

Deserting and Believing in Jesus:  
The Gospel of John and Jewish Identity

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## Abstract

This thesis began with a perceived need to expand on the scholarship that has recently been countering the longstanding popular and academic claim that the Gospel of John is anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish. For approximately the last century, evidence has continually demonstrated that this, the Fourth Gospel, is more deeply rooted in some kind of Jewish tradition than scholars earlier believed. What has been missing from this scholarly discussion, however, is convincing historical data. The arguments are largely centered around plausibility and comparative literature from Qumran. In this thesis, I primarily utilize the important and emerging method of literary criticism to show that the text of John's Gospel demonstrates not an ideology that is anti-Jewish, but rather one that seeks to reformulate what it means to have a Jewish identity. Demonstrating this is the project of my first chapter.

In the second of this two chapter work, I will show that the character of John the Baptist is intended as a literary device to show the author's ideal transition of a person's Jewish identity, as it is reformulated by faith in Jesus. Because the Christian religion was not yet fully formed,<sup>1</sup> the boundary between Judaism (in its various forms) and the followers of Jesus did not have clear language. This is why the Gospel of John uses the character of John the Baptist to demonstrate how a person of Jewish identity should, in the author's mind, respond to Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Nor, in a sense, was any "religion" fully formed in the way we consider them today.

Religion, as we shall see, in the first century, was one part of a fully integrated person, nearly inseparable from ethnicity, heritage, and nation.

## Introduction

Many readers infer a clear distinction in the Gospel of John between Christianity and Judaism. The term “Jew” (Ἰουδαῖος) is seen as a term for outsiders, who don’t have the correct theological lens. C.K. Barrett even claims that “John differs from the Synoptics in providing a more explicitly a theological framework within which this dominating person [Jesus] must be understood.”<sup>2</sup> If John’s compositional framework is more explicitly theological, this raises questions of under what label this theology falls. If the Gospel is a work of “Christian” theology, the absence of the word “Christian” (Χριστιανός) in the text, and the anachronism of using the corresponding modern religious label to describe an early mutation of a certain kind of first-century Judaism, must be explained. If the Gospel is a Jewish theological work, the continuous negative portrayal of Jews, as the enemies of Jesus and his disciples, must be explained. What, then, is the nature of this text and its relationship to Judaism?

This question is contested among scholars and, despite more than a century of debate, the field has not reached a compelling consensus. Many, both within and outside the academy, call the Gospel anti-Jewish, but scholars have begun to see this framework break down in significant ways. Even a cursory treatment of the issue in an introductory textbook reveals this. Bart Ehrman, in his *Historical Introduction to the New Testament*, notes, in a section on the relationship between John and Judaism, “the Jews are portrayed as the enemies of Jesus who are consequently opposed to God and aligned with the Devil

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<sup>2</sup> C.K. Barrett. “Christocentric or Theocentric?” in *Essays on John*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982. 4.

and the forces of evil. Vitriolic statements of this kind may sound anti-Semitic to our ears... But we will see that our modern notion of anti-Semitism may not be appropriate for understanding the meaning of such comments in the early Christian literature.”<sup>3</sup>

Ehrman goes on to show that, because of the close connection between Jesus’ own Jewish identity and that of his followers, there must be more going on here than something easily called anti-Judaism. Scholars before Ehrman, such as J. Louis Martyn, have attempted to situate the connection to Judaism comfortably in the socio-historic setting of the book’s composition. This method, however, has fallen out of favor in recent decades.<sup>4</sup> Yet the tendency to see a close connection and contention with Judaism in this text is a valid and helpful one.

The first section of this essay will put forth a stronger option for understanding the Gospel’s relationship with Judaism; one that does not depend on anachronistically

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<sup>3</sup> Bart D. Ehrman. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*. 5th edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 166.

<sup>4</sup> See J. L. Martyn *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. 3rd ed., Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2003. 47: “This statement [John 9:28] is scarcely conceivable in Jesus’ lifetime... It is, on the other hand, easily understood under circumstances in which the synagogue has begun to view the Christian movement as an essential and more or less clearly distinguishable rival.” This and similar conclusions have come under criticism because of their unfounded nature. If the text can be understood without speculating about unfounded and hypothetical historical situations, this approach must be logically preferred.

labeling the Gospel “Christian,” or calling it anti-Jewish without serious qualification. The Gospel, as I will show, represents an example of early religious boundary work between various contemporary Jewish groups and what would become Christianity. Because the Gospel uses so many Jewish frameworks, such as an exegetical meditation on Genesis 1 in the prologue, and the prominent references to the Sabbath,<sup>5</sup> the label of anti-Jewish is not the best option. Because of various issues with non-Jewish origin theories for the Gospel, and the light that the Qumran discovery shed on first-century Judaism, it has no longer sufficed to find any other origin for the Gospel than in a Jewish religious framework.<sup>6</sup> This section will also demonstrate how, in the use of the word οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, John is demonstrating a symbolic literary function. This is revealed in how the Gospel’s use of the word breaks its usual pattern, revealing that the author knows its proper meaning, and implying that its typical uses must have some literary or thematic significance.

Subsequently, I will demonstrate that because the Gospel has such ties to Judaism, and yet also is in contention with the Jews, it is best understood as a project of identifying boundaries of religious identity that are, at the time of composition, undefined. The

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<sup>5</sup> See the dialogue in John 7:19-24. There Jesus demonstrates that his aim is not to destroy or supersede the Sabbath. He claims that while they (“Jews”) circumcise on the Sabbath to keep the Law of Moses, he goes so far as to heal the whole body on the Sabbath.

<sup>6</sup> See Barrett, C. K. *The Gospel of John and Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.

Gospel's author may not have been Jewish themselves, but that is not strictly necessary for them to understand their project as fitting within the overall story of the Jewish God and his people. The Gospel then represents a contentious insider's attempt to reformulate the nature of Jewish identity, through the lens of faith in Jesus.

In the second section of this thesis, I will show that, because the clear distinction between Judaism and Christianity has yet to be made at the time of the book's composition, John's Gospel uses narrative devices to embody the ideal relationship between the "old" formulation of Judaism and the "new" reformulation of it that the author has in mind. The main narrative device that embodies this transitional relationship is the character of John the Baptist. Because there are no identifying terms by which the author can demarcate their religious group, their religious identity is made tangible in the person of John. This character, as a traditional Jewish prophet who recognizes the supremacy of Jesus and makes ready his way, claiming that he must decrease for Jesus to increase, embodies the author's vision of the exchange between the historic Jewish identity and the "new" identity as God's children, defined by faith in Jesus. The foil to this ideal exchange is the character group labeled "the Jews." This label is used for characters who do not adapt their religious identity to the person of Jesus but instead persist in the "older" formulation of Judaism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In recognizing the Gospel as constructing a different formulation of Jewish identity, I must recognize that there never was one "Judaism" in the ancient world. As far back as our evidence goes, various contending Jewish groups are clearly seen, competing against one another and living alongside one another. The author of John's Gospel, however,



I will show that, as opposed to the Synoptics, John's Gospel gives John the Baptist a more prominent role and more confidence in the supremacy of Jesus. I will also show that this ideal relationship is directly contrasted to the relationship between "the Jews" and Jesus. By engaging and challenging the work of both Raymond Brown and Urban C. von Wahlde, I will show that the texts including or mentioning John the Baptist do not necessarily imply a historical relationship between a hypothetical Johannine Community and their local synagogue. Instead, by drawing evidence from Old Testament influences, as well as internal literary devices, I will show that these passages demonstrate the proper transition of Jewish identity to faith in Jesus.<sup>8</sup> This thesis aims to redirect the conversation of Judaism and the Fourth Gospel away from unfounded historical speculation and toward a critical and thoughtful reading of the text, using various tools of literary criticism. Given that the ancient texts themselves are the only evidence available to us for reconstructing the socio-historical situations of these various religious groups, the practice of literary criticism has become increasingly popular among scholars.<sup>9</sup>

The primary contribution of this thesis is the recognition of John the Baptist as a literary example of the author's ideal transition into religious identity reformulated from

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gives little attention to this nuance and primarily constructs the character of "the Jews" as a monolithic religious group.

<sup>9</sup> R. A. Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983. is a good example of the burgeoning scholarly approach to the Gospel as literature.

“traditional” Judaism into faith in Jesus. This manner of speaking about “old” or “traditional” Jewish identity as opposed to identity reformulated in faith in Jesus is the best way to understand John’s project but may bring offense to Jews living contemporary to the Gospel as well as now. Throughout this thesis, I will be sensitive to the anti-Jewish language of the Gospel and the ways in which the Gospel has been used to perpetuate injustice against Jewish people. Though I will argue the Gospel is not best understood as anti-Jewish in and of itself, it is important to recognize these sensitive issues. I am indebted to Jewish Johannine scholar Adele Reinhartz and others like her who have shed light in this field on what John’s Gospel communicates to its Jewish readers, both ancient and modern.

