

# Reading John with Reinhartz: Reception of and Reflections on *Cast Out of the Covenant*

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Adele Reinhartz's *Cast Out of the Covenant* is multivalent in that it addresses a handful of Johannine puzzles, both ancient and modern. Reinhartz reconsiders the anti-Jewish rhetoric of the Fourth Gospel, the context of its composition, and impact of its translation and usage in the modern world. Because of this complexity, I will reflect on the book along three different tracks. I will give my general impressions of the book, assess a few key arguments, and reflect on how this book was received in my classroom.

## General Impressions

*Cast Out of the Covenant* is a devastatingly compelling book.<sup>1</sup> Although I broke up with John years ago (it wasn't him, it was me), I took a certain comfort in thinking that Adele Reinhartz was reading the Fourth Gospel sympathetically, even if critically and with reservation.<sup>2</sup> Of course, anyone who has heard Reinhartz lecture in the last five years has been waiting for the other shoe to drop. Finally it has, and the verdict is in: the Fourth Gospel's Jewishness is not an inoculation against its anti-Jewishness. In fact, the Gospel might not be Jewish at all.

It is this final point that has had the most impact on me. She argues that the Fourth Gospel is fundamentally anti-Jewish in rhetoric, programmatically supersessionist, and has caused considerable damage in the real world because of its evangelistic rhetoric. While these arguments aren't especially novel, they have never been better framed than in this book. She convincingly pushes back against Steve Mason's translation preferences and Louis Martyn's popular theory of

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<sup>1</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Lexington Books/Fortress Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See also, Adele Reinhartz, "Reflections on My Journey with John: A Retrospective from Adele Reinhartz," *Ancient Jew Review*, April 11, 2018; <https://www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2018/2/24/reflections-on-my-journey-with-john-a-retrospective-from-adele-reinhartz>

synagogue expulsion. These arguments provide a powerful corrective. But the thing that sticks with me is her suggestion that the Fourth Gospel drives a compulsory wedge between Jews and Christ-confessors in a way that makes it impossible to be both a child of God and a Jew. As such, the Gospel's anti-Jewish rhetoric actually negates its apparent (albeit misconstrued) Jewishness. I will address this further below.

*Cast Out of the Covenant* is meticulously argued, coherently structured, and written with clarity. Indeed, the overall presentation of this book is delightful. Even my students who are not familiar with the style of academic monographs found the book engaging. This book serves as a useful introduction to anti-Jewish rhetoric, several important Johannine themes and passages, and the complexities of translating *Ioudaioi*. It is a superb introduction to Christian supersessionism and the so-called “parting of the ways.” Importantly, it meets readers in the present as it continues an important thread in Jewish-Christian dialogue.

### **Assessment of Key Arguments**

Although *Cast Out of the Covenant* is multivalent in argumentation, Reinhartz's most prominent interlocutor is Louis Martyn, specifically his theory of the Johannine community's expulsion.<sup>3</sup> Martyn—garnering scholarly consensus—argued that the Fourth Gospel was composed within and for a group that enjoyed synagogue affiliation while also holding to Jesus as messiah. Key to Martyn's theory was the group's ultimate expulsion, thus creating a traumatic parting between the synagogue and the Christ followers. Within this construct, the Fourth Gospel's anti-Jewish rhetoric demonstrates a reaction to a traumatic break up. It also explains why the story contains so many Jewish elements. Finally, Martyn's theory (whether intended or not) has motivated many interpreters to forgive the anti-Jewish rhetoric because (1) it represents in-group polemic and (2) it represents a reaction to trauma by a marginalized people.

Like so very many popular reconstructions in New Testament studies, Martyn's expulsion theory is ripe for reconsideration. There are just far too many assumptions at work and Reinhartz is well-positioned to reevaluate the theory. Indeed, one of the chief strengths of *Cast Out of the Covenant* is Reinhartz's critical reassessment of a theory that has been taken for granted for far too long. Central to her critique is this puzzle: “One wonders, however, whether such a group, no matter how angry about their expulsion from the synagogue, would have resonated with the stark dissociation from the label *Ioudaioi* that is so central to

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<sup>3</sup> Louis J. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003).

Johannine rhetoric.”<sup>4</sup> Martyn’s theory seemingly explains why the Fourth Gospel can be simultaneously Jewish and anti-Jewish, but it can’t explain the almost wholesale demonization of Jews.

