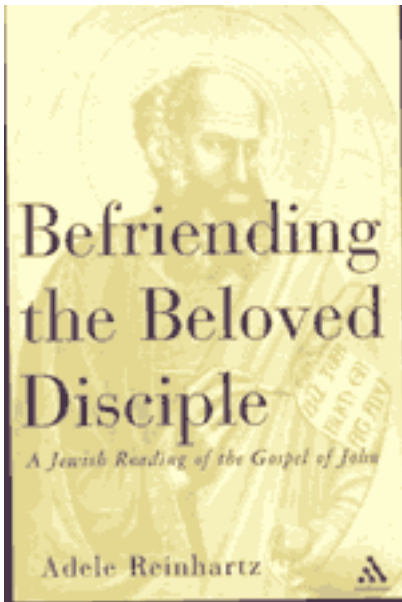


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**Reinhartz, Adele**

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

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In this important and engaging contribution to Johannine studies, Adele Reinhartz invites the reader along for a series of conversations between the Beloved Disciple (as implied author) and various reader-responses, all the while maintaining her own significant voice as a Jewish reader of the Fourth Gospel. Reinhartz, an established Johannine scholar and Dean of Graduate Studies and Research at Wilfrid Laurier University, borrows the metaphor of “book as friend” and especially literary critic Wayne Booth’s notion of “ethical criticism” in approaching the Gospel of John as a conversation partner who might potentially also become a friend. Is such a friendship possible, particularly given the Gospel of John’s high Christology and decidedly anti-Jewish rhetoric (e.g., 8:44), on the one hand, and Reinhartz’s open and decidedly Jewish identity (the daughter of Holocaust survivors), on the other hand? This is the question that Reinhartz sets out to explore.

Following a prologue (ch. 1) in which Reinhartz is up front about her own identity as an author and reader, she begins by calling attention to “Reading as Relationship” (ch. 2). In this chapter she sets up the parameters of four evocative reading strategies, or what she terms “reading positions” (30) that form the substance of the remainder of the book. The four positions are: the compliant reader, the resistant reader, the sympathetic reader, and the engaged reader (to which we will return below). For each approach she concludes by

asking two related and crucial questions, both of which point to the relational character of reading: “What kind of friend is the Beloved Disciple to each sort of reader?” and “What are the ethical implications of each reading position, that is, what kind of person do I as a reader become as I take on each of these positions in turn?” (30). Though she is primarily pursuing these readings of the Gospel of John as an exercise in ethical criticism, Reinhartz is also attentive all the while to the more traditional literary and historical critical approaches to the Gospel.

In the third chapter (“The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple”) Reinhartz lays out her understanding of three overlapping stories found in the Johannine narrative: the story of Jesus, the story of the world, and the story of a community. She also labels these three stories as “historical,” cosmological, and ecclesiological tales of John (though I wonder if the first is more christological). Reinhartz squarely challenges the dominant scholarly story (or theory) about Johannine ecclesiology, the two-level approach to John so forcefully advanced by J. Louis Martyn (*History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel*) and his colleague Raymond Brown (*Community of the Beloved Disciple*). Whereas Martyn and Brown view the Gospel of John as narrating on one level the story of Jesus and on another level the story of the Johannine community’s expulsion from the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2), Reinhartz argues that the central conclusions of this theory should be called into question. Instead, Reinhartz advocates that the exclusion-from-the-synagogue passages “may have provided the Johannine community not with a direct reflection of their historical experience but rather with a divinely ordained etiology *in the time of Jesus* for a situation of separation [not expulsion] which was part of their own experience” (50). Her challenge reminds us of the reading strategies we employ as scholars to reconstruct artificial worlds that then become the backdrop against which we seek to understand the Gospel as a whole.

The heart of Reinhartz’s book comes in chapters 4–7, where she adopts the reading positions stated above—the compliant reader, the resistant reader, the sympathetic reader, and the engaged reader—all in an attempt to answer the question of potential friendship between a Jewish woman/feminist biblical scholar and the Beloved Disciple. The compliant reader sees the Beloved Disciple as mentor. Such characters as Martha of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and the Beloved Disciple himself are portrayed as compliant characters ready to believe in and to follow Jesus. They demonstrate that “faith is not a one-time decision but develops over time and through a variety of experiences” (58). They experience intellectual, spiritual, and emotional journeys as they accept the gift of becoming disciples of Jesus. In contrast to the compliant characters in the story stand “the Jews,” who exemplify the negative response to the Johannine gift of eternal life. A compliant reading of the cosmological tale shows the Jews as representatives of the forces that oppose Jesus, and so God. A compliant reading of the ecclesiological tale

demonstrates a community of Johannine believers separated from and hostile to the nonbelieving Jewish community. The Fourth Gospel is not, in Reinhartz's view, "operating with a narrow and limited definition of *Ioudaios*" (74). For Reinhartz, the Martyn-Brown approach to the so-called Jewish exclusion of the Johannine community "is used as a way of understanding or, to put it bluntly, of excusing the Beloved Disciple's harsh utterances to and about the Jews. By interpreting John's comments on Jews and Judaism as a response to Jewish rejection and exclusion, the hypothesis attenuates the anti-Jewish venom of the Gospel and makes its expressions more acceptable to a post-Holocaust audience" (75). Overall, Reinhartz sees tremendous problems with a compliant reading of the Gospel of John, as such reading leads to an unhealthy ethical dualism that labels believers in Jesus as "good" and the non-Christian Jews as "bad."

