

## **The Anti-Jewish Jesus: Socio-Rhetorical Criticism as Apologetics**

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In 1998, Howard Clark Kee, a widely respected New Testament scholar, and Irvin J. Borowsky, founder of the American Interfaith Institute, edited a volume titled, *Removing the Anti-Judaism from the New Testament*. The book was prompted by the belief that anti-Jewish statements in the New Testament or by later Christian interpreters have led to violence against Jews. Borowsky himself says so:

Publishers readily agree that anti-Semitism is anti-Christian madness and yet consciously or subconsciously leave unchanged the anti-Judaism in Bibles and Sunday School curricula that was written decades ago. **The stakes are high. People have been murdered because of these words.**<sup>1</sup>

Whether it be Chrysostom in the fourth century, Martin Luther in the sixteenth, or Rudolf Kittel in the twentieth, one can trace a steady stream of anti-Judaism in Christian thought and culture. Yet, few New Testament ethicists wish to admit that such vehement anti-

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\*NOTE TO READERS. This essay is an updated and adapted version of a chapter (7) of the same title in Hector Avalos, *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), pp. 179-195. It follows the style guide (e.g., for quotation marks, punctuation) of Sheffield Phoenix Press. Unless noted otherwise, and excepting the removal of transcribed guttural markers (e.g., Beor instead of Be'or or of the RSV), all of our biblical quotations follow the Revised Standard Version, as presented in Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). My thanks to Jameson Delaney, my research assistant, who helped to reformat and proofread this article. All transgressions are solely my responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> Howard Clark Kee and Irvin J. Borowsky (eds.), *Removing the Anti-Judaism from the New Testament* (repr., Philadelphia, PA: American Interfaith Institute/World Alliance, 2000 [1998]), p. 20; Borowsky's bold emphasis. See also Frederick B. Davis, *The Jew and Deicide: The Origins of an Archetype* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

Jewish rhetoric within Christianity had its origin with Jesus, the putative founder of Christianity itself. And despite the dangers that Borowsky believes are posed by the anti-Judaism of Jesus or other Christian figures in the New Testament, he proposes the following:

**The solution to erasing this hatred is for bible societies and religious publishers to produce two editions, one for the public similar to the Contemporary English Version which reduces significantly this anti-Judaic potential, and the other edition for scholars taken from the Greek text.<sup>2</sup>**

What is being proposed here is nothing short of a paternalistic deception. Borowsky and like-minded scholars believe that parts of the New Testament endorse and promote hateful and violent speech against Jews, but instead of denouncing the ethics of Jesus and other New Testament Christian voices, they simply want to revise the ethics expressed, at least for the *hoi polloi*. The masses will get the sanitized Bible constructed for them by scholars, and only scholars will have the version that best corresponds to the original meaning.

Historically, all such efforts to address the anti-Judaism in the New Testament received new impetus because of the Nazi Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> Many scholars, and particularly Jewish scholars, rightly noted that the long history of anti-Judaism could not be dismissed as part of the causal chain that led to the Nazi Holocaust. Among historians, this position can be traced as far back as the works of Guenter Lewy and

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<sup>2</sup> Kee and Borowsky, *Removing the Anti-Judaism*, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Alan T. Davies, *Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind: The Crisis of Conscience after Auschwitz* (New York: Paulist Press, 1969); Daniel F. Moore, *Jesus, an Emerging Jewish Mosaic: Jewish Perspectives, Post Holocaust* (Jewish and Christian Texts in Contexts and Related Studies, 2; London: T. & T. Clark, 2011); Geza Vermes, *Jesus, the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: William Collins Sons & Co., 1973).

Gordon Zahn.<sup>4</sup> Principal current representatives of this position are Richard Steigmann-Gall and Daniel Goldhagen.<sup>5</sup>

Within biblical scholarship proper, one finds two basic positions concerning the historical responsibility for Christian anti-Judaism. One position argues that any anti-Judaism is primarily the product of post-biblical Christian interpretation. Representative scholars include Paul N. Anderson and Paula Fredriksen.<sup>6</sup> The other position argues that anti-Judaism is already present in the New Testament writings. Amy-Jill Levine and Adele Reinhartz, for example, explore how the Gospels bear some responsibility for the anti-Judaism of later Christianity. I will argue more emphatically that anti-Judaism can be traced back to Jesus himself, at least as he is portrayed in the Gospels.

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<sup>4</sup> Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Gordon Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962). See also Dan Jaffé, *Jésus sous le plume des historiens juifs du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle: Approche historique, perspectives historiographiques, analyses méthodologiques* (Paris: Cerf, 2009); Lars Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function and Context* (WUNT, 2.220; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Anthony Le Donne, 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Revisionist History through the Lens of Jewish-Christian Relations', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012), pp. 63-86.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> See Paula Fredriksen and Adele Reinhartz (eds.), *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 4-5; Paul N. Anderson ('Anti-Semitism and Religious Violence as Flawed Interpretations of the Gospel of John,' *Bible & Interpretation*, October 2017; <http://www.bibleinterp.com/PDFs/Anti-Semitism%20and%20Religious%20Violence.B&I.2.pdf>). See further, R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (eds.), *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context* (Resources for Biblical Study 87; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

