

Article

Οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι (The Jews) in John's Gospel: An African Reading

Michel Segatagara Kamanzi

Pontifical Biblical Institute, 00187 Roma, Italy; melkamanzi@yahoo.com

Abstract: This article is dedicated to the loving memory of Bénézet Bujo and Laurenti Magesa, two giants of African Theology. The portrait of the Jews in John's Gospel has been the object of a great debate among Western scholars. The negative portrait of many of the Jews of the fourth canonical gospel has led some to qualify John's Gospel as the most "anti-Jewish" writing of the New Testament. Recent Western history, in particular the Shoah, has certainly had a heavy weight on this negative interpretation of John's Gospel. But another perspective, here African Biblical Hermeneutics, may give a different understanding of this disputed theme. Following this non-Western approach, we want to show that maybe it is not John's Gospel's characterization of the Jews which is problematic, but the hermeneutics used to interpret it. In the end, what is at stake, is not the Jews or Jewish people as such, but how one, Jew or non-Jew, responds to Jesus' message and gift of abundant life.

Keywords: the Jews; Gospel of John; African Biblical Hermeneutics; African decolonial optic; African reading

1. Introduction

The theme of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, The Jews¹, in John's Gospel has been a hot topic among Western scholars. When John's Gospel repeatedly mentions "the Jews" to whom is it referring? To all the Jews of Jesus' time, to the Judeans, to the Jewish religious and lay leadership, or to all the Jews without much distinction? Does it refer to a particular historical referent or is it more a symbolical use to single out a particular group of people who resisted and were hostile to Jesus' message and person as the Christ, the Messiah from God?

The position of two eminent Johannine scholars summarizes the solutions proposed by scholarship on the matter: "[Rudolf] Bultmann saw οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι as theological symbols, representing the unbelieving world in general in its hostility towards Jesus. [Louis] Martyn's contribution was to give οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι flesh, i.e., a historical context, by identifying them as the Pharisaic rabbis of Yavneh" (see [Bennema 2009b](#), p. 240; [Bultmann 1971](#); [Martyn 2003](#)). In other words, comments Cornelis Bennema, "while Bultmann defined the 'sense' of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, Martyn focused on its [historical] 'referent'" ([Martyn 2003](#); [Bennema 2009b](#), p. 240).

While there is a kind of general consensus reached by Johannine scholarship on the 'sense', role, or function of the οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in John's Gospel, that they represent "the Jewish authorities' attitude of hostility and rejection towards Jesus", the question of their identity or historical reference remains debated.

The question of the historical reference of the Jews of John's Gospel takes even more sensitive and dramatic importance in Western, European, and North American Scholarship, because of the hostility and persecution the Jewish people encountered in history, at least from the European Middle Ages, if not before, to the last century with the Shoah. While the Gospel of John has been acclaimed as a Jewish story, situated in a Jewish setting, and where, except for Pontius Pilate, the main characters are Jews, Jewish scholars such as Adele Reinhartz find it, on the contrary, to be thoroughly anti-Jewish ([Reinhartz 2018a](#), p. xxi). According to her, the anti-Jewishness of John's Gospel "is evident not only in the Gospel's hostile comments about the Jews as children of the devil and in its portrayal of the Jews and their leaders as hounding Jesus unto death, but also in the very elements



Citation: Kamanzi, Michel Segatagara. 2023. Οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι (The Jews) in John's Gospel: An African Reading. *Religions* 14: 1441. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111441>

Academic Editors: Hulisani Ramantswana and Michael Kodzo Mensah

Received: 23 September 2023
Revised: 8 November 2023
Accepted: 8 November 2023
Published: 20 November 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

that were constitutive of first-century Jewish identity” (Reinhartz 2018a, p. xxi). For Adele Reinhartz, “The Fourth Gospel appropriates Jewishness at the same time as it repudiates Jews. In doing so, it also promotes a parting of the ways between those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and those who do not, that is, the *Ioudaioi*” (Reinhartz 2018a, p. xxi). Any reader of the Fourth Gospel would be surprised by this rather broad generalization of the οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι of John’s Gospel! In fact, the same author, in another publication of the same year, cautions on taking the Jews of the Fourth Gospel as a monolithic group, noticing differences of opinion among them (See Reinhartz 2018b, p. 123).

