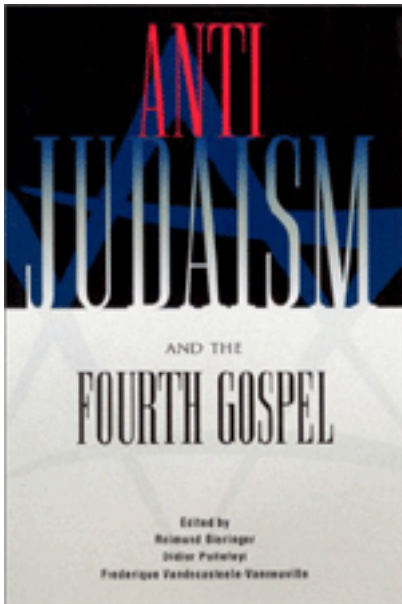


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Bieringer, Reimund, Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuille, and Didier Pollefeyt, eds.

Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel

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Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel is an interesting book for several reasons. (1) It deals with a currently highly contentious topic, namely, anti-Judaism. On the global religious-political scene this seems to be a topic that will still be with us for some time. (2) This book contains eleven essays dealing with the same topic, namely, the term “Jews” as it is used in John’s Gospel. It is enlightening to see how the same topic is approached from different angles, with different results by different scholars (obviously with different agendas), although the same basic material from John’s Gospel is used (except for the article of Lambrecht). We are thus confronted with questions about the nature, reliability, and validity of our research. (3) Hermeneutical issues concerning the use of biblical material, which irritates our present-day perceptions, are also highlighted. The contributors are sensitive to the problem of contemporary anti-Judaism and therefore try to steer away from negativity toward “the Jews” (as presented in the Gospel). Since there are seemingly negative remarks about “Jews” in the Gospel according to John, these remarks must be clarified and related to the present-day situation. Solutions as well as the reasons for those particular solutions differ considerably among the different contributors. In this sense this book offers a contemporary “laboratory” for hermeneutical procedures.

This book offers eleven essays that were originally read at an interdisciplinary seminar at the Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium (17–18 January 2000). Afterwards these papers were reworked and are now presented in this volume. (They only represent a selection of the papers read at this seminar.) The book starts with a lengthy introduction by the editors, followed by “three parts.” Part 1 deals with anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel with contributions by J. D. G. Dunn, R. A. Culpepper, S. Motyer and J. M. Lieu. Part 2, with its five essays, deals with the issue of the “Jews” and their identity as a common denominator. H. J. de Jonge, M. C. de Boer, R. F. Collins, P. J. Tomson and A. Reinhartz were responsible for these contributions. Part 3 offers three general essays on this issue by C. K. Barrett, J. H. Charlesworth and J. Lambrecht (on anti-Judaism in the book of Revelation).

In the introductory essay the editors try to formulate a hermeneutical framework for the analysis of the current debate. The essay presents the reader with a thorough analysis of the problem as well as with different solutions offered in the past. For anyone who wants an overview of the debate and positions taken, this essay will prove invaluable. However, everyone might not greet the hermeneutical framework that is presented with the same enthusiasm. I am also not of the opinion that even all the authors in the volume would endorse this hermeneutical framework. Reading their essays convinced me of the opposite in several cases. But it is not for me to say—the authors should speak for themselves on this issue.

What is the issue? The editors argue that, if “the revelatory character is not to be attributed to the biblical text in all its respects, and the biblical text is subject to critical evaluation according to ethical principles . . . Johannine anti-Judaism would then have to be understood as revealing the sinfulness of the people responsible for the text” (31–32). The point is that “higher” ethical values (which apparently are decided on by the reader and/or his or her community) should indicate where the text of the Bible reflects the sins of the original authors. Anti-Judaism is one such a case. Such issues should be rejected as sinful and unacceptable as it is presented in the text.

This argument is based on a different view of the theology of revelation. Revelation and scriptural text are not identical. Revelation is far more than scriptural text. “Revelation is not to be understood as simply coextensive with content of the scriptural text” (33). This allows for hermeneutical maneuverability within the biblical text to accept and reject material on the basis of principles laid down by readers. The implications of this suggestion are far-reaching, since it deals with authority: the authority of scripture versus the authority of the reader. The suggested solution seems to favor the authority of the reader to “contra-read” the text by accepting that something is wrong even though it is presented differently in the texts. In this way the onus of making the decision of what is

to be accepted and what not lies with the reader, not necessarily with the text. These arguments should again be carefully considered, since they touch some of the fundamental points of departure of traditional biblical theology. This chapter is stimulating but not convincing in all respects.

Although the essays deal with more or less the same topic, it is by no means a boring book to read, because the reader is confronted with a variety of approaches and opinions. Dunn, for instance, indicates that this Gospel appeared from within the factionalism of the Second Temple Judaism and explains what that means. He correctly points out that the definite revelation by Jesus is a crucial claim in the dispute with the “Jews.” He also emphasizes that this Gospel should be read in its historical context, which opens up possibilities for distinguishing between the situation today and that of the Johannine community. Culpepper assesses John’s anti-Judaism and then devotes a large part of his essay to the reassessment of John’s theology in the context of its anti-Jewish polemic. He concludes that the anti-Jewish polemic played a significant role in shaping John’s theology and ethics. As part of his hermeneutical solution he suggests a balanced reassessment of both the Jewish heritage as well as the anti-Jewish polemic in this Gospel. After his analysis of the problem, Motyer discusses the implications for the Jewish-Christian dialogue today. He encourages the reader not to break the continuity with the sacred texts and also not to sink into silence. Suffering (whether Jewish, Arab, or Christian) should be shared.

Lieu acknowledges that a consensus has yet to be achieved and then focuses on some of the reasons surrounding the impasse. She suggests a dialogical model that acknowledges both the historical and the theological treatment of the text.

In his description of “the Jews” Henk Jan de Jonge suggests that this group was not non-Christian Jews but contemporary Christians who refused to accept the particular christological understanding of the Johannine group. The polemic is therefore against non-Johannine Christians. This creative approach is argued from different sections of John’s Gospel, with the result that we cannot maintain that John’s Gospel is anti-Jewish per se. This approach takes the sting out of the problem.

Martinus de Boer concludes that “the Jews” refer to authoritative learned (Pharisaic) Jews. These followers of Moses came from among the synagogue and actively opposed Jesus and his followers. Collins discusses the idea that Jesus is identified as the “King of the Jews,” which, he notes, represents a new development in the Gospel’s discourse material that speaks of “the Jews.” Tomson compares the “Jews” in John’s Gospel with the Palestinian Talmud, the Synoptics, and with some New Testament apocrypha.

In a well-argued presentation Reinhartz points out that the Gospel not only sees the Jews as a symbol for the unbelieving world but portrays the historical community of Jewish nonbelievers as children of the devil. One cannot deny that the trajectory of some of the discourses includes the reality of a negative assessment of those Jews who reject Jesus. The text does not allow for salvation for nonbelievers.

I have given a brief survey of some of the essays in an effort to illustrate the variety of approaches and material in this book. This is the strength of the book. It gives the reader a solid introduction into the issue of anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel. The contributions are all of high quality, although they differ in many ways. To criticize here or there might only promote the view of the reviewer, and that is not the purpose of this review. The differences of opinion in the different articles themselves offer enough “intratextual criticism.” This is a book that makes a positive contribution to the debate and should be read by every interested person.