Otherwise, one can identify at least three approaches to New Testament anti-Judaism, which I summarize succinctly as follows:<sup>7</sup>

1. Censorship, which refers to either decanonizing offensive texts or revising the translations. This is what Borowsky has in mind.
2. Attacking the historical accuracy of the polemic. Thus, the historical scribes and Pharisees were more benign and less greedy than portrayed. Sjef van Tillborg's *The Jewish Leaders in Matthew* (1972) would represent one scholar in this camp.<sup>8</sup>
3. Revising the identity of 'the Jews', which really refers to some more select group such as the Pharisees or Judaizing Christians. One example is Harvey Falk's *Jesus the Pharisee: A New Look at his Jewishness* (1985).<sup>9</sup>

I will not enter too deeply into the extensive debate about the meaning of 'Jews' in the New Testament. According to James A. Sanders, *hoi Ioudaioi*, the phrase most literally translated as 'the Jews', occurs about 192 times in the New Testament, with 71 of those occurrences in John, and 16 in the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>10</sup> Suffice it to say that some

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<sup>7</sup> I am adapting the categories described by Luke T. Johnson, 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989), pp. 419-41 (421-22).

<sup>8</sup> 8. Sjef van Tillborg, *The Jewish Leaders in Matthew* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972). See also Ruth Sheridan, 'Issues in the Translation of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 (2013), pp. 671-95; Douglas R.A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Donald A. Carson, 'The Jewish Leaders in Matthew's Gospel: A Reappraisal', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982), pp. 161-74; Judson R. Shaver, 'Christian Anti-Semitism: Tracing the Roots to the Gospel', *Church* 20 (2004), pp. 15-19.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee: A New Look at his Jewishness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985). See also Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> James A. Sanders, 'The Hermeneutics of Translation', in Kee and Borowsky (eds.), *Removing the Anti-Judaism from the New Testament*, pp. 43-62 (59). Paul N. Anderson ('Anti-Semitism and Religious Violence') counts 72 references to 'Ioudaios and Ioudaioi' in John. See also Paul Spilsbury, *The Image of the Jew in*

scholars are concerned about the use of translation to conceal anti-Judaism. Ruth Sheridan remarks: **‘I am concerned about other more accommodating and conciliatory translations of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι that may obscure the harsh anti-Judaism of the text, as though the “rights” of the text need to be defended or protected.’**<sup>11</sup> For my purposes, the main ethical focus of this chapter is on how socio-rhetorical criticism is being used by those who think ‘Jews’ can or does refer to a collective group, whether it be all Jews or only a selected portion of them.

### ***Abuse Me, Please: Luke T. Johnson’s Apologetics***

The use of socio-rhetorical criticism in Christian apologetics has been very visible in attempting to mitigate slavery in the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, socio-rhetorical criticism is being used to mitigate the anti-Judaism in the New Testament. Unlike the philological efforts to redefine ‘Jew’ or to erase ‘Jews’ as a literal translation, a socio-rhetorical approach could argue that changing the terminology or ethnic identifications of the Jews is not necessary at all. Rather, the socio-rhetorical context can better explain, or even justify, any perceived anti-Judaism in the New Testament.

One scholar using socio-rhetorical criticism in this manner is Luke T. Johnson, who believes that he can explain the anti-Jewish rhetoric in the New Testament without theological assumptions.<sup>13</sup> In

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*Flavius Josephus’ Paraphrase of the Bible* (Texte un Studien zum antiken Judentum; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998); Steve Mason, ‘Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History?’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007), pp. 457-512. For a diaporic approach to Jewish identity, see Ronald Charles, *Paul and the Politics of Diaspora* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Sheridan, ‘Issues in the Translation of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι’, p. 695.

<sup>12</sup> See the extensive critique of such a use of socio-rhetorical criticism by Ben Witherington and other scholars in Hector Avalos, *Slavery, Abolitionism and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), pp. 119-24, 127-35.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, ‘The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander’, pp. 422-23. See also Luke T. Johnson, ‘Anti-Judaism in the New Testament’, in *Handbook for the*

fact, he criticizes those who use theologically oriented approaches as follows:

These approaches are theologically motivated and are anachronistic. They isolate ‘Christianity’ over against ‘Judaism’ as though each was a well defined entity when the polemic was written. This static bifurcation matches (and in part derives from) the contemporary Jew-Christian polarity. It also obviously exacerbates the negative power of the rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

However, by the time we reach the conclusion of the article, one begins to understand that Johnson’s article is at least partly inspired by ecumenical theology. As Johnson remarks:

Can this historical and literary analysis help the contemporary relationship of Jews and Christians? It ought to have at least this positive impact: grasping the conventional nature of the polemic can rob such language of its mythic force and therefore its capacity for mischief.<sup>15</sup>

As I will show, Johnson’s claim that he is not appealing to theological assumptions cannot withstand scrutiny.

