

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN AND THE JEWS:  
THE STORY OF A RELIGIOUS DIVORCE

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It is not surprising that Rosemary Ruether found the fullest development of New Testament anti-Jewish bias within the Gospel of John.<sup>1</sup> Her estimate of the gospel's anti-Jewish stance reflects the opinion of most exegetes.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this evaluation of the gospel are well-known and / often repeated. First of all, John proclaims a replacement theology.<sup>3</sup> What John's Jewish contemporaries held dear the evangelist seems to have abolished and replaced with the Christian Jesus.

John 15:1-17 represents Jesus as "the vine," a well-known symbol for God's people Israel (Ps. 80:8 [MT 9] - 16[17]; Hos. 10:1; see Jer. 6:9; Ezek. 15:1-6; 17:5-10; 19:10-14; Hos. 14:7 [8]; II Esdras 5:23).<sup>4</sup> Thus Jesus replaces Israel. As for the Jews, they have no right to call themselves children of Abraham (8:39f.)

In respect to the Jewish Law, John regards it as something alien to Christians (8:17; 10:34; 15:25), and he depicts Jesus ignoring it publicly (5:9-17; 9:16). As the one who truly reveals God's will, Jesus has become the Law's replacement (cf. 1:17; 5:39f., etc.).<sup>5</sup> In Rabbinic circles typical symbols for the Law of Moses included bread, light, water and wine.<sup>6</sup> According to John Jesus is the living bread from heaven (6:32-38) and the light of the world (1:4, 9; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 11:8f.; 12:35f., 46). Jesus also transforms the water of Jewish purification into the good wine (2:6-10) and contrasts the water from Jacob's well with his own living water (4:12-15). Moreover, even though the Mosaic Law belongs to the Jews, they themselves have failed

to understand it, for they have never known God (5:38-47; 7:28; 8:19, 24-27, 47; 15:21; 16:3).

According to John 2:18-22 there is to be no more Jerusalem Temple. Jesus has replaced it with his body.<sup>7</sup> There is also a whole new cult. No longer is worship to be grounded in the Jerusalem sacrifices. "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (4:24; see vss. 20ff.)<sup>8</sup> The new cult centers about Jesus as the new temple. According to Ezek. 47:1, Joel 3:18 (MT 4:18), and Zech. 14:8 living waters are to flow forth from the Jerusalem Temple in the age to come; but John 7:37-39 declares that these waters will flow from the body of Jesus in a messianic celebration of the feast of Tabernacles.<sup>9</sup> John also arranges his chronology so that Jesus' death coincides with the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. Then, to insure that all who read the gospel understand the symbolism, the evangelist adds that Jesus fulfills a scriptural requirement of the Passover Lamb in that none of his bones were broken (19:32-36; cf. Exod. 12:46; Numb. 9:12).<sup>10</sup> Another implication that Jesus has replaced the Jewish cult may lie behind the words of the Baptist in John 1:29, 36: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The interpretation of this saying, however, is far from certain and may have nothing to do with sacrifice.<sup>11</sup>

John 10 depicts Jesus as the door to the sheepfold (vss. 7, 9) and as the Good Shepherd of the sheep (vss. 11, 14). Since the Hebrew Scriptures often depict Israel's leaders as shepherds (Numb. 27:16f.; Ezek. 31:1-24; etc.), the passage in the gospel implies that Jesus has replaced <sup>the Jewish</sup> the traditional Jewish leadership. For John the Jewish leaders are thieves and bandits (vs. 1)<sup>12</sup> or, at best, mere hirelings (vss. 12f.)

Since the Hebrew Bible sometimes depicts God as a shepherd (e. g., Gen. 49:24; Pss. 23:1; 78:52; Micah 2:12f.), the title Good Shepherd may have implied Jesus' divinity. Elsewhere John is more explicit. He begins his gospel with the affirmation that Jesus is God's divine Word and has shown no concern over having Jesus addressed as "God" (20:28),<sup>13</sup> even though the evangelist generally prefers the title "Son of God" (see, e. g., 20:30) and regularly depicts Jesus' relation to God as a son's relation to his father (e. g., 14:9-11). The evangelist makes it clear, however, that in Jewish eyes Jesus' affirmation of his divine sonship implied a blasphemous claim to be equal with God. (5:18; 10:33; 19:7).

It is probable that John even has Jesus apply God's name to himself. In several instances, such as John 8:58 (also 6:20; 8:24, 28; 13:19; 18:5f.; and possibly 14:3), Jesus uses the words egō eimi (= "I am") of himself without a predicate nominative.<sup>14</sup> For Greek speaking Jews and Christians these words could stand for the divine name. They appear as such in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint. The use of "I am" for the divine name is especially clear in Isaiah 45:18 where the Greek translator used egō eimi<sup>15</sup> to render "I am YHWH. There is need for caution, however, in concluding that the Johannine Jesus regularly uses "I am" in this sense. Egō eimi could occur without any theological implication as, for example, in John 9:9, where a beggar whom Jesus has healed identifies himself with egō eimi, words translated, "I am the man," in the RSV. Still the fact that, at least in John 8:58, Jesus uses "I am" of himself

in a context where the words do not quite fit in the normal secular sense suggests that John regularly uses "I am" on the lips of Jesus in order to reveal his divinity. Thus for John, Jesus is a challenge to all the essential elements of the Jewish religion: to the concept of Jewish election, to the Law of Moses, to the Temple and its cult, to the Jewish leadership, and even to the belief that God is one, an affirmation which every male Jew was bound to recite at the core of his daily prayers.<sup>16</sup>