Without ignoring this important debate among mostly Western scholars, we want to explore the Jews in John’s Gospel from a different perspective, the one promoted by recent African Biblical Hermeneutics.² This perspective, which uses an African postcolonial optic, prioritizes “readings from the vantage point of the poor, the oppressed, the dominated, the suffering, and the marginalized (...) tends to focus on the biblical relevance for the present” (Mbuvi 2023, p. 106). It “critically examines both Western interpretations and biblical texts themselves to expose the dynamics of power and oppression, seeking to undermine and subvert the imperializing aspects of such readings” (Mbuvi 2023, p. 106). Here, we want to take the position of the African biblical scholar who “must continue to make the case for the relevance and legitimacy of the readings of the Bible addressing the plight of the oppressed and silenced, as a conscious presupposition” (Mbuvi 2023, p. 106). And as rightly underlined by Andrew Mbuvi, “given that the oppressed and silenced are in every culture and community, the implications of African Biblical Studies’ readings go beyond the African setting” (Mbuvi 2023, p. 107).

From an African point of view, the Gospel of John appears as the Gospel presenting Jesus the Messiah, Son of God, who came from God to bring to all, his fellow Jews and non-Jews, life in abundance: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10,10). And this Gospel, in its rhetorical project, aims at leading all its readers or listeners to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and through their faith in him receive life in his name (Jn 20,30-31). One can easily understand why this focus on the gift of abundant life through faith in Jesus is of particular relevance for an African reader or listener of John’s Gospel. For Africans and in African Religion “all principles of morality and ethics are to be sought within the context of preserving human life and its “power” or “force”” (Magesa 1997, pp. 31–32).

From this African perspective, we want therefore to explore the theme of the Jews in John’s Gospel, looking at the question of their identity and role in front of Jesus who identified as a Jew (Jn 4,9), but also as the Son of God, the Messiah, the King-Good Shepherd, bringing God’s gift of abundant life for all. We will thus first look at the οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in John’s Gospel as a mixed group of characters, and then look at those who are hostile to Jesus the Messiah giver of life, and conclude with those who are favorable to him. This last group of Jews may become an example to follow for the (African) reader in his/her search for a way of life which strengthens his/her life power and makes him or her resist forces against the moral traditions of abundant life.

2. The Jews in John’s Gospel, a Mixed Group of Characters

Following a narratological perspective, the South African Biblical Scholar François Tolmie studies the Ἰουδαῖοι in John’s Gospel as characters (see Tolmie 2005). In looking at their characterization in the Fourth Gospel, his study tries to establish a paradigm of traits of the Ἰουδαῖοι from their first to their last appearance in the text of John. And from the way they are introduced in the first episode of the Gospel, Jn 1,19-28, F. Tolmie states that “[the Jews] are viewed as a distinct group of characters” (Tolmie 2005, p. 378). At the same time, he acknowledges the difficulty of his study as “the concept Ἰουδαῖοι is not always used consistently in the Gospel” (Tolmie 2005, p. 378). In our opinion, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to study the Jews in John’s Gospel as a distinct group of characters. Most of the characters of the Gospel are Jews, and those explicitly labelled as οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the text are actually a mixed group of characters not always distinguishable from their previous

appearance in the text. Thus, we think, in such study, a criterion must be found to distinguish these various groups of Jews when they appear in the text, even though some geographical, religious, or social common traits may be found among them.

As already said, apart from Pontius Pilate and the Samaritans, and maybe the Royal official in Jn 4,46-54³, all the characters in John's Gospel are Jews. This is an important element to keep in mind when studying the Ἰουδαῖοι in John's Gospel. At the same time, it is true that John deliberately chooses to identify a group among others as οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι. But as noticed by different studies on the matter, the same word is also used in a general way to designate customs, festivals, or other religious elements pertaining to all the Jewish people (Jn 2,6; 2,13; 4,9; 5,1; 6,4; 7,2; 11,55; 18,20; 19,40). Of particular importance on this matter is the fact that in Jn 4, Jesus is identified as a Jew (Jn 4,9) by the Samaritan woman and he states that "Salvation is from the Jews" (Jn 4,22). But Jesus opens up this salvation from the Jews to all true worshippers of the Father "in Spirit and truth" (Jn 4,23), Jews or non-Jews, in different places of Palestine or of the world (Jn 4,21). And at the end of this episode, the Samaritans recognize in Jesus the savior of the world (Jn 4,42).