In general, Johnson’s basic argument involves a version of a *tu quoque* (‘you do, too’) argument. He details cases where philosophers assailed each other with insults parallel to what we find Jesus uttering against Pharisees and Sadducees in the New Testament. Among Johnson’s examples is Colotes, an Epicurean, who attacked the heroes of Plutarch, a priest of Apollo at Delphi and a defender of Platonism. According to Johnson, Colotes assails the philosophical heroes of Plutarch as ‘buffoons, charlatans, assassins, prostitutes, and

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*Study of the Historical Jesus* (ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter; 4 vols.; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2011), II, pp. 1609-638.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, ‘The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander’, pp. 422-23.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, ‘The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander’, p. 441.

nincompoops'.<sup>16</sup> Johnson emphasizes how Jews insulted each other in ways similar to what we find in the New Testament. Indeed, he emphasizes 'the use of this language everywhere in the fragmented Judaism of the first century'.<sup>17</sup>

There was a strong tradition of Gentile anti-Judaism by the first century. In *Against Apion*, Josephus reports how Jews were characterized as liars and spreaders of diseases (2.29), not to mention that they worshipped the head of an ass (2.80). Jews could also engage in anti-Gentile rhetoric. Josephus says that Apion has been 'gifted with the mind of an ass and the impudence of a dog'.<sup>18</sup> Gentiles who dislike Jews are generally characterized as 'frivolous and utterly senseless specimens of humanity', who were 'accustomed from the first to erroneous ideas about the gods', and 'incapable of imitating the solemnity of our theology'.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Jews could attack fellow Jews with equal zeal. Josephus says that the Hebrew race [τὸ γένος ἐφ'αύλιζον τῶν Ἑβραίων] who rebelled against Rome were 'slaves, the dregs of society, and the bastard scum of the nation'.<sup>20</sup>

After collecting a catalog of examples of abusive rhetoric, Johnson comes to his conclusions about whether the anti-Jewish rhetoric in the New Testament is any worse than other abusive rhetoric of the time or inappropriate in its context. Johnson's conclusions bear repeating at length:

First, the polemic is more intelligible. The great problem with the historical vindication approach is that it leaves the NT polemic unmotivated: If Jews were so blameless, why were Christians so nasty? But our survey shows the use of this language everywhere in the fragmented Judaism of the first century. Readers today hear the NT's

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson, 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander', p. 431.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander', p. 441.

<sup>18</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.85 (Thackeray, LCL): 'cor asini ipse potius habuisset et impudentiam canis'.

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.225 (Thackeray, LCL).

<sup>20</sup> Josephus, *War* 5.443 (Thackeray, LCL).

polemic as inappropriate only because the other voices are silent. Historical imagination can restore them. Second, by the measure of Hellenistic conventions, and certainly by the measure of contemporary Jewish polemic, the NT's slander against fellow Jews is remarkably mild. Third, the conventional nature of the polemic means that its chief rhetorical import is connotative rather than denotative. The polemic signifies simply that these are opponents and such things should be said about them. The attempt either to convict first-century Jews of hypocrisy or vindicate them from it is irrelevant as well as futile. Fourth, recognizing that both messianist and non-messianist Jews use the rhetoric associated with Hellenistic philosophical schools helps establish the hypothesis that this is the appropriate context for analyzing their interrelationships.<sup>21</sup>

There are significant historical, ethical and philosophical problems with each of these conclusions.

Philosophically, and as mentioned above, Johnson's argument is basically another version of the *tu quoque* argument. In such an argument, a proponent attempts to show that a behavior, criticism or objection applies equally to the person issuing it. A well-known summary alludes to the 'pot calling the kettle black'. The problem with such a *tu quoque* argument is that a behavior, criticism or objection is not itself validated because it also applies to others. Just because everyone is being abusive, for example, does not mean that it is ethically justified or appropriate to be abusive. Thus it is ethically irrelevant that 'the historical imagination' can restore any voices that show 'the use of this language everywhere in the fragmented Judaism of the first century'.<sup>22</sup> No matter how many other voices were saying the same thing, the rhetoric could remain objectionable on ethical grounds.

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<sup>21</sup> Johnson, 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander', p. 441.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander', p. 441.

Likewise, any anti-Judaism in the New Testament cannot be ethically excused just because non-Christians also are engaging in anti-Judaism, or just because Jews engage in anti-Gentilism. Any anti-Judaism would remain ‘inappropriate’ regardless of the use of such rhetoric by all sides. To understand this point, consider the following two statements:

**A. ‘Existence impels the Jew to lie, and to lie perpetually just as it compels the inhabitants of the northern countries to wear warm clothing’.**

**B. ‘You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires...When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies’.**

Rhetorically, both statements center on Jews being liars by nature. Both statements were in a cultural context where such rhetoric was often used of opponents. Both statements can satisfy all of the other features that Johnson deems important for characterizing the rhetoric as appropriate—or, at least, not inappropriate. By Johnson’s logic, in both statements **‘the polemic signifies simply that these are opponents and such things should be said about them’.**<sup>23</sup>

Yet, I wonder if one would say that about Statement A once one learns it belongs to Adolf Hitler, the foremost modern practitioner of anti-Jewish rhetoric.<sup>24</sup> Indeed there is not much difference between Hitler’s statement and Statement B, which is uttered by Jesus in Jn 8.44-45.<sup>25</sup> That is why the attempt to set the anti-Jewish rhetoric in the

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<sup>23</sup> Johnson, ‘The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander’, p. 441.

