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Dissent and disparagement: Dealing with conflict and the pain of rejection in John

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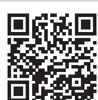

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This article addressed the issue of how the author of the Gospel according to John portrayed dissent, in particular, how the author had his protagonists respond to the experience of rejection by those typically designated as 'the Jews'. Research thus far has usually focused on the identity of the dissenters but rarely on the way dissent was handled. This article's aim was to examine the range of responses to dissent. It employed a sequential reading of the text to identify the various responses and then brought these findings into comparison with the way dissent was handled in related documents of the time, Matthew and Hebrews. It found that responses included not only argument and blame, including threat of divine wrath but also, beyond these, *ad hominem* allegations that those who dissent were inherently bad or beholden to the devil or had not been predestined or chosen by God to respond. Such categories were, however, not absolute, because the author assumed that people could choose to respond positively and so move from one apparently fixed and predetermined category to another. They served a rhetorical function. A further ploy was to reduce Israel's tradition to witness and foreshadowing within the tension of asserting both continuity and discontinuity.

Contribution: The article concluded that such strategies served in part to comfort and reassure hearers engaged in the process of grief at rejection. As such they warranted critical reflection.

Keywords: dissent; disparagement; continuity; discontinuity; predestination; 'the Jews'; conflict rejection.

Introduction

One of the challenges faced by democracies is the extent to which dissent may occur without disparagement. It is also a challenge faced in families and in all human relationships. Is it possible to hold dissenting views without therefore disparaging others? The alternative of avoiding or lying about dissent in the name of peace is no way forward. It produces all kinds of indirect or unexpressed tension, destructive to all involved. Sometimes it is necessary to dissent, indeed, to engage in vigorous debate. The problems arise when I move from debating with another person to denigrating them, the shift from dissenting stance to personal attack or disparagement. Denigrating or disparaging another person may occur in the heat of argument or it may occur in calmer moments of grief when coming to terms with dissent and rejection. In such moments we concoct stories about the other that portray them as just too dumb or, theologically, as destined not to believe. Such ontic fantasies serve not only the processes of grief but also moments of elation and acceptance, such as when joy hails the other as destined and chosen to be my companion, my lover, my partner.

Not surprisingly, such dynamics have been played out across history. This article examines how they were played out in the turbulent beginnings of the Jesus movement as it emerged within early Judaism. It looks not only at the phenomena, particularly in the gospel according to John (Loader 2017:421–471) but also with brief observations about other writings in comparison, especially the letter to the Hebrews and also the Gospel according to Matthew. The reason for coupling John and Hebrews together is that they, in part, share a strategy for dealing the complex issues of continuity and discontinuity with their religious past. I make brief comparison with Matthew because it is also best understood in my view as, like John, written against the background of tension and conflict with fellow Jews but takes a very different approach.

Were the believers whom the fourth evangelist addressed cast out of the synagogue, as the author suggests in 16:2, 'the expulsion theory' (Reinhartz 2018:111–130), or, at least, some of them, or did they and the author cast (other) Jews out of the covenant, as Adele Reinhartz has recently argued (2018)? Much, indeed, has been written about the term 'the Jews', in John, a topic far beyond the

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bounds of this article to pursue (Bennema 2009:38–46; Culpepper 2001:63–68; Reinhartz 2018:81–86, 93–108; Zimmermann 2016:71–109). My understanding is that the hearers of the gospel comprise a mixture of Jews and Gentile believers. Mostly 'the Jews', when cited in contexts of conflict, refer to fellow Jews who had rejected the claims being made by the author and his fellow-believers. Context determines meaning and the values attached, so that we can also recognise, for instance, that in 4:22 the context does not imply anything negative.

The focus of this article is not, therefore, to revisit the identity of 'the Jews' but to look at how the author dealt with the conflicts with 'the Jews', or more particularly, how the author depicted that his protagonists and their antagonists dealt with conflict. Conflict and experience of rejection is the context for most occurrences of 'the Jews' in John. For the author and his fellow Christ-believers that conflict was not the same as when Gentiles at Ephesus or Corinth or Rome might have rejected their message, because these Johannine believers, many of them probably Jews or proselytes, were laying claim to continuity with Israel's religious tradition, which was being expanded to include Gentiles. To have that claim to continuity rejected by other Jews was offensive and painful because it questioned a major element of their claim to legitimacy. In some instances, we may speculate, it also played itself out quite personally in divided families and divisions in what were once synagogue communities and, one may speculate, in experience of self-doubt. Calling fellow Jews who dissented 'the Jews' and speaking of 'your Law' indicates serious distancing (Culpepper 2001:63), making all the more striking the efforts to assert continuity.