As for individuals, apart from Jesus, there are also two other characters explicitly labelled as Jews in John's Gospel: Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews (Jn 3,1), and an anonymous Jew discussing with John the Baptist's disciples (Jn 3,25).

For the rest of the majority of occurrences, we find a group character. There are those associated with the temple in Jerusalem and with a certain authority and influence in religious and political matters, they are often associated or even identified with the chief priests and the Pharisees according to different circumstances and episodes (Jn 1,19-28; 2,13-22; 5,1-47; 7-10; 18-19), and of whom the crowd in Jerusalem (Jn 7,13), other Jews believing in Jesus (Jn 9,22; 19,38), the disciples (Jn 11,8; 20,19), and even Jesus himself (Jn 7,1; 11,54) are afraid. There are also the Jews questioning Jesus' Christological claims in Galilee (6,26-59), those mourning with Lazarus' sisters Martha and Mary (Jn 11,19.31.33), and a rather general group that come together in synagogues and the temple (Jn 18,20).

This diversity of groups and individuals which constitutes the οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John calls then for a different treatment of each one of them, even if, as said earlier, one could find certain common traits among them at a geographical, religious, social, or political level. And indeed, this could give a hint about their historical identity. But identifying them historically may not be the point of the Evangelist in presenting these different groups of Jews in his Gospel.

However, even if it is difficult to distinguish these various groups of Jews in John's Gospel, there is still a criterion that could make a difference in the way they are portrayed by the Evangelist. As suggested by F. Tolmie at the end of his article on the οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel, "what is important is not who they are, but what they do in the narrative world" (Tolmie 2005, p. 395). And here, the way they respond to Jesus, the main protagonist of the Gospel, becomes critical for their evaluation following the purpose of the Gospel. This criteria of how one responds to Jesus is also one of the criteria set by Cornelis Bennema in his study on Character and Characterization in John's Gospel (See Bennema 2009a, pp. 12–15). And for us, from our African biblical studies perspective, what makes the Jews of John's Gospel even more distinguishable for the reader or the listener of the Gospel, is the way they respond to Jesus as giver of life and how they treat the poor, the marginalized, those suffering, to whom Jesus shows special care.

3. The Jews Hostile to Jesus the Messiah and Giver of Abundant Life

The first group of Jews who respond in a hostile way to Jesus appear in Jn 5 after the healing of a lame man (Jn 5,1-18). The healing of the sick man by Jesus happens on a sabbath day and this makes that group of Jews start to persecute Jesus for breaking the law of "no works" on the sabbath (Jn 5,15). The justification of Jesus for doing this on the sabbath, "My Father is working still, and I am working"⁴, makes them even angrier and they seek to kill him for "not only he broke the sabbath but also called God his Father, making himself equal with God" (Jn 5,18). For those Jews, the healing of that man who

was ill for thirty-eight years and was marginalized is not as important as the respect of the Sabbath law. Jesus, who sees that man in pain and marginalized for so long, seeks to heal him and restore his life in the community as a work of God of life and concerned for the well-being of all his children. But for that group of Jews, what Jesus did was simply against the law and his justification is blasphemous.

Another or maybe the same group of Jews are mentioned in the beginning of the section of the Sukkoth Festival (Jn 7,1–10,21) as seeking to kill Jesus (Jn 7,1). But even with that threat on his life, Jesus, as an observant Jew, went up from Galilee to Jerusalem to attend the Feast of Tabernacles. During that Festival, Jesus courageously goes to the temple and teach his fellow Jews assembled there. And a group of them marvels at his teaching: “How is that this man has learning, when he has never studied?” (Jn 7,15). And Jesus takes the opportunity to challenge those Jews who are seeking to kill him for not keeping the law received from Moses: “Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?” (Jn 7,20). The people answer: “You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?” (Jn 7,21). Jesus makes his point clearer regarding the law and their attitude: “If on the sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the sabbath I made a man’s whole body well? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (Jn 7,23–24). Jesus takes the opportunity to question their interpretation of the law, showing the deep contradiction their position holds.

