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Chapters 1–9

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"The Jews" in the Fourth Gospel

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The Problem of Translation

John's Gospel refers seventy-one times in sixty-seven verses to *hoi Ioudaioi*.[1] The phrase appears in every single chapter of John except the Farewell Discourse (chaps. 14–17) and chapter 21. The NRSV usually translates this phrase "the Jews," although the phrase resists facile translation, because it does not mean the same thing each time it occurs. Numerous scholars have suggested various meanings for *hoi Ioudaioi* in the different instances in John, and these have been considered and categorized by Urban von Wahlde.[2]

"The Jews." First, the "national" sense refers to religious, cultural, or political aspects of people. When an event occurs in the time frame described as a festival of *hoi Ioudaioi*, it may be fine to translate it as "the Jews," because indeed the Festival of Sukkot (Booths or Tabernacles), for example, is a Jewish occasion, not a pagan one. Additionally, when Jesus declares to the Samaritan woman that "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22), he invokes the whole ethno-socio-religious history of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel and Leah. This usage is ethically neutral and merely descriptive. Von Wahlde includes the following passages in this category: 2:6, 13; 3:1; 4:9a, 9b, 22; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 11:55; 18:20, 35; 19:21a, 40, 42.

"The Judeans." Sometimes, though, it is better to translate *hoi Ioudaioi* as "the Judeans." Von Wahlde calls this the "regional" sense. If one changes the Greek *I* to an English *J* (as we do with Jesus' name), one can practically hear the word "Judea." At times the term is used to designate those who are geographically connected to Judea. This usage also is ethically neutral and merely descriptive and can be found in the following verses: 3:22, 25; 11:8, 19, 31, 33, 36, 45, 54; 12:9, 11; 19:20.

Here is where it begins to get complicated, though, because it is clear that Jesus comes into conflict with the leaders of his own tradition, whose symbolic (and literal) seat of power was located in Jerusalem, which, of course, is in Judea. As the three-year ministry of Jesus is narrated, notice that Galilee is a safe haven of sorts for Jesus, whereas each time that he goes to Jerusalem (or even contemplates it), ominous music begins to play in the background. In 1:19 we read: "This is the testimony given by John when *hoi Ioudaioi* sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'" One might argue that this should be translated as "the Judeans," since the party comes from Judea.

"The Religious Authorities." The example from 1:19, however, raises another translation possibility. It is not everyone in Judea who sends priests and Levites; it is patently the religious authorities. The same is true in 7:13, and in both cases it would be best to translate *hoi Ioudaioi* as "the religious authorities." They are not the only religious leaders, though, as even 1:19 makes clear with the mention of priests and Levites. There are also high priests, rulers, and Pharisees. This brings us to von Wahlde's third category, which he designates the "Johannine use" of the word; most instances of the phrase *hoi Ioudaioi* fall into this category, so it is worth explicating, if briefly.

First, in these instances, the term does not have the national meaning, since these "Jews" are distinguished from other characters in the narrative who are also Jewish in the national sense. In other words, taken in a literal ethnic or religious sense, it makes no sense to translate these instances as "the Jews," because that does not distinguish them from anyone else in the Gospel: apart from the centurion and Pilate, everyone in the narrative is Jewish (even the Greeks in chap. 12 may be Greek Jews), both those who believe in Jesus and those who do not. Second, this usage is characterized by hostility toward Jesus. Passages that depict hostile or skeptical religious authorities include 1:19; 2:18, 20; 5:10, 15, 16, 18; 7:13, 15; 9:18, 22a, 22b; 18:12, 14, 36; 19:38; 20:19. Third, in these instances, the authorities labeled "the Jews" think and act en masse: "they represent a single undifferentiated reaction."[3] This use includes 2:18, 20; 7:35.

1. John 1:19; 2:6, 13, 18, 20; 3:1, 22, 25; 4:9 (twice), 22; 5:1, 10, 15, 16, 18; 6:4, 41, 52; 7:1, 2, 11, 13, 15, 35; 8:22, 31, 48, 52, 57; 9:18, 22 (twice); 10:19, 24, 31, 33; 11:8, 19, 31, 33, 36, 45, 54, 55; 12:9, 11; 13:33; 18:12, 14, 20, 31, 33, 35, 36, 38, 39; 19:3, 7, 12, 14, 19, 20, 21 (three times), 31, 38, 40, 42; 20:19.

2. Urban von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews': A Critical Survey," *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982): 33–60; "'The Jews' in the Gospel of John: Fifteen Years of Research (1983–1998)," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 76 (2000): 30–55. See also Joshua D. Garroway, "*Ioudaios*," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 524–26.

3. Von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews,'" 47.

Religious Authorities or the Common People? Another issue that always arises in the debate about *hoi Ioudaioi* in John is that, after one has moved through the national and regional meanings (which are ethically neutral) and has extracted the passages that refer rather clearly to religious authorities, one still has a batch of verses to address. With those, it is less clear whether the author has in view the religious authorities or the common people. This becomes even further complicated because sometimes the author blurs the line between *hoi Ioudaioi* and the "world" (*kosmos*). The "world" is another complex character in John's Gospel, sometimes believing and sometimes not. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him" (1:10). Some interpreters conflate "the [unbelieving] Jews" with "the [unbelieving] world." Such a move is not helpful.

