

Discuss the view that the historical context of the Johannine Community must be taken into account when assessing the anti-Jewish sentiments expressed in John's Gospel

Introduction

At the heart of this question is the issue of implied anti-Semitism in John and the attempt to mitigate it by reconstructing the historical context of the writing. Kysar quotes Samuel Sandmel to offer a succinct statement of the issue, ‘..in its utility for later Jew haters, the Fourth Gospel is pre-eminent among the New Testament writings’¹. This essay will examine whether it is a valid assertion that historical context is the key to mitigating the polemical tone of the Fourth Gospel.

It must immediately be said that the labelling of the gospel ‘anti-Semitic’ is in itself controversial as the contemporary definition of ‘anti-Semitism’ implies a racial and political dimension. Dunn makes this important and needed distinction in his work². Hitler was anti-Semitic because any German with a Jewish grandparent was to be killed as a matter of honour. Conversion and

¹ Sandmel, S., ‘A Jewish understanding of the New Testament’ (Cincinnati: 1956) in Kysar, R., ‘Anti-Semitism and the Gospel of John’, *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. C.A. Evans & D.A. Hagner (Minneapolis:1993), p113.

² Dunn, J.D.G., ‘The Embarrassment of History: Reflections on the Problem of “Anti Judaism” in the Fourth Gospel’, *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, eds. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt & F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, Louisville: 2001, p41.

religion were irrelevant. Christian apologists would perhaps prefer the term 'anti-Judaism' as indicative of the attack on the representatives, traditions and institutions of Judaism the religion. Within this definition, there seems little doubt that the fourth gospel is heavily focussed in part on challenges to the paradigms of Judaism but that perhaps would be expected from a document that breaks new theological ground in many ways. Dunn takes the measured approach of admitting that a knowledge of the historical context is required to inform judgements about the text but that the term "the Jews" can not be simplistically applied to a single group³.

However, the perceived force of the language was perceived by some, particularly in response to the usage of texts from John by the Nazis, to require a historico-centric approach to interpretation. Kysar perhaps summarises best the position that emerged with Martyn's thesis that the historical setting is the key to understanding the gospel as essentially a polemical work. Martyn's key assumptions were firstly that:

"the tension and hostility...between the Jews and Jesus..[is]..the key to the life and purpose of the Gospel...it represents a genuine historical setting...it is not an exercise in theological symbolism.."4

Secondly, "...this historical setting can scarcely be that of Jesus and his actual, original disciples and opponents"⁵. In other words, the key events and

³ Dunn, op.cit., pp44-45.

⁴ Smith, D. Moody, 'The Contribution of J Louis Martyn to the Understanding of the Gospel of John', *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Martyn, J.L., Louisville:2003, pp6-23.

⁵ Smith, D., op.cit., p6.

personalities of the story are thinly disguised figures that were in current opposition to the Johannine community. Martyn's approach is thus to apply a form critical approach and attempt to reconstruct the history in terms of the 'life setting' rather than the immediate subject matter and the key locus about which Martyn's thesis and his disciples revolves is the expulsion event from the Synagogue. This is asserted as a distinctly Johannine event having no correspondence in the Synoptic accounts and was originally connected with the *birkat haminim*, asserted as the prayer that was instituted by rabbis to eliminate the Nazarene sect from amongst the Jews. The corresponding tone of the narrative with its seemingly comprehensive dismissal of "the Jews" and the recasting of the theological aspects of Judaism in Christological terms is all ascribed to this historical event.

Kysar is subsequently very keen to assert that a simple "reader-response" analysis of the text assuming an "untrained...or unsophisticated in theology" reader will give a "popular and natural understanding"⁶ of the text. His assertion is that the narrator is "neither a Jew nor leads the reader to Jewishness"⁷ and most seriously that "their leaders abrogate their loyalty to their God for fidelity to Caesar"⁸. "The Jews" for the reader's minds are those "representative of opposition to Jesus and his mission"⁹. Kysar would

⁶ Kysar, R., 'Anti-Semitism and the Gospel of John', *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*, eds. C.A. Evans & D.A. Hagner (Minneapolis: 1993), pp114.

⁷ Kysar, op.cit., p115.

⁸ Kysar, op.cit., p115.

⁹ Kysar, op.cit., p116.

continue that these Jews are put alongside the deliberations of Pilate whom “declares no less than four times...that Jesus is innocent” and the reader is thus left with the impression that the “Jewish leaders alone” were responsible for the death of Jesus and “...the narrative of the Gospel...persuades a reader to cast Jews and Judaism in an unfavourable light.”¹⁰ John is thus apologetically presented as an ‘embarrassment of history’ of questionable canonical value.