In chapter 8, the Evangelist mentions a group of Jews who believed in Jesus following his teaching (Jn 8,30). Jesus invites them to go further in their initial faith in him and “abide” in his word so that they may know the truth, the truth that will liberate them (Jn 8,31–32). But not getting the point of his message of truth and liberation, this group of Jews strongly resists Jesus’ invitation (Jn 8,33–36). Jesus, in response, strongly challenges their claims of freedom as descendants of Abraham: “I know you are descendants of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me, because my words find no place in you” (Jn 7,37); “now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. You do the works of your father” (Jn 8,41). It is in the context of this particular controversy on the truth from God which Jesus reveals and incarnates (Cf. Jn 14,6) that Jesus has those famous strong words towards this group of Jews: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (Jn 8,44a). Very sadly, in recent Western history, during the persecution of Jews in the last century, these words of Jesus were abused to designate all Jews as sons and daughters of the devil (See [Devillers 2005](#), pp. 117–18). Clearly in the context of John’s Gospel and of this particular passage, these words of Jesus, who is himself a Jew, are not used towards all his fellow Jews!

What follows in the narrative of the same chapter 8 of John clarifies even further the point Jesus wants to make here. In the same verse (8,44), Jesus continues explaining in which sense those Jews who refuse to receive the truth from God and want to kill him are “sons of the devil”: “[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8,44b). In refusing to receive the truth from God Jesus reveals and incarnates, those Jews are therefore not on the side of God and his truth (Cf. Jn 8,46–47). The reply of those Jews to Jesus, often forgotten on the discussion on this emotionally charged section of John’s Gospel, is not tender towards him: “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (Jn 8,48). This section ends violently with those Jews taking stones to throw at Jesus, but he escapes from them by hiding.

In calling Jesus a Samaritan, these Jews who had started to believe in him reject him as not one of them, they want to marginalize him, making him look strange and stranger. From his cultural background, an African reader will easily understand this verbal technique of downplaying the argument of a fellow member of the group by making him or her look like a stranger belonging to a despised tribe or group. And in saying that this person

is possessed by the devil, this will lead fellow members of a group to distance themselves from the accused person or even want to stone or kill him or her.

In chapter 9, we have another episode where Jesus takes the initiative again as in Jn 5, and gives sight to a marginalized person, a man born blind who was also a beggar in the vicinity of the temple of Jerusalem. This healing also happens on a sabbath day, causing the anger and indignation of another or the same group of Jews, here associated and sometimes identified with the Pharisees. In investigating the healing of the formerly blind man, this group of Jews declares that surely Jesus is not from God “for he does not keep the sabbath” (Jn 9,13). This group of Jews even doubts the veracity of the healing, questioning the parents of the man born blind (Jn 9,18-23). But the parents of this man, themselves Jews, are afraid of saying any words regarding the healing of their son and Jesus who did it, for fear of those Jews who had power and authority to exclude them from the synagogue: “For the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue” (Jn 9,22).

But the formerly blind man courageously discusses with this group of Jews contesting his healing as coming from God and accusing Jesus of being a sinner: “You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes, we know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will God listens to him. (...) if this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (Jn 9,30-33). This man is cast out for challenging this group of Jews and taking the side of Jesus, whom he had recognized as a prophet of God. Jesus, having heard that this man was cast out by that group of Jews, he finds him, opens a door, and welcome him as one of his followers, unmasking at the same time the blindness and injustice of those Pharisees/Jews (Jn 9,35-41). It is interesting to note that among that group of Jews/Pharisees, there is a schism, a division, some saying that Jesus was mad and had a demon, and others questioning how such a person could perform such miracle: “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” (Jn 9,16); “Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” (Jn 10,21).

