-World War II contexts.

Nonetheless, despite the central and motivating role that John's reception history has played in these investigations, scholars have frequently generalized and stereotyped the entire interpretive history as uniformly negative, rather than investigate its diverse aspects closely—and that has done little in the service of Jewish-Christian relations or scholarship on Christian origins. In what follows, I will first trace the development of modern scholarship with regard to "the Jews" in the Gospel of John and its reception history and, second, offer some examples from the gospel's earliest reception history that give reason to reconsider the ways in which that history has been the subject of stereotyping and rhetorical flourish rather than the subject of close and critical investigation.

It was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that the Fourth Gospel's relationship to Jews and Judaism became central issues in Johannine studies. One key scholarly impetus for this shift in Johannine scholarship was J. Louis Martyn's 1968 monograph, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel.* (Beyond Martyn, one could add—with more space—other factors that led to these changes, such the growth in awareness to the Holocaust after the 1970s, the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the new political relationship between the West and the State of Israel, or the official as well as unofficial pronouncements in the wake of Vatican II.)

The chief achievement of Martyn's well-known thesis arises from his suggestion that the Johannine "Jews" were not merely a symbolic theological construct, as they had been for the mid-twentieth century scholar Rudolf Bultmann, but representative of a historically real group of the first century from which the "Johannine community" (as it would eventually be known) had been excluded. As the theological consciousness with which Bultmann viewed the "Jews" gave way, after Martyn, to a primarily historical consciousness, the general thrust of Johannine scholarship on the gospel's origins for much of the next two decades swung toward quests to

identify the first-century historical referents of the gospel's "Jews," while also attempting to demonstrate that John's rhetoric, when viewed in its original historical and social context, should not be considered antisemitic or anti-Jewish *per se*. In other words, these scholarly investigations were not merely quests of historical interest but came with an ethical tint as well. Publications from these few decades of the twentieth century show time and again that identifying the historical referent of "the Jews" became the linchpin in determining whether or not John should be considered anti-Jewish or antisemitic and, therefore, culpable for later hostilities (see Von Wahlde 1982).

As historical critics of this period foregrounded the recognitions that the gospel's authors were Jewish, that Jesus was Jewish, that the earliest followers were Jewish, and that the whole portrayal was essentially an inner-Jewish debate, they were able to throw scholarly weight against previous assertions (especially under the Third Reich) that the gospel was somehow the account of "Jesus/John against Judaism," "Christianity against Judaism," or, perhaps worst of all, "Gentiles against Jews." Furthermore, in emphasizing that the harsh rhetoric contained within the Fourth Gospel was not only a product of an inner-Jewish debate but of a *normal* inner-Jewish debate (by first-century standards), commentators established that John's Gospel was actually fairly harmless in its historical context—whatever the later effect of its unfortunate rhetoric (see, e.g., Johnson 1989). While these historical observations did not entirely mitigate the ethical issues raised, they nonetheless served to push the primary blame for anti-Jewish use of the Fourth Gospel to later interpreters who failed to understand properly the entirely Jewish character of the gospel's context. Historical-critical investigations became the means to rescue Christianity's sacred text from the ancient, ostensibly antisemitic readings.

By the 1980s, trends in both Johannine scholarship and biblical scholarship more broadly shifted toward more literary-critical approaches that emphasized the gospel's narrative or rhetorical features as well as the effects of the final, complete text rather than various strata or, in many cases, historical backgrounds (see Von Wahlde 2000). Nonetheless, Martyn's thesis more or less continued to be embraced as a kind of historical basis (Smith 2008, 42). Even when certain details of Martyn's thesis were questioned or outright rejected, scholarship continued to presuppose some event of real and actual separation that gave rise to John's *hostile* (a key word) pitting of Jesus against "the Jews." And despite the different readings encouraged by the more literarily oriented investigations of these decades, scholars continued to point to the supposedly uniformly negative reception history as a motivating factor for drawing attention to the Johannine Jews, but typically with generic and unspecified references to that history.

With growing frequency in the 1980s and 1990s, and into the 2000s, scholarship on the Johannine "Jews" became increasingly linked to questions regarding whether or not the Fourth Gospel is "anti-Jewish" and how the gospel's treatment of "the Jews" should be addressed, especially in Christian communities (cf. Culpepper 2001, 68). This mounting scholarly interest in the issue of the Johannine "Jews," in tandem with the growing ethical concern, reached a crescendo in 2000 at a conference in Leuven dedicated to the topic of "Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel". The collection of essays produced by the conference (Bieringer, Pollefeyt, and Vandcasteel-Vanneuville 2001a [complete edition] and 2001b [select edition])—the most comprehensive collection ever brought together on the issue—encapsulates the history of Johannine scholarship on the issue as well as its motivations. As the editors make clear in the introductory chapter, the goal of the conference did not lay in a detached scholarly exercise but in the intention to contribute to the betterment of Jewish-Christian relations, in part by

recognizing and repudiating the anti-Jewish or antisemitic potential and history of the Fourth Gospel—what one essay calls "the embarrassment of history" (Dunn 2001).