The second indication of John's anti-Jewish bias is his negative portrayal of the Jewish people. Perhaps the most prominent aspect of this portrayal is simply his use of the terms, "Jew" and "the Jews." The very frequency of the terms make them stand out. Although they occur in each of the other gospels only five or six times, John uses them seventy-one times. The other gospels identify those opposing Jesus as particular groups within Judaism: Pharisees, Sadducees, and the like. Such specific designations give the impression that, although certain cliques within Israel were hostile to Jesus, the Jews as a whole were not. In contrast John tends to label all of Jesus' opponents "Jews." John makes no attempt to avoid all specific designations of the opponents,<sup>17</sup> but he calls them "the Jews" far more often than anything else. The effect of this usage upon the reader is the implication that the Jews as a whole were enemies of Jesus. The Jews in John appear so evil that some exegetes believe them to be, not simply Jews, but a symbol for the evil hostility of the world to God's

revelation. "The Jews" oppose Jesus and persecute him throughout his ministry, and their attack reaches its climax in the Passion narrative.<sup>18</sup> There it is specifically the Jews (e. g., 19:14f.), not merely an anonymous crowd (Mk. 15:8, 11, 15; Mt. 27:15, 20; Lk. 23:4), who cry out for Jesus' blood; and it is the Jews who have the responsibility for carrying out the sentence of death (Jn. 19:16).

In spite of the apparently overwhelming evidence of John's anti-Jewish bias, a substantial minority of exegetes, including several who are Jewish, have concluded that the Fourth Gospel generally and its passion narrative in particular are at least no more anti-Jewish than the other gospels.<sup>19</sup> Some interpreters even suggest that John was intended as a missionary tract for Jews.<sup>20</sup>

There are indeed good reasons to believe that the Fourth Gospel is not as anti-Jewish as commonly supposed. First of all, John does not hesitate to affirm the Jewish setting of his narrative. He readily indicates that Jesus himself was a Jew (4:9; cf. 1:11; 4:22) and has him, along with John the Baptist (3:26), addressed as Rabbi (1:38, 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8; cf. 20:16). The evangelist also makes liberal use of the Hebrew Scriptures and affirms the importance of the Jewish people in God's plan for salvation (4:22). Among exegetes there seems to be a growing awareness, if not a consensus, of the extent to which the Fourth Gospel reflects first-century Judaism.<sup>21</sup> Not long ago it was commonplace for interpreters of John to



understand the gospel in terms of Hellenism or Gnosticism.<sup>22</sup>

At present there is a tendency to interpret the Fourth Gospel with a stress on one or more types of first-century Judaism, such as the Qumran community, Hellenistic Judaism, the Samaritans, etc.<sup>23</sup> Such labels, however, may themselves lead to false

interpretations of John. We must always be aware "that

'Palestinian-Jewish' and 'Hellenistic' are not terms denoting separate planets."<sup>24</sup> Even within Rabbinic Judaism Hellenistic

modes of thought were rife.<sup>25</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that exegetes can approach John with quite different assumptions regarding background without arriving at radically different results.

In the second place, if one looks closely at the evidence for John's anti-Jewish bias, there are several points at which the evidence may have been exaggerated. John may well believe that in Christ the Old Israel has been replaced, but the Fourth Gospel is hardly unique in this regard. As early as the Pauline Epistles there were Christian arguments that Jewish election had become meaningless (Rom. 4; Gal. 3f.; Phil. 3:2ff.; etc.) although the Apostle may not have been entirely consistent on the matter (see, e. g., Rom. 3:1; 11:1-36). Similarly according to Matt. 3:9f. the Baptist warns the Jews about the danger of relying upon their lineage from Abraham.<sup>26</sup>

In order to assess what John says about the Temple and its cult, it is necessary to remember that, when John wrote, the Temple lay in ruins and the cult had lapsed.<sup>27</sup> The fall of Jerusalem was a serious blow to both Jew and Christian. Both had their explanations.<sup>28</sup> According to John Christians no longer need a temple. Their temple is Jesus Christ. John was not

abolishing a living institution. The temple and cult which he proclaims has been replaced in Jesus no longer existed. John never questioned the validity of the Jerusalem Temple before the hour arrived for worship in spirit and in truth (4:21-23). In this respect John is considerably more restrained than Acts 7:42-50, according to which the Jerusalem Temple and its cult were monuments to Israel's disobedience from the beginning (cf. Acts 17:24ff.) In the Fourth Gospel Israel's temple and cult retain their rightful place in God's plan for salvation.<sup>29</sup>

