

Who are “the Jews” in John?

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English versions of the New Testament traditionally translate the Greek term (οἱ) Ἰουδαῖοι¹ as “the Jews.” To contemporary Western readers, and in the context of public liturgy, this translation raises a number of issues.

The Meaning of Ἰουδαῖοι

Four distinct meanings for Ἰουδαῖοι are deployed in scripture and in other writings of the same era. From the broadest to the narrowest sense, these are:

1) Israelites and those born into the traditions of Judaism. This sense of Ἰουδαῖοι is closest to our contemporary understanding of “the Jews” as “people of Jewish heritage” or as “the Jewish people” — one “nation” among the many “nations.” We remain cautious to note that our understanding of an ethnic group and a global religion differs in significant ways from that of the first century.

2) The people of one of the geographic regions identified as “Judea.”

- a. The narrowest territory included the area centered on Jerusalem, the patrimony of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin — more or less the old Southern Kingdom, most importantly as distinguished from the Northern Kingdom centered in Samaria. This distinction is stressed in John’s Gospel (see, for example, John 4).
- b. The Romans used “Judea” to include Samaria and Idumea, and during the time of Herod the Great, Galilee, in addition to the territory in (a).
- c. By the time of Christ “Judea” (in Roman use) was reduced by paring off Galilee, which was placed under the jurisdiction of the tetrarch Herod Antipas. Note that under (a) or (c) Galilee is not “Judean.”

¹ pl. of Ἰουδαῖος (Ioudaios). A derivative of Ἰουδαία (Judea), Ἰουδαῖος is translated by standard Greek-English lexicons as “a Jew”, “Jewish”, or “Judean”.

3) Israelites of the tribe of Judah, one of the twelve tribes of ancient Israel. This sense of Ἰουδαῖοι can be found in parts of the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was in wide circulation by the first century. Many of the authors of the New Testament relied on this translation as a source. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) often translates this as “the Judeans.” (e.g., Jer 32:12, 38:19, etc.)

4) The inner circle of the Temple leadership in Jerusalem. This narrowest meaning appears unique to some passages in John. A few modern English translations render Ἰουδαῖοι in these instances as “the Jewish leaders” and some scholars have suggested in this context that Ἰουδαῖοι could be considered virtually synonymous with the term for the Temple authorities found widely employed by the authors of the synoptic gospels: “the chief priests”.

The Problem in John

Several New Testament writers, particularly those writing in the context of diaspora and Gentile-Jewish interaction such as Paul and the author of Luke-Acts, use Ἰουδαῖοι almost exclusively in the first, broadest sense of the word. Again, this is closest to our contemporary sense of “the Jews” and rendering Ἰουδαῖοι in this way continues to be justifiable in our context.

John’s Gospel, however, poses unique problems as it extensively deploys Ἰουδαῖοι, more than any other New Testament text². Looking at the gospel as a whole, we find John using Ἰουδαῖοι in at least three of the four senses above, and, in many places, translating this term as “the Jews” obscures rather than illuminates the author’s meaning.

Some of the Jewish Christians of the late first century were in bitter conflict with the synagogue communities from which they were excluded. This colors John’s use of Ἰουδαῖοι, and it appears in many places as a polemical term to identify Jesus’ most vociferous opponents and the opponents of the late-first-century Johannine community. Unfortunately, this Johannine language, familiar enough to John’s community, has subsequently been misunderstood or misapplied in later Christian situations.

² While the authors of the synoptic gospels use Ἰουδαῖοι only a handful of times (most commonly in the passion narratives in the expression “the King of the Jews”), John uses the term seventy times. The term’s second most common appearance in the New Testament is in the Book of Acts, where it is used (as in the synoptic gospels) in sense 1 above, most frequently during the conflicts Paul experiences with Jews living in the diaspora.

By way of example, at the outset of John's Gospel, the Ἰουδαῖοι send authorities to question John the Baptist (1:19). Many translations, such as the NRSV, hold with tradition by rendering Ἰουδαῖοι simply as "the Jews", but John the Baptist himself is a Jew in sense 1. A clearer translation into contemporary English in this instance might be "the Jewish leaders" (sense 4), as found in the Contemporary English Version (CEV) and Common English Bible (CEB) — that is, authorities connected with the Temple in Jerusalem who are concerned about John's unconventional activity and teachings. This translation of Ἰουδαῖοι illuminates several passages of John, where it clarifies an internal struggle between various late Second Temple Judaism's: a lived reality for not only John the Baptist and Jesus, but for the late first-century Johannine community.

Ἰουδαῖοι and anti-Semitism

In our time, the uncritical translation of Ἰουδαῖοι as "the Jews" not only obscures John's meaning in a number of passages, it also can sound gratuitously anti-Semitic. Scholars continue to debate whether this anti-Jewish sense is a product of translation, the projection of centuries of later Christian anti-Semitism onto the text, or an anti-Judean³ polemic operating in the context of the late-first-century Johannine community. All three factors are likely at work.