The conference's central question considered three levels: Is the anti-Judaism of the Fourth Gospel rooted in the interpretation of the text, in the text itself, or in the author? The majority of scholars have tended to come down on the first level, holding that the Fourth Gospel's anti-Judaism is rooted primarily in the *interpretation* of the text rather than the text itself (once the text's historical context and literary motifs are properly understood). Such scholarship, the editors commendably note, often has looked to the *Wirkungsgeschichte* as a means to "neutralize the anti-Jewish character of John by relegating it to the responsibility of later interpretive groups," without considering sufficiently the relationship between "the interpretation and the text itself." The editors therefore question whether blaming the *Wirkungsgeschichte* for John's anti-Judaism is really a sufficient way to excuse the gospel and its author (Bieringer, Pollefeyt, and Vandcasteel-Vanneuville 2001, 7). The Fourth Gospel's *Wirkungsgeschichte*, they contend, is something that must be acknowledged; it is essential to understanding the problem of anti-Judaism in the gospel, but it can never be a crutch to deflect criticism from the Evangelist himself (ibid., 4). Though the editors later assume the *Wirkungsgeschichte* was almost entirely negative (particularly with regard to the infamously disturbing words in John 8:31–59, where Jesus calls the "Jews who have believed in him" children of the devil), they nonetheless acknowledge that an actual investigation of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the gospel is necessary (ibid., 36–37).

With the prevailing assumption of a negative *Wirkungsgeschichte*, this collection of essays from Leuven proves to be a microcosm of modern research on John and anti-Judaism, in the methods it describes, the conclusions it reaches, and the lacunas it overlooks. Though the

Fourth Gospel's *Wirkungsgeschichte* arises frequently in the many varied essays, the authors make no significant attempt to describe it. The need to investigate the *Wirkungsgeschichte* more closely is cited alongside the assumption that the early Gentile readers automatically exacerbated potentially anti-Jewish Johannine passages (e.g., Schoon 2001, 153–54). While early Christian readings are faulted for their uncritical, anti-Judaic, and theologically misguided interpretations (e.g., Klappert 2001, 162), only two essays cite patristic commentaries on John (Van Belle 2001 and Barrett 2001). One such citation is of Origen's third-century commentary, which the author employs for no other reason than to foreground, alongside Nazi readings, the anti-Jewish reading of Heracleon, a second-century gnostic thinker, as an example of John's anti-Jewish *Wirkungsgeschichte*, while completely ignoring Origen's own comments *against* Heracleon (Van Belle 2001, 393–95). Even when other essays in the collection offer readings that, unwittingly, closely reflect patristic readings, the many failures of the latter are still asserted, ironically in light of the supposedly *modern* methods that enable the apparently new readings (e.g., Hoet 2001, Von Wahlde 2001, and Beutler 2001). Such modern methods—especially historical criticism—are praised for revealing a setting of John's gospel that precludes anti-Jewish readings and thereby allows the Christian tradition to reverse centuries of its supposedly undifferentiated reading of the Fourth Gospel against "all Jews" (e.g., Barrett 2001, Dunn 2001, Von Wahlde 2001). The Fourth Gospel's *Wirkungsgeschichte* hovers over the rhyme and reason of the Leuven collection, and over Johannine scholarship on the issue more broadly, as an amorphous afflatus whose precise incarnation is never fully described or appreciated.

My purpose in this review so far has not been to provide a comprehensive survey of the history of Johannine scholarship on "the Jews." Rather, the intention has been to establish one fundamental point: Whatever approaches scholars have employed in interpreting the Johannine

"Jews," both before and after the Leuven conference, the overwhelming motivations and assumptions have stemmed from an uncritical vision of the Fourth Gospel's *Wirkungsgeschichte* that is entirely negative and hostile, especially when its earliest, Gentile readers have been considered.

Undoubtedly, there is much in the Christian past that warrants recognition and repudiation in the service of rectifying Jewish-Christian relations. The history of interpretation of John assuredly will not reveal many irenic readings. But to assume that the entire reception history—especially the early history that was so formative for Christianity—uniformly bears the same hostility of more recent periods oversteps the evidence (whether or not such hostility fairly characterizes the vast majority of the tradition). When closely examined, there is much in the early reception of John's gospel that reveals significant problems in the way that that reception is so often portrayed and dismissed. A few observations from the earliest surviving and fullest expositions of John's gospel in Greek—Origen's *Commentary on John* (third century), John Chrysostom's *Homilies on John* (fourth century), and Cyril of Alexandria's *Commentary on John* (fifth century)—provide some key examples.

Origen's *Commentary on John* shows a Gentile reader explicitly using John 8:31–59 to deny that Jews are "by nature" of the devil, despite scholarly intimations that compliant readers of John must assert otherwise (cf. Reinhartz 2009, 386). Against Heracleon, Origen contends that no one can be a "child of the devil" (cf. John 8:44) by nature; rather, looking to 1 John 3, Origen asserts that *whoever* commits sin *has become* of the devil: "Insofar as we commit sins, we have not as yet put off the generation of the devil, *even if we are thought to believe in Jesus*… [and] to the extent that he has not yet destroyed the works of the devil in us…we have not as yet put aside being children of the devil, since it is our fruits that show whose sons we are" (*Comm. Jo.*

20.103, 105; italics added). Origen, a staunch opponent of determinism, is well known for his incessant resistance to any threat to total human free will.