Although John indicates that Jesus has replaced the Law of Moses, the evangelist is hardly unique in this regard among New Testament writers. In fact what he writes about the Law seems relatively restrained. Nowhere in his gospel are there assaults on the Law comparable to the assaults in Galatians and Romans. As for what John says against the leaders of Judaism, his attacks are mild compared to those of the scriptural prophets (e. g., Jer. 23:1f.; Ezek. 34:1-10) and from the Qumran community.<sup>30</sup> Even the Fourth Gospel's affirmation of Jesus' divinity is not as opposed to the beliefs of first-century Jews as one might expect. First of all, the evangelist makes clear that, contrary to Jewish assumptions about Jesus claiming equality with God, Jesus as the Son is subordinate to the Father and never acts on his own behalf (5:19, 30; 6:38; etc.)<sup>31</sup> Secondly depicting a human being as divine was not entirely alien to the Judaism of John's day. The evangelist's references to Jesus in divine terms are similar to the language that Philo sometimes uses of Moses, and according to Josephus (*Antiquities*, 3:180) Moses was a "divine man" (*theios anēr*).<sup>32</sup> Even in later Rabbinic literature Moses

occasionally comes to occupy divine status with the title of "God."<sup>33</sup>

One particularly significant section of the Fourth Gospel for determining the extent of its anti-Jewish bias is the passion narrative. Its significance is twofold: Passion narratives generally tend to blame the Jews for the crucifixion, and the Johannine passion narrative is the longest section of the gospel with parallel accounts in the other gospels for comparison.<sup>34</sup>

Even though certain aspects of the Johannine passion narrative seem to heighten the blame placed upon the Jews, at some points John is less anti-Jewish than the other evangelists.<sup>35</sup> Whereas the other gospels insist that the Jewish charge against Jesus was blasphemy (Mark 14:64 & //s), John 11:48 makes it clear that the Jewish authorities were concerned lest Jesus disrupt political relations with Rome. In the early parts of the gospel John readily affirms that the Jews wanted to kill Jesus because he transgressed the Sabbath and made himself equal to God; however, it is the political concern that dominates the passion narrative. There is only one passing reference to the other accusations (19:7). John laid the groundwork for the political charge throughout his work. He reports an attempt to make Jesus king by force (6:15) and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to acclamations of "King of Israel" from the crowd (12:13). Also reported are an attempt to arrest Jesus, which was thwarted by the power of his preaching (7:30-32, 44-49), and official concern over his growing popularity (11:47f.; 12:9f.), a concern that leads directly to the decision to



destroy him. The authorities plan to kill Jesus lest his growing popularity invite Roman intervention (11:48); see also 12:9f.) In contrast to the Fourth Gospel, Matthew 26:3f. reports the official decision but omits the political concerns behind it (similarly Mark 14:1; Luke 22:2).

The first three evangelists report Jesus' arrest as a wholly Jewish action. They all mention that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus to Jewish authorities (Mark 14:10f. & //s; Mt. 27:3-10)<sup>36</sup> and that, in addition to Judas, those responsible for the actual arrest were a crowd from the chief priests, scribes, and elders. John makes no mention of Jewish involvement with Judas (cf. 6:71; 12:4; 13:2, 26-30), but he adds that Roman soldiers were present at the arrest. Instead of the crowd mentioned in the other gospels, John reports that Judas came for Jesus with a cohort of soldiers under a centurion<sup>37</sup> along with some officers from the chief priests and Pharisees (18:3, 12). Thus according to John Jewish authorities were responsible for arresting Jesus, but these authorities had acted under Roman pressure and had carried out the action with a band of Roman soldiers. Of the four evangelists John alone was unwilling to shift responsibility for the arrest from Roman to Jew even though failure to do so implied that Rome considered Jesus dangerous and invited Roman persecution of his followers.

John portrays the Jewish proceedings that follow the arrest as being relatively unimportant. Apart from the fact that they take place before the High Priest Caiaphas and his father-in-law Annas there is remarkably little detail about what happened to Jesus. John is content to say that the High Priest "questioned Jesus

about his disciples and his teaching (18:19).<sup>38</sup> John's meager treatment of these proceedings stands out in comparison to the other gospels. They describe a formal inquest,<sup>39</sup> if not a trial, and make clear that the charge against Jesus was blasphemy (Mark 14:63f.)<sup>40</sup> The Jewish proceedings tend to overshadow the trial before the Roman governor. Thus the Synoptic Gospels emphasize that the primary charge against Jesus was blasphemy, a strictly Jewish crime. In the Fourth Gospel the opposite has happened. By making the Jewish proceedings quite informal with no mention of the accusations against Jesus, the evangelist has featured the importance of the Roman trial<sup>41</sup> in which the charge was a political crime against Rome.

In the Roman trial all the gospels agree that Jesus was charged with claiming to be King of the Jews and that Jewish pressure forced the governor to condemn Jesus, whom he believed to be innocent. In the Synoptic Gospels, however, it is the Jewish crowd that cries out against Jesus (Mark 15:11-15 & //s), while in John the Jewish presence at the trial is limited to the chief priests and their officers (19:6).<sup>42</sup> Even though John regularly refers to those demanding Jesus' death as "the Jews" (18:31, 38; 19:7, 12, 14; cf. 18:36), the context makes clear that these Jews are merely the priestly delegation (see 19:6, 15). Certainly John's account of the Roman trial contains nothing so anti-Jewish as Matt. 27:25, according to which the Jewish people (laōs) demand that responsibility for Jesus' death fall upon them and their children. Still the fact that John frequently chose to identify the priestly delegation as "the Jews" would lead the casual reader to believe that it was the Jewish people who forced the crucifixion.