#### **A note about terminology**

This thesis addresses issues of Jewishness and Jewish identity in the ancient world. The problem with this is that Judaism is anything but monolithic at this time, and every scholar must be careful about using terms in a way that avoids generalization and unwanted implications. A.T. Kraabel writes that throughout the Jewish Diaspora, there were local Jewish communities adapting, better than any other minority population in the Greco-Roman world, to the pluralistic world around them. This was done by creating distinctive understandings of Jewish identity. Kraabel also adds that most Jewish communities outside Palestine were not formed and led by Rabbis, but lay people.<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>10</sup> A.T. Kraabel. “Unity and Diversity among Diaspora Synagogues” in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*. ed by Lee I. Levine. Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1987, 54.

lack of universal rule and structure also gave way to vast diversity in Jewish identity. Isabella Sandwell, in a survey of religious identity in the first four centuries C.E., notes that “there were many different kinds of Jews and there are problems about whether this label is purely a religious one.”<sup>11</sup> Considering this multifarious Judaism of the early centuries C.E., then, it is important to note how I use terms throughout this thesis. The problem any Johannine scholar is faced with when addressing the topic of the text’s relationship with Judaism is that the text itself uses terms in a confusing way.

For example, the term “Jews” is consistently used to denote people opposing the ministry and teachings of Jesus in John 1:19, John 10:31, and elsewhere. In other places, such as John 11:19, 31, and 33, the same term is used to simply refer to the community members that make up the area of Judea and are part of the daily life of Jesus and his followers. In John 12:11, Jews who believe in Jesus are thought by other Jews to be deserters. Yet, Jesus himself is called a Jew by the Samaritan woman in John 4:9. None of his other followers are called Jews, which, along with the term’s use to denote Jesus’s opposers, implies a strong negative connection to the term. Yet, to complicate things further, Jesus himself calls Nathaniel “a true Israelite” in John 1:47, followed by the wildly positive statement “in whom is no deception.” Is “Jew” a bad word and “Israelite” a good word? What is the real difference between a Jew and an Israelite? The author of this Gospel is using these terms in confusing ways. I will later show that this is an

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<sup>11</sup> *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch.*

Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 11.

intentional move, serving a specific literary and rhetorical purpose, but for now, I must be cognizant of how my own writing uses these terms.

When I refer to Judaism in this thesis, I am generally referring to the historical cultural and theological tradition with which John's Gospel is interacting. This tradition, as variegated as it may be in real history, is characterized by dedication to the God of the Bible and connection to the historical tradition of Israel. W.D. Davies points to a strong conviction among diverse Jewish communities throughout antiquity that "there is an unseverable connection among Israel, The Land, and its God."<sup>12</sup> The term Judaism throughout this thesis does not necessarily refer to groups of people contemporary with the Gospel's circulation, but the theological and cultural tradition to which the Gospel writer attempts to lay claim.

The Gospel seems to dislike the term "Jew," and has no consistent affirmative term for the correct religious identity it is promoting. I argue later that this Gospel actually seeks to reformulate Jewish identity and Jewish faithfulness, not create a new religion. Because the Gospel, as I will show, relies heavily on elements theology and ideology from the Old Testament, I will often refer to the Gospel's use of the "Jewish tradition." While doing so, I recognize that the Gospel's author is uncomfortable with the term "Jew," yet does not provide another term for what they see as proper religious identity.

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<sup>12</sup> W.D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*. Berkley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1982. 45.

## A note about authorship

I have already, and will continue, to refer to “the author” of John’s Gospel. This is problematic for a number of reasons, and requires some clarification. Many scholars have noted the various *aporia* in the Gospel. These are inconsistencies in narrative sequence, theological perspective, or language and style that make it unlikely for John’s Gospel, in its current form, to have come from a single author. Michael Labahn, in a section on John’s sources in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* wrote that “[The aporia] have been interpreted as evidence that material has been taken from different sources (or written traditions). But they have also been given other explanations, e.g. that interpolations have occurred (e.g. by a later redactor) and/or that the Gospel was composed in several stages by one or more authors.”<sup>13</sup> The final chapter of the Gospel, chapter 21, presents perhaps the most difficult aporia. Sherri Brown and Francis J. Moloney summarize it this way:

Biblical scholars often ponder the intent— and even the origin and role— of John 21, given the concluding tone of 20:30– 31. Nonetheless, ancient manuscripts always conclude with the scenes of this chapter as the final act of the Gospel. Many of these same scholars also agree that the Gospel was likely composed in stages over a period of time. This final chapter could, therefore, have been added

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Labahn. “Literary Sources of the Gospel and Letters of John” in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*. ed. by Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer. Print Publication Date: Jul 2018.

late in the composition history of the Gospel to respond to the changing needs and circumstances of the Johannine community.<sup>14</sup>

While the necessary connection of the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter's composition to the Johannine Community, if such a community exists in any coherent way, is unfounded, Moloney and Brown are right to point out that, while all of our manuscript evidence contains the final chapter, it was likely added later. To that end, I will not include evidence from chapter 21. Additionally, when I refer to the "author" of the Fourth Gospel, I mean the person who finalized chapters 1-20, whatever their sources may have been.<sup>15</sup>

I should also add here that that throughout this thesis I presuppose that the author of John's Gospel had some awareness and access to the Synoptic Gospels. Without providing a comprehensive defense of this view, let me reference the wave of scholarship that has made this view a common one in the field. C.K. Barrett, in his 1958 introduction to the Gospel, cites the Synoptics as a source for the author, claiming that "John was familiar with Mark, and [it is] probable that he also knew Luke." Barrett's primary arguments are based on verbal and thematic similarities, such as the bread of life

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<sup>14</sup> Sherri Brown and Francis J. Moloney. *Interpreting the Gospel and Letters of John: An Introduction*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017. 296

<sup>15</sup> These sources could include previous editions of the Gospel, redactions, sayings and signs sources, etc. Here I will not treat the complicated issues of the Gospel's redactional history. Such a treatment is available in Raymond Brown's *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, page 42.

discourse in John 6 and its predecessor in Mark 14:22.<sup>16</sup> Dwight M. Smith followed suit in his 1999 commentary on John. Yet he added the point that not only does John use Mark, but he expects his readers to also know Mark. Jesus as Christ, for example, is presumed knowledge in John 1:17.<sup>17</sup> Richard Bauckham picks up this line of argument as well in *The Gospels for All Christians*, when he points out that not only did John use Mark and expect his readers to know Mark, but that both texts were widely circulated around the ancient world, not confined to a local community.<sup>18</sup> If this is true, it lends even more credibility to the likelihood that John's author could have had access to Mark, and perhaps other Synoptic Gospels.

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<sup>16</sup> C.K. Barrett *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes*. 15

<sup>17</sup> Dwight M. *Abbingdon New Testament Commentaries: John*. Nashville: Abbingdon Press, 1999. 29.

<sup>18</sup> R. Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark", in *The Gospels for All Christians*. 149.

## Chapter 1: The Fourth Gospel as Reconstructing Jewish Identity

For as long as critical scholarship has examined the Fourth Gospel, its relationship to Judaism has been debated. The 2001 publication of the volume *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel* and the Leuven Colloquium that engendered it represents only the beginning of disparate opinions from leading scholars such as Reimund Bieringer, Adele Reinhartz, Judith Lieu, R. Alan Culpepper, and others. A consensus seems unreachable concerning the project of John's Gospel as it relates to the Jewish tradition, as well as the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) of the Gospel and its identity concerning Judaism. All previous concrete conclusions, either labeling the Gospel anti-Jewish<sup>19</sup>, inner-Jewish or the like have serious flaws. The Gospel does not neatly fit into any previously proposed paradigm of Jewish or anti-Jewish identity. In this work, I argue that the reason for this is that the Gospel represents an early example of boundary-work between Jewish traditions that do understand belief in Jesus as the foundational point of Jewish identity and those who do not. I will argue that understanding the book as anti-Jewish is outdated and problematic, that the book reflects strong ties to Jewish identity,

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<sup>19</sup> Adele Reinhartz. "Jews' and Jews in the Fourth Gospel," in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*. ed by Bieringer, R, Didier Pollefeyt, and F Vandecasteele-Vanneuville. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. Reinhartz states "the Fourth Gospel's polemic against the Jews undermines its declaration of God's boundless love for the world." 227.



and that ultimately the project of the Gospel is to reformulate both the composition and the characteristics of the people of the Jewish God.