In chapter 11, after the resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus, we find that many of the Jews who had come to mourn with the sisters Martha and Mary believe in Jesus (Jn 11,45). But some others who had witnessed the miracle go to report him to the Pharisees (Jn 11,46). So, the chief priests and the Pharisees gather the council, the Sanhedrin, and they decide to put Jesus to death, seeing the growing influence he has and fearing that “everyone will believe in him”, and the Roman colonizer therefore comes and destroys their holy place and their nation (Jn 11,47-48).

Ironically, this decision to kill Jesus then takes place with the collaboration of one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who has taken the side of the devil, “murderer and father of lies”, and the Roman colonizer forces. Thus, after organizing his arrest, a group of Jews hostile to Jesus take him to be judged and condemned to crucifixion by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. During Jesus’ trial, the question of his Kingship is central, and he is crucified as “King of the Jews”, after a group of influential Jews who had taken him to Pilate apostatizes, stating that: “We have no king but Caesar” (Jn 19,15). In his condemnation of death, the group of Jews who appear as leaders are identified as chief priests (Jn 18,35). Those Jews accusing Jesus of not being respectful of the law and of being blasphemous show themselves on the side of injustice, preferring the freedom of a brigand, Barabbas, to the innocent Jesus, and recognizing the Roman emperor colonizer as their only king!

In the process leading to his arrest and crucifixion, and eventually to this death, it is important to notice how Jesus reacts to this growing hostility towards him. He refuses a violent resistance from his disciples: “[Simon Peter], Put your sword into its sheath” (Jn 18,11a). But at the same time, he questions and denounces violence and injustice done to him: “If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” (Jn 18,23). This gives a model of non-violent resistance to the reader and the courage to denounce injustices in all its forms.

4. The Jews Favorable to Jesus the Messiah and Giver of Abundant Life

The criteria we have chosen to distinguish different individuals and groups of Jews in John's Gospel is their response to Jesus, especially the way they act towards his deeds and words of abundant life, the way they are or are not on the side of the marginalized, the poor, the way they do or do not promote justice, the way they do or do not take side of the colonizers.

In this African decolonial optic, one interesting Johannine character to look at is Nicodemus. This man is encountered at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, in the middle during the Sukkoth Festival, and at his death. He is a leader of the Jews and a Pharisee. Other Jews with a similar characteristic, power, and influence, as we have seen, are for the majority openly hostile to Jesus. They find him as someone who does not follow the law and who is blasphemous in his claims as the Christ, the Son of God. However, Nicodemus, who comes initially to Jesus at night for fear of being seen by others or because it is the most appropriate moment to have a personal encounter with him (Jn 3,1)⁵, shows different signs of being favorable to Jesus and his message and works of abundant life.

In Jn 3, Nicodemus comes at night to meet Jesus, attracted like many in Jerusalem by the signs/miracles Jesus is performing (Jn 2,23). For him, this is an indication that Jesus is a Rabbi, a teacher from God: "for no one could do these signs Jesus did, unless God was with him" (Jn 3,2). Being a leader of the Jews, probably a member of the Sanhedrin, and a Pharisee, a teacher of Israel (Jn 3,10), Nicodemus wants to know more about Jesus and his message and works from God. However, he does not understand the revelation of new life through faith in Jesus, the Son of God descended from Heaven, and his mission as God-sent savior of the world (3,3-21). After the initial dialogue with Jesus on the necessity for entering the Kingdom of God of being born again/from above, from water and the Spirit, Nicodemus remains puzzled and silent (3,11-21).

In Jn 7, during the Sukkoth Festival, Nicodemus in council with his colleagues, chief priests, and Pharisees, most of them hostile to Jesus and searching to arrest him, courageously speaks up on the side of justice, asking for a fair treatment of Jesus (Jn 7,44-52). He reminds his fellow colleagues of what their law asks of them as observant Jews: "Does our law judge a man without giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" (Jn 7,51). This intervention in favor of justice for Jesus makes him appear to his colleagues of the Sanhedrin as a follower of Jesus the false prophet (Jn 7,52).