Reinhartz offers an alternative theory. The Fourth Gospel is a tool to convince urbanite pagans (who may have been somewhat familiar with Jewish life) in Asia Minor to become children of God by supplanting “the Jews” as recipients of Israel’s covenantal relationship with God. Reinhartz’s theory is difficult to dispute. And while it leans at times on imaginative reconstruction, she is well aware of the limits of theoretical constructs and carefully offers the necessary caveats. In the end, her theory that John targeted Asia Minor urbanite pagans is just as plausible as Louis Martyn’s theoretical expulsion theory. My guess is that Johannine scholars of future generations will not be able to appeal to Martyn’s theory of provenance without balancing it with Reinhartz’s alternative.

I will offer two critical notes. First, Reinhartz plays with rhetorical analysis early and often. While I found her use of rhetorical theorists (both ancient and modern) helpful, I couldn’t help but remember an essay by Thomas Boomershine that deserved mention.<sup>5</sup> It’s an obscure essay and the only reason that I know it is because I served as one of the editors for the publication. Perhaps then it’s bad form to call out such an omission. Even so, Boomershine deals directly with interactive performance in the first century, with specific attention to John’s anti-Jewish rhetoric. Boomershine suggests that a better understanding of the dynamics between performer and audience might help us rethink the evangelistic encounter as mediated through the Fourth Gospel. Because Boomershine lands (*contra* Reinhartz) with evidence for a late first-century Jewish audience for the Fourth Gospel, it would have been interesting to see Reinhartz interact with that essay. Second, in my work on narrative representations of Jesus’s family, I have often wondered about the tendency in some new religious movements to shun biological family members to promote a new family of believers. Reinhartz hints in this direction when she describes the audience of the Fourth Gospel as “an exclusive family of choice. Joining this family requires separating from other powerful family or family-like affiliation.”<sup>6</sup> While Reinhartz appeals to several social psychologists (helpfully so!), I would have liked to see her

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<sup>4</sup> Reinhartz, *Cast Out*, 135.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas E. Boomershine, “The Medium and Message of John: Audience Address and Audience Identity in the Fourth Gospel” in *The Fourth Gospel in First-Century Media Culture*, ed. Anthony Le Donne and Tom Thatcher (LNTS 426; London: T&T Clark, 2012), 92–120.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhartz, *Cast Out*, 43; see also p. 23.

interact with specialists of new religious movements on this point.<sup>7</sup> In truth, this lacuna can't be called an omission. But future work on John's audience might benefit from this line of research.

One final point of exegesis is warranted before moving on to matters of pedagogical reception. Reinhartz considers various theories about *which* Jews are targeted by the Fourth Gospel's polemic and ends up supporting those who read *hoi Ioudaioi* as a designation of Jews as a whole.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the phrase does not refer to "these Jews," inhabitants of Judea, or subsets of certain Jewish leaders. In her view, the Fourth Evangelist means to condemn almost all Jews (save the few who have adopted Christocentric worship). Reinhartz goes further to suggest that the designation is ultimately only appropriate for Jewish outsiders of the community that John seeks to create. She writes that "the Gospel constructs a profound chasm—or high wall—between his compliant audience and those who reject his claims. No member of God's family can be a *Ioudaios*; no *Ioudaios* can be a child of God."<sup>9</sup> Thus her translation undermines well-intentioned translations (e.g. the New Living Translation) which translates *hoi Ioudaioi* as "the Jewish leaders." Moreover, this reading undermines many progressive Christian preachers who attempt to incorporate John into modern, philo-Jewish theologies. That said, as I have argued elsewhere, I prefer her translation.<sup>10</sup>

### **Pedagogical Reception**

I recently assigned *Cast Out of the Covenant* to a class of seven students at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. The class title was "Johannine Theology" and focused (albeit only in part) on the Fourth Gospel's anti-Jewish rhetoric. Most of my students were Christians immersed in the African American Church experience. Some were rural, midwestern, white Americans connected to the "renewalist" (cf. charismatic) Christian experience. Very few in this class had been exposed to the conceptual problems associated with the rhetorical use of Jews and

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. Doni Whitsett and Stephen A. Kent, "Cults and Families," *Cultic Studies Review* 3.2 (2004): 491–502.