The claims being made for Jesus were 'over the top' for many in the synagogue and tantamount to making Jesus a second god or making him equal to God. People making such claims should have no place in the synagogue of faith. The defence, which countered by appeal to traditions rooted in speculation about Wisdom and Torah, should suffice according to the author and so to reject God's new initiative was to place oneself outside the covenant, indeed, to reject God!

Not all of John's gospel is focused on conflict with 'the Jews'. The following survey, conducted sequentially, identifies the key passages where it is prominent. A synthetic analysis follows in which common elements are observed before briefly considering them comparatively in relation, especially to Hebrews and Matthew.

Reviewing key texts

> He came to his own and his own did not receive him, but as many as received him to them he gave authority to become the children of God, to those who believed in his name, who born not of blood nor of the will of a male, but of God. (Jn 1:11–13)

The rejection, which echoes Wisdom's rejection in 1 Enoch 42 (in contrast to Sirach 24), is already indicated in general terms in the words 'and the darkness did not accept (or overcome) it' (1:5) and 'the world did not recognise him' (1:10) and becomes specific in 1:11. 'His own' means his fellow Jews (Thompson 2015:31; cf. Zumstein 2016:82–83) or at least must include them (Keener 2005:398–399; Michaels 2010:67). That takes us to the heart of the conflict. Already by association 'his own' who reject him are identified or associated with 'the world' and 'darkness', as later in 7:7–12. That is, not that they are equated but that 'his own' who reject him belong to the wider category of 'world' and 'darkness'. Equally significant is the statement that some did receive him. To interpret this woodenly as meaning only Gentiles received him fails to appreciate the author's rhetoric. The gospel narrative to follow, indeed, confirms that those who accepted the Word included some of 'his own' (Thompson 2015:31; cf. Reinhartz 2018:138). John 3:32–33 is comparable where the author writes that no one received Jesus' testimony and goes straight on to speak of some who did.

John 1:12–13 declares that they are thereby born of God and not by normal means. This may be a general statement, but more likely it distances their faith and the new status which follows, namely being children of God, from claims of 'his own' who might appeal to their status as children of Abraham and so children of God (Schnelle 2016:55; Thompson 2015:32). Whilst prophetic tradition could challenge self-assurance and immunity from judgement based on Abrahamic descent (e.g. Mt 3:7–10; Lk 3:7–9), here in John is probably our first indication of rejection of any special claims based on being of 'his own'. In that sense, we see already here the beginnings of what Adele Reinhartz calls being cast out of the covenant. 'The Gospel rhetorically transfers the benefits of Jewishness – covenantal relationship with God – from the *Ioudaioi* to the "children of God"' (Reinhartz 2018:xxii).

The language of accepting, believing, assenting to Jesus as the Word comes again in 2:23–25, where the formulation 'believe in his name' reappears but, strikingly, this time to reject such faith because it fails to comprehend who Jesus is and simply hails him as one who can perform miracles. The passage continues into chapter 3 with Nicodemus held up as an example (Culpepper 2016:253–254). His 'Christian' confession 'You are a teacher come from God because no one can do the miracles which you do unless God is with him' also fails to meet the standard and as a response the author has Jesus repeat the motifs of 1:12–13, speaking of new birth, 'Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above"' (3:3). At one level, the problem is that Nicodemus and those like him in 2:23–25 do not see enough. At another level, the assumption is that they see enough to be culpable for not responding with the adequate level of faith. With those in 2:23–25, the author attributes it to what Jesus knew about human beings, probably their sinfulness or unwillingness to really see what they are seeing. It is a blameworthy failure on their part.