Three verses in the Johannine account of the Roman trial require special attention. They are verses 15, 7, and 16 of chapter 19. According to John 19:15 (cf. vs. 21) the chief priests declare, "We have no king but Caesar!" These words not only confirm the political nature of the trial; they also serve as a self declaration that the chief priests serve no longer under the kingship of God. No longer are they true Israelites but loyal Roman underlings.<sup>43</sup> Such a judgment on the high priest was scarcely an exaggeration. During the last decades of the Second Temple Jewish high priests were appointed and deposed at will by Roman governors who generally controlled their actions.<sup>44</sup>

John 19:7 appears quite unexpectedly in the context of a trial about Jesus' kingship. In this verse "the Jews" make the following accusation against Jesus: "We have a law, and according to the Law he ought to die because he made himself Son of God." Whatever "Son of God" might have meant in Jesus' day,<sup>45</sup> the evangelist clearly understood the title quite literally, in a sense which he believed Jews would regard as blasphemous. Earlier in the Gospel he is quite clear that the Jews were ready to kill Jesus over the issue of his divine sonship (5:18; 10:33-39). Therefore, although these verses seem out of place in the context of a Roman trial about kingship, they fit in well with the thought of the gospel as a whole.

According to John 19:16 (see also vs. 6) The Roman governor Pilate handed Jesus over to Jewish authorities for execution by crucifixion, but such an act seems highly unlikely. There is an apparent contradiction between this verse and vss. 23, 31, according to which Jesus was crucified by the governor's soldiers.<sup>46</sup> Besides, would Jewish chief priests be expected to carry out a

a Roman execution, especially on the day before Passover (18:28; 19:31; etc.)? Still, while John has given the Jewish authorities an unlikely role in the crucifixion, that role would not have been impossible. The position of the chief priests was such that Pilate could regard them as his subordinates. The Jerusalem Temple was under his control, and he even kept the high priestly vestments in his possession.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, as subordinates of a Roman governor, the chief priests could have used Roman soldiers for the crucifixion as well as for the arrest. In writing John 19:16, however, the evangelist was likely less concerned with historical probability than with a desire to continue direct Jewish involvement in the passion through the act of crucifixion. The Jewish part in the crucifixion also appears in vs. 21 where the chief priests argue with Pilate over the wording of the inscription on the cross and in vs. 31 where "the Jews" ask Pilate to make sure that the crucifixion is finished before the beginning of Passover.

The most commonly cited indication of John's anti-Jewish bias is his use of "the Jews,"<sup>48</sup> but again the evidence needs qualification. In the first place, the designation "Jew" does not always appear in a negative sense. As mentioned above, John reports that Jesus himself was a Jew (4:9; cf. 1:11) and that Jews have a special role in God's plan for salvation (4:22). The gospel also affirms that many Jews believed in Jesus (2:23; 7:40; 8:30f.; 10:42; 11:45-48; 12:11, 19) although their faith was merely a naive trust in Jesus miracles (2:33; 11:45; 12:9-11).<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately such a shallow faith could easily turn to rejection (6:66) or even hatred (8:49); nevertheless, many Jews did

maintain their commitment. In fact according to John 11:45-48 Jesus' popularity among the Jews is what led to the decision to destroy him. John reports that even some of the Jewish leaders secretly believed in Jesus (12:42; cf. 3:1f.; 7:50-52) and that after his death two such leaders took his body and gave it a proper Jewish burial (19:38-42).

Other Johannine uses of "Jew," while not necessarily pro-Jewish, certainly do not depict Jews in a negative way. Sometimes the Greek word for Jew (Ioudaios) is simply an adjective as in "the Judaeen land" (3:22). Other uses of "Jews" simply identify certain festivals and customs as Jewish (2:6, 13; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 11:55; 19:40, 42). Jesus is called "the King of the Jews," and occasionally "Jew" is merely a convenient way of distinguishing a Jew from a Samaritan (4:9) or from non-Jews generally (18:35; cf. 3:1).

In the remaining places where John mentions Jews, the context generally suggests hostility to Jesus. There is wide agreement among exegetes that in these cases "the Jews" denote opponents of Jesus, but there is considerable disagreement about just who the opponents are. According to many "the Jews" in John represent, not simply Jews, but the sinful world as a whole.<sup>50</sup> On the basis of this interpretation some commentators argue that John's use of "the Jews" is not anti-Jewish because he is not actually referring to Jews at all.<sup>51</sup> Such reasoning, however, is hardly logical. As Ruether points out,<sup>52</sup> quite the opposite is true. Using "the Jews" to denote, not only Jewish opponents of Jesus, but the whole sinful world is scarcely pro-Jewish. In such a case "the Jews" have become the epitome for what is evil!



Other exegetes suggest other interpretations of "the Jews" in John and commonly that their interpretations lessen the gospel's anti-Jewishness. Most would argue that "the Jews" denote, not all Jews, but only a limited group within Israel such as the authorities, those Jews who oppose Jesus, Jewish non-believers, Judaeans, etc.<sup>53</sup> Occasionally one finds the suggestion that the Fourth Gospel is basically Samaritan and represents a Samaritan attitude toward the Jews.<sup>54</sup>

A number of interpreters correctly point out that John is quite inconsistent in his use of "the Jews." These exegetes find that John has used "the Jews" in several senses, including most of the ones just listed.<sup>55</sup> Such varying usage should not be surprising. It is common today. M. Lowe has recently pointed out that we regularly employ national designations in a number of different ways.<sup>56</sup> He cites the way we might use "the French." In a strict sense a Frenchman is a French citizen of French ancestry who lives in France and speaks French. However, we may also use "the French" to mean the French government, in reference to the French negotiating with the Russians, or the French judicial authorities, when speaking about the French putting someone on trial. In the proper context one may use "the French" to denote those of French language and culture outside France, such as French Canadians. Similarly John appears to have used "the Jews" in a variety of ways.