In Jn 19, after the death of Jesus, Nicodemus comes with a great quantity of spices to assure an honorable and proper Jewish burial for Jesus (Jn 19,39). This time, he comes during the day and can be seen by all. He joins Joseph of Arimathea, another eminent Jew, a member of the council, a good and righteous man, according to Luke (Lk 23,50) and Mark (Mk 15,43), and who was also a rich man and a disciple of Jesus, according to Matthew (Mt 27,57). For John, Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple of Jesus for "fear of the Jews" (Jn 19,38). Together, only John's Gospel associates them, they give a decent and proper Jewish funeral to Jesus. For some commentators, the great amount of spices used for the funeral reminded them of the funeral of Herod the great and this could be interpreted as a royal funeral done for Jesus the King of the Jews (See [Brown 1970](#), p. 960). While Joseph of Arimathea is clearly mentioned as a disciple of Jesus, for Nicodemus nothing is said. The (African) reader, seeing what Nicodemus does, especially the great amount of spices he brings to honor the body of Jesus (Jn 19,39), and the risk he takes to associate himself openly with Joseph of Arimathea, another good and righteous man, may infer that Nicodemus had also become a secret disciple of Jesus, even if this is not mentioned in the text but shown.

That "fear of the Jews", seen already among the group of Jews favorable to Jesus in Jerusalem (Jn 7,13) and those who would believe in him as the Messiah (Jn 9,22), present also among Jesus' disciples (Jn 11,8; 20,19), has made Joseph of Arimathea and maybe also Nicodemus, secret disciples of Jesus (Jn 19,38). Even a group of Jewish authorities, this time "for fear of the Pharisees" (Jn 12,42), does not openly confess their faith in Jesus, "lest they should be put out of the synagogue, for they loved the praise of men more than

the praise of God" (Jn 19,42-43). But with their actions in favor of Jesus, for his burial, with such courage in public and much respect shown with that enormous quantity of spices (Jn 19,39), we can see that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea have overcome that fear. This is the courage Jesus will ask of his disciples in his farewell discourse, preparing for the time of persecution in his absence: "They will put you out of synagogues" (Jn 16,2), and in the world you will have tribulation, find peace in me, do not be afraid, "I have overcome the world" (Jn 16,33). And after his resurrection, appearing to his disciples, Jesus brings them the gift of that peace promised, and frees them from the fear of those Jews hostile to him and his followers (20,19-23). With that peace and the gift of the Holy Spirit in which they are born to new life in him, Jesus sends his disciples to continue his works of promoting abundant life for all, Jews and non-Jews alike.

A last group of Jews favorable to Jesus we want to mention here are those mentioned earlier, those who believed in him (Jn 11,45), after seeing the resurrection of Lazarus. They had come to show compassion to the bereaved sisters of Lazarus, they were already on the side of those suffering, and now, many of them adhere to the Messiah giver of life in abundance.

5. Conclusions

Our short study on the οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in John's Gospel has shown us that these are actually a mixed group of Jews which should be studied separately. What is important is not so much to identify who these Jews were, Pharisees, chief priests, religious leaders, political leaders, ordinary Jews of Israel, Judeans, or Galileans, but what they did and how they reacted to Jesus the Messiah, Son of God, who came from God to bring life in abundance to all.

Depending on their hostility or benevolence towards Jesus and his message, we could differentiate these different groups of Jews presented in John's Gospel. In being hostile to Jesus and to his message of love, inclusion, and restoration of life for the marginalized and suffering of his society, a person and a message challenging their legalism, these Jews have shown to the (African) reader an example not to follow and to denounce. We have seen in particular how Jesus challenged them in their project of killing him, and how the man born blind challenged their evaluation of Jesus as sinner and not from God while what he did was a clear sign of his coming from God.

On the other side, we have Jews who are favorable to Jesus and his message. They recognize in him a teacher sent from God, a man who does good and who, unlike their fellow leaders, is a good shepherd ready to give his own life for the sake of his sheep (Jn 10,11). These Jews show themselves as righteous people asking, in the case of Nicodemus, for a fair treatment of Jesus according to the law. Although afraid of persecution like the disciples of Jesus and other Jews who had believed in him, some of them, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, were courageous enough to take public action in favor of Jesus, even though Jesus was already dead; they took the risk of appearing publicly favorable to him. It looks like with the gift of his life for his sheep, his death, the good shepherd-King of the Jews had freed some of them from their fear and made them act publicly as his disciples. The (African) reader or listener of this Gospel will therefore feel invited to follow the example of these Jews favorable to Jesus, overcoming his/her own fear of others, leaders or not, taking publicly the side for justice, supporting those who bring more life to others, following Jesus who came to give life in abundance to all.