<sup>24</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (trans. Ralph Manheim; Boston, MA: Houghlin Mifflin, 1971), p. 305. For the German text, see Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP/Franz Eher Nachfolger, 1938), p. 335: ‘Das Dasein treibt den Juden zur Lüge, und zwar zur immerwährenden Lüge, wie es den Nordländer zur warmen Kleidung zwingt.’

<sup>25</sup> For a thorough examination of the textual history and the syntax of the genitives in the phrase, ὑμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ διαβόλου, in Jn 8.44, see Émile Puech, ‘Le diable, homicide, menteur et père du mensonge en Jean 8,44’, *Revue biblique* 112 (2005), pp. 215-52. Puech (‘Le diable’, p. 250) concludes that the best translation is: ‘Vous, vous avez pour père le Diable...’. See also Reimund

context of the Hellenistic world, as though it is special only to that context, is irrelevant. Vitriolic rhetoric has existed in most of recorded history. Therefore, setting vitriolic rhetoric in Nazi Germany is really not different from setting it in the Greco-Roman era.<sup>26</sup> Such rhetoric strives to incite some action, whether human or divine, against the opponent.

On a factual level, it is not clear that, as Johnson claims, **‘the NT’s slander against fellow Jews is remarkably mild’** by comparison with Hellenistic conventions.<sup>27</sup> For example, in none of the examples collected by Johnson is there even the rhetorical suggestion that opponents should be burned or tortured eternally. Yet, Jesus describes the consequences of not catering to his followers: **‘And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me”. Then he will say to those at his left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”’** (Mt. 25.40-41).

The argument that such descriptions are ‘connotative rather than denotative’ is also unsupported or dubious. Indeed, it is demonstrably untrue that **‘[t]he polemic signifies simply that these are opponents and such things should be said about them’**.<sup>28</sup> Despite Jesus’ invectives elsewhere, he did not always deem terms of abuse so acceptable:

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Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> A study of anti-Christian rhetoric may be found in Bart Wagemakers, ‘Incest, Infanticide, and Cannibalism: Anti-Christian Imputations in the Roman Empire’, *Greece and Rome* 57 (2010), pp. 337-54.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, ‘The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander’, p. 441.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, ‘The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander’, p. 441. Scot McKnight (‘A Loyal Critic: Matthew’s Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective’, in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith* [ed. Craig E. Evans and Donald A. Hagner; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], pp. 55-79 [78]) offers a similar conclusion: ‘His [Matthew’s] rhetoric may be unacceptable to modern sensitivities, but it was not to his Jewish world’.

**But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire (Mt. 5.22).**

Clearly, Jesus does not see even calling someone a fool (μωρῆ) as signifying **‘simply that these are opponents and such things should be said about them’**.

The general purpose of rhetoric is also important. Although there were diverse views on the general purpose of rhetoric, some Roman authors thought that its main purpose was to incite an audience to take certain actions. Note Cicero’s rhetorical question: **‘Who indeed does not know that the orator’s virtue is pre-eminently manifested either in rousing men’s hearts to anger, hatred, or indignation, or in recalling them from these same passions to mildness and mercy?’**<sup>29</sup> So, it is not true, at least for Cicero, that insults are merely to identify opponents and nothing more. The insults are meant ultimately to persuade the audience to take certain actions against the targets of the insults. The author of Mt. 5.22 might be cognizant of such a use of abusive rhetoric.

Even in the sources cited by Johnson, abusive rhetoric is not merely considered some harmless pastime among opponents. For example, Johnson uses Philo’s *Flaccus* to support the existence of anti-Gentilic rhetoric among the Jews.<sup>30</sup> But Philo also relates how abusive rhetoric was used to incite the Alexandrian populace against the Jews during the time of Flaccus, the prefect of Egypt appointed by

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<sup>29</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* 1.12.53 (Sutton and Rackham, LCL): ‘Quis enim nescit, maximam vim exsistere oratoris in hominum mentibus vel ad iram, aut ad odium, aut ad dolorem incitandis, vel ab hisce eisdem permotionibus ad lenitatem misericordiamque revocandis?’ See also Kathryn Tempest, *Cicero: Politics and Persuasion in Ancient Rome* (New York: Continuum, 2011); David A. DeSilva, ‘The Strategic Arousal of Emotions in the Apocalypse of John: A Rhetorical-Critical Investigation of the Oracles to the Seven Churches’, *New Testament Studies* 54 (2008), pp. 90-114; Matthew Leigh, ‘Quintilian on the Emotions [Institutio Oratoria 6 preface and 1-2]’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 94 (2004), pp. 123-40.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, ‘The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander’, p. 435.