It is certainly true that the word "Jew" appears in John far more than in the other gospels; but the word also appears seventy-nine times in Acts, eight times more than in John. Why

did Luke, who only uses the word "Jew" five times in his gospel, increase this usage almost sixteen times in the book of Acts? Since the same person wrote both volumes, the difference cannot be simply a matter of an author's unconscious choice of words. A clue to Luke's use of "Jew" is that the word is not evenly distributed in Acts. In the first eight chapters, where the setting is Palestinian, "Jew" appears only three times, and the word only becomes frequent when the setting becomes Greek. This distribution corresponds to Luke's tendency for matching style with setting. As long as his narrative moves in Palestinian circles, his style is quite Semitic; but, as the story moves into the Greek world, the Semiticisms disappear.<sup>57</sup> When writing about events in Palestine, he tends to distinguish among the various Jewish groups as any Palestinian Jew would do. In a gentile setting Luke refers to Jews as a gentile would and lumps them together as "the Jews" without distinction. Similarly in John, the frequent use of the word "Jew" may well be due, at least in part, to an author who writes from a gentile point of view.<sup>58</sup>

Support for this explanation comes from other indications that John no longer considered himself or his readers part of the Jewish community. For the evangelist the Law of the Jews is "their law" (15:25), and in his gospel even Jesus speaks of the Law to Jews as "your law" (8:17; 10:34). Moreover, John assumes that his readers are so far removed from Judaism that he must explain the Jewishness of certain customs (2:6; 19:40; cf. 18:39) and of various festivals, including Passover (2:13; 6:4; 11:55) with its Preparation (19:42); Tabernacles (7:2) and possibly Pentecost (5:1).<sup>59</sup> Finally, the gospel mentions that certain followers of

Jesus were expelled from the Jewish community (9:34f.; cf. 16:2) and that Jews sympathetic to Jesus feared being expelled (9:22; 12:42). John also mentions a Jewish agreement "that if anyone should confess him as Christ, he would be expelled from the Synagogue"(9:22). There is even the suggestion that expulsion was accompanied by severe persecution (16:3). Thus the evangelist, not only lived in a Christian community that is separate from Judaism, but he believed that the separation was forced upon them by the Jews. Thus it was natural for John to view the Jewish community as an outsider and follow gentile practice in lumping together all segments of this community under the name "Jew."

Although John generally uses "Jew" with an unfavorable or neutral connotation, his occasional use of "Israel" and "Israelite" always indicates a favorable bias.<sup>60</sup> The words appear a total of five times: Twice incipient believers hail Jesus as "King of Israel" (1:49; 12:13), and John the Baptist declares that his mission is for Jesus to be "revealed to Israel"(1:31). Also Jesus declares that Nathanael is "truly an Israelite in whom is no guile" (1:47) and refers to Nicodemus as "the teacher of Israel" (3:10). These few examples suggest that John may intend "Israel" to denote a faithful remnant among the Jews.<sup>61</sup>

The above survey indicates that the anti-Jewish bias of John, while real, is not as extreme as commonly believed. The evangelist was no Marcion. He valued much that is Jewish including the Hebrew Scriptures; and he affirmed the Jewishness of Jesus, whom he depicted as the Jewish Messiah. Also in his account of the Passion, John often appears less anti-Jewish than the other

gospels. Nevertheless, in many respects the gospel lives up to its anti-Jewish reputation. Although John affirms the Jewishness of Jesus, at times the evangelist has Jesus address the Jews as an outsider. According to this gospel the Jews regarded Jesus as both lawbreaker and blasphemer. John even implies that the Jews as a whole were responsible for the crucifixion. He does so largely by a subtle use of the word "Jew." By freely applying "the Jews" to limited groups within Judaism, he manages to imply that the Jews as a whole were behind Jesus' execution. John is never quite as anti-Jewish as Matthew in declaring that the Jewish people deserve God's vengeance (Matt. 27:25); nevertheless, the Fourth Gospel teaches that rejection of Jesus brings condemnation (3:18; 12:48; see 5:22-30) and that it was the Jews who rejected him.

That John contains both anti-Jewish and relatively pro-Jewish elements is a contradiction in need of some explanation. The common way to explain such divergent tendencies in a single work is to regard them as reflecting multiple authorship with one view stemming from the author or redactor and the other, from an earlier edition or source.

In the case of John there are commonly held source and redaction theories quite apart from its divergent views on the Jews. In regard to sources, P. Gardner-Smith<sup>62</sup> and C. H. Dodd<sup>63</sup> have persuaded most interpreters that John does not use any of the Synoptic Gospels. John does, however, rely on other sources, and a considerable number of exegetes believe it is possible to detect a source (or sources) behind the gospel's miracle stories and passion narrative. Although some, notably

E. Schweizer<sup>64</sup> and E. Ruckstuhl,<sup>65</sup> argue that Johannine editing has made these sources irrecoverable, there have been a number of attempts to recover both a sign (or miracle) source<sup>66</sup> and a Johannine passion source.<sup>67</sup> One of the more daring recent studies on Johannine sources is The Gospel of Signs, by R. T. Fortna.<sup>68</sup> Fortna recreates an early gospel which he believes was a single source behind both the miracle stories and the passion narrative in John. In spite of many disagreements over the details of Fortna's work, especially over his view that the rediscovered source materials ever formed a single gospel, a number of interpreters are in basic agreement with him over what lies behind the Johannine miracles and passion.<sup>69</sup>