In portraying these various groups of Jews in his Gospel, the Evangelist John probably wanted to guide the reader or listener of his Gospel, to see how this Gospel rooted in a Jewish context and filled with Jewish characters, was calling to take distance from a certain group of influential Jews hostile to Jesus and side with others favorable to him. As the Prologue of the Gospel puts it: "[Jesus] the true light that enlightens every man [and woman] came to this own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1,12). This new life in God through faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God, is therefore offered to all Jews

and non-Jews. And the question of one identity in front of Jesus, Jew or non-Jew, becomes secondary. When one is born of God, born from above, born again, what matters is not to be Jew or not, what matters is to embrace the path of life in abundance granted by God through his Son Jesus, to believe in him, and to become his witness in public and without fear like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, and many other Jewish anonymous believers of Jesus savior of the world.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The translation of the *Οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι* into English has been subject to discussion among scholars, some suggesting “Judeans” as more appropriate following their historical investigation on the matter, other choosing the more general “Jews” not limited to the geographical region of Judea. We take this second option. For a summary of the discussion, Cf. (Reinhartz 2018b, pp. 128–29).
- ² We do not ignore that there have been different African approaches to the biblical text, from the Church Fathers, Origen and Augustin, to Colonial and Prosperity Gospel approaches. Here, we choose to follow this most recent one: African Biblical Hermeneutics, as developed by A. M. Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies* (London: T & T Clark, 2023) and *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus* (Louisville, KY: WJKP). In our humble view, it corresponds better to the contemporary postcolonial African audience (Ngwa 2022).
- ³ In our own study of this pericope we have come to the conclusion that this royal official may also be a Jew. (Kamanzi 2020, p. 296).
- ⁴ Our Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version Bible, Second Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).
- ⁵ Scholars give different interpretations of this coming at night: for fear of the Jews, the night as symbol for ignorance, unbelief or sin, the night being the favorable moment for discussion and study for rabbis, the night underlying the secrecy in which a prophet reveals secrets of the Kingdom of God... (Zumstein 2014, p. 114, n. 27).

References

- Bennema, Cornelis. 2009a. *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John*. Colorado Springs: Paternoster.
- Bennema, Cornelis. 2009b. The Identity and Composition of *οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι* in the Gospel of John. *Tyndale Bulletin* 60: 239–63. [CrossRef]
- Brown, Raymond E. 1970. *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*. AB 29A. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. 1971. *The Gospel of John*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Devillers, Luc. 2005. *La Saga de Siloé: Jésus et la fête des Tentés (Jean 7,1–10,21)*. Lire la Bible 143. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf.
- Kamanzi, Michel Segatagara. 2020. *Le Second Signe de Cana: Etude exégétique et théologique de Jn 4,46–54*. Lectio Divina 275. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf.
- Magesa, Laurenti. 1997. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books.
- Martyn, J. Louis. 2003. *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. Louisville: WJKP.
- Mbuvi, Andrew M. 2023. *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies*. London: T & T Clark.
- Ngwa, Kenneth N. 2022. *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus*. Louisville: WJKP.
- Reinhartz, Adele. 2018a. *Cast Out of The Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John*. Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic.
- Reinhartz, Adele. 2018b. The Jews of the Fourth Gospel. In *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*. Edited by Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. De Boer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 121–37.
- Tolmie, D. François. 2005. The *Ἰουδαῖοι* in the Fourth Gospel: A Narratological Perspective. In *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*. Edited by Gilbert Van Belle, Jan G. Van Der Watt and Petrus Maritz. BETL 184. Leuven: Leuven University, pp. 377–97.
- Zumstein, Jean. 2014. *L'Évangile Selon Saint Jean (1–12)*. Commentaire du Nouveau Testament Iva. Genève: Labor et Fides.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.