<sup>8</sup> Reinhartz, *Cast Out*, 97–98.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhartz, *Cast Out*, 43. It is possible that Reinhartz considers Jesus in John 4 (who is both a Jew and the son of God) to be an exception to this rule (68–73, 148).

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Le Donne, "Complicating the Category of *Ethnos* toward Poliscentrism: A Possible Way Forward within Second Temple Ethnography," in *The Urban World and the First Christians*, ed. Steve Walton, Paul R. Trebilco, and David W.J. Gill (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 3–19.

Judaism in Christian writings. One of my students wrote, “Reading Dr. Reinhartz’s book was my first encounter with the anti-Jewish/anti-Semitic overtones of John.” Another student wrote (as if chiding the Fourth Evangelist) a reflection, saying, “Aren’t you called to love not only your neighbors but your enemies? . . . Do you truly see Jews as your enemy? Do they not deserve the same love and acceptance that you have received in your life?” My students are lovely people, capable of critical reflection and compassion.

I call out this reception context for three reasons. First, Reinhartz reveals something of herself in this book and so some degree of reciprocity is perhaps appropriate. Second, while my primary expertise is in New Testament, my more recent work relates to Jewish-Christian dialogue. As such, my reading of *Cast Out of the Covenant* is inevitably colored by my own interests. Third, while I am culturally and doctrinally entrenched within Christianity, I am not charismatic, nor am I Black, nor am I from the rural Midwest. My own social placement is only ever adjacent to the lived experience of my students. Conversely, while I lived in Canada for a few years and while I’m invested in Jewish well-being, I find myself opposite to Reinhartz along multiple borders. As an Italian male from the North Bay Area, my understanding of the lived experience of Adele Reinhartz—a Jewish, Torontonion, daughter of Holocaust survivors—is minimal. For these reasons, I read her book with a sense of otherness, including nationality, religion, race, gender, and the many and varied fault lines left by the Shoah. So I did not read Reinhartz’s book passively. Rather, I was an active (and, too often, inadequate) mediator between the author and my students.

As a Christian educator of seminarians, it is often my job to teach would-be preachers how to present the Bible as good news. When it comes to the Fourth Gospel, a large part of my job involves convincing Christians to avoid anti-Jewish theology. *We can preach good news*, I argue, *without inventing a bad guy to overcome*. With this in mind, I point out the programmatic vitriol of the Fourth Gospel that needs to be understood rather than echoed. The delicate part, of course, is that most of my Christian students simply cannot divorce themselves from their sacred, authoritative text. So even if they choose to read the Fourth Gospel critically, they will continue to read with the eyes of belief. Sad but true: if my students are forced to choose between the authority of the Fourth Gospel and philo-Judaism, many will likely choose the former. It is therefore beneficial to me to have a coherent theory of composition that accounts for the Fourth Gospel’s ultimate Jewishness. *Remember*, I repeat, *Jesus, John, Peter, Mary, Mary, and Mary (and all of the other Marys) were Jews! Keep this in mind when the Gospel says nasty things about “the Jews.”* While perhaps simplistic, this makes sense to my students

and allows them space to wrestle with the tension between John's Jewishness and anti-Jewishness.

In assigning *Cast Out of the Covenant*, I knew that I was taking a risk. There is no doubt that Reinhartz provides a resonant and eloquent voice. And there is no doubt that the topics she treats are necessary discussion points. And there is no doubt that Reinhartz treats these topics with nuance. In all of these ways, her book is the perfect supplementary text for a class on Johannine Theology. All the same, this book has the potential to reveal John as something other than good news. It is difficult to walk away from Reinhartz's beautifully written book and not view the Fourth Gospel as thoroughly anti-Jewish, supersessionist, and ultimately deceptive.

At the end of her book, Reinhartz asks, "Are there those for whom this Gospel is authoritative who would also feel bound to uphold its anti-Jewish stance?"<sup>11</sup> The answer, as she fears, is yes. The students in my classroom do not "see Jews as benighted Christ-killers" but they do lean toward supersessionism and will lean into it all the more if/when Reinhartz convinces them that the Fourth Gospel is fundamentally supersessionist.