With Nicodemus, introduced also as an ἄνθρωπος, linking him to them (Michaels 2010:176; Zumstein 2016:133), it could be just that he has not seen enough but, as the constructed

dialogue continues, it becomes clear that his response and of those identified with him is also blameworthy, as the author has Jesus declare: 'Truly I tell you, we are speaking about what we know and we are bearing witness to what we have witnessed and you do not accept our testimony' (3:11), echoing the language of accepting that runs through the prologue. It reappears in the quasi-summary in John 3:31–36, where the author writes of Jesus:

> What he has seen and heard, this he testifies and no one accepts his testimony. He who accepts his testimony sets his seal on the fact that God is true. (vv. 32–33)

As the comments about 'his own' who do not accept him in 1:11 is followed by reference to those of 'his own' who did (1:12), this statement exhibits the same apparent contradiction: no one accepts him, but some do! The focus is clearly upon the need for hearers of the testimony to accept and believe it. That is their moral responsibility and not to do so is therefore blameworthy and will incur God's anger, as expressed in 3:36.

The exchange with Nicodemus is like a skit played out on stage, a kind of serious entertainment to enhance faith, rich in irony. One can imagine the smiles and laughter at the caricature, which is Nicodemus and his stark naiveté. Portraying him like this, especially as a teacher of 'the Jews', goes beyond blaming him and them for dissent. It ridicules. This is a kind of poetic licence written for insiders and also typical of how people understood biographical writings in the period (Burridge 2018:213–232). The author and doubtless his hearers would have been aware that this was a constructed story and appreciated its entertaining playfulness, such as in the use of ἄνωθεν, whose two senses, 'again' and 'from above' are at play in the story. It is nevertheless going beyond recognition of dissent to disparagement of the dissenter.

Moral accountability to accept the witness about Jesus is assumed in the story and makes sense because it lies in people's capacity to do so. This is very clear in the famous 3:16, which declares of Jesus that 'whoever believes in him has eternal life'. Just a few verses later, however, we read (Jn 3):

> And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. [20]For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. [21]But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. (vv. 19–21)

This almost aphoristic statement comes close to making absolute claims, about which, as we have seen, caution is needed in John (cf. on 1:11–13; 3:32–33 above). As Michaels (2010) observed, 'A notable feature of Johannine style in these early chapters is a sweeping negative assertion followed by a conspicuous exception' (p. 206). At the level of the image, it makes good sense. Bad people do not want light shone on their deeds. Applied to the theme of the context about accepting or not accepting the testimony about Jesus, identified as light already in the prologue, it implies that good people will assent but those who dissent do so because they are bad people. For the author, good people, because they are good, would accept the testimony. That is what good people would do. If people do not do so, this is not only blameworthy but indicative of the fact that they are bad people.

This sounds almost like a closed system, but the author will surely also have believed that bad people can repent. They, then, become good people and escape being bound forever in those categories. The author, however, does not say this. The phenomenon of bad people coming to the light because they need it, normally central to the call to repent and believe in the good news, is not in view. If only good people come to the light, then this would raise serious questions about what role the light plays for them and the extent to which they need it and why. The issues raised here recur as we continue through the gospel. Such explanations go beyond reporting dissent. They explain rejection (and so come to terms with it, including the pain it inflicts) on the basis of making assumptions about the dissenters, namely that they are bad people in themselves and not just because of their dissent. This is to deal with dissent by denigration or disparagement.

The next stage play, as it were, comes with Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. Again, the faith audience is being entertained with irony and double meaning at the woman's expense, but, again, this is the author's consciously creative artistry. Thus, like Nicodemus, the woman is a stage caricature of naiveté. The woman's words contain profound meaning at one level even if she has not a clue about it and persists in still wanting to have actual water 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water' (4:15) and only reaches so far on the faith journey to exclaim, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' (4:29; cf. also 4:39), which deserved a laugh from the audience, having heard about her private life but scarcely goes beyond the faith of those in 2:23–25. Her compatriots go further (4:32) and we are left wondering if she finally made it. I agree with Jerome Neyrey that for hearers of the time she would be seen as not only a foreigner and socially ostracised but also as a sinner (Neyrey 2009:143–171). Much that the author is doing in this portrait lies outside of the scope of this article (see my discussion in Loader 2012:350–352). In relation to the theme of conflict it is important to note that she is the one whose deeds were evil who came to the light, albeit gradually. Her story, therefore, serves as a warning to us to be cautious about what appear to be exclusive categories in 3:19–21.