Tiberius in 32 CE. Flaccus was a primary actor in the massacre of Jews in Alexandria in 38 CE during the reign of Caligula.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, Flaccus experiences a political demise that he attributes to his anti-Judaism. As Philo tells it, Flaccus confesses how he utilized xenophobic rhetoric against Jews: **‘I cast on them the slur that they were foreigners without civic rights, though they were inhabitants with full civic rights’**.<sup>32</sup> In another instance, Philo describes how a certain Isidorus employed ‘vocalists’ [φωνασκεῖν], who specialized in the art of yelling in marketplaces, to incite a mob against Flaccus himself in a gymnasium. Philo says that these vocalists **‘filled the building and launched accusations against Flaccus with no foundation inventing against him things which had never happened and spinning long lying screeds of ribald doggerel’**.<sup>33</sup> Yes, rhetoric can lead to killing.

Within the New Testament, authors sometimes position a hostile speech just prior to some violent actions against Christians. At Philippi, Paul is confronted by an angry mob, which proceeds as follows:

And when they had brought them to the magistrates they said, ‘These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice’. The crowd joined in attacking them; and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods (Acts 16.20-22).

Similarly, in Acts 21 another speech precedes violence against Paul:

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, who had seen him in the temple, stirred up all the crowd, and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of

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<sup>31</sup> See further, Pieter W. van der Horst, *Philo’s Flaccus: The First Pogrom. Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003); D.R. Schwartz, ‘Philo and Josephus on the Violence in Alexandria in 38 C.E.’, *Studia Philonica Annual* 24 (2012), pp. 149-66.

<sup>32</sup> Philo, *Flacc.* 17.138-39 (Colson, LCL).

<sup>33</sup> Philo, *Flacc.* 17.138-39 (Colson, LCL).

Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching men everywhere against the people and the law and this place; moreover he also brought Greeks into the temple, and he has defiled this holy place'...Then all the city was aroused, and the people ran together; they seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them; and when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing, some another; and as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd; for the mob of the people followed, crying, 'Away with him!' (Acts 21.27-36).

The speech resulted in the city being 'aroused' (v. 30; ἐκινήθη), and so satisfies the very purpose that Cicero cites for rhetoric (**'ad iram...incitandis'**).

In this case the rhetoric contributed to the violence against Paul. Rhetorically, the accusations made by the Jews against Paul include: (1) teaching men everywhere against the people and the law and this place; (2) bringing Greeks into the temple; (3) defiling the temple. Paul, therefore, probably was characterized as lawless or by other terms that Johnson says were used against opponents. But would this mean that Paul's opponents just wanted to identify him as their opponent, or was the rhetoric meant to describe Paul in a way that violence or some other action could be taken against him?

Johnson also misunderstands the imprecatory nature of at least some of the rhetoric used. Some abusive utterances can be categorized as belonging to the magical tradition insofar as the very act of uttering

them has effects in the real world.<sup>34</sup> Other such utterances were specifically forbidden in Jewish law. One illustration involves Paul in Acts 23:

**And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, ‘God shall strike you, you white-washed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?’ Those who stood by said, ‘Would you revile God’s high priest?’ And Paul said, ‘I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, “You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people”’ (Acts 23.2-5).**

The author indicates that there were some utterances that were so grievous as to be punishable offenses.

In the end, Johnson’s argument for a more benign view of the slanderous and abusive rhetoric in the New Testament cannot be sustained. It is simply untrue that **‘grasping the conventional nature of the polemic can rob such language of its mythic force and therefore its capacity for mischief’**.<sup>35</sup> The ‘conventional nature’ of this rhetoric shows that it was used to incite mischief and violence. It is not true that interlocutors in such rhetoric just saw it as a way to identify opponents. Rather, many, including Jesus, saw it as a cause for arrest or other punitive measures. And it is ethically absurd to hold abusive rhetoric as ethically appropriate once we realize how everyone used such rhetoric. Such abusive rhetoric is ethically inappropriate regardless of how many people may use it then or now, as the examples from *Mein Kampf* show.

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<sup>34</sup> On curses, see Brian Britt, *Biblical Curses and the Displacement of Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011); Leroy A. Huizenga, ‘The Confession of Jesus and the Curses of Peter: A Narrative-Christological Approach to the Text-Critical Problem of Mark 14:62’, *Novum Testamentum* 53 (2011), pp. 244-66.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, ‘The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander’, p. 441.

### ***When is Anti-Judaism not Anti-Judaism?***

Closely allied with the strategy of questioning the meaning of *Ioudaioi* and the propriety of abusive language is the discussion of whether one can label what Jesus said as ‘anti-Judaism’ or ‘anti-Semitism’. These terms have a long and complicated history in western scholarship. For my purposes, I use the term anti-Judaism/anti-Jewish when rhetoric attacks the legitimacy or character of Judaism as a religion and/or as an ethnic group. Etymologically Judaism referred to a territorial identification, but it usually coincided in the ancient world with a religious identity, as well. I use anti-Semitism when rhetoric attacks Semites as the entire sphere of Semitic speaking peoples, including Jews and Arabs. Historically, of course, the term, ‘anti-Semitism,’ has been used only to refer to anti-Judaism. But the fact is that Jews form only a small percentage of Semitic speaking people, and it is a matter of semantic logic to reserve anti-Semitism only for those who are against all Semitic people because there would be no other word left to use for such an all-encompassing hatred.