In regard to earlier editions of the Fourth Gospel, there is wide agreement that it took shape in several stages within a Johannine community.<sup>70</sup> Exactly what these stages were may be beyond recovery, but the following four seems to be minimal.<sup>71</sup> Stage one would represent the traditional material about Jesus that circulated in the earliest Johannine group. Such material, derived ultimately from eye-witness accounts (see John 19:35; 21:24), would have been similar to the traditions behind the Synoptic Gospels. Stage two would represent the development of stage one into Johannine patterns through discourses, meditations, etc. In stage three an evangelist would have put the Johannine tradition into the form of a gospel, which in a fourth stage seems to have been reedited by a redactor.<sup>72</sup>

As the present version of the Fourth Gospel took shape, each author or redactor implanted his own views upon the developing tradition. We should not overemphasize, however, the freedom with which Johannine writers treated their sources. Even E. Käsemann,



who insists that John used "the earthly life of Jesus merely as a backdrop,"<sup>73</sup> must admit that the evangelist found tradition "absolutely necessary" and that he used narrative from a miracle source "without great modifications."<sup>74</sup> The evangelist feels a responsibility to transmit his tradition, but he also writes as a theologian who interprets that tradition out of his own experience and the experience of his community. L. Martyn in his book, History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel,<sup>75</sup> describes the tension between tradition and the evangelist's own experience as a two-level drama. On one level John looks back on the life of Jesus, while on a second level he relates the past to the situation of his own day.<sup>76</sup>

Jesus and his earliest followers were Jews; yet, as shown above, by the time that the Gospel of John had reached its present form, the Johannine community no longer considered itself Jewish. Since the movement of the community was away from Judaism, the gospel's relatively pro-Jewish elements must belong to the earlier stages of its development, while the more anti-Jewish aspects would have entered the text with later editing. Other considerations tend to confirm this conclusion. In the first place several recent studies of the Johannine sign (or miracle) source find it free of the anti-Jewish bias that pervades the gospel as a whole.<sup>77</sup> Secondly, there are places in the gospel where the editorial nature of "the Jews" appears fairly obvious.

The following examples are typical: According to John 1:19, "the Jews of Jerusalem sent Priests and Levites to ask [John the Baptist], 'Who are you?'" Certainly the Jewish people of Jerusalem had no authority to dispatch priests and Levites. The only Jews

having such authority would have been the chief priests and those close to them.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, an earlier version of these words might have been the following: "The chief priests sent priests and Levites to ask [John], 'Who are You?'"<sup>79</sup> A middle stage in the developing tradition seems represented in John 1:24, according to which those who sent out the questioners are, not simply "the Jews" of Jerusalem, but "the Pharisees," the ones who assumed control of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and its priesthood in the year 70. Thus, the John 1:19 would lie at the end of a threefold development corresponding to three periods in Jewish and Christian history. When the chief priests exercised authority in Jerusalem, they would have been the ones responsible for dispatching temple personnel to the Baptist. After the year 70 it was the chief Pharisees who would have sent such a delegation, and this changed situation is reflected in John 1:24. Finally, when the Johannine community had severed its ties with the Synagogue, these Christians tended to ignore distinctions within Judaism. At this stage, found in John 1:19, it is simply "the Jews" from Jerusalem who dispatched the delegation.<sup>80</sup>

In telling of Jesus feeding the five thousand and then walking on the sea, John 6 agrees with the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 6:32-56) & //s) in referring to the people involved as a "multitude" (óchlos). Throughout the whole narrative section of the chapter and the beginning of the following discourse, the gospel portrays the multitude in a favorable light. Then, commencing from verse 41 the people begin to murmur against Jesus. At the same point also they cease to be a "multitude" and become "the Jews." This change fits in well with the usual source-critical analyses of the chapter. According to

these analyses, the narrative section depends on a relatively early source;<sup>81</sup> but there is no consensus of any source behind the rest of the chapter.<sup>82</sup> It probably came from the evangelist or his redactor.<sup>83</sup> Thus in John 6 the anti-Jewish element probably represents a late stage in the development of the gospel.<sup>83</sup>

John's anti-Jewish bias generally appears to have entered the developing gospel at a relatively late stage. This stage would have come from a period when the Johannine community no longer considered itself to be Jewish. It is quite likely that the gospel's allusions to being expelled from the synagogue, to the official nature of such expulsions (9:22), and to further Jewish persecution reflect the living experience of the evangelist and his church. Having themselves experienced rejection and suffering at the hands of the Jews whom they knew, they were ready to assume that Jesus and his disciples had undergone similar experiences among "the Jews". Yet those who completed the last stages of the Fourth Gospel were too conservative to transform radically the tradition that they had received. They were ready to write lengthy additions and probably to make deletions. They were willing sometimes to modify their tradition through changes in wording as seen, for example, in their use of the term "Jew." They were apparently unwilling either to ignore what they had received or transform it entirely. Rather they generally chose to retain their source material, even when it contradicted the way they felt and what they wanted to say. The result became a gospel containing a strange mixture of some of the most anti-Jewish parts of the New Testament resting upon a relatively pro-Jewish Johannine tradition.

