

# THE FOURTH GOSPEL—AN APPEAL TO JEWS<sup>1</sup>

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The central concern of the thesis is with the so-called anti-Judaism of the fourth Gospel, particularly with 'You are of your father the Devil' in 8:44. Its starting-point is the observation that, if the currently dominant hypothesis of the Gospel's origin is correct, then it can hardly be rescued from the charge of a fundamental hostility towards Jews. The hypothesis associated with J. Louis Martyn has dominated scholarship for 25 years, and pictures a small Jewish-Christian group producing the Gospel (in its final form) as a response to exclusion from its parent synagogue. In this reconstruction, inward-looking self-assertion and hostility are the fundamental motives in the johannine community's appropriation of the Scriptures and institutions of Judaism. The thesis therefore sets its treatment of johannine anti-Judaism into a broad consideration of the 'Martyn hypothesis' and of the situation and purpose of the Gospel.

Reviewing contemporary methodology in johannine studies, the thesis is sharply critical of the allegorical method employed by the 'Martyn hypothesis', whereby the history of Jesus is re-read as the history of the johannine community. In addition Martyn is criticised for the partial use of the evidence of contemporary Judaism in his reconstruction of the historical circumstances behind the Gospel. Martyn is not alone in this: in particular the evidence of the contemporary (late first-century) apocalypses has not been sufficiently exploited by johannine scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen Motyer, *John 8:31-59 and the Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Fourth Gospel* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, London University 1993); supervisor, Professor G.N. Stanton.

The thesis proposes a method developed from J.D.G. Dunn's significant essay 'Let John Be John': this involves first exploring the text for its 'points of sensitivity', that is, those features of it which seem to relate to or address contemporary movements or needs. Then a survey of the situation of Judaism in the late first century, drawing particularly on the apocalypses, gives depth to these 'points of sensitivity'; and finally a return to the text from the background situation enables the authentic, first-century voice of the text to be heard. The exegesis of John 8:31-59 is thus conducted (a) against the background of the political and religious situation of Judaism in the late first century, and (b) in the light of a wider sense of the function of the whole Gospel in that setting.

Vital to the method is a movement away from a focus on authorial intention to a focus on reception: what would this text have been 'heard' to say, in the situation faced by late first-century Judaism? This question can be explored irrespective of authorial intention and of the date of composition: although inferences can be made about both, when it is discovered that the fourth Gospel beautifully addresses the needs of Jews in the traumatic situation following the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

In order to explore the reception and function of the Gospel in this way, the thesis uses some of the categories of recent literary criticism, most notably that of the 'implied reader'—although this is carefully redefined in order to employ the idea within an essentially historical approach. Whereas Culpepper treats the 'implied reader' as the 'ideal reader' intended by the author, and Staley uses the term to personify the time-line implied by a sequential narrative, this thesis defines the 'implied reader' as any first-century reader, whether actual or potential, who felt or would have felt that his or her situation was directly addressed by the text.

This definition grows out of the perception that the 'points of sensitivity' of the fourth Gospel match and address the vital issues of late first-century Judaism, so that there will have been many Jews who would have felt themselves addressed by the text in this way:

(1) Supremely, Jesus is presented in the fourth Gospel as the answer to the problem of the destruction of the Temple. John's Gospel may indeed be understood as an authentic Christian contribution to the pool of literature which was spawned within Judaism by that dreadful event. But unlike other contemporary responses, which sought the answer in reaffirming commitment to Torah (2 Baruch, Yavneh), or in polemic against all cultic religion (Sibylline Oracles 4), or in resurgent militarism (Apocalypse of Abraham, the Zealots), or in apocalyptic revelation of a future divine intervention (4 Ezra, Sibylline Oracles 5), the Fourth Gospel takes the sting out of the disaster by identifying Jesus with the Temple, and by portraying his crucifixion as an anticipation of its destruction, and his resurrection as its rebuilding already completed. In turn each of the main festivals is shown to be only truly celebrated when focused on Jesus as the centre of worship.

