

Antisemitism and the gospel of John

The charge of antisemitism in the Gospel of John usually involves negative statements about “the Jews.” The assumption is that those statements are intended by the author to induce dislike and hatred of “the Jews,” both as a people and as individuals. In John 5:16, 18 and 7:1, it says that “the Jews” sought to kill Jesus. There are also other examples of “the Jews” showing opposition and even hostility toward Jesus. But is that what John meant when he used the term “the Jews?” John, being Jewish himself, was not talking about all Jewish people at all times. He was referring to a specific subgroup of Jewish people in a specific time that were in opposition to Jesus. The term Jews (Ἰουδαῖοι, Ioudaioi, in Greek) is used about seventy times in the Gospel of John and not all references have a negative connotation. In John 2:6, the word is used to explain a Jewish custom.

In John 4:22, John reports that “salvation is from the Jews.” In John 4:9, Jesus is identified as a Jew. In John 11:45 and 12:11, John reports that many Jewish people believed in Jesus. In John 7:1, the term is used for the Jewish leadership in Judea. The most common use of the term Ioudaioi refers to the Jewish leadership, especially for those in Judea and Jerusalem (e.g., John 1:19). In many of those instances, Jesus is in opposition to that leadership. This opposition was a “within the family” dispute because those on both sides of the issues were Jewish, including Jesus and His disciples. Not all Jewish leaders are presented negatively. For example, Nicodemus (John 3:1-21; 7:50) and Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38-42) are presented in a positive way. The diversity of the use of the language as well as the context in which the term Ioudaioi was used in John’s Gospel demonstrate that Jesus was referring to the Judean leadership of His day who, for the most part, missed the mark and stood in opposition to the Jewish Messiah and those Jewish people who put their faith and trust in Jesus.

One could argue that any criticism of Jewish leadership or even of Jewish people is antisemitic. If one makes that argument then they are not only calling John, who was a Jew, antisemitic, but they are also calling much of the Torah and the rest of the Tanakh (Old Testament) antisemitic. In Exodus 33:5 and Deuteronomy 9:6; 31:27-29, Moses called the Jewish people of his day—not just the leadership—a stubborn and obstinate people and even defiant toward the Lord. In Isaiah 30:9, the prophet describes the Jewish people this way: “For this is a rebellious people, false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord.” The prophet Ezekiel (2:3–4, 6; 3:4–7) also harshly criticized the Jewish people of his day. None of these Hebrew prophets were antisemitic and neither is the author of the Gospel of John¹. It is unfortunate that antisemitic people twist the words of the prophets as well as John to fit their purposes. An accurate reading of the texts in context will show that there is no antisemitism involved and no attribution to all Jewish people at all times. When John wrote about the Jews seeking to kill Jesus (John 5:16), it was part of a larger series of disputes that Jesus had with the leadership about proper Sabbath observance.

The penalty in Torah for violating the Sabbath is death. In John 5:18 and 7:1, “the Jews” sought to kill Jesus, but “the Jews” didn’t refer to all Jewish people. It was the leadership in Judea that sought Jesus’ life because they perceived His claim of equality with God as blasphemy, and the Torah’s penalty for blasphemy is death. Placed in context, the passages in question refer to the leadership in a given time and in a given place. The leadership did not recognize Jesus as Messiah and Lord and they were also trying to adhere to their interpretation of the Mosaic Law. While this may not be obvious to the reader in the twenty-first century, it would have been obvious to John’s intended audience in the first century

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