The next questions concern dating. When did the Johannine

community separate itself from the Synagogue? and what happened to cause the separation? The usual answer to the first question is that the separation occurred near the end of the first century when Rabban Gamaliel II was nasi, i. e., the chief religious leader of the Jews.<sup>84</sup> The usual answer to the second question is that the Jews excluded the Christians from synagogue worship by adding a curse against them to the liturgy.<sup>85</sup>

There is evidence of hostility between some Jews and some Christians from the earliest days of the Church. The Apostle Paul testifies that he himself, while still a Jew, had persecuted the Church (I Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13, 23; Phil. 3:6) and, as a Christian, had himself suffered persecution from Jews (II Cor. 11:24). Even though many Christians of Jewish background retained their Jewish identity and way of life (see, e. g., Gal. 2:7-13), hostility between Jew and Christian tended to increase. Two events in particular highlighted the hostility. The first was the martyrdom of James of Jerusalem, the leader of the Jewish-Christian group at the hands of Jewish authorities shortly before the first Jewish revolt.<sup>86</sup> The second was the Christian abandonment of Jerusalem just before the Romans besieged and destroyed it.<sup>87</sup>

After the revolt and the loss of the Temple, Jewish leadership passed to the Pharisees. They became the saviors of Judaism. In the process they attempted to force Judaism into a narrow uniformity. To achieve this end they had to deal with the minim (or heretics)<sup>88</sup> either by forcing them to conform or by expelling them from the Synagogue. The means chosen was liturgical. Central to the Jewish daily liturgy are the prayers known as the Shemoneh

Esreh (or Eighteen Benedictions). At the request of Gamaliel II a certain Samuel the Small emended (tiqgen)<sup>89</sup> benediction twelve to address the problem of the minim,<sup>90</sup> and the Rabbinic evidence clearly shows that the purpose of the prayer was indeed to force their conformity or to drive them from Jewish worship.<sup>91</sup>

Although early Rabbinic sources never claim that Samuel's emendation was directed specifically against Jewish Christians, two other kinds of evidence compel this conclusion. The first concerns the wording of the benediction in later texts. It appears in many versions, but two related versions mention Christians by name. One of the latter was published by S. Schechter from two medieval Egyptian liturgical fragments in 1898.<sup>92</sup> The other comes from a late manuscript containing <sup>a version of</sup> the ninth-century liturgy of Rav Amran Gaon.<sup>93</sup> The versions read as follows:<sup>94</sup>

| Schechter fragments   | Siddur Rav Amran Gaon   |
|---|---|
| For apostates ( <u>meshummadim</u> ) may<br>there be no hope<br>[unless they return to thy law];<br>And the kingdom of arrogance <sup>95</sup> mayest<br>thou quickly uproot in our days;<br>And may the Christians ( <u>haNotserim</u> )<br>and the <u>minim</u> perish in an instant.<br>[May they be erased from the Book of<br>Life;]<br>And along with the righteous may<br>they not be written.<br>Blessed art thou, O Lord, who<br>humblest arrogant ones. | For Apostates ( <u>meshummadim</u> ) may there<br>be no hope<br>[another version: unless they return<br>to thy covenant];<br>And may the Christians ( <u>haNotserim</u> ) and<br>the <u>minim</u> be destroyed in an instant;<br>And may all our enemies and those with<br>violent hatred be quickly cut off;<br>And the kingdom of arrogance <sup>95</sup> mayest<br>thou quickly uproot, break, and<br>humble in our days.<br>Blessed art thou, O Lord, who breakest<br>enemies and humblest arrogant ones. |

The second other kind of evidence consists of patristic references to benediction twelve, references proving that the mention of Christians in the above versions



was not a late addition from Islamic times. The most specific references are those of Epiphanius and Jerome. In 410 Jerome alluded three times to the benediction in his commentary on Isaiah (2:18; 49:7; 52:4). He confirmed that "three times each day in all the synagogues [the Jews] under the name of Nazarenes (sub nomine Nazarenorum) curse the designation Christian" (2:18). Somewhat earlier in 375/76 Epiphanius had also written that Jewish boys, "on rising at dawn, in the midst of the day, and at evening, three times during the day when they perform their prayers in the synagogues, give a curse three times during the day by saying, 'Curse the Nazarenes (Nazōraious), O God'" (Haereses, 29:9). Only slightly less specific is Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century, who charges the Jews with "cursing in your synagogues those who believe on the Christ" (Dialogus cum Tripphone Iudaeo, 16:4; similarly 96:2; see also 47:4; 93:4; 95:4; 108:31; 117:3; 137:2).<sup>96</sup> Therefore there must have been some mention of Christians in benediction twelve after Samuel revised it.<sup>97</sup>

The fact that benediction twelve in the Shemoneh Esreh was re-worded to include Christians, <sup>among others?</sup> suggests that other liturgical changes may have come about with Christians in mind. The most likely change of this type concerned the Decalogue.<sup>98</sup> According to Rabbinic accounts<sup>99</sup> the Ten Commandments were dropped from the liturgy, even though they had been recited daily in the Temple, in order to forestall a claim from the minim that Moses had received no commandments on Mount Sinai except these ten.<sup>100</sup> The liturgical form of the Decalogue would have been particularly open to this interpretation because after the commandments came the following:

"and these are the statutes and the commandments which Moses gave the Children of Esrael when they went forth from Egypt."<sup>101</sup> Since many early Christians tended to regard the Ten Commandments as the whole law from Sinai,<sup>102</sup> the minim who prompted their deletion from the Synagogue liturgy may indeed have consisted partly or entirely of Christians.

