

Michael G. Azar
Exegeting the Jews:
The Early Reception of the Johannine “Jews”
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In a March 2017 open letter protesting the Italian Biblical Association’s choice of a title for its upcoming annual meeting, Rabbi Giuseppe Laras of Milan also remarked that the advances in Catholic-Jewish relations made since Vatican II are “contradicted on a daily basis by the homilies of the pontiff, who employs precisely the old, inveterate structure and its expressions.” Rabbi Laras was referring to Pope Francis’ tendency to revert to the centuries-old stereotypes of Pharisees as cold-hearted, legalistic critics of Jesus in his daily *Domus Sanctae Martae* homilies. Jewish and Catholic commentators have noted that the pope often deploys these tropes not against contemporary Jews but against his critics within the Catholic Church. Thus “the Pharisees” become a site for current debates within the Church.

As Michael A. Azar demonstrates, this exegetical and rhetorical strategy is not new to the Christian world. His monograph, published in Brill’s “The Bible in Ancient Christianity” series, is a revision of Azar’s Fordham University doctoral dissertation. The starting point for this volume is a critical examination of the modern scholarly assumption that the reception history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the Gospel of John and, in particular, its polemic against “the Jews” has been at the foundation of modern antisemitism. Azar aims not to deny that anti-Jewish themes are present in patristic readings of the New Testament, but rather to demonstrate that John’s “Jews” were often understood within the framework of spiritual exegetical methodologies and thus read as types of various opponents within the Church. Azar closely examines the three sole Greek patristic texts which systematically interpret the Gospel of John in their entirety: Origen’s *Commentary on John*, John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on John*, and Cyril of Alexandria’s *Commentary on John*. These works, according to Azar, read John’s “Jews” not as referents to contemporary Jews, but as typologies of other Christians.

In a succinct introduction, Azar calls into question “the stereotyping and totalizing manner in which contemporary scholars have often understood Gentile

readings of John's 'Jews'" (p. 7). He therefore recommends a critical reassessment of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of John's gospel that uncritically "links these late ancient thinkers to modern antisemitism" (p. 8). In each of the next three chapters, he studies one of the patristic authors named above and then presents a conclusion with a summary and his reflections.

In chapter one he reviews twentieth-century scholarship linking the Gospel of John and its reception in early Christianity to antisemitism. Azar singles out James Parkes, Jules Isaac, Fadiev Lovsky, Gregory Baum, and Rosemary Ruether, who had great influence on reassessments of Jewish-Christian relations and specifically of John. He next considers the influence of these thinkers on biblical scholars for whom the identity of John's "Jews" became a central question starting in the middle of the twentieth century and of increasing importance over time. Conspicuously absent in this section is discussion of the scholarship of Raymond E. Brown, who made major contributions to our understanding of John and to Jewish-Christian relations. (Brown is mentioned minimally in otherwise very detailed footnotes and not listed in the Index). Obviously, choices about sources have to be made, though Brown's work is relevant. However, this omission does not detract from the author's ability to navigate and summarize the enormous body of scholarship. Azar concludes that "the vast majority of modern scholarship...continues to assume an entirely hostile [i.e., anti-Jewish] *Wirkungsgeschichte*," stemming from an "ethical awareness" of anti-Judaism in the period after Vatican II and due to growing Jewish-Christian engagement (p. 47).

Without ignoring anti-Jewish attitudes in patristic writings, the next three chapters expose how this totalizing assessment of modern scholarship on the Gospel of John does not adequately reflect the complexity of patristic exegesis. Azar notes that the "Jews" often served a paraenetic purpose, functioning as "a scriptural resource for the spiritual formation and delineation of [the Church Fathers'] Christian communities" (p. 51). Chapter two focuses on Origen *Commentary on John*, a work begun in Alexandria at a time when there was a minimal Jewish presence in that city and completed in Caesarea where there was a vibrant and active rabbinic community. Nevertheless, Origen reads the Johannine Jews not as referents to contemporary Jews, but, when read according to Alexandrian exegetical principles, as "types" of Origen's opponents—"corporeal Christians" (p. 70)—who rejected his spiritual teaching and adhered to a literal understanding of Christ and the biblical text. Chapter three treats John Chrysostom's *Homilies on John*. Despite Chrysostom's notorious hostility against Jews in his *Orations Against the Jews*, Azar maintains that the traditional assumptions about his exegesis are complicated by the *Homilies* in which the conflict between Jesus and "the Jews" typologically reflects John's own struggle to bring moral reform to his congregation. Chapter four deals with the complex figure of Cyril of Alexandria and his *Commentary on John*. While Cyril certainly came into conflict with Alexandrian Jews during his episcopacy, his exegesis of the Fourth Gospel reads "the Jews" as symbols of Christians who rejected fifth-century doctrinal orthodoxy. Christ is presented as an orthodox theologian and

“the Jews” are anti-Nicene Christians. In all of these cases, Azar notes that the figure of “the Jews” in these works is malleable and dependent on the thematic context.

Through close and careful reading of these patristic texts, this excellent study sheds important, critical light on the connections between exegetical tradition and the history of Jewish-Christian relations. Two questions remained for this reviewer. First, while the author’s argument is convincing, the Christian “opponents” at issue remain rather shadowy. Perhaps this is the nature of the evidence, but more attention might have been given to reconstructing the real ecclesial dynamics at the base of these exegeses. Second, scholars have noted that the distinction between “rhetorical” and “real” Jews is not always so clear. I suspect this may be true here. Nevertheless, Azar’s study is an important contribution that brings attention to the complexities of anti-Jewish rhetoric and its intra-ecclesial dynamics.