In a "resistant reading" of the Fourth Gospel, the Beloved Disciple becomes the opponent, as Reinhartz identifies with the Jewish "other" of the Gospel. A resistant reading sees that the Jews are completely "scripted" by the Fourth Evangelist and are really given no true voice of their own. We see in the passion narrative "the controlling hand of the Beloved Disciple as implied author," who in turn "victimizes the Jews through the narrative and marshals the sentiments of the compliant reader against them" (87). A resistant reading of the ecclesiological tale means also resisting the mainstream of Johannine scholarship and its ecclesiological reconstruction of the Johannine community. A resistant reading, for Reinhartz, does little more from an ethical perspective than turn the tables of a compliant reading, leaving in its wake the damage of the rhetoric of binary opposition. Thus neither a compliant nor a resistant reading can serve as the basis for friendship between Reinhartz and the Beloved Disciple.

A sympathetic reading of the Fourth Gospel sees the Beloved Disciple as colleague. A sympathetic reader seeks to take a step back from the heat of John's polemic. Here Reinhartz invokes the contemporary Jewish appropriation of the Passover Haggadah in seeking to sympathize with how the Johannine Christians felt addressed by the Fourth Gospel. "This ability to reach out beyond the boundaries of time, space, and text helps to account for the ongoing vitality of both the Haggadah and the Gospel of John, and their ongoing formative role within the communities that hold them dear" (106). The Jewish view of the Sabbath as the foretaste of the world to come can become a sympathetic echo of the Johannine belief in the resurrected life beyond death. Ecclesiologically, Reinhartz can appreciate the leadership conflicts reflected in John, as Judaism has also seen its share of comparable conflicts (Hillel/Shammai, and most recently the messianic Rabbi Schneerson). A sympathetic reading of John is comfortable, but for Reinhartz it does not directly address the real issues of distance and otherness that she experiences in reading John. It falls short of true ethical engagement with the Beloved Disciple as friend.

Finally, then, we come to an engaged reading of the Fourth Gospel, where the Beloved Disciple is engaged as other. The kind of real encounter between Pinchas Lapide and Karl Rahner models for Reinhartz the kind of engaged friendship between Jew and Christian that respects the other without letting go of the christological divide that separates them. The Jewish statement *Dabru Emet* also models, from the Jewish side of the conversation, an engaged encounter with the Christian as other. In being honest about the difficulty of John from a Jewish perspective, Reinhartz notes that the cosmology presented by John is exclusivist and allows no room for another model. Still, Reinhartz hypothesizes that the “Beloved Disciple’s exclusivism is conceived not in response to an equal but opposing exclusivism but in the face of a worldview in which an exclusive theological truth is not the core value” (145). She finds evidence for such a hypothesis in the recent papal encyclical “*Dominus Jesus*,” which articulates two macro-metaphors, one that is exclusive and the other that expresses a postmodern commitment to pluralism. The core dispute for John with the Jews, avers Reinhartz, is a disagreement over “the role that messianism itself should play in covenantal self-definition” (152). Such a thesis compels Reinhartz to argue that John’s messianism and Christology put this expression of Christianity “on a collision course with Judaism that would inevitably lead him to feel excluded and repudiated by those many Jews who did not similarly construct their covenantal identities” (156).

Finally, then, what of potential friendship with the Beloved Disciple? In the end, John’s Christology and exclusivism make true friendship nearly impossible between John and Reinhartz. John’s monomyth makes real-world engagements dangerous for Jews. Nonetheless, Reinhartz’s explorations of John have led to a deepened relationship with the Beloved Disciple, and she looks forward to ongoing conversation.

By way of evaluative comments, I have little but praise for Reinhartz’s insightful and stimulating book. In my own view the Martyn-Brown theory of Johannine ecclesiology does not so much excuse the Gospel of John’s harsh anti-Jewish statements as help us to understand something of the polemical parting of the ways between one group of Jewish Christians and another group of non-Christian Jews, even as it has been heavily mythologized by the Johannine Christians. Still, her challenge remains. Finally, on a personal note, as the son of a Jewish father and a Roman Catholic mother, as one who ended up being ordained as a Presbyterian minister and who now teaches early Jewish-Christian relations at a Catholic university, I confess to being deeply engaged by Reinhartz’s very personal approach to the Gospel of John. If in the end Reinhartz not surprisingly finds it difficult at best to befriend the Beloved Disciple without sacrificing something at the core of her Jewish identity, nonetheless her own book provides a platform for engaging conversations and, I hope, real friendships between all those who seek a deeper understanding of the thorned beauty we call the Gospel of John.