The Gospel of John represents the complicated and contentious process of drawing boundaries to delineate identity; this process is known as boundary work. Sociologist Thomas Gieryn first introduced the concept of boundary work in regard to the demarcation of types of scientific knowledge and the communities that control them.<sup>20</sup> Religious sociology has become fascinated with the concept of boundary work. It is a useful tool in studying groups that are in competition and how they understand themselves. The drawing of a boundary is done by identifying who, precisely, is on the other side of the boundary; who is the “other”; who is “us” and who is “them.” In a study on American Evangelicalism, Christian Smith writes “the implicit distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is omnipresent in evangelical thought and speech.” His modern example shows that religious groups tend to define themselves against an opposing “other.” Typically, that “other” is part of a completely different tradition, as demonstrated by the

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas F Gieryn. *Cultural Boundaries of Science : Credibility on the Line*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, 1. Gieryn discusses the “credibility contests” that occur between groups that disagree on fundamental aspects of their identity, and the tendency to take shortcuts by finding a litmus test, or a set of key principles that determine whether one is within the boundaries or without them. In the Christian tradition, creeds and canons became convenient litmus tests. For the Fourth Gospel, the litmus test is belief in Jesus.

relationship between Jews and Samaritans in the Fourth Gospel.<sup>21</sup> However, that “other” can also stand within the broader religious tradition. Smith continues in this contemporary example: “Evangelicals also maintain a clear sense of the difference between themselves and *Christian* ‘others.’”<sup>22</sup> Smith points out that it is possible to find an “other” inside one’s own tradition. This, it appears, is the sociological reality behind John’s Gospel. Rather than thinking of itself as *diverging* from Jewish identity, it thinks of itself of containing the true Jewish identity,<sup>23</sup> which has been redefined by belief in the divine Word, Jesus.

In this analysis, I will begin by showing that “anti-Jewish,” though a popular paradigm, is not the best term for what the Fourth Gospel is, considering scholarship on Jewish influence of John’s Gospel and recent studies on the intertwined Jewish-Christian

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<sup>21</sup> John 4:9 relates that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.” This is an example of an external other. However, Jesus is identified as on the internal part of that Jewish-Samaritan divide, and so the formulation of the “other” by the followers of Jesus reflect the same reality of internal Jewish identity that is attributed to Jesus by the Samaritan woman.

<sup>22</sup> Christian Smith and Michael O Emerson. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 124. Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Since the term Ἰουδαῖοι generally labels the “other” in the Gospel, it may be stated more accurately that rather than preserving *Jewish* identity, John’s Gospel seeks to preserve the identity of the people of the Jewish God.

relationships in the early centuries. I will then demonstrate the ways in which the Gospel is comfortably situated among the first-century Jewish traditions, which were far from monolithic. Finally, I will argue that the Gospel's project is a reformulation of God's people, both in terms of composition and foundational characteristics.

### **The problems with the label “anti-Jewish”**

Adele Reinhartz has offered an argument for labeling the Gospel anti-Jewish. Here I will show that, although a surface reading of select passages gives rise to that interpretation, such a reading is not consistent throughout the Gospel. She argues that the Fourth Gospel is anti-Jewish to the extent that it “conveys negative attitudes toward the Jews as a group and carries the potential to inculcate such views in its audience.”<sup>24</sup> The second part of this definition is true of John's Gospel. Reception history of the Fourth Gospel has fueled anti-Jewish rhetoric and violence throughout the centuries, and this is due to the ways in which some Jews are antagonized in the Gospel. The first part of that definition is a bit more complicated, however. Her wording implies that to be anti-Jewish, one needs to be situated outside Judaism, targeting the Jews as a group entirely. That is, rhetorical tension between Jewish groups<sup>25</sup> does not constitute anti-Judaism. I will argue that the author or authorial group of this Gospel considered themselves within the religious tradition of Judaism, and though clearly targeting some historical Jewish groups, they did not think of their own project as an attack against Judaism entirely.

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<sup>24</sup> Reinhartz, “‘Jews’ and Jews in the Fourth Gospel,” 227.

<sup>25</sup> Or at least groups considering themselves to be inside the Jewish tradition.

Within the Fourth Gospel, there are clear binary forces. These forces are sometimes narratively portrayed in the characters of the Gospel. These important dichotomies reveal theological meaning, particularly relating to salvation (or “life,” as it is most commonly called in the Gospel). Among them are light and dark, death and life, flesh (or body) and spirit, this world and that world, below and above, believing and not believing. They are all present, in some form, in the first chapter, and continue throughout the Gospel. What seems most likely to me is that the concept of the Jews is one side of a similar dichotomy. Reinhartz notices this as well. “The two contrasting states of being, while described in universal terms at certain points within the Gospel, are therefore also made concrete in the form of Jesus' followers on the one hand and the Jews on the other hand.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the contrast of light and dark is incarnated in human form through the use of “Jews” and “disciples (or believers).” The Jews in John’s Gospel thus serve as a literary abstraction, representing what Reinhartz calls a “contrasting state of being.” This literary device puts “Jews” on the negative side of the dichotomy, as the Logos’ “own people” who did not receive him.<sup>27</sup> This abstraction is not contingent on sociological realities, since most of Jesus’ followers retain their Jewish identities, both in the Gospel account and in history. Reinhartz recognizes these things and is then comfortable claiming that, since the Gospel is clearly anti-darkness (the negative side of a similar dichotomy), it is also clearly anti-Jewish.

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<sup>26</sup> Reinhartz, “‘Jews’ and Jews in the Fourth Gospel,” 216

<sup>27</sup> John 1:11

However, the attitude of the Gospel toward Judaism in this dichotomy may best be compared with the attitude toward the world. That is the best parallel dichotomy for the Gospel, rather than light and dark. For example, while there is much language against the world (see John 1:10, 8:23, 12:31-32), there is even more language of love for the world (John 1:29, 3:16, 9:5). Consider the following verses. John 1:10 reads “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.” This verse sets the world as an opposing force to Jesus. So too does 8:23, “He said to them, ‘You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world.’” This verse goes on to introduce the correct side of the boundary: the world (κόσμος) that Jesus is from. John 12:30-32 reads also “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” This is a description of a κόσμος that is opposed to Jesus and his κόσμος. The relationship of the whole Gospel to the κόσμος, though, is more dynamic than that. John 1:29 features John the Baptist describing Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” This verse signifies Jesus’ mission, not as opposed to the world but attempting to restore the world. John 3:16 also famously shows the motivation of God’s sending his υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ to be his great degree of love for the world.

The picture here is of a reclaiming of the world. When Jesus says “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” he is attempting to claim back his own people who rejected him in 1:11. This is a new beginning for the world, in Jesus.

This is a claim over the world as exclusively belonging to Jesus. The language against the world represents the need, in the author's view, of this "Lamb of God" to "take away the sin of the world." Here we have an institution (the world) that is fundamentally considered lovely<sup>28</sup>, but is, in the Gospel's view, in need of restoration and reclaiming. The attitude toward Judaism is comparable. The Jewish people are claimed as the flock of Jesus<sup>29</sup>, and Jesus recognizes their place as Abraham's children, and yet urges them toward a reformulation of that identity.<sup>30</sup>

This literary device points to an internal relationship between John and Judaism, and supplements concrete evidence in recent decades that the Gospel is more influenced by Judaism than was previously recognized by scholarship. Much ink has been spilled in the last century of Johannine scholarship to determine for whom the Fourth Gospel was written, and what its purpose may have been. Some, along with Bultmann<sup>31</sup>, suppose that the Gospel is, essentially, our first extant text of "Christian Gnosticism."<sup>32</sup> If they do not go so far as to label the text "Gnostic," they may look to platonist or Mandaean influence to separate the Gospel from its Jewish origins. It is this assumption of separate origin that has made it most easy to label the Gospel as anti-Jewish since, if it does not arise from a Jewish context, it would have little concern for Judaism. Scholarship has largely fallen

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<sup>28</sup> John 3:16

<sup>29</sup> John 10:27-28

<sup>30</sup> John 8:34-44

<sup>31</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *Gospel of John; a commentary*. Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1971. 7.

<sup>32</sup> C.K. Barrett. *The Gospel of John and Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975. 7.

out of favor with Bultmann's theory, recognizing, with C.K. Barrett, "the criticism, directed against Bultmann and those who follow him, concerning the relative lateness of the comparative material used to establish a Gnostic background of John."<sup>33</sup> Most scholars have moved away from calling the Gospel Gnostic, but many still place the Gospel outside Judaism.

For Barrett, there are two major reasons that the Gospel indicates a strong Jewish background. One is the lateness of comparative "Gnostic" texts mentioned above. The other is further study of the Qumran scrolls. These have given us such a robust insight into the nature of Palestinian Judaism that finding other influences of the Gospel has proved unnecessary and implausible. W. Michaelis goes so far as to say that "the Palestinian character of the Gospel of John has become so clear that attempts to promote another provenance really should cease."<sup>34</sup>

The significance of the Qumran discoveries of 1946 and following cannot be overstated for modern biblical studies. Their significance for the study of the Fourth Gospel was observed quickly after those discoveries. Brown writes that "many writers have recognized that here (Johannine corpus) we have the most impressive relationships

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Michaelis, Wilhelm. *Einleitung in Das Neue Testament: Die Entstehung, Sammlung Und Überlieferung Der Schriften Des Neuen Testaments*. Bern: Berchtold Haller, 1961. 23.

between the Scrolls and the New Testament.”<sup>35</sup> The parallels most commonly drawn, both by Brown and Barrett, include the eschatological dualism and the pervading themes of light and dark. The distinctive features of John that seem most “platonist,” “Gnostic,” or Mandaean to figures like Bultmann and Dodd find better and more plausible parallels in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Rather than looking for the Evangelist’s material outside of the tradition of all of its main characters (Jesus, John, disciples, etc.), a more logical conclusion is to look for influence in the more familiar traditions of eschatological dualistic Judaism.