The rejection of inadequate faith, which we met in 2:23–25 and 3:2, reappears in Jesus' response in 4:48 and so, by implication, the faith mentioned in 4:53 would be understood by the author to be beyond that. In chapter 5 the exchange between Jesus and his critics for healing on the sabbath (5:17–30) remains at the level of dissent and helps us see what the author depicts as the objection of 'the Jews', his breaking sabbath law, but more importantly, his making himself equal

to God (5:18). The exchange focuses on claim and counterclaim with Jesus countering their misunderstanding of what he was claiming when they accuse him of making himself equal to God (Loader 2017:331–336). It remains a debate focused on substance with Jesus' appealing to testimonial support from John the Baptist, his deeds, and ultimately, God (5:31–37a).

The author has Jesus blame his critics for refusing to acknowledge his claims about himself (5:38b, 40–44), to which he also adds the witness of scripture (5:39) and the warning that, therefore Moses will condemn them in the judgement (5:45–47). In John 5:37b–38, however, it goes further:

> You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. (vv. 37b–38)

Echoing Deuteronomy 4:12, 'You heard the sound of words but saw no form', it goes beyond the uncontentious claim that no one has seen God, as in 1:18, to declare that they have also not heard God's voice. The allegation is better understood as declaring that they have not hearkened to God's word whether in the past or in Jesus as the only one who has seen God and who speaks God's word, than as a dismissal of biblical tradition altogether, not least because the author is about to appeal to it as witness (Keener 2005:658–659; Michaels 2010:330; cf. Zumstein 2016:235). The blame extends not just to their non-acceptance of Jesus' claims despite the witnesses, which support him but also generalised to their not listening and obeying God's word. Their rejection of Jesus is symptomatic of their refusal to hearken to God's word.

Dealing with dissent reappears more decisively in chapter 6. Here, again, we meet the inadequate faith of those admiring miracles, who acclaim Jesus prophet and king, to whom Jesus, accordingly, gives the slip (6:14–15) and later rebukes them because they saw the miracle only as a mass feeding, not as a sign (6:26). The exchange with the crowd continues in reference to Moses and the manna (6:30–35). It remains at the level of substance as the author now has Jesus reject the belief that Moses gave bread from heaven (6:32) (Loader 2017:443–452), as he had that the scriptures, which Moses represented give life rather than pointing to Jesus as its source (5:39). The move in 6:32 is to deny the significance of Torah as life-giving and in effect to usurp its claims by now declaring that only Jesus offers bread, light and life. This denial is reinforced by the use of 'true', here and elsewhere, which functions not only as a positive statement but also as a negative one, negating all other claims (Keener 2005:682; Loader 2018a:318–319).

The author then has Jesus address their failure to believe in him. 'Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away' (6:37). Here, as in his prayer in John 17, the reference is to those who are 'given', destined by God, to respond. The same thought recurs in 6:44, 'No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me and I will raise that person up on the last day'. This goes beyond the issue of moral accountability, namely the choice to respond and becomes an explanation of why some respond positively and some do not, almost to the point where responsibility for who responds to Jesus and who does not belongs to God, not an issue of praise or blame in relation to individuals. Some are 'taught by God' to respond, as the author has Jesus cite Isa 54:13 and some are not (6:45). The author has Jesus return to the claim in 6:64–65, where Jesus is attributed with foreknowledge both about who would believe and who would not and also about who would betray him and again declares: 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father' (6:65). This may function to help believers come to terms with the pain that some do not respond but otherwise is highly problematic and stands in tension with the notion that anyone can respond and all are accountable for doing so or not. As Keener (2005:685) observed: 'Like most of his Jewish contemporaries John felt no tension between predestination and free will' (similarly, Michaels 2010: 377–378).

In 7:2–5 Jesus' siblings are depicted as embracing the inadequate faith of 2:23–25, Nicodemus, 4:48 and the crowd in 6:14–15, which the author summarises with the words: 'For not even his brothers believed in him' (7:5) and then uses the broad category of 'the world' to depict not only dissent but also hate: 'The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil' (7:7). This is shifting the focus from blameworthy dissent to direct hostility, also blameworthy. Within the 'world' that hates, the author places 'the Jews' who grumble about his claims (7:12), as they had in 6:41, 51. The intent to kill (7:20b) prepares us for the passion but the exchanges in chapter 7 range from some who contemplate his possibly being the Messiah to those wanting to arrest and execute him and are primarily focused on dissent over substance. The exchanges in 8:12–30 continue in similar vein as concerned with substance and authenticating testimony.

