This fine book, the revision of the author’s 2006 doctoral dissertation for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, examines one of the perennially problematic issues in Johannine studies: the role of “the Jews” in the Gospel of John. Kierspel explicitly situates his study in the post-Holocaust context. He is concerned not only with exegesis but also with contribution that the Fourth Gospel may have made to the racial anti-Semitism that culminated in the Nazi program devoted to the annihilation of the Jews.

The specific aim of the study is to understand and evaluate the discussion about ὁι ᾼουαίοι, “the Jews,” in the Fourth Gospel. Kierspel notes the frequent use of “the Jews” (71 times) as compared with the relative infrequency of this term in the Synoptics, which tend to focus more on the role of the Jewish leaders and the various groups within Judaism, especially Pharisees and Sadducees. Its main hypothesis is that “the Jews” must be understood in relation to a second term, “the world.” The parallels between these two terms require us to rethink the usual ways of interpreting “the Jews” and to recognize that is not “the Jews” but humanity as a whole that acts as Jesus’ principal antagonist in the Gospel of John. If this is correct, Kierspel argues, the literalist reading and “racist interpretation” of “the Jews” is a grave mistake (12).
The argument is tightly structured; each chapter directly advances the hypothesis stated above. The first chapter begins with a very useful review of the different theories that have been proposed with regard to the sense and referent of “the Jews.” Kierspel argues against most of the current proposals: narrowing the meaning of the term to mean only the Jewish religious authorities or the inhabitants of Judea; the reinterpretation of the term to mean fellow Christians; and Bultmann’s idea that the term has no empirical referent, being primarily of symbolic significance. In Kierspel’s view, the term can only refer to an ethnic-religious group that is not restricted to Judea or to the ruling classes. As he notes, however, this broad definition of “the Jews” is what requires interpreters to address head-on the “frightening question” of whether the author held anti-Semitic views. The second part of this chapter reviews previous studies. It distinguishes between diachronic approaches, which focus on the historical circumstances in which the Gospel was written, and synchronic approaches, which are primarily literary-critical in nature. Kierspel then outlines his own method, which begins with a synchronic analysis, and then addresses diachronic issues by locating the language of “the Jews” and “the world” in a particular social and historical situation.

Studies of “the Jews” in the Fourth Gospel generally commence with a catalogue of the Gospel’s neutral, positive, and negative usages of “the Jews.” Interestingly, Kierspel devotes chapter 2 to the neutral and positive connotations of “the Jews,” but he does not at the same time provide a similarly detailed analysis of the negative passages. He concludes that more than half of the references to “the Jews” are either neutral or positive. His synchronic approach, the author argues, will meet the challenge of interpreting the positive and negative usages as part of one text that conveys a coherent theology. Included in this chapter is also a fascinating excursus on Jesus as a Galilean Gentile, which reviews the history of the notion that the Galilee was primarily inhabited by Gentiles rather than Jews. The excurses links this development with the romantic nationalism that expressed itself in a racial dichotomy between Occident and Orient. One of many interesting points in this excursus is the observation that 4:22 was removed from editions of the Fourth Gospel during the Third Reich (67).

Chapter 3 presents the heart of the argument and perhaps its major contribution: a detailed analysis of the synchronic relationship between “the Jews”—focusing primarily the negative usages of this term—and “the world.” Kierspel opens the chapter by asking whether an honest reading of John necessarily brings one face to face with an anti-Semitic theology. His answer is strongly negative, for in his view the idea that John is anti-Semitic “destroys the Johannine dialectic that penetrates the whole work.” This statement is somewhat opaque; likely Kierspel is referring to the interplay that he traces between “the Jews” and the “the world,” which in his view militates against a racially anti-Semitic reading of the Gospel. This is a point to which we shall return at the conclusion of this
review. Noting that the term “the world” is used even more times than the term “the Jews” (78 versus 71), this chapter demonstrates convincingly that the Gospel links these two terms by drawing numerous compositional, narratological, and conceptual parallels. In terms of composition, “the Jews” dominates in the first part of the Gospel (chs. 1–12), and “the world” dominates in the latter half. In terms of narrative, “the Jews” is used more often by the narrator than by Jesus, whereas “the world” is used more often by Jesus than by the narrator. Conceptually, there are several common points. For example, both terms are associated with the devil. Jesus tells a group of Jews that they are of their father, the devil (8:44), but the devil is also “the ruler of the world (12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