The perceived strength of this position is seen in that Martyn, in his most recent edition of his seminal work, ‘...sees no reason to retreat from what is from any point of view a murky swamp in which his opponent’s views can be grounded no more securely than his own’¹¹. Subsequent work by Fortna employing a source-critical approach is noted for his enthusiastic recommendation of Martyn’s work despite having very little of substance in common with it as he is analysing the text as a source critic. Such is the pervasive influence of the near paradigmatic work.

However, this work now has a battery of contra-evidence refuting his primary thesis of the expulsion event from the synagogue directly connected with the historical event of the *birkat haminim* prayer. This is summarised obliquely by Moody-Smith and very directly by Motyer¹². Motyer is arguing for a paradigm

¹⁰ Kysar, op.cit., pp116-117.

¹¹ Smith, D.M., op.cit., p8.

¹² Motyer, S., *Your Father the Devil – A New Approach to John and ‘the Jews’*, Carlisle: 1997, pp25ff.

shift where Moody-Smith is content to contend that the weight of evidence still admits a primary place for Martyn's thesis whilst accepting it has been found wanting in its details. However, as Lincoln concurs with Motyen, these "details" unfortunately are the primary assumptions of Martyn, "...it is doubtful..that the *birkat ha-minim* can be so directly related to the fourth gospel."¹³

Stibbe articulates the consequences for Martyn's analysis for one sympathetic to those ideas thus, '*in general terms* [John] reflects a severe controversy with Judaism'¹⁴. Of course, the same could be said for the Prophet Ezekiel. The historical context then, stripped of its potency of being anchored in a specific historical event, is always going to be a vague and a speculative one of the "recently expelled from the synagogue" Christian community and an equally defensive community of Judaism "stripped of its cultic centre"¹⁵. The document is then necessarily considered to have had multiple editions and to reflect the on-going tense and increasingly hostile dialogue between the communities. Each is searching for its own identity and definition. For the Christian Jews, "Judaism was in error, degenerate, and unfaithful to its God...the vitriolic attack on Judaism is nothing more than the desperate attempt of the Johannine Christians to find a rationale for their existence..."¹⁶.

¹³ Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St John*, p83.

¹⁴ Stibbe, Mark W.G., *John as storyteller. Narrative criticism and the fourth Gospel.*, Cambridge:1992, p61 quoted in Motyen, op.cit., p27.

¹⁵ Kysar, *Anti-Semitism and the Gospel of John*, p121.

¹⁶ Kysar, op.cit., p122.

Such an account necessarily sounds like an excerpt from a sociology text book based on an imagination fed by 20th century experience and Hegelian categories.

Such a model for the evolution of John is in itself fraught with difficulties as it suggests a fractured history whereas one of the great strengths of John seems to be the very tight lens provided by the Prologue and the strong themes that run through the Gospel. Whereas it is possible to argue that there is a distinct shift in pneumatology between the Johannine Revelation apocalypse and the Gospel with perhaps the crisis in the community requiring the fuller presentation of the Gospel¹⁷, the evolution of the Gospel itself seems much less susceptible to the charge of multiple Christological or Pneumatological phases. The edits seem to be in the details and narrative annotations rather than in multiple editions, excepting the controversy provided by the addition of the final chapter.

John is particularly noted for its *spiritual* nature and its rich theological threads. To assert that the narrative is primarily polemical rather than as the narrative itself says (20:31), “these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name...” is not really to do justice to the text as a *whole*. Kysar’s final conclusion that the document is “now...read and understood without reference to its first purpose...an embarrassment and oppressive in [our]

¹⁷ Smalley, S.S., *Pneumatology in the Johannine Gospel and Apocalypse*, pp296-7.

culture...[its] canonical authority resides only within an interpretative context"¹⁸ is not really a specifically Johannine issue but ascribes equally well to all other Scriptures. It is a fundamental issue within all hermeneutics. However, reasonable such a position may seem to be it is at the mercy of the subjectivity and theological agenda of the interpreter as Kysar's hopelessly subjective concept of a "simple reader-response" analysis must be seen to be. It must be remembered that the 19th century historical quest for Jesus made Jesus the 19th century bourgeois intellectual.