In 8:31–47 the conflict sharpens when Jesus claims that to embrace the truth about him is to be set free (8:32), which provokes the counterclaim by 'the Jews' that they are free. John's Jesus proceeds with the argument that those who sin are slaves of sin, even more so because they seek to kill him. He challenges their claim to having Abraham as their father, whilst acknowledging it at the literal level of descent and charges that they are children of the murderous devil. 'You are from your father the devil and you choose to do your father's desires' (8:44). This is not a statement about Jewish ethnicity or race. Rather, it is typical of statements in John that appear on the surface contradictory as we have seen in 1:11–13 and 3:32–33. For in 8:37 the author has Jesus say, 'I know that you are descendants of Abraham'. The author is, accordingly, laying blame on 'the Jews' because they reject Jesus' claims and want to kill him, but adding that they do so because they are slaves to sin and serving the devil. These are those amongst 'his own' who do not accept him (1:11),

those 'who do evil' (3:20), who, therefore, belong to the darkness that rejects the light or wants to overcome it (1:5) and to 'the world' which hates. They are depicted as morally reprobate. Despite the way in which this passage has been read, it remains at the level of blamed dissent attributed to slavery to sin and the devil, not to divine destiny (which would by logic somewhat alleviate guilt) nor to ontology, that is, that they are by nature demonic as in later antisemitic use of the passage.

It comes closest to the claim in 3:20 that people who do not come to the light do not do so because their deeds are evil, only that here this state of being is depicted as slavery to sin and the devil and so being children of the devil. The narrative is written to be heard primarily by Christ-believers, who might, again, take it as comfort in explaining their pain (and anger) that their message had not been met with assent. As such it is a problematic generalisation, a descent to *ad hominem* argumentation in disparaging the dissenters as already bad people.

The story continues with the dissenters' own *ad hominem* countercharge of demon possession against Jesus (8:48), not a charge he had made against them in that form, although his depiction of them as children of the devil is equivalent. The focus returns to a matter of substance of dissent with their rejection of Jesus' claim of pre-existence before Abraham.

The faith entertainment that follows in John 9 centres around belief and unbelief, concluding with the age-old motif of spiritual blindness as a charge levelled at the Pharisees for their unbelief (9:39–41) but not in any way exculpating them of guilt, as one would in saying that it is never a blind person's fault that they cannot see something! John's Jesus declares: 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind' (9:39), a problematic claim if taken to mean that he intended spiritual blindness on people but possibly understood as a way of depicting the impact of his message, which would force people to decide for or against and so, see or not see. In that sense it explains dissent as inevitable, as it is when people make claims but it likely means more, reflecting the topos of God hardening people's hearts, often linked with notions of divine determining, such as we see in 12:39–40, where the author explains:

> And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said, 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them'. (Is 6:10; cf. also 29:9; 42:18–19; 56:10)

In chapter 10 the notion of predestination reappears in the words, 'What my Father has given me' (10:29). The dissent focuses on blasphemy (10:33) in Jesus' alleged claim to be God when he declares, 'The Father and I are one' (10:30), to which the author has Jesus respond with clarifications to avert such a misunderstanding (Loader 2017:337–345). It echoes the substantial argument in 5:17–30. In chapter 11, after the Lazarus story, we have further reference to the authorities seeking to execute Jesus but with the emphasis on religio-political expediency (11:47–53). The authorities also want to kill Lazarus because of the impact of his resuscitation (12:9–11). In 12:36–43 the author returns to the motif of spiritual blindness, as observed here, problematically explaining rejection as engineered by God.