The Qumran influence of the Gospel has been clearly demonstrated by scholars of recent decades, yet I add a third reason to Barrett’s two: the fresh perspective on the intertwined relationship of Judaism and Christianity in the first four Christian centuries, offered to us by Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, as well as a host of other scholars in their 2007 edited volume, *The Ways that Never Parted*.

Their contribution in this matter is succinctly stated when Reed and Becker write that “Christ-believers of both Jewish and non-Jewish ethnicities engaged in a range of exchanges between non-Christian Jews, such that even conflicts between them were typically predicated on close contact and competition.”<sup>36</sup> This competition is in fact so

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<sup>35</sup>Raymond E. Brown and James H Charlesworth. *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. New York: Crossroad, 1990, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Adam H Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed. *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. 5.



close in the Fourth Gospel, that the usual categories of “Christian” as opposed to “Jewish” are utterly unhelpful. In John’s Gospel, when a non-Jew is invited to believe in Jesus, they are invited to join the Jewish story. The Gospel does not label them as Jewish, however, in an attempt to present this offer as reaching beyond the parameters of Jewish ethnicity and hereditary lineage. This is evident in John 4:22 when Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that salvation is from the Jews.

Because the Gospel became the most helpful resource for anti-Jewish polemic, the scholar is tempted to call its background Christian and its target Judaism. In such a literary frame, the Gospel exists as a polemical tract directed at “Jews,” from a “Christian” author. This is a hopelessly anachronistic picture, since, as Paula Fredriksen has noted, in the ancient Mediterranean city, well into the third and fourth centuries, “religious and social mixing between Jews and Christians, between Christians of different sorts, and between Jews, Christians, and pagans, continued.”<sup>37</sup> Considering the intertwined relationships between early followers of Jesus and Jews, we must find a way to identify the internal group of believers in John’s Gospel that goes beyond the anachronistic title of “Christians.” The imagination of a group formed on the foundational texts and beliefs of Judaism, but totally separate from Judaism, no longer

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<sup>37</sup> Paula Fredriksen. “What Parting of the Ways? Jews, Gentiles, and the Ancient Mediterranean City” in *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. ed. by Becker, Adam H, and Annette Yoshiko Reed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, 61.

considering themselves part of the Jewish tradition does provide a convenient answer to our problem, but it relies on a clean parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity within the first century, a point which cannot be conceded.

In the mid-second century, texts such as Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* began to emerge, which started to drive the division between Judaism and the new varying forms of Christianity. Fredriksen describes these texts as *Contra Ioudaeos* literature.<sup>38</sup> Bogdan Bucur argues that later writings like this are the beginning, not the end, of a separation process between Christian and Jewish identities:

Justin's writings seem to substantiate the thesis that, inasmuch as the christological exegesis of theophanies produced an immediate reinterpretation of the object and manner of divine worship, it also, more than the 'proof from prophecy,' sowed the seeds of a communal separation between those who advocated and those who rejected this exegetical avenue.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, a clean break between Judaism and Christianity cannot be assumed for the case of John's Gospel. Not only does the Gospel pre-date the more concrete tradition of *Contra Ioudaeos* literature, but it is also drawing directly from various Jewish thought and scriptures, and grounding itself firmly in the Jewish story. Even if the author of the Gospel is not ethnically Jewish, he certainly sees himself as an inheritor of the Jewish

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<sup>38</sup> Fredriksen "What Parting of the Ways?" in *The Ways that Never Parted*. 69.

<sup>39</sup> Bucur, Bogdan G. "Justin Martyr's Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies and the Parting of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism." *Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (March 2014): 34–51.

story. The Gospel then should be understood as emerging from within some tradition of Judaism.

To speak of the Gospel emerging from within Judaism without drawing attention to the multifarious forms of Judaism in the first century would be irresponsible. Judith Lieu has pointed out that:

a range of specialized studies that have shown that John presupposes Jewish exegetical traditions sometimes otherwise attested only contemporary with or later than the Gospel—for example the “bread-of-life discourse” of chapter 6, the Cain traditions behind chapter 8, and the allusions to the feast of Tabernacles in chapter 7. At the same time, the centrality of Wisdom traditions not only for the Johannine “Logos” but, more broadly, for John’s Christology has been demonstrated, so that concepts that previously were understood in radically “non-Jewish” terms, such as John’s “high Christology” characterized by the claim “I and the Father are one,” have more recently been interpreted within the increasingly elastic boundaries of “Jewishness.”<sup>40</sup>

Considering that the Gospel emerges from a context far more situated in Judaism than we originally realized, and considering the way in which the Gospel claims a restorative relationship with the “world,” which is easily compared with its relationship with Judaism, the Gospel cannot be called anti-Jewish without extensive qualification.

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<sup>40</sup> Lieu, Judith. “Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel: Explanation and Hermeneutics.” in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*. ed by Bieringer, R, Didier Pollefeyt, and F Vandecasteele-Vanneuville. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 102.

## The Internal Jewish Characteristics of John's Gospel

Having examined the problems with labeling the Gospel anti-Jewish, and demonstrating the various aspects of its Jewish background that have been recognized by scholars, I will now show the reasons that the Gospel can positively be identified as a Jewish book, or in the very least one that imagines itself within the story of Judaism. To that end I will discuss and elaborate on the facts that the Gospel mimics the opening of the Jewish scriptures, positively identifies Jesus as a Jew and declares that salvation is from the Jews.

John's prologue closely mirrors the opening of the Jewish scriptures and may reflect a kind of exegesis on this foundational text regarding the world's creation and purpose. This is evident through the consistent language between Genesis 1 in the Septuagint and John 1. Genesis opens with ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεός, and John 1 opens with ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος. The pattern here is "in the beginning," followed by the verb and then the subject. John 1 also follows the stair-step logic of Genesis 1: "ἐποίησεν ὁ θεός... τὴν γῆν, ἡ δὲ γῆ..." The predicate of the previous statement becomes the topic of the following statement, John mimics this with the sentence "ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν." Daniel Boyarin has demonstrated that the prologue of John, in particular, represents a thoroughly Jewish use of exegetical Midrash, commenting on this passage of Genesis and that his λόγος is directly comparable to the "word" of Philo and the "word"

(memra, in Aramaic) of Targumic Midrash.<sup>41</sup> Just as Philo uses Jewish exegetical practices and theological foundations to posit new philosophical and theological ideas, so too does the author of John's Gospel. The Gospel thus represents an expression of Jewish identity, if possibly a marginal one.

In John 4:9 a Samaritan woman identifies Jesus with the term Ἰουδαῖος. "The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'" Her questions represent the sociological reality of creating identity by identifying who is on the other side of the boundaries. Here, the text represents the Jews as having created an "other" in the Samaritans. The fact that the Gospel poses this non-Jew as seeing Jesus within the boundaries of Judaism shows that, for the Gospel's authors, this is a comfortable identity marker for Jesus. Rather than rebuke this

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<sup>41</sup> Boyarin, Daniel. "John's Prologue as Midrash" in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament : New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*. ed by Brettler, Marc Zvi, and Amy-Jill Levine. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 547. Boyarin was not the first to notice this. William H. Brownlee noticed the Targumic influence on John's prologue in 1972 in his essay in *John and Qumran*. The argument there is that John's author did not reference a particular Targum, but used the general structure and themes to construct his prologue. One of the primary data points for this is John's reluctance to describe God in any visual form, and the explicit statement that "no one has ever seen God." (John 1:8. Cf. also 1 John 4:12).

identification, Jesus focuses on the question of the drink. “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10). Rather than separate Jesus from his Jewishness, the text highlights it and reminds the reader of his Jewishness in this interaction that is outside an inner-Jewish conflict.<sup>42</sup>

In this same dialogue, Jesus claims in John 4:22 that “salvation is from the Jews.” This is a fragment of the author’s idea that Judaism exists to give rise to the *true worshippers* (verse 23), who will worship the Father (John’s title for the Jewish God) in spirit and in truth. This is in response to a question about the role of Jerusalem and the temple in the proper worship of God. The author signifies that salvation (σωτηρία) is from the Jews, but it has gone beyond the Jewish locale, Jerusalem, and is available to all people on the grounds of belief in the truth. The concept of σωτηρία is not an unfamiliar concept to the Jewish scriptures. In fact, in the Psalter it is most commonly connected to God himself and referred to as his salvation (Psalms 13:5, 18:35, 36:10, 37:39, 40:10, 51:2, 69:29). That salvation, which includes being with God, as part of God’s people, is *from the Jews* and is now being made available to all people who will worship the Jewish God in spirit and truth.

