



A Way to Understand John's Bitter Anti-Judaism



Every year on Good Friday we read the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John (John 18:1—19:42). What does the passion account of the Fourth Gospel teach about anti-Judaism? The gospel of John stressed the universal law of love and did not exclude Jews from this love. John encouraged prospective members of his community to make the painful transition away from Jewish institutions, including the temple, synagogue, priesthood and feasts. He asked them to replace Jewish practices with faith in Christ and Christian practices. The "beloved disciple," who likely started the Johannine community, served as the best example of the transition.

In John's passion account (18:1—19:42), there is a small sample of Jewish institutions that received the evangelist's sharp, negative judgment. "Judas the betrayer" arrived with a hostile "band of soldiers and guards from the chief priests and Pharisees," who represented official Jewish institutions. "Jewish guards seized Jesus" (18:12). This is not how other evangelists reported it. Could it be that John's hearers learn more about the last part of the first century here than they do about the actual time of Jesus in the first part of the century? "Caiaphas . . . counseled the Jews that it was better that one man die rather than the people" (18:14). "The Jews" clearly did not receive Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. The beloved disciple and the Johannine community did receive him. "The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar'" (19:15). The evangelist heard this statement as the ultimate blasphemy.

A widely held theory may help to understand these indictments. Members of John's community were Jewish followers of the Nazorean Jesus. Members of the synagogue community expelled them for their faith in him as the Messiah, Son of God. How intense was their subsequent hostility toward that Jewish establishment, from which officials alienated them by force! It matched their bitter disappointment that not only the Jews but the whole world rejected the Word-made-flesh (see 1:10–11). However, their intense anger did not match their strong commitment to Jesus.

The anti-Judaism of John's gospel is not the same as historic and modern anti-Jewish prejudice. Nor can it be used to justify the sin of anti-Judaism. Rather, this hostility reflects less a prejudice and more a "postjudice." It resulted from rejection and expulsion from the parent Jewish community for a strongly held belief. John felt raw human outrage that the cherished Son of God did not find a home where he himself had been at home. His gospel did not model or encourage anti-Judaism for future times. Instead, it encouraged conversion to the love of Jesus. The evangelist took pride in the great examples there were to follow! These included the experiences of the Beloved Disciple, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary of Magdala, Thomas the twin and Mary the mother of Jesus.

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