

**Sonya Shetty Cronin**  
***Raymond Brown, “The Jews,”***  
***and the Gospel of John:***  
***From Apologia to Apology***  
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In this unique study, a revised doctoral dissertation done with David Levenson at Florida State University, Sonya Shetty Cronin charts the evolution of New Testament scholar Raymond E. Brown’s statements touching on the thorny issue of the depiction of “the Jews” in the Gospel of John, culled from his earliest publication in 1960 to works published posthumously in 2003. Brown’s career began at the same time that the Catholic Church was re-examining both its teachings on the Jews and its attitudes towards Scripture. (*Nostra Aetate* and *Dei Verbum* were both published in 1965.) Brown, a faithful Catholic, both influenced and was influenced by these changes. In the spirit of full disclosure, I note that Brown was my dissertation advisor and friend.

After a survey of the background to Brown’s biblical interpretation, she begins with Brown’s first work on John in 1960, *The Gospel of John and the Johannine Epistles*. Cronin identifies typical replacement theology, an understanding of “the Jews” as referring to the Jewish leaders, no apparent concern with anti-Judaism, and no clear distinction between his own stance and the gospel author’s. In his authoritative Anchor Bible commentary on the Gospel of John (1966-70), he broadens the possible meanings of “the Jews” (now in quotation marks) and places the hostility toward the Jews in post-70 C.E. conflicts of John’s time, while distancing himself from the evangelist. By 1975, in an article in the journal *Worship*, he identifies John’s deliberate intent to incriminate “the Jews,” and in his *Community of the Beloved Disciple* (1979) he uses the term “anti-Judaism” for the first time. In *The Death of the Messiah* (1994), he first mentions *Nostra Aetate* (though finding its theological solution to the deicide charge inadequate) and actively addresses the topic of anti-Judaism. His final publication before his death, *A Retreat with John the Evangelist* (1998), is a devotional work where the evangelist speaks, via Brown’s imagining, in the first person. He acknowledges that his anger over his community’s expulsion from the synagogue

drove his language about “the Jews” of his own time and that he regrets later stigmatizing Jews with his words (p. 122). This is the “apology” referred to in the book’s subtitle. Finally, she looks at a statement from the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001). Brown was part of the drafting committee, but the final work, published after his death, muted his concern for anti-Judaism and mangled his sympathetic portrayal of non-Christian Jews. Cronin says mildly, “Brown would be in disagreement” (pp. 152-53). An illuminating final chapter compares Brown to other Johannine scholars, who show a stunning range of attitudes regarding the gospel’s depiction of the Jews, from Ernst Haenchen’s utter insensitivity to such issues to Alan Culpepper’s recognition of the ethical challenge posed by the gospel. Cronin sees Brown’s as unique in his combination of historical understanding with his direct caution to readers against anti-Judaism, as well as the early stage at which he recognized the problem.

The work is extremely readable, and Cronin has distilled a considerable amount of scholarship by Brown and others. Sifting the material requires painstaking attention to detail, and because of Brown’s caution and fondness for understatement, she must assign weight to what look like minor revisions. The significance of the changes comes into relief when she compares his ideas with other Johannine scholars.

Cronin has captured the essence of Brown’s approach in her sentence, “Brown thought historical truth was important, regardless of the findings” (p. 181). As she notes, he alienated scholars on the right and left—on one side, because he did not insist that every event in the gospel was historical, and on the other because he did not jettison difficult material. He retained to the end the idea that some Jews were implicated in Jesus’ death and that members of John’s community were expelled from the synagogue. Cronin’s judicious language is reminiscent of Brown’s.

Cronin chronicles Brown’s career as it unfolded in tandem with major changes in the Catholic Church and its relation to Judaism. His first book was published in 1960, the same year that Jules Isaac met with Pope John XXIII and encouraged him to reconsider traditional Catholic views on Jews and Judaism. The first volume of his John commentary came out following *Nostra Aetate*. A particularly interesting tidbit is the knowledge of Brown’s presence at the Second Vatican Council. He served as scholarly advisor to archbishop Joseph Hurley, who had criticized Pope Pius XII for doing too little both to oppose the Nazis and to help the Jews during World War II. (Hurley had ordained Raymond Brown in 1953.)

The author’s appreciation for Brown is evident, and although she identifies weak spots in his presentations, she also defends him against all comers. Her critique of Dominic Crossan, who was a critic of what he saw as Brown’s ambiguity and of his historical methods, is severe. However, I share Crossan’s frustration at Brown’s expressions like “not implausible,” especially when the issue at hand is later asserted as probable. She finds it merely “odd” that Brown’s *Introduction to the New Testament* (1997), published towards the end of his life, did not include a

section on anti-Judaism. Also, she calls Brown's inconsistent presentation of the views of the evangelist (who, he says, both intended and, he imagines in *Retreat*, did not intend to present "the Jews" so negatively) as "tricky" (p. 122).

Finally, are Brown's final remarks in the voice of the evangelist a true apology? She notes that the strange but personal style of *Retreat* can leave us wondering. Cronin says that the words of the evangelist (as imagined by Brown) are "not exactly an apology" (p. 123). Indeed, Brown's evangelist says "Quite frankly, I never gave a thought to Jews (or others) who had never heard of Jesus or Jews of future generations and I sincerely regret that my words were applied to them." Perhaps it is the best we can expect, especially as Brown elsewhere declines to "condemn or justify" first-century believers or their opponents (p. 99). Similarly she says Brown was able to "repent" as one linked to the sins of John the Evangelist. It is quite a narrow path, to maintain the crucial importance of an accurate reconstruction of John's historical situation, to assert John's intentionally negative depiction of the Jews, to decline to pass judgment, to argue that future generations must not use this material for anti-Jewish actions, and to acknowledge that many Christians have done so. Perhaps this is repentance, but it is highly qualified. Brown as an individual respected Judaism and enjoyed his Jewish friends' holidays and practices. Cronin shows the intellectual journey that was part of that appreciation.