

Essays Introducing a Jewish Perspective on the Gospel of John

An Editorial By

Charles David Isbell,
Louisiana State University

Abstract: *This article’s aim is to highlight the impact that plain sense readings of the Gospel of John have on educated Jewish and Christian lay persons but who typically do not aspire to learn or appropriate current scholarly theories seeking to explain sacred texts in a technical and often inordinately complex fashion. Essay topics include: 1) the anonymous author (“John”), the relationship of his gospel to the Synoptic Gospels, his interpretation of Jewish actions and customs, and his influence on a distinct group of early Christians, the “Johannine” community; 2) John’s portrayal of Jesus’ self-identification in using the divine name YHWH; 3) John’s description and interpretation of various Jewish responses to Jesus, as well as the author’s understanding of the reasons for Jews rejecting the message and person of Jesus; and 4) John’s portrayal of the early break between Judaism and Christianity, laid entirely at the feet of “the Jews.”*

Keywords: Gospel of John, New Testament, Jewish-Christian Dialogue, Johannine Studies, Anti-Jewish Semitism in John

Introduction

IN THREE EARLIER ARTICLES, mention was given to the non-Jewish frame of reference evident in the Synoptic Gospels, the relationship of Saul/Paul to Judaism in general, and the affiliation of Paul with the Pharisees and the Sadducees.¹ It is now incumbent to examine the Gospel of John from a Jewish perspective, seeking a fresh approach to the issue of modern Jewish responses to the Fourth Gospel. The Gospel of John has remained the most popular of the four New Testament gospels since its appearance late in the first century. By any objective standard, the Jesus whom readers encounter in John is a compelling person of wisdom and great compassion. John is anxious to portray

¹ See Charles David Isbell, “Emic or Etic? Interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures,” *The Bible and Interpretation: Second Temple Judaism* (2015), bibleinterp.com/PDFs/Isbell.pdf; “Paul and Judaism,” *The Bible and Interpretation: New Testament* (2017), bibleinterp.com/PDFs/isbellPaul.pdf; and “Saul the Sadducee? A Rabbinical Thought Experiment,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 85–119, doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.voll.no2.01.



Jesus as a faithful Jew and his followers as the product of a faith that shares (and improves upon!) many of the spiritual values derived from their Jewish heritage. In this effort, the Fourth Gospel offers numerous examples of deeply spiritual and rewarding religious literature: John's brilliant encomium about light and life in the opening chapter; the portrayal of Jesus as a loving friend of Lazarus; the model teacher whose skill and patience with his disciples are matchless; and the itinerant traveler who is open to both outsiders and foreigners. To these qualities, John adds Jesus' tender acceptance of children, his focus on both physical and spiritual wellness, and his concern for the hungry and needy. Ultimately, John's Jesus faces death with bravery and equanimity, willingly offering his own life for the benefit of others. To borrow the word picture of John, Jesus is indeed the "Good Shepherd."

However, while John has indeed been a comfort and inspiration to Christian readers for centuries, the book has often been disturbing for Jewish audiences, as well. Although echoes of anti-Jewish rhetoric are present in the Synoptic Gospels, the rhetoric about Jews in John appears to erupt into open antagonism. Because John refers to "the Jews" more than any other gospel, and because the negative outbursts against these unspecified Jews are so liberally sprinkled throughout the text, the emotional impact on readers can be significant. It appears that virtually all Jewish words and actions are framed in such a way so as to indict Jews as the main opponents of Jesus. Beginning with their desire to murder him early in his career, and repeatedly attacking Jesus regarding multiple aspects of his life and ministry, "the Jews" come across as a sorry and despicable group of people. The long-term impact of these narratives quickly crystallized into violent anti-Semitism among numerous generations of Christian interpreters throughout church history. Their initial interpretation of John has continued for two millennia as a sad witness to the disdain, fear, and hatred of Jews across many regions. The words of Samuel Sandmel, written in 1956, still ring true: "In its utility for later Jew-haters, the Fourth Gospel is pre-eminent among the New Testament writings."²

Jewish Questions about John

As a rabbi and professor of Jewish studies for more than four decades, I have often been asked by Jewish congregants and students to explain various New Testament (NT) passages that come across to modern Jewish readers as harsh or judgmental, many of which sting as if they had been aimed directly at

² Samuel Sandmel, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 269.

pathway to “godness,” with its own independent integrity for those who honestly and faithfully walk it.¹⁰ Above all, the goal must not be to produce a hermeneutical winner, and at the same time an historical loser, in examining various ways to read and study the impact John has had on modern readers.