For our purposes, one of which includes reading the New Testament ethically, trying to determine which instances might refer to the common people instead of the authorities is not productive and can, in fact, lead to a reasoning that results in a seemingly "partial" anti-Semitism: "Well, it is not Jews per se who are to be maligned, but just their leaders; or maybe just the Jews who did not accept Jesus; or maybe just the Jews who do not accept him now." Faulty logic quickly becomes deadly logic. That said, with respect to the "debatable" instances, von Wahlde argues that, with two exceptions (6:41, 52), they likely refer still to "the religious authorities" rather than "the common people." These are 7:1, 11; 8:22, 48, 52, 57; 10:24, 31, 33; 11:8; 13:33; 18:31, 38; 19:7, 12, 14, 31.

We have now accounted for all of the occurrences of *hoi Ioudaioi* and shown the variety of meanings and the problems in attempting a reasonable translation in each instance. Two further observations should be made. First, because John's passion narrative has been a particularly thorny text with respect to Christian anti-Semitism, it may be worth noting that even there varieties in meaning inhere. The "Johannine sense" of *hoi Ioudaioi* appears in the following, according to von Wahlde: 18:12, 14, 31, 36; 19:12, 14, 31. The following use one or another of the other senses discussed earlier: 18:20, 33, 35, 39; 19:3, 19, 20, 21a, 21b, 21c, 40, 42.

Untranslated. Second, regarding the meaning of the seventy-one occurrences of *hoi Ioudaioi*, there is actually a surprising level of general agreement among scholars about the "Johannine uses." The following seven, however, remain the most contested: 3:25; 8:31; 10:19; 11:54; 18:20; 19:20, 21. So riddled with difficulties is this translation issue that many scholars simply leave the phrase untranslated in those cases. Several authors of the essays in these volumes have made precisely that choice.

The Importance of Context

The Fourth Gospel evinces numerous tensions within itself, obvious literary seams, responses that do not answer the question posed, and so on. There are apparent strata, and scholars posit a lengthy and complicated composition history. Let us take a moment to sort out at least three of these strata chronologically.

1. Jesus of Nazareth is born, conducts his ministry, and dies at the hands of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate in about 30 CE.
2. Post-Easter, Jesus' disciples preach publicly about Jesus' identity, words, and deeds.
3. These oral traditions are committed to writing and eventually are drawn together into the narrative we know as the Gospel of John. Tension with the parent tradition remains high as the community discerns its identity vis-à-vis that tradition.
4. Sometime after the composition of the Fourth Gospel, the Epistles of John are penned, reflecting a later stage of the community. The issues now center on internal church conflict among the leaders, apostasy, and docetic Christology.

At the time of Jesus, the temple in Jerusalem is still standing, and numerous varieties of Judaism exist. The power of the Sadducees is temple-based; thus, when the temple is destroyed in 70, they fade from power. The Zealots, Sicarii, and the Fourth Philosophy are nationalists who oppose Roman occupation and favor civil war. The Essenes are a reformist, ascetic sect residing primarily at Qumran near the Dead Sea. The nationalists and the Essenes are decimated by the Roman army in the war of 66–70. The Pharisees are Torah-based teachers whose power derives from their ability to interpret the law—kind of a cross between lawyers and Bible scholars. When the temple is destroyed, they are the ones best positioned to assume leadership. The destruction of the temple effectively ends the period known as Second Temple Judaism and makes way for rabbinic Judaism, the kinds of Judaism that perdure to this day.

The original Johannine community consisted of Jews who worshiped in synagogues with their fellow Jews; they were Christian Jews because they believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Claiming that "the" or "a" Messiah had come was certainly not foreign to first- and second-century varieties of Judaism. John of Gischala in the first century and Simon Bar Kochba in the second were declared Messiahs. This was not grounds for dismissal from the Jewish community. So what happened? It is impossible to say with certainty, but clearly the Johannine community began to experience conflict with its parent tradition. The author of the Fourth Gospel claims that the members who made up John's community were put out of the synagogue, *aposynagōgos* (a word unknown in early Jewish or Christian literature apart from John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2), due to their high Christology, perhaps even confessing Jesus as God. It is clear that a full confession of the identity of Jesus as defined by John led to extremely painful conflict between the parent tradition and the sect that formed as a result of their expulsion from the synagogue.

According to J. Louis Martyn,[4] John can be read as a two-level drama. First, there is the story of the historical Jesus, what happened "back then." Second, there is the reality that the Johannine community is experiencing near the end of the first century, sixty to seventy years after Jesus' death and twenty to thirty years after the temple has been destroyed; the Pharisees (not the Sadducees) are in power, and the synagogue (not the temple) is the seat of power for the religious authorities. The story of the Johannine community living in the late first century gets retrojected onto the story of Jesus and the first disciples.