If salvation is from the Jews, and the savior is himself a Jew, and that Jewishness is based in the Jewish scriptures, what exactly is Jewishness to John? It is important here

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<sup>42</sup> There are many various inner-Jewish conflicts in the Gospel, especially when one recognizes that Jesus and his followers were Jewish and understood their Jewish identity as foundational.

to recognize the sensitive complexities of this topic for all readers, ancient and modern. It must be conceded that John's Gospel is at least anti-something. We may, as modern readers, identify this something differently: as the world, the Jews, the particular Jewish community contemporary with the Johannine worshippers, or the unbelievers.

Nevertheless, it must be recognized that there is hostility in this book, as its boundary-work takes place, often (perhaps exclusively) targeted at people whom John's author refers to as Ἰουδαῖοι (Jews). So let me begin to wade into the overpopulated and emotionally charged waters of what this word means for John.

As the dialogue increases between Jewish and Christian scholars of this Gospel, much refreshing insight has been raised about the type of harm this book can cause to many people. This harm needs to be recognized and validated. I am here attempting to demonstrate the relationship between the Gospel and Judaism, as it has been abstracted in the Gospel's own terms. I do not seek to undermine the actual perceptions felt by Jews, modern and ancient alike, in reading this Gospel. As Adele Reinhartz, to whom this current work owes much, as said "in my own initial encounters with this text, in which each Johannine usage of the term Jew felt like a slap in the face."<sup>43</sup> I am not attempting to convince anyone that the hand that slapped them was merely their own. The reason that the Gospel's construction of Jewish identity is so polarizing is that it draws strong

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<sup>43</sup> Reinhartz, "'Jews' and Jews in the Fourth Gospel." 213

boundaries that do not include historically foundational elements of Jewish identity such as circumcision and the temple.<sup>44</sup>

It is my view that the Jews in John who are referred to explicitly as Jews (Ἰουδαῖοι) are a literary abstraction representing unbelievers who lose their status as children of Abraham because, in the Gospel writer's view, their structures of Jewish identity prevent them from believing in Jesus. In this ironic and revolutionary twist, Jewishness can be more available for the Greeks than for the "Jews" who reject Jesus. This is an extension of Jesus' message in John 12:25 to Greeks who wish to join him: "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."

It is at least clear that the term Jew in the Fourth Gospel does not refer to all Jews. This is important because it betrays some literary strategy employed by the author. If the author intentionally sidesteps certain uses of the word Jew, using it only in some cases, it is best to assume there is a purpose in this. Reinhartz herself noticed this when she pointed out (in an article that arrives at different conclusions than this one) that "given the ubiquity of the term Ἰουδαίος, however, it is curious that while it is applied to Jesus (4:9), it is never used of a figure who is a believer; this despite the fact that almost all the followers of and believers in Jesus within the Gospel narrative, with the exception of the Samaritan woman, her compatriots, and, perhaps, the officer of John 4, are Jewish in the

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<sup>44</sup> This is pointed out in Raimo Hakola *Identity Matters: John, the Jews, and Jewishness*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005. 218.



national and ethnic sense.”<sup>45</sup> This pattern is most salient, Reinhartz also shows<sup>46</sup>, in the example of Nathaniel, who is not referred to as a “true Israelite” (Ἰσραηλίτης) and not a true Jew (Ἰουδαῖος) in John 1:47. Judith Lieu noticed something similar, but in reference to the group that is referred to as Jews, as differentiated from others who, though clearly Jewish, are not called so:

Quite clearly, action predicated on ‘the Jews’ at various points must be predicated on a delimited group, and contextual analysis indicates those with authority; such a framework also makes sense of the curious alternation with ‘the Pharisees,’ of the absence of other groups identified in the Synoptic tradition, as well as of the Johannine awareness of ‘the crowd.’ If we were to set the Fourth Gospel on stage, “the Jews” would be clearly distinguished by their appurtenances of authority from the no less “Jewish” Jesus, disciples, and individuals such as the blind man and his parents.<sup>47</sup>

If the word Jew is not used to denote Jesus' followers and is used to denote the figures of authority, toward whom Jesus has constant animosity, it appears that the term Jew is carrying some meaning more than its usual, common one.

The meaning placed on the term Jew seems intentional by the author. This is made clear through the places in which this meaning breaks down, which are few. The pattern outlined above disintegrates in some important places. One is in 18:35 when

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<sup>45</sup> Reinhartz, “‘Jews’ and Jews in the Fourth Gospel.” 220.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Lieu, “Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel: Explanation and Hermeneutics.” in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*. ed by Bieringer, R, Didier Pollefeyt, and F Vandecasteele-Vanneuville. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 101-117. (111).

Pilate says “I am not a Jew, am I.” This use of the term is as an ethnic and cultural identifier, because Pilate is stating his justification for not having his own opinion about Jesus’ kingship over the Jews. He follows this by saying: “Your own nation (ἔθνος) and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Pilate uses this term, Jew, as a dividing ethnic and cultural line.

The isolation of “the chief priests” as the persons in authority, rather than simply “the Jews” is uncommon for the Gospel, but very common for other literature, such as the Synoptics. In Matthew’s Gospel, for example, the term Jew is used almost exclusively in reference to Jesus as King of the Jews. This title, interestingly, is only used mockingly in John’s Gospel. When the sign is posted above the cross, displaying “King of the Jews,” John’s Gospel takes careful attention to qualify it with the story about the chief priests requesting it to be changed, thus distancing Jesus from this title (John 19:21). These places in the Fourth Gospel, where chief priests are mentioned explicitly instead of Jews, and where the word Jew is used as a cultural and ethnic marker, show that the author knows the common use of the term, and is manipulating it as a literary tool.

How can the Gospel hate Judaism if it mimics the opening of the Jewish scriptures (John 1:1), calls Jesus Jewish (4:9), claims that salvation is of the Jews (4:22)? This shows, to me, that instead of being entirely against Judaism, the Gospel seeks to show how it imagines Judaism will be reclaimed by Jesus so that all true children of Abraham must believe in Jesus, or else lose their status as disciples and “true Israelites.” In this sense, the term “Jew” in the Gospel refers to the sort of Jews who do not submit to

Jesus' claim over Judaism, just as the people of this world refer to the sort of people who do not submit to Jesus' claim over the world.

That so many scholars have toiled over the question of John's anti-Judaism and come to polarizing conclusions reflects a reality that is often overlooked. The confusion we have of the attitude toward Judaism in John is shared by John's own authors. What this text represents is a fragment of the early formation of new identities. I have discussed above the ways in which the text sits within the tradition of Judaism. The problem, though, is that the Gospel is continuously betraying antagonistic or ambivalent attitudes toward some fundamentals of Jewish identity. Raimo Hakola notes that "Jesus' ambivalent attitude to such integral matters of Jewishness as the temple, the Sabbath, circumcision, the revelation at Sinai, Moses, the law and Abraham may well reflect the ambivalent stance of the Johannine Christians on these matters."<sup>48</sup> Scholars have attempted to reconstruct the social circumstances surrounding the existence and formation of the text of John to explain this ambivalence and antagonism, arguing for methods such as a two level reading of the Gospel to reveal historical circumstances beyond those that the text relates.<sup>49</sup> This sort of speculation is usually hard to defend, and is not necessary to observe the kind of identity shifts that are happening for the disciples of this text. Rather, the best interpretive lens comes from seeing the project of this text as

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<sup>48</sup> Hakola. *Identity Matters*. 218.

<sup>49</sup> This is the contribution of Martyn, J. Louis. *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. 3rd ed., Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2003.

a reformulation of both the composition and the characteristics of the people of the Jewish God.

### **The Project of the Gospel**

There are distinct methods of boundary drawing in John's Gospel that aid in the demarcation of sociological groups. Reinhartz writes that John "provides abundant evidence for how he wanted his audience members to understand themselves: as children of God (1:12; 11:52) who participated in the cosmic realm rather than the earthly realm of existence."<sup>50</sup> The final topic of study for this paper is what exactly this notion of belonging to God means for Jewish identity. I will show that John reformulates the composition and the characteristics of Jewish identity. In historic Jewish tradition, it was the nation of the Israelites that belonged to God. John does not undermine this notion. Rather, the Gospel reformulates the precise composition of that nation.

In the Fourth Gospel, being a reborn child of the God of Israel becomes the identifier of those that are "in" and those that are "out" of God's nation, regardless of their connection to ethnic Jewish heritage. Reinhartz goes on to note that the identification of faithful worshippers of God as children of God is not originally a Johannine idea. In Deuteronomy 14:1 the Israelites are called children of God. In the book of Hosea, the promise of redemption is phrased as a declaration that the people of Israel shall be called Children of God (Hosea 1:10). If, as Hakola pointed out, faith in Jesus for the Johannine disciples reinterprets every aspect of Jewish identity, this must

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<sup>50</sup> Reinhartz, Adele. *Cast out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018. 39.

also be true for its message of being and becoming children of God. Reinhartz continues, “those who are persuaded by the Fourth Gospel to engage in a process of transformation are reborn as the children of God and siblings of one another.”

