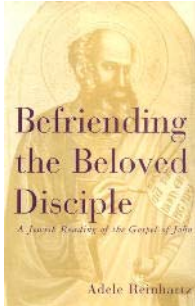


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**Reinhartz, Adele**

***Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John***

New York: Continuum, 2001. Pp. 206, Cloth, \$24.95, ISBN 0826413196.

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Adele Reinhartz has given us a confessional and personal reading of the Fourth Gospel. Herein lies the power, helpfulness, and, indeed, challenge of the book. As she tells us in the prologue (ch. 1) to the book, she reads as a professional New Testament scholar and Jewish woman shaped by feminist biblical criticism. But she also adopts four different stances in her reading, of which more anon, and this provides a rich and multilayered examination of several issues of concern in her encounter with the text of the Gospel. Chief among these concerns are the Gospel's attitude to "the Jews" and the implied author's severe rhetoric of "binary opposition" that casts those who refuse to receive positively his message about Jesus as "Other" and as "bad."

Reading is likened to relationship with a "friend," where one must engage with full, honest commitment, retaining the sort of "ethical considerations with which our human relationships are fraught" (18). Reinhartz outlines her relationship with the Fourth Gospel as ambivalent: she is drawn to the richness of its ambiguity and interpretive depths, repelled by its representation of the Jews. The status of the book as "friend" draws it into the role of a person. Reinhartz writes of encountering the storyteller, through and in whom the book's ethos is inscribed. A light engagement with the critical understanding of the literary persona of the writer, in the threefold form of writer, narrator, and implied author (a construct of the reader), results in an

identification of the Beloved Disciple as the implied author. While Reinhartz (as the real reader) must initiate the conversation with the Beloved Disciple (as implied author), she discovers in the engagement that he offers a gift: “the promise of eternal life, through faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God” (24). The offer is insistent and not unprejudiced: to accept the gift is “good” and leads to eternal life; to refuse the gift is to render one “evil” in the eyes of the Beloved Disciple, cast in the role of “Other” and under condemnation.

Several responses are possible to this offer, and these responses provide Reinhartz with her four strategies for reading the Gospel. One may read as a “compliant reader” by accepting the Beloved Disciple’s offer and reading at the direction of the implied author. This entails accepting the Beloved Disciple’s understanding of Jesus and the ethical stance that results from that. Alternatively, one may read as a “resistant reader” in which the Beloved Disciple is regarded as an opponent. In this case, one “reverses” the ethical judgments called for by the text and opposes the Beloved Disciple in that one understands the rhetoric from the perspective of those who refuse the gift and resist his overtures. Two further responses mediate these stances: one sees the reader as interlocutor, from her or his own social location, adopting a sympathetic reading that downplays those aspects of the text that accent “otherness” and attending to aspects where some elements of common experience and comparative rhetorical expression may be found. Finally, one may read as an “engaged reader,” aiming for a respectful acknowledgement of otherness and facing differences and difficulties face on while attempting to understand the experience and perspective that might give rise to this “other” rhetoric.

The “venue” for the relationship between the reader and the Beloved Disciple must be constructed from the text. Reinhartz outlines the three distinct stories told by the Gospel. First, there is the story of Jesus (a “historical tale”) that tells about the human life and ministry of Jesus (“gathering disciples, working miraculous signs, and

delivering complex discourses” [34]), leading to opposition from the Jews and eventual crucifixion and resurrection. Next there is the story of the world, a cosmological tale that gives a cosmic, deeply theological freight to the historical tale, with which it intersects and remains in some tension, as it sets a rationale for the death of Jesus as a necessary part of his mission (36) against its historical causation as the outcome of a plot by the Jews. Finally, there is the “ecclesiological tale” that provides the story of the Johannine community embedded in the text. Reinhartz maintains that the first stories may be read off from the surface of the Gospel text, but she acknowledges that the third “emerges only when read against a particular set of assumptions and using a specific reading strategy” (33).

Reinhartz outlines the scholarly construction of the Johannine community, built upon or developed out of the work of J. L. Martyn and R. F. Brown. This sees the “ecclesiological tale” as a two-level drama portraying a sequence of events that led to a divide between “two separate and rivalrous communities of faith, one Christian, one Jewish” (38). Reinhartz discusses some textual indications (11:1–44; 12:11) that suggest that a more nuanced view of the split must be adopted. Briefly, she suggests that there are features in the Gospel that point to some institutional distinction between Jews and Christians but where boundaries are less firmly drawn than the scholarly consensus suggests. There are both ongoing social contacts (some Johannine Christians, indeed, may have found it quite possible to remain within the fellowship of the synagogue) and continuing strain and tension between the Jews and Johannine Christians.