Lincoln correctly illustrates that "by no means all the references [to the Jews] have negative connotations...only just over half the references have in view those Jews...unbelieving or hostile...to Jesus."¹⁹ The text clearly illustrates that the Jews can be used in an extra-ethnic sense. Lincoln again shows that ethnically Jewish parents of the man born blind were afraid of "the Jews"²⁰. Jesus' passion as the "King of the Jews" is hardly a polemic against the Jewish nation as much as in the nailing of the sign above His head it is a condemnation of the Latin, Greek and Hebrew speaking "world". The primary message of "world" is a theological one; "the world" will hate you as it hates me, regardless of ethnicity. Lincoln in the logic of his position finally asserts, "the Gospel's high Christology... reinforces [its Jewishness]...God is now decisively disclosed...a Jewish face [for the logos]."²¹ Lincoln in direct

¹⁸ Kysar, *Anti-Semitism in the Gospel of John*, pp125-6.

¹⁹ Lincoln, A.T., *The Gospel according to St John*, Minneapolis: 1993, pp70-71.

²⁰ Lincoln, *op.cit.*, p72.

²¹ Lincoln, *op.cit.*, p81.

opposition to the Martynesque school would conclude, "...its message transcends the circumstances of its production"²².

Moody-Smith, though generally defensive of the ideas of Martyn though conceding the details of his thesis can not be supported by the data, also raises the interesting historical data that as late as the fourth century the Christians were welcome in the Synagogue inciting Chrysostom's vicious assaults against them²³. Smith also concludes that the debate between the Johannine community and Judaism is much more akin to the debate within the religion of Judaism itself²⁴. The direct historical evidence is of course of a fractured Judaism busy re-identifying itself and that John's Gospel was a missionary Gospel to Jews. Meeks also importantly identifies that John is overwhelmingly *Jewish* even when referring to the "Greeks". John uses this term for the Greek speaking Jews of the *diaspora*. Meeks reminded the scholarly world, 'earliest Christianity was a sect of Judaism'²⁵ with the historical reconstructions of both Martyn and Brown conveniently leaving aside the meanings within the narrative of other groups such as Samaritans

²² Lincoln, op.cit., p89.

²³ Smith, D.M., 'Judaism and the Gospel of John', *Jews and Christians: Exploring the Past, Present and Future*, ed. J.H. Charlesworth, New York: 1990, pp176-199.

²⁴ Smith, op.cit., p96.

²⁵ Meeks, W.A., 'Breaking Away: Three New Testament Pictures of Christianity's Separation from the Jewish Communities', *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity*, eds. J. Neusner & E.S. Frerichs, Chicago: 1985, p93.

and Galileans.²⁶ This would seem to strengthen the case for the dispute to be within Judaistic factions rather than of an anti-Semitic quality.

The charge of racial anti-Semitism implied as a corollary of John's anti-Judaism should really be quickly dealt with by considering the text itself as a whole. John's repeated usage of metaphors drawn from the Prophets (particularly Isaiah) and the Exodus motif underline the central importance of its Jewishness to the writers. The Prologue describes Jesus the Logos as 'coming to His own' and Jesus in His discussion with the Samaritan woman in John 4 identifies himself with the "Jews" as the people from whom salvation comes. It is only by considering the surface words completely out of their own context that even John 8:44 could be considered a proof text for racist anti-Semitism. Jesus, in typical Johannine fashion of looking beyond the literal to the spiritual, makes it clear that it is the action of "lying" that associates the fatherhood of the Devil with the people and not their ethnicity as descendants of Abraham.

Conclusion

This essay has considered the chief thesis advanced first by Martyn that the historical setting of the Johannine community was the key to the rest of the Gospel and in particular provides an explanation for the allegedly polemical conflict with "the Jews". However, such an assertion has been shown to be wanting both because of lack of historical evidence and can only really be sustained when there is a partial and selective use of the evidence in

²⁶ Meeks, 'Breaking Away...', p97.

reconstructing the history of the community. All attempts at reconstruction are fraught with subjectivity and it is shown that even when assumptions of the Martyn school have proved faulty the idea spawned by that assumption of the primacy of the historical context for interpretation, it has somehow retained its attractiveness²⁷.

In final conclusion, it would be reasonable to assert that the historical context is an important but subservient factor to the wider stated aim of the Gospel as a theological unfolding of the person of Jesus. The debates within the text regarding Judaism are primarily theological in character, not ethnically anti-Semitic.

²⁷ Motyer, op.cit., p27.

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