John’s Gospel attempts to reform from within the promise of belonging to God as children, framing it not as a matter of identifying with the ethnicity of Judaism, but with the more broadly defined “chosen nation” of Israel and the faith (πίστις) of the Jewish Messiah. Faith in Jesus then becomes the litmus test of identifying as a reborn child of the God of Israel, regardless of connection with the Jewish ethnicity. This principle is made clear when, in John 11:49-53, Caiaphas the high priest prophesied about what exactly Christ would do for the children of God.

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

The narrator’s explanation of these words clarifies what the author of the Gospel views as what Jesus and his death mean for the identity of the people of God. Viewing the way that the title “Children of God” has historically been applied strictly to Israel, the comment that people from outside the Jewish ethnicity are now also God’s children and are waiting to be gathered into one<sup>51</sup> shows that there is a grand redemption intended that will create a new people by gathering all of the true children of God into one, which

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<sup>51</sup> καὶ οὐχ ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἔθνους μόνον ἀλλ’ ἵνα καὶ τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ τὰ διεσκορπισμένα συναγάγη εἰς ἓν.

includes the nation that, until the appearing of the Messiah, were exclusively regarded as God's children.<sup>52</sup>

This then raises the question of why *all* people who are part the Jewish heritage that was (in the view of this text) formerly the exclusive children of God are not part of the newly defined children of God (τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ). It is because the characteristics of those belonging to that group have been reformulated as well. Hakola writes that “the Johannine Christians themselves interpreted their faith in Jesus in such a way that it led them on a collision course with basic matters of Jewishness. The passages dealing with central matters of Jewish identity show how ambivalent is John's relationship to these matters.”<sup>53</sup> The basic matters he examines include the temple, the Sabbath, and the patriarchs of Abraham and Moses. To avoid a repetition of his detailed descriptions of John's ambivalent relationship with these, I will here briefly examine each of these, using Hakola's insights.

The first episode that pits the Johannine Jesus against the Jews is the temple scene in chapter 2:13-22. In this text, Jesus presents himself and his body as the new temple. It

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<sup>52</sup> Here it is important to note that the word in the LXX for “children” for the verses listed above is υἱοὶ, not the Johannine τέκνα. I believe, however, that this parallel is still sound considering the reinterpretation John does of the word υἱός. In this Gospel, the word υἱός is only metaphorically used to describe the Son, Jesus. John does not assign this title to true believers, or God's people except in the cryptic passage in John 12:35-36.

<sup>53</sup> Hakola. *Identity Matters*. 216.

is clear that the concept of the temple has not escaped its critical role in the identity of a worshipper, but its referent has been relocated from the physical temple to the person of Jesus. In this sense, the characteristic of a worshipping child of God as an observant of the temple is not abolished but reformulated by faith in Jesus. The topic of temple worship reappears in John 4:20-24 when Jesus explains to the Samaritan woman that the “hour is coming, and is now here,” when worshippers will have to recalculate what worship means. Worship will henceforth be based not on a physical locale of the temple, but a spiritual one which “the Father is seeking.”

In John 5:1-18 Jesus heals an ill man on the Sabbath, and given that the healing was not necessary for the preservation of the man’s life (since he’d been ill for 38 years), it represented a violation of the Sabbath, and Jesus is questioned about this by the Jews. Jesus’ response is not to negate the significance of Sabbath, but to say that “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” Hakola notes that “The Sabbath question is not treated as a legal issue here, but it serves as a means to assert Jesus’ close relationship to his Father.”<sup>54</sup> Here again the unique person of Jesus reinterprets the place of a foundational characteristic of Jewish identity. This is a similar notion to the synoptic phrase “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” ( Matthew 12:8, Mark 2:28, and Luke 6:5).

Finally, the relationship between the Gospel’s identity construction and Jewish patriarchs may be the most telling of these characteristics. Historically, as Paula

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 120.

Fredriksen<sup>55</sup> notes, religious identity was tied closely to nationality and heritage (γένος), and so it naturally follows that the people born into the Jewish heritage are the inheritors of the proper Jewish worship and practice. In John 8:39, however, the Johannine Jesus reinterprets what it means to be an inheritor of that tradition. The Jews tell him “Abraham is our Father,” to which he responds “If you were Abraham’s children (τέκνα), you would be doing what Abraham did.” Here he separates their ethnic heritage from their relation to the spiritual tradition of the patriarchs. This in concert with the passage from John 11:49-53 mentioned above shows that there is a reformulation project of what the characteristics are of true worshippers. In 5:42 this divorce of genealogical heritage to Abraham and worship of Abraham’s God is applied to God himself. “If God were your Father, you would love me.” Here we see what exactly the characteristic of those inside the boundaries is: love of Jesus. That is the new litmus test to determine one’s identity as a child of God.

## **Conclusion**

There is a sociological situation behind John’s Gospel, which leads to a literary technique that helps to draw identifying boundaries. Ever since Martyn’s *History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel* was published, it has become ubiquitous among scholars to speculate about what the exact historical situation was that lead to the antagonistic (or at least ambivalent) attitudes toward Judaism present in the Gospel. The conclusion to

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<sup>55</sup> Fredriksen, “What Parting of the Ways? Jews, Gentiles, and the Ancient Mediterranean City.” 63.



which Martyn arrives is that the birkat ha-minim was used as the Jewish litmus test, expelling attendees of the synagogue who could not recite it. Evidence for this is meager, and reconstructing any precise circumstance must rely on unfounded speculation. However, whatever the historical circumstance may have been, it is clear that an attempt to reformulate the identity of the worshippers of the God of Israel is present in the Gospel, composed of any person (ethnically Jewish or not) that will trust Jesus, and characterized not by observance of fundamental Jewish laws and practices, but by belief in Jesus.

## Chapter 2: John the Baptist as a Critical Symbol

In the first chapter of this thesis, I showed that the Fourth Gospel features a symbolic use of the character of “the Jews.” The Jews, in this Gospel, represent a contrasting state of being against the foil of “the disciples.” These disciples are themselves Jews, which gives credence to the conclusion that the term Jews is used in this symbolic way. What I will show in this section of the essay, is that the foil of “the Jews” is most tangibly present in the character of John the Baptist. This reformulation of Judaism discussed in the section above is symbolized in the character of John the Baptist. As a Jewish prophet, he represents the Gospel’s ideal response of the whole Jewish nation to Jesus. By redirecting his own followers to Jesus, John shows that truly faithful Jews now follow Jesus,<sup>56</sup> and by standing aside as a bridegroom’s friend, and not a bridegroom<sup>57</sup>, he demonstrates the way that, in the Evangelist’s mind, historical Jewish identity must decrease, that Jesus may increase. In this way, John the Baptist is a template to the proper relationship between historical Judaism and Jesus, in the mind of the Evangelist. There is no contention or hostility between the two, but there is a mutual recognition of re-identification.

In this section, I will begin by challenging the work of Raymond Brown and Urban von Wahlde that suggests a historical solution to the Gospel’s emphasis on John the Baptist. They infer a John the Baptist sect, which had a contemporary conflict with the readers of John’s Gospel, which bred the Gospel’s highlighted focus on the character.

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<sup>56</sup> John 1:37

<sup>57</sup> John 3:22-30

This is problematic considering the lack of external independent evidence and the precedent in the Fourth Gospel for literary characterization like we saw with “the Jews,” above. Having shown that John the Baptist is being used symbolically, I will then show that the symbol’s precise referent is the kind of ideal submission to Jesus’ reformulation of Jewish identity. To show this, I will demonstrate how the character of John constantly performs this submission. In every passage in which John the Baptist appears or is mentioned, this motif of proper submission is present, and is used as an example to other Jews. Finally, I will show that John the Baptist, as a symbol of proper submission to Jesus’ reformulation of Jewish identity, represents the literary foil to the character of The Jews, who continually refuse the reformulation of identity that Jesus is enacting. Above I discussed that their contrasting state of being is, as Reinhartz has noticed, “believers” or “disciples,” but the language for this is far less concrete than that of John the Baptist, and it is from John the Baptist himself that Jesus gains his first disciples.

### **The Problems with Historical Approaches to John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel**

Brown and von Wahlde are not the first, nor only, scholars who see evidence of a conflict between the Johannine Christians and some contemporary followers of John the Baptist. Bultmann, also seeing evidence for a contemporary John the Baptist sect, yet claimed that the prologue is the work of a Gnostic sectarian of John the Baptist, composing a hymn of praise to the figure.<sup>58</sup> It is precisely this stark contrast in seeing the text as either praising or undermining John the Baptist that reveals the faults in this

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<sup>58</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *Gospel of John*. 84.

historical-critical explanation. Von Wahlde supposes that because of John's prominent focus in the Gospel, as opposed to in the Synoptics, the contemporary followers of John the Baptist must have been in close contention to the Johannine community, such that the author felt the necessity to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus to John. Von Wahlde is claiming that some active community of distinct followers of John the Baptist existed into the end of the first century. If this is true, the Gospel of John would be the only evidence of this.<sup>59</sup> Since, then, scholars cannot even agree on what the text is saying about John the Baptist, it is problematic to make historical conclusions about the community of John's readers, or whatever religious groups with whom they may have had conflict.