Reinhartz’s method, then, is to apply each of her four reading strategies to an analysis of each of the three stories within the Gospel. This she does in chapters 4 to 7. Asking in each case what type of “friendship” with the Beloved Disciple is established by the reading strategy adopted—namely, What is the nature of the reading implicit in and directed by the given strategy, and what ethical consequences derive from this

strategy?—provides the basis for the “ethical criticism” upon which the book is grounded. In applying each reading strategy to the three stories in the Gospel, Reinhartz is able to discuss and critically evaluate a number of issues raised in Johannine scholarship. In each case, she also provides fresh readings and exegetical insights into selected passages of the Gospel or engages issues within the contemporary (i.e., modern and postmodern) context and from her own social location. For example, her compliant reading includes a discussion of the various positions taken by scholars on the translation and exegesis of the term *hoi Ioudaioi* (“the Jews”).

In her resistant reading, Reinhartz brings into sharp relief the Gospel’s negative assessment of the Jews and the way in which they (and resistant readers) are victimized. But she also provides a way of understanding the motivations of the Jews as springing from a desire to remain faithful to their monotheism. This mitigates their depiction as the “vilified Other” and demonstrates how they might perceive the claims made for Jesus as “a radical infringement upon this basic Jewish belief” (95).

Reinhartz’s sympathetic reading provides an opportunity to explore the ongoing vitality of the Fourth Gospel for the Christian community, which may be compared to the way in which the Passover Haggadah, and within that a popular song *Dayeinu*, is updated by and revitalizes Jewish spirituality and experience. A discussion of the way the Beloved Disciple’s tradition, like Jewish tradition, draws upon scripture leads Reinhartz to examine some intriguing intertextual resonances between Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Jesus in John 20 and Gen 1 and the Song of Songs. This gives rise to some interesting exegetical insights and an illuminating reading of the passage.

Reinhartz finds that the ethical commitments to which the Beloved Disciple’s gift invites her, particularly the anti-Jewish tendencies to which it gives rise and the “polarised, dichotomizing” rhetoric and worldview that it adopts, means that she cannot finally feel comfortable “befriending” him. Thus her engaged reading tends to keep the

text of the Fourth Gospel “at arm’s length,” in my opinion, while she turns to other texts and issues (though these are not unrelated to the problems posed for her by the Gospel). She frankly admits this disengagement, while offering some important discussion on strategies and modes of engaging the “Other.”

In engaging the Beloved Disciple in conversation, Reinhartz also invites engagement with her readings. One might quibble over whether her easy identification of the Beloved Disciple with the implied author can be fully justified either in terms of narrative dynamics or exegesis, or one could argue the degree to which the implied author is a construct of the reader or inscribed in the strategies of the text. One might wish she had engaged at more depth interpretations of the treatment of the Jews in the Gospel that read them against first-century polemical rhetoric or inner-Jewish feuds. (S. Motyer’s *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and “The Jews”* is noted in the bibliography but scarcely discussed.) One might wonder whether the ambiguities in the Gospel’s narrative presentation of some of the models of belief and the implications of a story set in Palestine and largely Jewish locales might be explored further to see whether they undercut the force of some of the rhetoric.

This is the Beloved Disciple as Reinhartz hears him (or more properly, reads and constructs the implied author). But her book gives us one clearly articulated voice whose perspective on the Gospel is stated honestly, openly, and carefully. She has articulated the sense of otherness and alienation the Beloved Disciple’s rhetoric can engender in those who feel themselves to fall under the Gospel’s negative judgments. There is no denying the difficulty this Gospel poses in its portrayal of the Jews. It can, and sadly has, inculcate anti-Jewish sentiments and may encourage a transfer of negative assessment and hostility to a “real” group that shares the same “Jewish” label (as Reinhartz says [79–80]). In my opinion, the book contributes well to her stated goal “to encourage [Christian readers] to rethink the views of Jews and Judaism that they have brought to their study” of this text (12), and one hopes it will receive an attentive

and empathetic reading. Moreover, she has modeled a mode of discourse that is generous and open, and for this her attempt to “befriend the Beloved Disciple” is valuable.