In any case, Richard Burridge believes that ‘anti-Semitic’ is not appropriate for language that is used in disputes within a group. He appeals to **‘the Dead Sea Scrolls, which use even harsher language about the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem—yet no one calls them “anti-Semitic”’**.<sup>36</sup> Burridge adds:

**Severe criticism is tolerated within a family alone, and, as with all families and communities, today only Jewish comedians (or Rabbis!) are allowed to tell Jewish jokes, and likewise for the Irish or whoever; as [Amy-Jill] Levine concedes, ‘The analogy to the ethnic joke is somewhat apt’. Matthew is part of an argument going on within Judaism as he seeks to explain the theological problem for Jewish Christians of why Israel rejected her teacher, the fulfillment of her scriptures and her hopes, of why the kingdom has**

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<sup>36</sup> Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 195.

**gone to the Gentiles, and why Jerusalem was destroyed.**<sup>37</sup>

Allen Verhey also uses this in-the-family analogy, and acknowledges that **‘family quarrels, of course, are frequently ugly and they were in this case’**.<sup>38</sup>

Paul N. Anderson makes a similar argument about whether fellow Jews could utter ‘anti-Semitic’ remarks:

**The evangelist was himself Jewish, as were the leaders and core members of the Johannine situation. It would be akin to claiming the Essenes or John the Baptist were anti-Semitic in their vitriolic judging of the Judean status quo, or that the Pharisees were anti-Semitic because they opposed the Sadducees. Would any genuine scholar argue such a thesis?**<sup>39</sup>

Anderson’s question already assumes that a ‘genuine scholar’ would not make such an argument, but there is no empirical evidence offered for why that should be the case. After all, how many ‘genuine scholars’ were surveyed or can be surveyed to answer this question? More importantly, Anderson provides no ethical or meta-ethical arguments to refute the claim that Jews could utter offensive insults toward other Jews that would not differ from anything an “anti-Semite” might say. As noted already, Josephus and Jesus are quoted as issuing statements that do not differ from what ‘genuine anti-Semites’ who are not Jewish have said or could say.

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<sup>37</sup> Burrige, *Imitating Jesus*, pp. 195-96.

<sup>38</sup> Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 437.

<sup>39</sup> Paul N. Anderson, ‘Anti-Semitism and Religious Violence’. See further, Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); David Mamet, *The Wicked Son: Anti-Semitism, Self-Hatred, and the Jews* (Jewish Encounters: New York: Schocken, 2006).

In any case, Burrige's claims are flawed on many levels. First, he offers no support for his generalization that **'severe criticism is tolerated within a family alone'**. As mentioned, Jesus had injunctions against using the word 'fools' against one's brother (Mt. 5.22). There were codified rules against Jews insulting Jewish priests. So the idea that such abuse is necessarily tolerated within a family is demonstrably untrue.

Second, Burrige is oblivious to debates about the nature of ethnic comedy, and the extent to which it is harmful or ethically inappropriate, within or outside of a 'family'. Consider the work of Simon Weaver, a theorist of rhetoric who examines **'the ways in which racist humor acts as racist rhetoric, has a communicative impact, is persuasive, and can affect impressions of truth and ambivalence'**.<sup>40</sup> He specifically studied how the Danish cartoon controversy illustrates the fact that abusive humor has an inherent polysemy that can lead to plausible offensive interpretations that, in turn, lead to violence. Because of that polysemy, it is inherently misguided to argue that one interpretation of that humor is wrong and another is right.

Even individuals who engage in ethnic humor about their own ethnic group may be engaging in a counterproductive activity. The counterproductive aspects of ethnic humor by Jewish insiders has been particularly critiqued by Ruth Wisse, Martin Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature and professor of comparative literature (emeritus) at Harvard University, in *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (2013).<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Weaver observes the following concerning black comedians who use ethnic humor: **'While the humour of black comedians is important and often crucial for the explosion of stereotypes and expression of anti-racism, we should not forget that such discourse is always incongruous and thus ambiguous and double edged in its outcome.'**<sup>42</sup> Because humor is so often

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<sup>40</sup> Simon Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humor: US, UK, and Global Race Joking* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ruth Wisse, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humor*, p. 132.

polysemic and contextual, it is relatively easy for one group to take offense and another not to take such offense.

Many Greco-Roman ideas of humor do not support Burrige's claims. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle specifically addresses the dangers of humor. When discussing the behavior of an educated man (πεπαιδευμένος), Aristotle remarks: **'Hence a man will draw the line at some jokes; for raillery is a sort of vilification, and some forms of vilification are forbidden by law; perhaps some forms of raillery ought to be prohibited also.'**<sup>43</sup> It is clear, therefore, that Greco-Roman ideas about abusive language and humor are too diverse to make the sorts of generalizations that Burrige enunciates.

Third, Burrige's view of what constitutes 'the family' within which such abusive language is tolerated is too amorphous to be of any practical use. For example, if such language is tolerated only within 'the Jewish family', then should Jesus' pronouncements against non-Jews be censured? Would Burrige tolerate abusive language by Christians against Muslims because they can all be viewed as part of the 'Abrahamic family of religions'? The Muslims who reacted violently against the Danish cartoons certainly did not see themselves as part of any larger Abrahamic 'family' to which the Danes historically could belong.<sup>44</sup> Would all such language be tolerated if we simply redefined 'the family' as 'the human family'?