Chapter 4 considers the function of “the world” in relation to “the Jews.” In Kierspel’s view, the way in which readers understand this relationship will either heighten or dilute the anti-Jewish reading of John. Kierspel shows that readers of the Fourth Gospel enter each of the two main sections of the book via a “gateway”: the Prologue for the first half (chs. 1–12) and the Farewell Discourses for the second half (chs. 13–21). Furthermore, as Dodd showed a half century ago, the discourse and narrative portions are intimately related. Here Kierspel describes what he views as some distinguishing characteristics of Jesus’ voice in the Gospel. He does not address the question of authenticity, however, but seems to view Jesus’ distinctive voice as a matter of narrative style on the part of the Gospel’s author. He concludes that “the world” occurs in places of strategic importance for the interpretation of the text. Specifically, this term is one of the vehicles by which the author translates the particulars of Jesus’ life into universals, the other techniques being a gnomic and repetitive style and a lack of concreteness. If so, the term “the Jews” does not have a primary role but rather a subordinate function within the dynamics of the text. The literalist reading of “the Jews” apart from “the world” distorts the author’s point of view. Rather, the readers’ attention is constantly pulled away from the Jewish antagonist and led to perceive “the Jews” as only a part of an opposition that is universal in scope. One might ask, however, if this is the case, why it is that so many commentators, who are also, after all, readers of the text, overlook this element and attribute a rather more prominent and central role to “the Jews.”

Chapter 5 delves more deeply into the relationship of “the world” and “the Jews.” In contrast to many other commentators, who suggest that “the world” is a cipher for “the Jews” or that “the world” and “the Jews” are coterminous, Kierspel argues that the Jews are but one subgroup of “the world,” which must be understood very broadly as humanity. In his view, the Gospel speaks in terms that apply to everyone without regard to ethnic origin and therefore transcends all racial boundaries. The Gospel must therefore be read not only in the context of the relationship between Judaism and nascent Christianity but also, indeed, primarily, in the context of the Roman Empire, and
specifically, Roman persecution of Christianity. In castigating “the world,” Kierspel argues, the Gospel has Gentiles in mind at least as much as, and maybe more than, Jews.

In support of this point of view, Kierspel notes that the Gospel culminates in a trial before the Roman governor over the issue of kingship and omits any trial before the Sanhedrin. The inclusion of political charges against Jesus, which challenged imperial sensitivities to non-Roman claims of kingship, was intended as an allusion to ongoing Roman suspicions about the Christian religion as an attempt to usurp Roman authority. But many other sections of the Gospel, beginning with the Prologue, can be read as an argument against pagan polytheism. If this polemic is not overt, it is only because the Gospel respects the original Jewish framework for the life of Jesus. The book concludes by offering some comments about the possible social location of the community. Kierspel suggests that “the world” represents a theodicy that aims to encourage readers who suffer under Roman persecution in a post-Easter context of universal hate and persecution.

The book is well-researched, well-written, and tightly argued. It is also refreshing in that it raises so directly the question of racial anti-Semitism. Of great interest is the information regarding German and Nazi appropriations and reinterpretation of the Gospel of John for those of us less than familiar with this material. The book also contains many insights regarding the synchronic interpretation of the Gospel, in particular the clear exposition of literary relationship between “the Jews” and “the world” and the compositional and narrative parallelism.

Two elements of the argument are less than convincing, at least to this reader. One is the theory concerning social location and Sitz im Leben, emphasizing the Gentiles as a primary referent of “the world” and positing that, for the Johannine author, concerns for Roman persecution override the hostile relationship with “the Jews.” This hypothesis is intriguing but ultimately not convincing. Certainly some elements of the Gospel can be interpreted this way, and it may well have formed part of the overall historical context, but this does not allow us to explain away or to minimize the obvious tensions between the followers of Jesus and “the Jews.” Even if the latter are but one example of “the world” that rejects Jesus, the amount of attention devoted to them makes it difficult to subordinate this group to other groups in terms of their role as Jesus’ antagonists.

A second problematic element concerns the fundamental question of whether the Gospel is or is not anti-Semitic. In light of his concern for the interpretation of the Gospel of John by the Nazis and the post-Holocaust era, it is not surprising that Kierspel focuses on the racial implications of anti-Semitism. Kierspel is undoubtedly correct that the Gospel does not provide any basis for anti-Semitism racially understood. But this does not in itself provide a comprehensive response to the “Johannine problem.” As Kierspel
recognizes, the Gospel’s issue with “the world” is its lack of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. If all of humanity, including pagans and Jews but excepting Jesus’ followers, are guilty of this “sin,” the Gospel nevertheless focuses most intensely on the Jews, whose scriptures, messengers, and deity all spoke of Jesus (John 5), who witnessed his works and who heard his words, and whose refusal to believe therefore renders them blind when they should have seen. Furthermore, the emotional tenor of the passages about “the Jews” suggest that there is more to their portrayal than faithfulness to Jesus’ own Jewish context.

My reservations about these two points do not diminish my appreciation of Kierspel’s study, which in my view is a valuable, and refreshing, contribution to the study of the intractable problem of “the Jews” in the Fourth Gospel.