The notion of divine determining reappears in John 13, both in relation to Judas (13:2), associated with scripture fulfilment, and in Jesus' calling the disciples 'chosen' (13:18; 15:16; cf. 6:70–71). The theme of 'the world' and its hate comes into focus in 15:15–25, where it is associated with those who hated Jesus, by implication, 'the Jews', and indicating that the same fate would await disciples. This continues in chapter 16, which notes that such acts of hostility would result in their being expelled from synagogues (ἀποσυναγώγους ποιήσουσιν ὑμᾶς 16:2; similarly, 9:22; 12:42). With Keener (2005:1025) I see no reason to deny that the author was referring to what had actually happened, at least for some as one aspect of the ongoing conflicts. I also see no need to generalise it to the whole so-called Johannine community, let alone to read into it the later curse of the Minim, a view now widely discredited (Lamb 2014). Concern for such disciples is reflected also in the prayer of Jesus in John 17, where, again, we meet the motif of divine determination. 'I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world' (17:6; similarly, 17:11, 12) and Judas as 'the one destined to be lost' (17:12). Those who are to believe in the future (17:20–21) are also included amongst those 'given' by the Father (17:24). Conflict with 'the Jews' is not directly present in the passion narrative but we see the author in his neatly contrived account of the seven alternating scenes of the trial before Pilate tendentiously depicting their leaders as betraying the heart of their faith by declaring, οὐκ ἔχομεν βασιλέα εἰ μὴ Καίσαρα, 'We have no king but the emperor' (19:15). In effect, they repeat the allegation put on the lips of 'the Jews', earlier in the work, namely that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God (19:7), a true claim for the author but also a false one in the manner in which the antagonists had used it.

Dissent and beyond

The author is writing in a context where people have embraced the claims about Jesus and found that others have rejected them. Whilst such rejection would be an inevitable feature of response to the Christian message wherever it was made, it was particularly acute or at least of special quality when Jews rejected the message, that is, as we may assume for many of John's hearers, fellow Jews. The author has incorporated into his narrative some indications of the reasons for such rejection. They focus particularly on the high claims made for Jesus. Thus, the author has Jesus respond to claims that Jesus allegedly was making himself equal to God or even a second god. There would likely to have been disagreement over claims that someone is the Messiah (as in 9:42), but such claims are not blasphemous in the way that these allegations were. Beyond these allegations, the broader

claims that the author has Jesus make of himself, as the Word, the Son sent from the Father, who has seen the Father and can alone make him known, not to speak of his claim that he would return exalted and glorified to the Father, were, for many, outlandish.

At a number of points in the narrative the author portrays this refusal to accept Jesus' claims and deems it blameworthy, indeed as warranting divine wrath. There is strong dissent that the author depicts as escalating into hatred and the will to have Jesus executed, based primarily on what 'the Jews' saw as blasphemy. The rejection of claims became more than dissent over ideas, because the claims were claims about his person so that to reject his claims was also to reject him and then when he was perceived as a religious danger (a blasphemer) or political danger, this escalated to the will to execute.

From the author's perspective, and we might say from the point of view of his protagonists, the conflict was at one level over the dissenters' unwillingness to accept the claims made for Jesus. As we have seen, however, there was an expansion beyond dissent over ideas and disappointment over their rejection. For the author makes the allegation that the dissenting 'Jews' were not only bad people for rejecting the claims but were bad people in general. This is the implication of 3:19–21 because good people would have accepted the claims. It comes close to this in chapter 8 where the author depicts 'the Jews' as being in slavery to sin, thus children of the devil, not ethnically or in any literal sense, but ethically and in terms of being captive to the devil's power. This is an allegation about their state of being, an *ad hominem* argument, far beyond a judgement on their refusal to believe.

Such allegations go beyond what the conflict over claims and the dissent warranted and reflect a development in conflict where argument over substance has been expanded into *ad hominem* invective. This, according to the author, has also happened on the side of 'the Jews', who could call Jesus possessed and who saw his claims inevitably bound up with his person, so that both needed to be removed.

Two further developments of the conflict as the author portrays it are worthy of note. Firstly, the employment of the notion that some have been chosen by God to respond and some have not been chosen also plays a role in John. It includes the notion that God engineered the negative response, blinding the eyes of the dissenters. This might give comfort to those hurt and angry at rejection of their claims about Jesus. The thought of divine determining can also serve a positive role, to boost the self-assurance of those of 'his own' who have responded to the message and so can view themselves as chosen, given by God, in contrast to the majority, 'the Jews', who were not. Pressed to its logical conclusion, this system of thought effectively lays the blame not on 'the Jews', but on God, but this would be to misunderstand the rhetorical function of such language. For the author also recognises that people can change. They can choose to believe where once they did not (Beutler 2013:275). Perhaps the only example we have is the Samaritan woman but the possibility of change is clearly presupposed in John.