Fourth, Burrige does not contemplate the option that such abusive language should be wrong whether it is within the family or outside of the family. Otherwise, by that logic one might also be asked to tolerate domestic verbal abuse because it is happening within a

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<sup>43</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.8.9 (Rackham, LCL): οὐ δὴ πᾶν ποιήσει. τὸ γὰρ σκῶμμα λοιδορήμᾳ τί ἐστίν, οἱ δὲ νομοθέται ἔνια λοιδορεῖν κωλύουσιν. ἔδει δ' ἴσως καὶ σκώπτειν.

<sup>44</sup> On the Danish cartoons controversy, see David E. DeCosse, 'The Danish Cartoons Reconsidered: Catholic Social Teaching and the Contemporary Challenge of Free Speech', *Theological Studies* 71 (2010), pp. 101-132; Geoffrey B. Levey and Tariq Modood, 'Liberal Democracy, Multicultural Citizenship, and the Danish Cartoon Affair', in *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship* (ed. Geoffrey B. Levey and Tariq Modood; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 216-42.

household not between households. A husband might be able to call his wife all sorts of abusive names as long as it stays within the family. Certainly, there is something very ethically questionable with such thinking about abuse.

Fifth, such a position raises other ethical problems that may betray an imperialistic agenda on the part of modern Christian ethicists. Burrige seems to argue that modern ethicists can determine what others should find offensive. Scot McKnight, in fact, thinks Matthew's rhetoric is the opposite of anti-Semitic: **'Matthew's gospel, however harsh and unpleasant to modern sensitivities, is not anti-Semitic. It is, on the contrary, a compassionate but vigorous appeal to nonmessianic Judaism to respond to the Messiah.'**<sup>45</sup> Both Burrige and McKnight represent Christian ethicists who allow themselves the right to determine how the 'other' should feel or think about particular insults issued by Jesus.

McKnight is especially operating on questionable ethical and logical grounds. After all, why could it not be that what sounds 'compassionate' to modern sensitivities is actually harsh and unpleasant? In other words, why treat 'harsh and unpleasant' as possibly being the opposite of what they appear to be, and yet not contemplate the possibility that what appears 'compassionate' may also be the opposite of what it seems? And why restrict ourselves only to modern sensitivities, when the Gospels themselves tell us how offensive Jesus' words and deeds were to the sensitivities of the Jews of that time? The term, **'compassionate,'** can only be justified on theological grounds, as it could just as well be said that what the Jews did to Jesus or Paul, however harsh and unpleasant to modern sensitivities, is not anti-Jesus or anti-Pauline. Rather those are 'compassionate' actions on the part of nonmessianic Jews.

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<sup>45</sup> Scot McKnight, 'A Loyal Critic: Matthew's Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective', in Evans and Hagner (eds.), *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, pp. 55-79 (77).

### ***When Did Christian Anti-Judaism Begin?***

The question of whether Jesus engaged in anti-Judaism or not logically relates to the question of when Christian anti-Judaism began. If anti-Judaism can be attributed to the putative founder of Christianity, then anti-Judaism is there from the beginning. If anti-Judaism is the result of some later development, then the founder of Christianity is absolved. As mentioned, there is a division among scholars on this question. The religious and theological nature of this division is apparent in that most of those attributing anti-Judaism to Jesus are self-identified Jewish scholars, while those blaming later Christian interpreters are self-identified Christian scholars.

Paula Fredriksen is a scholar who denies that Jesus engaged in anti-Judaism. She briefly outlines the history of Christian anti-Judaism thus:

**Christian antipathy toward Jews and Judaism began when Christian Hellenistic Jewish texts, such as the letters of Paul and the Gospels, began to circulate among total outsiders, that is, among Gentiles without any connection to the synagogue and without any attachment to Jewish traditions of practice and interpretation. At that point, the intra-Jewish polemics preserved in these texts began to be understood as condemnations of Judaism *tout court*. The next stage intensified the process, by taking this outsider's perspective to the text of the Septuagint. By the early second century, the engagement of intellectuals enriched the controversy by putting it on a philosophical basis, thereby integrating what otherwise might have remained secondhand name-calling into comprehensive, rational, total worldviews. Christian theologies of many different sorts were thereby born.<sup>46</sup>**

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<sup>46</sup> Paula Fredriksen, 'The Birth of Christianity and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism', in Fredriksen and Reinhartz (eds.), *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism*, pp. 8-30 (28). Fredriksen's italics.

This historical assessment contradicts much of what Fredriksen claims in her own article, not to mention what is within the quoted passage.