From very early Christian times, passages of John were combined with a distorted interpretation of other New Testament narratives to justify anti-Semitism. Given this history, the uncritical translation of Ἰουδαῖοι as "the Jews" remains problematic, especially as contemporary Christians and Jews⁴ rediscover our many common roots and engage together in common cause for a more just society; more so as we are confronted by a resurgent anti-Semitism in many parts of the world.

³ One clarifying theory of John's use of Ἰουδαῖοι is predicated on conflict between Galilean and Judean Jews of the first century, a tension evident in John's Gospel. (7:1, 41, 52). The Galilean-Judean conflict had deep roots in the nearly millennium-long tensions between the older Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Some suggest that the author of John himself may have been a Galilean Jew with a particularly focused polemic against the Judeans and his local synagogue community. For these reasons, some scholars argue that a better general translation of Ἰουδαῖοι in John would be "the Judeans." John 7:1 is a case in point, where "the Jews" (NRSV) is particularly inappropriate and illogical.

⁴ Modern Judaism in its various forms, like Christianity (and some would say, Islam), is a descendant of first-century Judaism. An ancient conceit in Christian triumphalism is the belief that Christianity superseded Judaism, its "mother" religion. A more accurate history reveals modern Judaism and Christianity as siblings that have evolved side-by-side over the past two millennia. What we share is a common scriptural heritage and roots in the Jewish traditions of late antiquity.

A Way Forward

The Church is engaged in ongoing conversation about the best liturgical approaches to the passion narratives and other scriptural passages that implicate “the Jews” in Christ’s crucifixion. In spite of this ongoing conversation, few of the Scriptural translations authorized for liturgical use in The Episcopal Church have responded to this concern and to contemporary scholarship on this matter. Of the authorized translations, the CEV and the CEB have opted to address the issue. At the same time, and notwithstanding the range of authorized translations, the NRSV has become the virtual standard for liturgical use (as the default choice in, for example, printed lectionaries and Gospel books). Given this situation, we suggest substituting the NRSV translation of selected verses or, in a few instances, a phrase in John containing Ἰουδαῖοι in senses 2) and 4) above with the equivalent verse or phrase as found in the CEV. This is not unlike the use of “marginal readings” as alternatives to existing language in the KJV (then the only authorized translation), in response to the work of late-19th-century biblical scholars.

The CEV often renders Ἰουδαῖοι more broadly into English as “the people” or “the crowd”. Not only does this better capture John’s frequent depiction of the Ἰουδαῖοι as the crowds disputing with Jesus and his teachings, it reflects a longstanding pattern in dramatic readings of the passion narratives in Christian liturgy, in which the congregation reads words attributed to the authorities and crowds. As “the people” we see ourselves as the Ἰουδαῖοι most at odds with Jesus, engaging the humility of self-examination in the face of Christ’s faithful witness rather than implicitly or explicitly projecting our failings wholesale onto another religious tradition.

We believe this solution

- 1) Maintains our community’s obedience to the use of scriptural translations authorized by the Church;
- 2) Clarifies the text wherever possible; and
- 3) Mitigates against the historic tendency to use the Johannine Gospel’s anti-Judean polemic to support an anti-Semitic agenda.

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Easter, 2017

For further reading

Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh: *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*

Philip A. Cunningham: Translating and Excerpting the Johannine Passion Narrative for Liturgical Proclamation & Boston College: Specific Issues in Translating and Excerpting the Johannine Passion Narrative for Liturgical Proclamation

Annette Yoshiko Reed: *Ioudaios* before and after "Religion"

Adele Reinhartz, Steve Mason, Daniel Schwartz, et. al.: Have scholars erased the Jews from Antiquity?

A. James Rudin: The promise of the Good Friday-Passover overlap
Doug Ward: Who were "the Jews" in John's Gospel?

Louis Weil: Anti-Judaism Issues in the Scriptures for Holy Week

Examples from the Daily Office Lectionary

Within passages of the NRSV, CEV substitutions are in italics.

John 6:41-51

The people started grumbling because Jesus had said he was the bread that had come down from heaven. They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

John 6:52-59

The people were arguing with each other and asked, “How can he give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

John 11:1-27

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” *“Teacher,” they said, “the people there want to stone you to death! Why do you want to go back?”* Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because

the light is not in them.” After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.” Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, *and many people had come from the city to comfort Martha and Mary because their brother had died.* When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

John 18:28-38

Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate’s headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate went out to them and said, “What accusation do you bring against this man?” They answered, “If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” *The crowd replied, “We are not allowed to put anyone to death.”* (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.) Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting *to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders.* But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” *Pilate went back out and said, “I find no case against him...”*