Brown, for his part, recognizes this complexity and seeks to redress previous scholars' tendency to overstep historical bounds. He claims that "it is reasonable to suspect that *some* (but not necessarily all) of the negations about JBap in the Fourth Gospel were intended as a refutation of claims that followers of JBap made about their master."<sup>60</sup> While he loosens the grip on this historical theory, he cannot quite remove it. Brown sees Johannine conflict with John the Baptist in passages like 1:8-9, that claims Jesus was the light, and not John; in 1:30, that states Jesus' preexistence and preeminence over John the Baptist; in 1:20 and 3:28 that state that John was not the Messiah; and

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<sup>59</sup> Von Wahlde, Urban C. *The Gospel and Letters of John*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2010. Volume 1. 119-20.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Introduction*. 155.

finally in 10:41 where it is claimed that John never worked miracles, while Jesus did.<sup>61</sup> These apparent contentions have distracted scholars for generations, yet few have given real attention to the fact that John the Baptist himself is commonly the one stating Jesus' preeminence. If there was a historical John the Baptist sect in conflict with Johannine Christians, it seems more likely that the Evangelist would want to drive distance between Jesus and John the Baptist. Yet the opposite occurs. As opposed to the Matthean John, who doubts Jesus' Messiahship<sup>62</sup> and preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (rather than only testifying about Jesus<sup>63</sup>) the John of the Fourth Gospel makes stronger and more direct claims of submission to Jesus' superiority. It doesn't seem likely that an attempt to distance the Johannine Jesus from the figure of John the Baptist, in the aim of defeating a contemporary rival sect, would include a close connection and respect between the two figures.

### **Toward a Literary-Rhetorical Approach**

Recognizing the issues with historical explanations and speculations about a John the Baptist rival sect, it is now best to interpret the John the Baptist of the Fourth Gospel as a literary and rhetorical tool. Brown even cites this as a possibility, claiming that "John

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<sup>61</sup> Brown, *Introduction*. 155.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew 11:3

<sup>63</sup> Compare Mark 1:4 and John 1:15. While both contain submission of John the Baptist to the superiority of Jesus, and the phrase about John's unworthiness to untie Jesus' sandals, John's very first words in the Fourth Gospel indicate Jesus' preeminence.

presents JBap primarily as a witness to Jesus, but that may be from a Christological emphasis, rather than from any apologetic interest.”<sup>64</sup> This approach of reading John the Baptist as highlighting Christological emphasis best explains the character’s role in the text. Rather than merely making historical claims, the Evangelist uses John the Baptist as a symbol to highlight a Christological perspective.<sup>65</sup> The variants between the synoptic John the Baptist and the Johannine John the Baptist suggests that John is manipulating his historical data to make a theological point. To what precisely that point is, we will turn our attention next.

John the Baptist was a helpful trope to symbolize the new structure of God’s kingdom, such that John represented historical Judaism as “preparing the way” for Jesus and his inbreaking life which has been made available for all who believe. This will be most easily demonstrated by examining two passages that are significant to John the Baptist’s development as a character. Both of these passages contain important allusions (or, in the case of the first, a direct quote) to the Old Testament<sup>66</sup>. In looking closely at the way these allusions to the Septuagint are used, both thematically and semantically, we can see what the Evangelist is attempting to draw out.

John 1:23 says:

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<sup>64</sup> Brown. *Introduction*. 156.

<sup>65</sup> Whether or not the Fourth Gospel is treating John the Baptist historically at all is a question beyond the scope of this project.

<sup>66</sup> Presumably, for the author of John, the Septuagint (LXX). A brief defense of this view is found in Menken, 23.

ἔφη ἐγὼ φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ

εὐθύνετε τὴν ὁδὸν Κυρίου,

καθὼς εἶπεν Ἡσαΐας\* ὁ προφήτης.

*He said "I am a voice of shouting in the wilderness*

*Make straight the way of the Lord*

*Just as Isaiah the Prophet said."*

Whatever was John's source for this quotation, it has been changed. The Hebrew bible has פָּנּוּ (*pannu*), which is rendered in the LXX as ἐτοιμάσατε, not εὐθύνετε as written here<sup>67</sup>. However, the second colon of the Isaiah passage, quoted here, is rendered in the LXX as εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν. The phrase εὐθείας ποιεῖτε is the translation of the Hebrew phrase יָרַשׁוּ (*yasru*). This leads some scholars to suggest that the evangelist was only reliant on the LXX, and that the change from ἐτοιμάσατε to εὐθύνετε was influenced by the wording of the second colon. This is the view of Maarten Menken, along with others he cites.<sup>68</sup> What Menken fails to notice is that the word ἐτοιμάσατε is used in the synoptic gospels in reference to this passage as well (Mark 1:3; Matt 3:3; Luke 3:4), making it possible that John quoted the passage from the Synoptics, and changed the words to match his symbolic use of John's character.

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<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, the only other occurrence of εὐθύνω in the New Testament is in James 3:4, in which it is the participial title of the pilot of a ship, steering the rudder.

<sup>68</sup> M. Menken. *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form*. Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1996. 23.

Menken notes an important difference in the meanings of these two words. “The verb ἐτοιμάζειν, when used with an indirect object, often has this connotation: a subject A prepares something for an indirect object B, and only when it is ready, B may come there where A already is, to use what has been prepared.” This is clearly the role of John the Baptist in the Synoptics. He comes to prepare the way, and then gets out of the way by imprisonment. The way that John and his followers prepare the way of the Lord is by repenting and being baptized (Matt 3:1-2; Mark 1:4-8; Luke 3:1-3; 7-18). In John’s Gospel, the story is different, and so the word is different. Nowhere is John preaching a baptism of repentance, and John is not even labeled as a βαπτιστής, as he is in the Synoptics. John performs a different role here. Menken continues, “In the Fourth Gospel, the clause ‘make straight the way of the Lord’ can have a meaning within its context only when it refers to the Baptist’s witnessing to Jesus.” John, in the Fourth Gospel, did not come as a βαπτιστής, but rather, ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν (he came as a witness, John 1:7). So the way in which John “makes straight” Jesus’ way is by pointing to him as greater. In the author’s view, this is the role of the Jewish religion. When John claims “He must increase, but I must decrease,”<sup>69</sup> this is, in the Evangelist’s view, the proper script for traditional Jewish religious identity. John does not resist Jesus’ supremacy, but actually comes to support it (make it straight). By putting the words of Isaiah into the mouth of John the Baptist, rather than the narrator (as in the Synoptics), the Fourth Gospel makes John the Baptist a primary agent in this submission, and also gives him the voice of the Prophets, showing that Judaism and its scriptures has been preparing the way and

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<sup>69</sup> John 3:30



witnessing to Jesus. The character of John in the Fourth Gospel clearly represents, for the Evangelist, the role of traditional Judaism as leading to and then submitting to Jesus.

The next passage that demonstrates this is John 3:22-30, which begins with a scene of John and Jesus both baptizing at Aenon near Salim because there was plenty of water there for both of them. A dispute then breaks out between John's disciples and a certain Jew about purification rituals. After this discussion, John's disciples notify him that all are going to be baptized by Jesus. John's response to this reads:

*“No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

This text is probably the most important for our present study of the role of John the Baptist as a paragon of the relationship between Judaism and Jesus for the Fourth Gospel. In order to understand this, we must make sense of the “parable,” as von Wahlde calls it, concerning the bride and the bridegroom. It is noted in von Wahlde’s commentary and in Schnackenberg's that this comes from a “Jewish custom of having the bride escorted by two friends to the bridal chamber.” Von Wahlde then mentions briefly that while the “bridegroom” is not a common trope in reference to the Messiah, the whole nation of Israel is commonly called the bride of God. This is not analyzed by von Wahlde, but

simply mentioned in passing. This requires more examination. We will here look at four Old Testament texts where this trope is in use.

Ezekiel 16:8

*I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine.*

Jeremiah 2:2

*Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.*

In these passages, the marriage between Israel and God is reflected as a past covenant. The covenant made implied that Israel henceforth belongs to the Lord God (“you became mine”). In the Ezekiel passage, the implication of this belonging is security and love. In Jeremiah the implication of devotion is added.<sup>70</sup>

Isaiah 62:4-5

*You shall no more be termed Forsaken,  
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;*

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<sup>70</sup> A more common interpretation of  $\text{רָחֻם}$  (the word translated devotion here) is kindness or faithfulness.

*but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,  
and your land Married;  
for the Lord delights in you,  
and your land shall be married.  
For as a young man marries a young woman,  
so shall your builder marry you,  
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you.*

Unlike the Ezekiel passage, these verses invoke a future covenant of marriage between Israel and the Lord. The motif of marital security and love is affirmed again here, and complemented with themes of rejoicing and redemption from “desolation.” As I mentioned in chapter one, John’s Gospel contains a theme of reclaiming a desolate world into the security and love of God, by means of the Word (Jesus). When John the Baptist invokes themes of ushering Israel as a bride into a covenant with Jesus, he is echoing the same sort of redemption from desolation as such passages from the Old Testament.