I squirmed a bit while reading *Cast Out of the Covenant*. I am ready, willing, and able to call the Fourth Gospel anti-Jewish. Indeed, I've done so often in classrooms, Jewish-Christian dialogue, and professional publication. But I was not ready to call the Fourth Gospel un-Jewish. To be quite honest, I'm still not ready.

At this point, I'm speaking as an educator rather than a historian. So I am saying less about the merit of Reinhartz's reconstruction and more about how I will use it in my classroom to generate discussion. Simply put, Reinhartz's book is wonderfully useful as a way into a Johannine puzzle: Is John's anti-Jewish rhetoric a feature of John's Jewishness? Or is John's anti-Jewish rhetoric a feature of John's departure from Jewishness? I have always taken the first view, but I am reconsidering this view after reading *Cast Out of the Covenant*.

In my attempt to communicate these alternative frameworks for John's rhetoric to my students, I offered two cinematic analogies. The first is *The Godfather* (1972); the second is *Malcom X* (1992). Both films are important to me, if for different reasons. Both I have loved for years. In addition, and importantly, my recent study of various hegemonic and subordinate masculinities has given me new eyes for both films. Although I cannot view these films as I once did, I continue to appreciate them with new eyes. While there isn't space to address representations of gender here, both films deal with particular ethnic borders

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<sup>11</sup> Reinhartz, *Cast Out*, 164

familiar to American culture. While offering the necessary caveat that no analogy is perfect, I pointed to these two films as possible models for understanding border-transgressing polemics. Noteworthy here is the fact that *The Godfather* wasn't aimed only at Italian Americans, nor was *Malcolm X* only intended for Black Muslims. Indeed, these supposed "in-groups" were only a small fraction of their wider audiences.

To say that *The Godfather* is revered is an understatement. Few films have enjoyed the popular and critical receptions that this film boasts. It may seem redundant therefore to point out that many Italian Americans have a special connection to this film. I risk this redundancy because I am an Italian American male in my mid-forties. Moreover, I am from California where my Italian roots were less important than my cultural assimilation. Connecting to this film as a young man gave me something that my dead grandparents couldn't: a symbolic shorthand for an old-world collectivism (even if fictional). It may also be significant to note that when the film was first released in 1972, Italian Americans were on the cusp of "whiteness." Although not fully realized, the privileges that come with whiteness were within reach. It would only take another generation (my generation) before cultural assimilation would change our fates.<sup>12</sup> My reception of the film, therefore, was what Reinhartz (citing Suzanne Keen) calls "bounded strategic empathy." This is when a story informs an in-group, building from a sense of mutuality, and building to a sense of familiarity.<sup>13</sup> Even so, *The Godfather* portrays Italians as murderous, vengeful, conniving racists.

In an attempt to claim the Italian experience as the quintessential American experience, the story draws parallels between war for/within one's country and war for/within one's family. The viewer is left to consider violence in context: when is it heroic and when is it criminal? And how much should the defense of one's in-group change from generation to generation? In this way and several other crucial ways, the story presented by Puzo and Coppola is both Italian and anti-Italian. Could it be, I suggested to my students, that the Fourth Gospel is a bit like this film? *Is John's anti-Jewish rhetoric a feature of John's Jewishness?*

As someone with my religious background, I know what I risk making this suggestion. In a world where the Shoah is recent history, we Christians must not eschew our responsibility for how we have used the Fourth Gospel's rhetoric. Jon Levenson might be right when he claims, "Nowhere does Christianity betray

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it only took three generations for my family to leave the coal mines and enter higher education.

<sup>13</sup> Reinhartz, *Cast Out*, 33.

its indebtedness to Judaism more than in its supersessionism.”<sup>14</sup> But Reinhartz is undoubtedly correct too: “The Jewishness of the [Fourth] Gospel is not an antidote to its anti-Jewishness, but part and parcel thereof.”<sup>15</sup>

Of course, there are a few crucial differences between *The Godfather’s* portrait of Italian-American identity and the Fourth Gospel’s portrait of Jewish identity. Most notable, with *The Godfather*, we know who wrote the story, filmed the story, and how this story was generally received. We can’t say the same of the Fourth Gospel. It may well have been written by someone who considered himself *from* the Jews once, but no longer *of* the Jews. Moreover, as Reinhartz suggests, the Fourth Gospel may have been written for gentiles who would lay claim to Israel’s key symbols by expropriating tactics. If her suggestion is correct, the Fourth Gospel’s anti-Jewish rhetoric is a poor comparison to *The Godfather*.

