

John, 'the Jews' and us: John's context and ours

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

A recurring challenge for preachers, teachers and readers of the Gospel of John is making sense of its references to “the Jews.” At Jesus’ sentencing Pilate goes “out to the Jews” to tell them that he finds no reason to crucify Jesus (18:38). After Jesus is dead, John says that two men—Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus in secret “because of his fear of the Jews” (John 19:38), and Nicodemus, earlier described as “a leader of the Jews” (3:2), who came to see Jesus under cover of darkness (presumably out of that same fear of the Jews)—claim the body of Jesus for anointing and burial.

These and other negative references to “the Jews” are at least partially responsible for the shame of Christian anti-Semitism. Students of the New Testament understand that “the Jews” can’t really mean all the Jewish people and is usually used by John to refer to the part of the Jewish leadership that was accommodating and cooperating with the Romans. After all, Jesus was an observant Jew and so were his disciples and his mother.

The Fourth Gospel was written in the context of early Christians’ painful separation from Judaism and from the synagogue. For a while, Christian believers felt persecuted by the community they were leaving. John’s Gospel was written for those believers.

In her very helpful book, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*, Frances Taylor Gench explains that “in John’s social environment, adherence to this community bore a cost,” and she quotes David Rensberger’s statement, in *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community*, that at that time declaring oneself a Christian believer was “to undertake an act of deliberate downward mobility.”

This understanding in no way justifies the terrible history of Christian anti-Judaic teaching. It is nevertheless necessary for Christian preachers and teachers of John to understand and in some way include this point in sermons, lectures, essays and

books.

The obvious problem is that it's hard to squeeze such lessons into a sermon. The very least we can do is explain that "the Jews" does not mean all the Jews and that a phrase like "because of fear of the Jews" does not refer to fear of the entire religious population.