Accordingly, talk about divine determination and talk about people's state of being (doers of evil, as in 3:19–21, children of the devil or blinded by God) must be recognised as serving to offer comfort, to rationalise rejection and failure and not be heard as making absolute claims, although always by their nature they are in danger of doing that, too. Too much in the text contradicts that. For instance, talk of predestination has a similar function when used in the Community Rule at Qumran (1QS III 13 – IV 26) (Keener 2005:762; Loader 2018b). Sons of darkness can become sons of light. Change is possible and this is not usually understood as foreordained as part of the divine plan. Such rationalising rhetoric is dangerous and its disparaging language so easily goes beyond its loose rhetorical function to become language of fact, resulting in serious contradictions, at least, on the surface of the text but, even more serious, also injustices in the world of reality.

In a broader sense, secondly, the author and apparently others before him have dealt with dissent not only by denigrating opponents through *ad hominem* allegations but also by denying the legitimacy of their own claims, including by misrepresenting them. We see this already in what probably reflects dissent with the followers of John the Baptist. Thus, whilst the Synoptic Gospels portray John the Baptist as using the immersion rite creatively to offer people a preparedness for the judgement, including forgiveness of sins, the author of the fourth gospel reduces him to simply a witness to Jesus, almost certainly a deliberate misrepresentation. Similarly, and much more significantly, the author now uses imagery once employed of Torah to refer no longer to Torah, but only to Jesus. Thus, he alone, now, is the Word, the true light, life and bread. In place of the gift of Torah given by God via Moses, God has now given Jesus, the Word, as 1:16–17 puts it (Loader 2017:443–444). Torah (and Scripture generally as a rich source of imagery) is now primarily the witness to the one who brings life, namely Jesus and Jesus alone. It is not a source of life. This is a devaluation of Torah and Scripture and for those who lived by it a misrepresentation.

The author can make this move whilst at the same time claiming continuity with the old. He does so by portraying key elements of the past, the covenant of Moses, especially the temple and the festivals, as earthly reflections of the new reality that has come with Jesus, who himself is the real temple and whose ministry now brings the light, water and bread once part of the ancient festivals. Whilst being careful never to disparage the old or to suggest it was given by anyone other than God (1:17), the author nevertheless repositions it, demoting it, so that its sole role now is to be a witness to the new, which has replaced it. In this sense the claims for the new are at the expense of the old and, explained in this way, are developed as a means of boosting morale and offering comfort for those who have had to grapple with the

break. The claims that only in Jesus and his faith community is life to be found disenfranchises the old, delegitimises the covenant, and, as one might imagine, this did not sit well with those for whom their faith had always been a source of life and hope and healing. Thus, whilst the author never disparages individual elements of the old, for instance, as never making sense, as Mark's portrait of Jesus in 7:1–23 suggests, the overall effect of consigning the past to the past and to the level of the flesh, which is of no profit (6:62) is, in effect, a disparagement. This is to achieve for his hearers a sense of continuity, but at great cost.

In the Gospel according to John we find, therefore, a mixture of genuine dissent over substance, for which dissenters are deemed blameworthy but, beyond that, a tendency to denigrate them as persons and denigrate their faith tradition whilst laying claim to it in seriously truncated form.

Comparative observations

I conclude with some comparative observations. There is a striking contrast between John and Matthew. Matthew, following Q tradition, which doubtless reflects Jesus' own stance, has Jesus declare that not a stroke of Torah is to be set aside (5:17–19; Lk 16:17). Rather than replacing Torah or fulfilling it by setting it aside, Matthew's Jesus upholds and expounds it. This is all the more interesting because, like John, Matthew appears to be writing in a context of conflict and dissent in relation to fellow Jews and this dissent relates primarily to the 'over the top' claims being made about Jesus, namely Christology (Loader 2021a). Matthew does not deal with the dissent by denigrating the tradition, although there is *ad hominem* argument in the generalising attacks on scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites, especially in chapter 23, reflecting hurt and anger at their dissent.