With her thesis in mind, I wonder whether Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* is the better analogy. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (the book upon which the film was based) was assigned to me in my first college classroom.<sup>16</sup> It had such a profound impact on me that I was forced to reconsider notions of whiteness, nationality, and the in-group narratives I’d grown to consider sacred. For me, this book had all of the features of what Reinhartz calls “evangelizing empathy.”<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>14</sup>The context of this quotation is necessary to understand Levenson’s program: “Radically transformed but never uprooted, the sacrifice of the first-born son constitutes a strange and usually overlooked bond between Judaism and Christianity and thus a major but unexplored focus for Jewish-Christian dialogue. In the past this dialogue has too often centered on the Jewishness of Jesus and, in particular, his putative roles of prophet and sage. In point of fact, however, those roles, even if real, have historically been vastly less important in Christian tradition than Jesus’s identity as sacrificial victim, the son handed over to death by his loving father or the lamb who takes away the sins of the world. This identity, ostensibly so alien to Judaism, was itself constructed from Jewish reflection on the beloved sons of the Hebrew Bible, reflection that long survived the rise of Christianity and has persisted into the post-Holocaust era. The bond between Jewry and the Church that the beloved son constitutes is, however, enormously problematic. For the longstanding claim of the Church that it supersedes the Jews, in large measure continues the old narrative pattern in which a late-born son dislodges his first-born brothers, with varying degrees of success. Nowhere does Christianity betray its indebtedness to Judaism more than in its supersessionism” (Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993], x).

<sup>15</sup> Reinhartz, *Cast Out*, xxxii.

<sup>16</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X (As told to Alex Haley)* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

<sup>17</sup> Reinhartz, *Cast Out*, 33.



sort of storied empathy aims to persuade the audience to join the disciples of the larger cause of Malcolm X. By the end of *Autobiography*, I desperately wanted to cast aside whatever cultural whiteness my family might have accumulated. (I was in my early twenties and had no clue what this meant.) After all, my new hero called white folks liars, oppressors, and devils. This book deconstructed me in ways that I still can't quite explain. Finally, Alex Haley's epilogue built me back up by suggesting that there might be room for someone like me as an ally. Spike Lee's ending doubles down on the evangelizing character of the story as children from North America and Africa stand up to proclaim, "I am Malcolm X!" Clearly the audience is meant to identify with the hero and the cause of the hero.

*Malcolm X* is the story of a Baptist's son who learns to cast off white culture and white religion in a journey to rediscover his true culture and religion. Along his journey he reclaims Black culture by repudiating his former life. He must learn to reinterpret his life from the ground up by reconsidering his language foundations, his notions of a white god, and several American narratives/symbols. Repudiation, in this story, is presented as justified, necessary, and heroic. And as painful as it is to name it, the hero repudiates Christianity in general, and the Black Christian experience in particular. This is something that my students and I can't echo, but it's something we can appreciate as allies.

Perhaps then, the Fourth Gospel is a bit like *Malcolm X*. The hero is *from* the group, but no longer *of* the group. It is a critique of a culture/religion that the author leaves behind, repudiates, and casts off. Moreover, the author means to persuade potential allies to do the same. If so, the Fourth Gospel's anti-Jewish rhetoric is a feature of John's departure from what the author considers to be "false" Jewishness. Of course, the analogy fails when we consider the differing legacy of these two stories. Christian use of the Fourth Gospel has caused incalculable harm.

Neither cinematic analogue is perfect. But these comparisons might be useful to illustrate the fundamental differences between Martyn's theory and Reinhartz's alternative.

### **Concluding Reflection**

*Cast Out of the Covenant* showcases a rare honesty in both voice and approach. Reinhartz bridges (in a few crucial ways) the usual distance between scholar and scholarship. She invites the reader toward her research with determined vulnerability. She risks detailing her long investment in the material, her social placement, and her vantage point as a scholar of the Fourth Gospel. At least for me and my little focus group, her risk pays off. We weren't just drawn by her argumentation, we were drawn by her voice, her experience with the text, and her

careful self-awareness. At the end of the day, if I am going to have my theology eviscerated, I want the doctor to have a steady hand.