The Fourth Gospel would further be heard to engage with each of the other main competing 'answers' to the disaster available at the time:

(2) *Resurgent Torah*. The Yavnean rabbis, in continuity with pre-A.D. 70 Pharisaism, reasserted Torah as the focus of Israel's life. With purity redefined in behavioural terms, the loss of the Temple was not so disastrous, but was even advantageous. The Fourth Gospel strongly attacks the notion that obedience to Torah is the answer to sin (which nearly all agreed was the reason for the destruction of the Temple), and presents Jesus not only as the answer to sin but as a Word from God greater than the word given to Moses, which testifies to Jesus.

(3) *Resurgent apocalypticism*. In the confusion following the destruction of the Temple, it was not surprising that apocalyptic impulses appeared, as people sought revelation which would explain the perplexing and horrifying events just experienced. In this period apocalyptic does not seem to have favoured one response over another, but supported them all: the renewed emphasis on Torah (2 Baruch), the quietist response which discerned a secret plan of God and waited for him to act (2 Baruch, 4 Ezra), and the renewed militarism which

sought a return match with the Romans (Apocalypse of Abraham).

The Fourth Gospel would be heard to oppose all other claimants by its insistence that only Jesus has been present in heaven and is the source of heavenly knowledge. And by his gift, his followers enjoy the presence of the Paraclete who is a continuing source of revelation from Jesus, now at home in his Father's house (the heavenly Temple).

(4) *The revolutionary response.* The power of this response is attested simply by the fact of the further war against Rome, 70 years after this new exile began. In the revolutionary atmosphere of the years between the two wars, the proclamation of 'freedom' in John 8:31-36 would have a strongly political ring. But, notably, the freedom proclaimed is not political but spiritual—real deliverance from the sin which all agreed had brought Israel to this pass, and from the death which had been such a conspicuous feature of Israel's recent experience. The irony of 8:33 is the explosion of a wonderful myth.

(5) *The debate about sin and blame.* The contemporary literature reveals a lively debate about blame: whose sin was responsible for the disaster? The Temple authorities? The inhabitants of Jerusalem? The whole nation? Or were the Romans to blame as the incorporation of the Devil?

The Fourth Gospel shares the view that sin is the cause of death, but resists the attempt to apportion blame: the important thing is not to decide who caused the man's blindness, but to bring him healing and new worship. Jesus is presented as the one who can save from their sin those for whom the Temple can do nothing at all—like the lame man of chapter 5.

The conclusion is thus drawn that the Fourth Gospel could indeed have functioned evangelistically among Jews in the closing decades of the first century. One of the useful results of reading the Gospel against this background is the recognition that 'the Jews' of John cannot be interpreted globally but would be identified by many Jewish readers as a

particular group to which only a small minority of Jews belonged: the group that Bornhäuser called the 'Torafanatiker', the Pharisees of Jesus' day and the Yavneh loyalists of the late first century, the Jews of *Judea* whose religion required them to live in close proximity to the Temple, and who therefore felt its loss most keenly. There were many other Jewish groups who felt little sympathy for this religion, and the apparent hostility of the Gospel toward them must be interpreted in this light.

The hostility is actually more apparent than real. There are many positive references also to 'the Jews'. And the powerful 'you are of your father the Devil' of 8:44 should not be understood, as so frequently, as an ontological statement about the inner essence of those addressed, but as a statement about the influence under which Jesus' opponents act—and thus as a warning to such people (just as similar language is used by the patriarch Dan to his sons in *T.Dan* 5:6). Instead of regarding the execution of Jesus as *obedience* to Torah (the infliction of the penalty prescribed for the false prophet) they need to see it as *violation* of Torah—murder.

The thesis concludes with an exegesis of John 8:31-59 in which this background is made fruitful for the understanding of this vital passage.