John Chrysostom's fourth-century *Homilies on John* reveals a series of homilies surprisingly devoid of the anti-Jewish hostility for which Chrysostom is so well known. Rather than view Jesus's accusation in John 8:44, for example, as the bitter reaction of a community of Christians excluded by "the Jews" (as would be more necessary in much of the historical-critical scholarship explored above), Chrysostom views these "striking" and "forceful" words as those of a caring, but tough teacher, who seeks to shock his beloved students (not just Jews) away from their clinging to the world and its achievements, its goods and riches, that they might be free to learn the things of heaven (*Hom. Jo.* 54).

Finally, there are the comments of Cyril of Alexandria, perhaps the most prolific of the early biblical commentators, who is still commemorated in Eastern Christianity as "the seal of the fathers." The manner in which Cyril explains John's Passion Narrative in his *Commentary on John* raises serious concern with the modern scholarly assumption that John's portrayal of "the Jews" led early Gentile readers to believe that all Jews of all time were responsible for Jesus's death (see, e.g., Epp 1975, 42). To be sure, this has been a common position in the history of Christianity, but it is not one offered by Cyril here. Though Cyril, like Chrysostom, was a well-known opponent of Judaism, he asserts that Jews as a whole cannot be blamed for the crucifixion of Jesus. As he *explicitly* says (commenting on John 19:5–6), "[It] is to the leaders of the Jews alone, it seems, that the wise Evangelist ascribed the origin of such impiety" (*Comm. Jo.* 12).

I do not cite these examples from Origen, Chrysostom, and Cyril with the intention of defending the early *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Johannine "Jews" entirely, and I by no means suggest that these fathers expressed no opposition toward Judaism or that they, all things

considered, offer the Christian tradition a desirably positive assessment of Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity. There is much in their writings overall that express significant and harsh opposition to Jews. These fathers are not models of interreligious sensitivity and dialogue, especially in the twenty-first century. Nor, I imagine, would they care to be.

However, though one cannot defend their wider opposition to Judaism by modern standards or in light of history, neither should one need to in order to establish that their readings of the Johannine "Jews," as well as their broader relationships with their Jewish contemporaries, were far more complex than either the labels of "anti-Judaism" or "antisemitism" allow. Research into early Christian views of Jews and the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Fourth Gospel's image of "the Jews" cannot simplistically employ Christian anti-Judaism as the "hermeneutical key for describing and understanding the historical development of the Jewish-Christian relationship" (Fürst 2003, 71). One must not deterministically assume that Gentiles, even Gentiles who generally opposed Jews, would cast by the wayside the spiritual and allegorical modes of interpretation in which they were trained simply to express their hostility against Jews on account of the fact that they were Gentiles. Gentile Christian hermeneutics (if there is such a thing) need not be so limited by such stereotypes and constructions. The early readings, closely considered, may in fact bear positive fruit for our understanding of the Johannine "Jews" and for Jewish-Christian relations more broadly.

The actual complexities evidenced in early Christian commentaries on John raise critical and ethical issues with the totalizing manner in which recent literature often portrays the earliest Gentile recipients not only as proponents of either anti-Judaism/antisemitism but as precursors whose comments warrant their place *alongside* Nazi propagandists. A greater awareness to the specifics of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the gospel is necessary before one can easily assert that

the gospel had "a blatantly anti-Semitic impact upon Gentile readers" (Epp 1975, 55) or inspired "wholesale condemnation of Jews and Judaism" (Smith 2008, 19) or, worse yet, that "a ghastly line can be traced from [the Fourth] Gospel's portrayal of 'the Jews' through the anti-Semitic statements of Cyril of Alexandria and of Chrysostom…up to the Nazi propaganda that employed the slogan *Der Vater der Juden ist der Teufel*" (Lincoln 2000, 405–6). Such generalizations of patristic relationships with Jews and the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of John that depend on what Marc Saperstein has admirably called "metaphors of continuity" (Saperstein 2011) do justice neither to the text of the gospel, its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, nor Jewish-Christian relations, whether historically or contemporarily. The direct and continuous links often drawn amid John–church fathers–Nazis, while rhetorically effective, are difficult to justify.

As scholars have frequently pointed out, the ethical problems involved in John's Gospel chiefly concern the fact that his phrase, "the Jews," is a totalizing literary device, however specific the historical referent might have actually been. In a similar manner, I suggest that *some* of the most drastic elements of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Johannine "Jews" (such as one finds in Nazi propaganda) cannot justifiably apply to *all* of the *Wirkungsgeschichte*. One cannot rightly undo the effects of one totalizing by totalizing another. History and literature are far more complex.

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