For example, when one is reading in chapter 9 the story of the blind man being persecuted and put out of the synagogue, unsupported by his parents, one should imagine a Johannine Christian who is openly professing faith in Christ and being persecuted by members of the parent tradition. The story is anachronistic, because the Pharisees and the synagogue were not such centers of power in Jesus' own day; the Sanhedrin and temple were. It is also anachronistic because no one could give a confession of Jesus as Lord (as the blind man does), Son of God, God (as Thomas does), Messiah, Son of Man, and more until *after* the passion, resurrection, sending of the Paraclete, and return of Jesus to God. In other words, the story could not have happened historically the way it is narrated. One should therefore be careful about making historical assumptions based on texts that have a different rhetorical aim. Certainly the text caricatures anyone who opposes Jesus, the hero of the narrative. The Pharisees are not excused from the Fourth Evangelist's lampooning.

While certain aspects of this reconstruction have recently been contested,[5] important conclusions and warnings can nevertheless be drawn from it. First, the Fourth Gospel reflects an intra-Jewish debate, not a debate between "Christians" and "Jews"; they are all Jews. This is the way sects develop. The Johannine community makes sense of itself as a Jewish community in categories drawn from the Hebrew Bible and Jewish markers of all kinds. Remembering this is crucial when reading this text. Those who choose to ignore the concrete social setting of the New Testament will find it easy to justify anti-Semitism by drawing on John. His violent, seething language about "the Jews" has been used and still is used to charge Jews with all sorts of wickedness.

Second, remember that the Gospel is a story and follows narrative conventions, including characters drawn for symbolic purposes, conflict that the hero must overcome, and so on. It is not a historical rendering, and it takes great poetic license in its depiction of history. Interpreters will be able to understand that only when they learn about the historical context from historical sources that, happily, scholars have provided in abundance.

The Insidious Problem of Anti-Semitism

Easter has always been a potentially dangerous time for Jews, as Christians accuse them of being guilty of deicide, of being Christ-killers, and, thanks to John 8, of being murderous children of the devil. In a post-Shoah world, it is ethically incumbent upon all Christians, especially those who preach and teach, to address and to battle anti-Semitism. There are at least three ways that the Gospel of John may fuel anti-Semitism. We have already addressed the first problem: the repeated use of the phrase *hoi Ioudaioi* in primarily pejorative ways.

The second problem is Johannine dualism. It begins already in chapter 1, where "grace and law"

4. J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel, Revised and Expanded*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

5. See the work of Adele Reinhartz, for example: *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002); and "John," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 152–96.

and "Jesus and Moses" are presented as opposites: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:16–17). Other dualistic categories include light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death, God the Father and Satan the father, above and below, not of this world and of this world. Jesus and the disciples are associated with all of the good categories; "the Jews" are primarily associated with the negative trait in each pair.

This contributes to a third problem that arises in the Fourth Gospel: the use of typology in a way that leads to Christian supersessionism.[6] Jesus is depicted as like, but superior to, numerous Old Testament figures, including Moses (chaps. 1, 5, 6), Jacob (1:51; chap. 4), Abraham (chap. 8), and Woman Wisdom herself. Jewish symbols and rituals now find their fulfilled meaning only in Jesus: his incarnation is a tabernacle (1:14); his body is now the temple (chap. 2); he is the bread from heaven celebrated in the Passover; he is the Passover lamb (which is why he dies a day earlier in John than in the Synoptics); he is the King of the Jews. He has fulfilled or replaced everything worthwhile in Judaism. In this way, John may be accused of being anti-Jewish, if not anti-Semitic. Helpful is the following from the Jewish Johannine scholar Adele Reinhartz:

> It must be emphasized that the Gospel is not anti-Semitic in a racial sense, as it is not one's origins that are decisive but one's beliefs. Nevertheless, it has been used to promote anti-Semitism. Most damaging has been John 8:44, in which Jesus declares that the Jews have the devil as their father. . . . While John's difficult rhetoric should not be facilely dismissed, it can be understood as part of the author's process of self-definition, of distinguishing the followers of Jesus from the synagogue and so from Jews and Judaism. This distancing may have been particularly important if the ethnic composition of the Johannine community included Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. This approach does not excuse the Gospel's rhetoric, but it may make it possible for readers to understand the narrative's place in the process by which Christianity became a separate religion, to appreciate the beauty of its language, and to recognize the spiritual power that it continues to have in the lives of many of its Christian readers.[7]

The authors and editors of the two John volumes of *Feasting on the Gospels* have worked diligently to bear such convictions in mind as they worked through this rich and complex Gospel to offer preachers, teachers, Bible study leaders, and interested Christian readers guidance through the thicket of language and images that historically have divided Christians from Jews and frequently resulted in Christian violence against Jews.

6. Supersessionism is a theological claim that Christianity supersedes or replaces Judaism in God's plan of redemption. Sometimes it is called fulfillment or replacement theology.

7. Reinhartz, "John," 156.