

**REVIEW**

Terence L. Donaldson

*Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament:  
Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations*

(Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), xi + 176 pp.

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In his most recent book, Terence Donaldson studies New Testament texts that have been found by many to be painfully (and by some, irredeemably) anti-Jewish. While confronting texts that are heavily fraught with a history of anti-Jewish interpretation, he resists the urge to minimize that history either for the sake of his Christian faith or his sensitivity to the danger they pose and the damage they have done. Donaldson demonstrates in chapter after chapter, in interpretations of text after text, that passages in the New Testament can be and have been interpreted in ways that have distanced Christians and Jews. However, he refuses simply to defend or reject these texts. Rather, he insists that critical study of the history of the communities that produced these texts, as well as of later communities who used them, reveals levels of complexity for interpreters. In each chapter Donaldson demonstrates that the writings of the New Testament have been interpreted in ways that point to very different and even contradictory ideas about the relationship between Christians and Jews.

Donaldson begins by presenting the problem of anti-Judaism in the New Testament within the context of the history of Christian anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and post-Holocaust Christian theology. After analyzing the terms “anti-Semitism,” “anti-Judaism,” and “supersessionism” in relation to the writings of the New Testament, he presents the matrix of variables he will use in his study. In order to interpret statements relating to Jews and Judaism in the various books of the New Testament, he examines the ways that the original author “understood and constructed the identity of the group to which he and his readers belonged” vis-à-vis the Jewish community. He then turns to the “location of the author and intended readers” in the ongoing process of separation between “Christianity” and “Judaism.” (Donaldson uses quotation marks, pointing to the problematic nature of these terms in the first centuries.) The final variable is “the rhetorical character of the text,” which includes features such as tone and polemic, which are necessary for analyzing the author’s reasons for writing (p. 28). The distinction between the first and second variables is not always clear, and Donaldson applies different tools to different books. For example, the interpretive challenges for Paul’s letters are different from those for the Gospels, since, as Donaldson writes, in the letters “we have much more explicit information about the identity and life-situation of the author and his intended readers than was the case” with the Gospels (p. 137). Still, the idea of applying a more or less consistent historical and rhetorical methodology to different and diverse books of the New Testament is a very helpful model of interpretation in general.

The main body of the book contains four chapters in which Donaldson employs his matrix of variables in order to determine whether or not troubling passages in Matthew, John, Luke-Acts, and the writings of Paul should be judged as anti-Jewish or supersessionist. For example, is Jesus’ accusation that the Jews are descended from “the devil” (John 8:44) an indictment of Jews for all

time? In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, which emphasize specific groups of Jewish leaders as Jesus' opponents, the Gospel of John condemns "the Jews." For some interpreters, the fact that John's dualism places the Jews together with all that is evil in the world (in contrast to Jesus, who is light and life) has led some of the faithful to feel an aversion to all Jews at all times (p. 83). Others have defended the Gospel of John, arguing that the rhetoric must be understood in light of the historical context of the author of the Fourth Gospel. The Evangelist knew that Jesus and his earliest followers were all Jews, of course. Perhaps "the Jews" condemned in this Gospel are only the Jews of John's time, who refused to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Donaldson helpfully evaluates these various interpretations with balance. Here and elsewhere, he succeeds in showing that many texts in the New Testament are somewhat less troubling when viewed within the context of early Christian struggles for identity. However, he does not hesitate to show that the use of these New Testament texts and ideas is never "innocent" (p. 156). Interpretations often have real-life consequences. Also, he does not simply leave the reader with multiple interpretive possibilities. In his final chapter, he offers a series of principles upon which to base interpretations that both "treat the New Testament with integrity as...canonical Scripture" and "is sensitive to the Church's legacy of supersessionism, anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism" (p. 153).

Many books have been written about anti-Judaism in the New Testament, as Donaldson demonstrates in his useful bibliography. Indeed, he discusses many of those studies in his own review of interpretive possibilities. But *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament* is written clearly and without academic jargon, making it an accessible introduction to the subject. Donaldson includes an excellent bibliography, and he refers his readers to many important studies on the topic. This book should be read by graduate students and Jewish and Christian clergy, and by anyone concerned with the relationship between Jews and Christians. Indeed, he provides a model of an academically rigorous approach to this set of troubling religious texts while also recognizing their centrality to Christian faith.