At the other end of the spectrum and much closer to John is the Letter to the Hebrews. Using popular Platonic categories mixed with apocalyptic ideology, it, too, acknowledges that what it calls the old covenant was given by God but argues that what it established was an earthly pattern or copy of heavenly realities, and, as John argued, this earthly pattern also foreshadowed what was to come (Loader 2021b). Again, we see considerable effort having been undertaken to affirm continuity whilst fundamentally arguing discontinuity, that is, that the new replaces the old. Reference to dissent is only indirect and may lie more in the author's past or at least be viewed as something that his listeners might experience in themselves existentially as they grappled with continuity and discontinuity, especially Jews and proselytes. As in John's gospel, continuity is asserted on the basis of divinely intended discontinuity, a salvation-historical discontinuity, from God who having spoken in many and various ways through the prophets then spoke through his Son (1:1).

The discontinuity in Hebrews focuses less on who Jesus was during his earthly life and what he did, although it emphasises his solidarity, based on having to hold off temptation to give up under pressure of persecution and suffering, also apparently significant for the author and his listeners who are encouraged to look to Jesus as therefore a sympathetic intercessor on their behalf as they face similar situations (2:18; 4:14–16; 7:25). The focus is primarily on the achievement of Jesus' death, which the author creatively expounds by a typological explanation based on a selective use of elements of the Atonement Day ritual. Accordingly, Jesus, having died, takes his blood to God in the heavenly Holy of Holies and presents the achievement of his atoning death before God (Loader 2018c).

This affirmation to enhance the faith of believers carries with it certain assumptions, which come under the category of denigration. For it implies that atonement, understood as forgiveness of sins, was not possible before Jesus' death. Indeed, the faithful of old had to wait for it to be achieved before they could enter the heavenly realm (11:39). In order to emphasise the achievement of Christ's death, the author denies that the old achieved anything more than to be a pointer to this achievement. Sometimes the author goes beyond John who also reduces the old to merely the earthly, the world of the flesh (not a negative moral category but expressing a level of reality), as foreshadowing what was to come. For he can use words like 'useless' to describe its rituals (7:18) and write dismissively of its sacrifices, reflecting, from our contemporary cross-cultural sensitivity, a limited understanding of the complex significance of sacrifices in religious cultures. The author's truth about Christ and his death is thus emphasised at the expense of the old, which is in effect disparaged. It is hard to reconcile such claims with the richness of faith we can observe in so-called Old Testament faith. Dissent has become disparagement.

Truth is often the casualty of the desire to make exclusive claims. In response we can find ourselves affirming what people affirm but denying what they felt they had to deny. Decisions then as now about how to retain integrity in dissent can be complicated by the fear of denying authority, especially religious or even divine authority. The respect for the divine authority of Israel's tradition produced the constructions of John and Hebrews, which affirmed continuity with the old by asserting divinely intended discontinuity and diminishing it value.

There were other less absolutist alternatives, such as we find in Matthew. How far Matthew really wanted his listeners to uphold every stroke of the Law is uncertain. We, at least, see significant prioritising and differentiation between greater and lesser commandments (5:18–19). Elsewhere, such as in Paul and similarly, to some extent, in Mark we see a more differentiated approach, which assumes that divine authority warrants the flexibility to adjust to new situations and insights. For example, in the setting aside of circumcision and much else, and in Mark's case, more radically, in the recognition that some laws, for instance, about food and purity, not only no longer but never made sense, whilst asserting the priority of keeping the decalogue commandments as the anecdote of the rich man and Jesus shows.

Concluding reflections

Dissent is not to be feared or escalated into hatred or disparagement. To affirm anything is to open up the possibility that others may disagree. That can be trifling or deadly serious and produce intense debate. That is healthy. Respect does not mean pretending to agree. It means acknowledging difference and conflict but keeping the conflict on topic and not sliding into disparagement of the person or denying value in the other where it is clearly present. In the heat of Christian beginnings we observe a range of approaches to dissent, sometimes richly insightful, instructive and exemplary, sometimes modelling unhealthy responses. The message of divine grace that finds its way in and out of these ancient texts can guide good and healthy dissent still in our own day and also help us to see where it loses its way.

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