First, Fredriksen apparently does not count the very words of Jesus in passages such as Jn 8.44 as showing **‘Christian antipathy toward Jews and Judaism’**. If Jesus did say such a thing, then how could such antipathy begin only when these texts began circulating among total outsiders?<sup>47</sup> Of course, there is a legitimate question about whether the historical Jesus did say such things. I cannot prove that Jesus did say those things. But Fredriksen offers us nothing to prove that Jesus did not say those things, especially in light of the fact that she admits that there are **‘intra-Jewish polemics preserved in these texts’**. If Jews of Jesus’ time were abusing each other in this manner, then is it at least possible that Jn 8.44 may preserve an ‘authentic’ oral tradition about what Jesus said? And if those intra-Jewish polemics do go back to Jesus himself, then why could one not say that anti-Jewish antipathy or polemics in Christianity began with Jesus?<sup>48</sup>

Second, there is nothing about condemning Judaism *tout court* that requires some post-Jesus development. The idea of the collective characterization of entire groups is certainly found in pre-Christian Jewish traditions. In Deuteronomy one finds the following characterizations and actions encompassing entire ethnic groups:

**No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the lord; even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the lord for ever; because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came forth out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you (Deut. 23.3-4).**

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<sup>47</sup> See further, J.R. Shaver, ‘Christian Anti-Semitism: Tracing the Roots to the Gospel’, *Church* 20 (2004), pp. 15-19.

<sup>48</sup> See further Puech, ‘Le diable’, pp. 215-52.

Evil moral attitudes could also be viewed as inherent, as in Jeremiah:

**And if you say in your heart, ‘Why have these things come upon me?’ it is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up, and you suffer violence. Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil (Jer. 13.22-23).**

Despite debates about the questions of the extent to which ‘race’ and ‘racism’ existed in the ancient world, there is little question that people could be viewed as inherently evil or bear other moral characteristics on the basis of their ancestry or genealogy.<sup>49</sup>

There is also evidence that Jewish sects or groups could view themselves as so separate from other Jews that they could speak of other co-ethnic members in the third person. Note this complaint in Isaiah: **‘For thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; thou, O lord, art our Father, our Redeemer from of old is thy name’** (Isa. 63.16).<sup>50</sup> Clearly, the speaker presumes some historical relationship to Abraham and Israel, but yet speaks of Abraham and Israel as not acknowledging the speaker’s group. Once such a differentiation is made, it would not take but another step to use other derogatory descriptors that the speaker could apply to Abraham and Israel, as collective entities.

The idea of collective punishment is pre-Christian, and could involve entire ethnic groups and religions. At the grandest scale, such collective punishment is inflicted on all life in Noah’s Flood in Genesis 6–7, which would count as a case of biocide or ecocide.

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<sup>49</sup> Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); idem, ‘Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity’, *World Archaeology* 28 (2006), pp. 32-47. Also useful are the essays in Daniel C. Harlow, *The ‘Other’ in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John Collins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> On the possible sectarian conflict reflected, see Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 92-97

Collective punishment is encoded in the Decalogue: **‘I the lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments’** (Exod. 20.5-6).

Similarly, Yahweh issues a list of horrific punishments applicable to the entire Israelite nation if they do not obey his commandments. Note these curses: **‘And the lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known’** (Deut. 28.64). Such punishments outlined in Deuteronomy 28 were viewed as in effect in many Second Temple texts, such as in Daniel:

We have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from thy commandments and ordinances; we have not listened to thy servants the prophets, who spoke in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. To thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us confusion of face, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those that are near and those that are far away, in all the lands to which thou hast driven them, because of the treachery which they have committed against thee...

As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us, yet we have not entreated the favor of the lord our God, turning from our iniquities and giving heed to thy truth (Dan. 9.5-13).

New Testament texts continued such ideas of collective punishment. One illustration is in Acts 2, where Peter speaks in Jerusalem to **‘Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven’** (v. 5) assembled for the feast of Pentecost. These Jews come from Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Egypt and Rome, among other places. Yet, Peter considers them responsible for the death of Jesus: **‘Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified [ Ἰησοῦν ὃν**

ὁμοῖς ἐσταυρώσατε]’ (Acts 2.36). The use of the second person plural (ὁμοῖς) pronoun as the subject of the Greek clause shows that Peter had no trouble attributing Jesus’ death even to those who may not even have been present at the crucifixion.

Given such a continued belief in collective characterizations and punishments, why couldn’t any historical Jesus think that Judaism was just as described in Jn 8.44? Why is it rhetorical, metaphorical or exaggerated language rather than descriptive of his actual beliefs? If Jesus is following polemic or theological Jewish traditions advocating collective punishment and characterizations, then such characterizations would not be outside of his tradition at all. And if Jesus is simply continuing such ideas of collective culpability and punishment, then Fredriksen’s historical scheme is fundamentally flawed.

### ***Summary***

If there was an historical Jesus, then there is no reason why Jesus could not have said any of the anti-Jewish statements attributed to him in the Gospels. That does not mean he did say those things, but the core of my argument is that the standard arguments offered for denying that Jesus did say those things are fundamentally flawed. It is not true, for example, that such abusive language was so routine that it was deemed acceptable or just another way of identifying opponents. It is not necessarily true that it would have been seen the way that in-group ethnic humor is viewed today. None of the ethicists discussed here even contemplate the very real possibility that Jesus was perpetuating the type of ethnic and collective culpability and characterizations that these ethicists otherwise accept as real phenomena in the Hebrew Bible, as well as at the time of Jesus. The refusal to admit that anti-Judaism may be attributed to Jesus, even if he was Jewish, is more the product of Christian theological apologetics than it is the result of rigorous critical scholarship and ethical reflection.