It is important to interpret Rabbinic measures against Christians in the context of the general Jewish situation at the end of the first century. Judaism was rebuilding and closing its ranks. There was a new demand for a rigid orthodoxy; and other groups, as well as Christians, were being suppressed.

One such group was the Sadducees, who had controlled the Jerusalem Temple with the cooperation of Rome. They were known for their rejection of Pharisaic oral law and particularly for their denial of a future resurrection.<sup>103</sup> The Rabbinic attitude toward such minim<sup>104</sup> was well expressed in the saying, "These are the ones who have no share in the world to come: he who says there is no resurrection of the dead, [he who says] the Law is not from Heaven, and Epicurus (i. e. a skeptic),"<sup>105</sup> Significantly there also appears in benediction two of the Shemoneh 'Esreh a reference to God as the one who raises the dead. This prayer would certainly have offended any Sadducee, and a relatively early Rabbinic reference specifically states that benediction two was used to identify such minim.<sup>106</sup>

Another group that suffered from an imposed Rabbinic orthodoxy was that segment of the Pharisees which comprised Bet Shammai (or the School of Shammai). The struggle between Bet Shammai and the rival Bet Hillel had been long and bitter. On one occasion Bet Shammai had even resorted to force and had

imposed its will through drawn swords and murder.<sup>107</sup> After the fall of Jerusalem Bet Shammai lost much of its influence; and finally under Gamaliel II came the declaration that, while the dicta of Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel were "like the words of the living God," the dicta of Bet Shammai were invalid.<sup>108</sup>

Repressive measures against Christians and others matched the character of Gamaliel. He believed in using his authority as Nasi and brooked no opposition, even from the sages of his generation. On one occasion he excommunicated his own brother-in-law.<sup>109</sup> In time Gamaliel's autocratic ways led to his deposition; but the fact that he loyally continued to be active under his successor, coupled with his obvious ability, led to his restoration.<sup>110</sup>

The effect of the anti-Christian addition to benediction twelve seems to have varied among the Christians from community to community. A few communities maintained a relatively positive attitude to the Synagogue as late as the third century.<sup>111</sup> One explanation could be that the anti-Christian emendation was not adopted in all synagogues. Another factor is that the Jewish congregations which did use the emendation would not have recited it on Sabbaths and festivals. On these days they said only the first three and the last three of the Eighteen Benedictions. Benediction twelve was omitted at the very times that Christians would likely have been present.

The Johannine community was not one of those that maintained a positive relationship with the Synagogue. It is impossible to say with certainty that the Johannine community was responding directly to the official Jewish liturgical emendation cursing Christians; however, such a conclusion seems justified. John 9:22 mentions what seems to be an official Jewish decision to drive Christians from their synagogues, and this emendation is the <sup>only</sup> major Jewish official act against Christians which could have affected the Johannine community. Thus in the Johannine community the new benediction apparently resulted in divorce and mutual hatred, and the changed situation affected the latter stages of the developing gospel. It is these latter stages that contain the bitter denunciations of "the Jews" coupled with implications of actual or impending persecution and even killing of Christians (16:2; cf. 5:18).<sup>112</sup>

The Fourth Gospel reflects the situation of the Johannine community both before and after its divorce from Judaism.<sup>113</sup> In the earlier stages before the divorce the gospel betrays no denunciations of "the Jews." Now after the divorce "the Jews" have become the enemy. In the earlier period certain Christian views on Jesus, the Law, etc., were probably tolerated in local Jewish circles. Now these views, at least in their developed form, have become central issues in Jewish Christian confrontations. In the earlier period there had been certain instances of persecution by Jews throughout the Christian world, but such persecution apparently did not affect the Johannine community. Now amid increasing tensions Johannine Christians, no longer welcome in the Synagogue, were beginning to face Jewish persecution themselves; and the community situation left its mark upon the Gospel of John in its final stages of development.

Inevitably the post-divorce situation of the Johannine community affected its view of the past. No longer could an evangelist from this community simply transmit a tradition that portrayed Jesus' death in largely political terms. While the Fourth Evangelist valued his tradition too highly to ignore it entirely, he did reinterpret it in the light of his own recent experience with the Synagogue. Thus throughout his gospel there appear references to "the Jews" persecuting Jesus for breaking the Sabbath (5:16) and particularly over Jesus' claim to divine sonship (5:18; 8:58f.; 10:33; 19:7; see 20:31f.) Later a redactor<sup>114</sup> apparently added his own experience that Jews generally were repulsed by Christian eucharistic teaching (6:51-60).

Unfortunately the anti-Jewish teaching of the Fourth Gospel did not stop with its final redaction. John soon became one of the most influential writings in the early Church, and its popularity has continued to the present day.<sup>115</sup> Its popularity has vastly increased the influence of the gospel's anti-Jewish teaching in Christian and pseudo-Christian circles. Today we may learn to understand the anti-Jewish tenor of the gospel as the unfortunate outgrowth of historical circumstances. Such understanding in itself, however, will not prevent the gospel from continuing to broadcast its anti-Jewish message unabated.