If the Church is the Mother of the Christian and the Torah is the Mother of the Jew (“a tree of life to all who hold it fast”), it seems pointless to argue over whose “Mom” is prettier. However, it is very much on point for us to learn to appreciate and celebrate the richness of the two starkly different approaches to life and faith that both mothers have offered throughout history. Since the structure of Christianity is as difficult for modern Jews to understand as many of the basic ideas of Judaism are for Gentiles, it is precisely here that the central difficulty facing any hope of Jewish-Christian dialogue must be located, defined, and overcome. Without total and frank honesty, meaningful dialogue is little more than a fantasy, and the result is that members of the two sister faiths cannot partner with each other to seek the improvement of a fractured world. Jewish responses to troublesome passages in John almost certainly cannot be those of most Christian believers, but they can serve as an appeal to Christian brothers and sisters to understand why John impacts so many Jewish readers as it does. And perhaps they can challenge Christian interpreters of John to more carefully separate the wheat from the chaff, to distinguish the essential spiritual value of John from the hurtful and often erroneous depiction of “the Jews.”

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¹⁰ This is the true meaning of the word *halakhah*. It is not simply Jewish law, but a “walk,” a pathway of life.

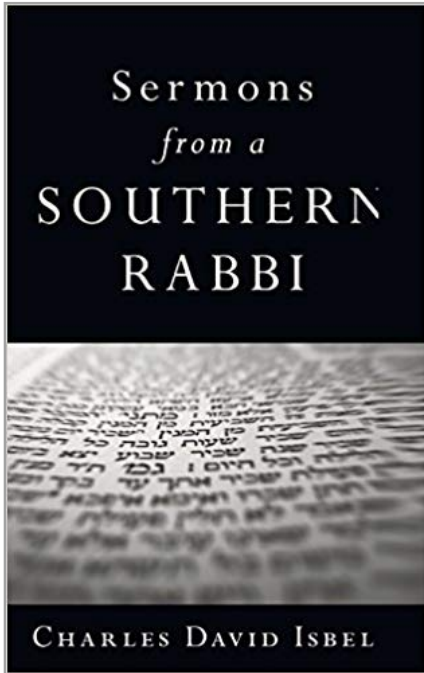
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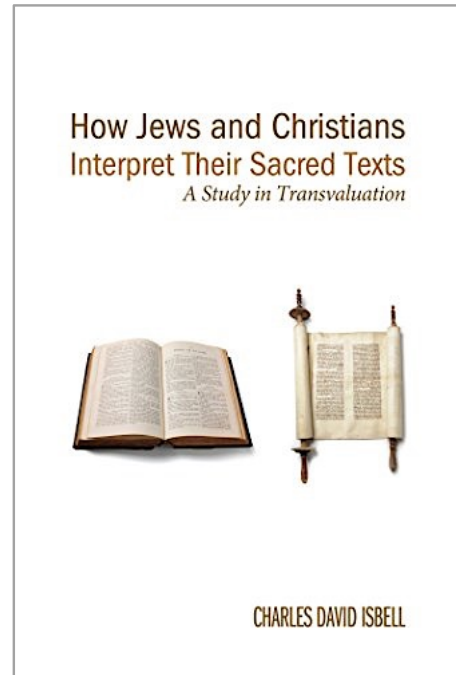
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Charles David Isbell](#) is the Jewish Studies professor at Louisiana State University. He holds a Ph.D. in Hebrew and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University and is an original member of the translation committee for *The New American Standard Bible*. For additional biographic and bibliographic information about Dr. Isbell, see his website: www.cdisbell.online.

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