Hosea 2:16-19

*On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Baal.” For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my*

*wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.*

What is common of the trope in all these passages is that the marriage (whether it is a past covenant, as in Ezekiel, or a future covenant, as in the other passages) is a redeeming act to win Israel back to God from desolation,<sup>71</sup> disaster,<sup>72</sup> nakedness,<sup>73</sup> idol worship and war.<sup>74</sup> When Israel is treated like a bride, the bridegroom acts as a redeemer, who pulls her away from the old status into a new one (righteousness, delight, safety, etc.). John uses this trope accordingly. In fact, the author of the Fourth Gospel puts the words into the mouth of John the Baptist to show all the more that Jewish faithfulness means following Jesus, because Jesus is the bridegroom who now has the bride (Israel). John the Baptist acts as the Jewish law and customs acted; as the friend of the bridegroom who would lead the bride to her ultimate bridegroom. What is represented in John's unbelieving disciples, and other unbelieving Jews in the Fourth Gospel, is a bride who wants to stay with her usher, rather than being united to her bridegroom.

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<sup>71</sup> Isaiah 62:4

<sup>72</sup> Jeremiah 2:3

<sup>73</sup> Ezekiel 16:8

<sup>74</sup> Hosea 2:16-19

## **John as a Literary Foil to the Jews of the Fourth Gospel**

Having shown that the character of John the Baptist is best understood as a literary-rhetorical device, I will not show that this symbolic character acts as a foil to the symbolic character of the Jews. In each of the texts in which John appears, he is correcting or setting a better example for unbelieving Jews. In 1:22, he is set against the Pharisees, who do not understand who the Messiah is, nor why John is baptizing. In 3:25, when John claims his total submission to Jesus, as the bridegroom of Israel, it is against the backdrop of a discussion between his disciples and a Jew about purification. The role that the Jews play in the literary strategy of the Gospel is antithetical to that of John the Baptist.

For a detailed look at this, I will examine the last mention of John the Baptist in the Gospel, in John 10:40-42. “ He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there. Many came to him, and they were saying, ‘John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.’ And many believed in him there.” John the Baptist is primarily noted here to show the veracity of Jesus' message, confirmed by signs, as opposed to John's, which was not confirmed by signs. von Wahlde again shows this as merely a superiority of Jesus to John.<sup>75</sup> However, in its present context, this passage is made to elaborate on the nature of those who are Jesus' “sheep.” J. Louis Martyn gives an expert analysis of this issue in the introduction to his *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. He writes:

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<sup>75</sup> Von Wahlde, Urban C. *The Gospel and Letters of John*. Volume 2. 482.

It follows, I think, that the portrait of the ‘other sheep’ is drawn in such a way as to refer primarily to other Jewish Christians who, like those of the Johannine community, have been scattered from their parent synagogues by experiencing excommunication. It is, then, a vision of the Johannine community that the day will come when all of the conventicles of scattered Jewish Christians will be gathered into one flock under the one Good Shepherd.<sup>76</sup>

Setting aside the historicity of the Birkath ha-Minim and the expulsion of Jewish Christian from synagogues on which Martyn bases his development of the Johannine Community, his analysis of this text in John 10 is valuable. It shows that the author’s community is waiting for the gathering of sheep of other folds, which can fairly be understood as Jewish Christians that are not part of the Johannine community. Jesus, in verse 26-27, tells the Jews: “you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” This is directly in opposition to the familiar scene of disciples from John the Baptist turning to follow Jesus, when directed to by the voice of John the Baptist in John 1:37. The Jews who do not believe because they are not part of Jesus’ flock are juxtaposed to the Jews who were of the flock of John the Baptist and turned to follow Jesus in chapter 1.

Immediately following this dialogue in chapter 10, Jesus goes to where John had been baptizing, and people there who had believed John came to follow Jesus because of his signs, following the witness of John, just as the disciples had in 1:37. As it says: “And

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<sup>76</sup> Martyn. *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. 20.

many believed in him there.”<sup>77</sup> So, then, if belief in Jesus is a trait unique to his sheep, then this passage shows that those who believe John will become the sheep of Jesus, and that this transfer of belief from John to Jesus is assisted by Jesus' signs. Jesus' signs are not, as von Wahlde has suggested, mentioned simply to show Jesus' superiority to John, but to show that John's witness about Jesus was true, and that John's followers who believe are truly sheep of Jesus. The reassociation of the sheep to the good shepherd is precisely John the Baptist's purpose in the Fourth Gospel. The Jews who are named as outside Jesus' flock in this chapter fail to see what John the Baptist had been saying. They claim to stone him, not for his works, but for his divine claims, which they call blasphemy. Yet these divine claims, of being the Son of God, are precisely what John the Baptist had been claiming about Jesus since chapter 1:34. Not only is John's witness not enough to convince these unbelieving Jews, neither are Jesus' good works. These good works, which do not convince, are directly opposed to the preceding good works (or signs) which lead many to believe in 10:40-42. John the Baptist for the Fourth Gospel, then, not only makes straight the way of the Lord, but makes straight the way *to* the Lord, by bearing witness to him. That many disbelieve this witness, despite the veracity of John's preaching and the signs of Jesus, is precisely the issue that leads the Evangelist to construct this literary foil between John the Baptist and the Jews.

### **Conclusion**

John the Baptist, in each passage of relevance in the Fourth Gospel, represents the Evangelists proper submission of Jewish identity and customs to Jesus, and the groups

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<sup>77</sup> 10:42

labeled the Jews represent the antithesis, or foil, of that proper submission. Both of these characters are not merely historical for the author of John's Gospel, as evident from the way the labels are used and the sources manipulated. This literary interpretation of these characters can properly shed light on how the Evangelist imagines the relationship between Judaism and Jesus.

I have discussed how John the Baptist is not best understood in the Fourth Gospel as representing a rival sect to the Johannine Community; a theory with no external corroborating evidence and little direct support from the Gospel itself. Rather, the Baptist is best analyzed as a literary device. The way the character is used in John 1:23; 3:22-30; and 10:40-42 in connection to the broader agenda of the Fourth Gospel, of supporting faith in Jesus rather than traditional Jewish identity supports this.



## Conclusion and Reflection

This thesis has expounded on the scholarship of recent decades that has stemmed the flow of historical speculation and two-level reading of the Fourth Gospel, and found literary-critical approaches to understand the various characteristics of the Gospel. I have suggested that the Gospel of John is attempting a reformulation of Jewish identity through the lens of faith in Jesus, and that the Gospel's author gives the character of John the Baptist to embody that reformulation, with the Jews as his literary foil.

These conclusions raise further questions about the nature of the Gospel's author and the community that surrounded the text. The reasons for speculating that the Gospel's author is not Jewish are numerous, and not easily discounted. It is rare in the Gospel that the nuance of the variance in contemporary Jewish groups is recognized, and many have pointed out that the author's use of the term "Jews" rings of an outsider's perspective. And yet the author is clearly, nevertheless, embedded in Jewish language and culture, given their fluidity in allusion to the Old Testament and themes of Jewish worship and practice. Given this ambivalent relationship to Judaism, one is left to wonder how the Gospel's author and their community were likely to understand themselves: Jewish or not? As Fredriksen<sup>78</sup> noted, religious identity and cultural identity were usually not understood as disparate categories in the ancient Mediterranean world. It is curious, then, that the author of the Gospel of John has separated Jewish heritage from Jewish religious identity. The fact that one nation's god could have "other sheep that do not belong to this

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<sup>78</sup> Fredriksen, Paula. "What Parting of the Ways? Jews, Gentiles, and the Ancient Mediterranean City," 61

fold” is highly uncommon, and it raises questions about what sort of person wrote this book and what inspired their understanding of religious identity, which, contrary to much contemporary religion, does not seem to have much regard for ethnic heritage.

This is the primary question that this thesis engenders. It is a question that brings us back to this paper’s introduction: under what label should the theology of the Fourth Gospel fall? While its theology is one that seeks to move outside the bounds of contemporary Judaism, it could conceivably still be considered Jewish theology; in that it is inspired and composed of the general story of Israel’s God and his redemption for his people. What then of the author? Under what label should they fall? One possible history is that the author, a Gentile, and perhaps a God-fearer, felt connected to the story of Israel and its God, and became eventually frustrated with the Judaism around them and felt that their faithfulness to the God of the Jews eventually led them to disassociate from Jews themselves. In any case, that is the very story that has been written onto the person of Jesus in the Gospel’s story; a Jewish man, with Jewish followers, who, out of faithfulness to the Jewish God, renegotiate their understanding of Jewishness entirely, and distance themselves from “the Jews” who give a negative answer to Jesus’ question: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> John 9:35

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