

IS JOHN'S GOSPEL ANTI-SEMITIC?¹

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Before 1945 a few pioneers began to argue that anti-semitic sentiments exist in some New Testament writings. After the war other scholars joined in with this contention, culminating in Rosemary Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide* (1974). The Fourth Gospel, with its notable polemic against 'the Jews', has subsequently remained largely abandoned to an anti-Jewish interpretation. Our aim is to demonstrate that the Fourth Gospel is not anti-semitic.

We begin by addressing some important related issues. First, what was first century Jewish faith? It encompassed a wide variety of strands, which were linked to Messianic expectation, Temple cultus and halakic observance. After the Temple destruction, however, these strands had to substitute something else for the significance they had attached to the Temple cultus.

Second, what is anti-semitism? It does not include all criticism of things Jewish. The genuinely Jewish form of self-criticism is more properly intra-Jewish polemic. Nor does it include all external criticism of things Jewish. External criticism of the Jewish *faith* is anti-Judaism. Only external criticism of the Jewish *race* can be rightly designated anti-semitism.

Third, what was the state of relations between Jews and 'others' in the first century CE? With the exception of the Alexandrian situation, they were generally good. Given the convincing evidence that the provenance of the Fourth Gospel was Ephesus, any anti-semitic notions would have to be entirely the product of the writer's own experience.

Much work has been done on the Fourth Gospel's use of the Old Testament, and it has shown the importance of the Old Testament

¹G.M. Balfour, *Is John's Gospel Anti-semitic? With Special Reference to its Use of the Old Testament* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Nottingham, 1995); supervisor: Dr. P.M. Casey.

to the shape and content of the Gospel. We contend that the Gospel's use of the Old Testament demands that it is in fact specifically Jewish in character, and that its polemic, like that at Qumran, is intra-Jewish.

Using the criterion that anything the writer explicitly presents as extant scripture constitutes an Old Testament quotation, there are eighteen such quotations in the Fourth Gospel -- 1:23; 2:17; 6:31, 45; 7:37f., 42; 10:34; 12:13, 15, 34, 38, 40; 13:18; 15:25; 19:24, 28, 36, 37 (the usual count is thirteen or fourteen) -- and one Christian quotation, 17:12.

The writer's main sources are the Psalms (2:17; 6:31; 10:34; 12:13, 34; 13:18; 15:25; 19:24, 28, 36) and Isaiah (1:23; 6:45; 12:15?, 38, 40). His over-riding concern is christology, and it seems that he, like other early Christian writers, finds these sources to be the most conducive to christological interpretation. He quotes them generally from the LXX (1:23; 2:17; 10:34 follow the LXX *verbatim*) but he also makes use of Hebrew and Targumic versions. His quotations from Zechariah (12:13, 15; 19:37) and Micah (7:42), on the other hand, invariably betray a specifically Christian history of interpretation. The only other sources he may quote are Exodus, Numbers and Nehemiah (6:31; 19:36).

Far from being vestigial remains of an earlier 'Jewish period' in the Fourth Gospel's history, these quotations are central to its christological presentation. Indeed, besides the three quoted from the LXX *verbatim*, the author masterfully adapts all of them to suit his wider christological purposes. This does not prove that he is Jewish, but it does prove his high regard for the Jewish scriptures. What puts his Jewishness beyond doubt is the *way* he quotes these scriptures.

For example, in 1:23 and 6:31 he conflates the Hebrew parallelism in line with the twenty-second of R. Eliezer b. Jose ha-Gelili's 'interpretative rules'; in 6:31 he evinces a remarkable awareness of contemporary Jewish developments of the Moses figure, not least that Moses provided the manna from heaven; in 6:45 he continues a long line of Jewish midrashic developments of important Jewish scriptures; in 7:37-38 he builds on Jewish exegesis of Zechariah 14:8 and on eschatological expectations surrounding the Temple; in 10:34 he shows an awareness of the Jewish association of

Psalm 82:7 with the giving of the law at Sinai; in 12:13 he provides an implicit commentary on Jewish scriptural messianic texts; in 12:34 he plays on Jewish differences of opinion over the precise nature of the messianic age; in 12:40 he follows a long line of Jewish exegetes who used Isaiah 6:10 to portray unbelief as blindness; in 19:24 he applies a literal hermeneutic to Hebrew parallelism which is perfectly in keeping with other Jewish writers of the period; in 19:28, 36 he depends heavily on implicit Passover imagery; and in 19:37 he associates Jesus as the New Moses with the brazen serpent incident and, *via* later accretions, with the riven rock tradition.

All of these efforts demand his familiarity with a wide range of complex contemporary Jewish exegeses. His wider use of the Old Testament presents the same picture. For instance, he builds yet further on developments of both the Moses figure and various Isaianic traditions, while his identifying of Jesus with God (1:1, 18; 20:28; the ἔγω εἶμι language) is possible only in light of the “Two Powers” and other contemporary Jewish religious developments. It also confirms that vital aspects of his christological presentation become all but incomprehensible when they are divorced from their Jewish exegetical background. Thus, for example, a true understanding of 1:51 demands an awareness of contemporary developments of Genesis 28:10-22, while 8:58 is dependent on various traditions associated with Abraham.

It also becomes apparent that the writer is in fact familiar with much more of the Old Testament than is often assumed. Moreover, the Jewish scriptures are essential to every major facet of the Fourth Gospel, even those facets that traditionally have been deemed ‘un-Jewish’. For example, although the writer like other Hellenistic Jews has certainly imbibed concepts from his surrounding environment, the Prologue is virtually entirely built on Jewish Wisdom tradition, while Old Testament ‘restoration’ passages have a marked influence on the “rebirth” language of John 3.

Given all this, the writer must hail from a Jewish Diaspora community (he does explain specifically Palestinian culture and geography: *e.g.* 4:9; 5:2). He uses this very heritage to confirm to his

readers that Jesus is the Messiah. It is also significant that while his invariably christological points are all but lost without their exegetical associations, he never bothers to explain the exegetical associations to his readers. It can only be that he assumes that they are already aware of it, *i.e.* they too are Jewish. His introducing of such notably Jewish characters as Nathaniel and Nicodemus, who are present in no other early Christian material, as well as his presentation of Jesus himself (*e.g.* 4:22) is indicative of this.

Extrapolating further, the fact that he also does not bother to explain to his readers various Christian traditions that are essential to the plot (*e.g.* 6:42; 7:42; 18:11) suggests that he assumes that they are familiar with these too, *i.e.* they are believers. This together with the fact that he is very precise about their Jewish knowledge (*viz.* they are aware of all the things he is aware of) suggests that they comprise the very Jewish community he hails from. Nevertheless, the persuading element of his message suggests that his intention is not only to confirm his community's faith but also, *via* its members, to persuade still wavering members of the synagogue from which the community has been expelled, that Jesus is the Messiah.

We conclude that the Fourth Gospel is not anti-semitic. Quite the opposite, it is specifically Jewish. Its polemic against 'the Jews', then, is intra-Jewish: it is directed against those Jews who reject the Messiah (as opposed to those Jews who accept him). The Fourth Gospel's replacement christology and realised eschatology, moreover, are part of the internal Jewish response to the Temple destruction: while one strand of first century Jewish faith, the Yavnean inheritors of the Pharisaic legacy, substituted a heightened awareness of halakic observance for the Temple cultus, the Fourth Gospel substituted the Messiah and the inauguration of the messianic age for it. It was this that caused the split between the messianic believers to whom the Fourth Gospel is written, and the local synagogue.