Jewish Studies and the Gospel of St John

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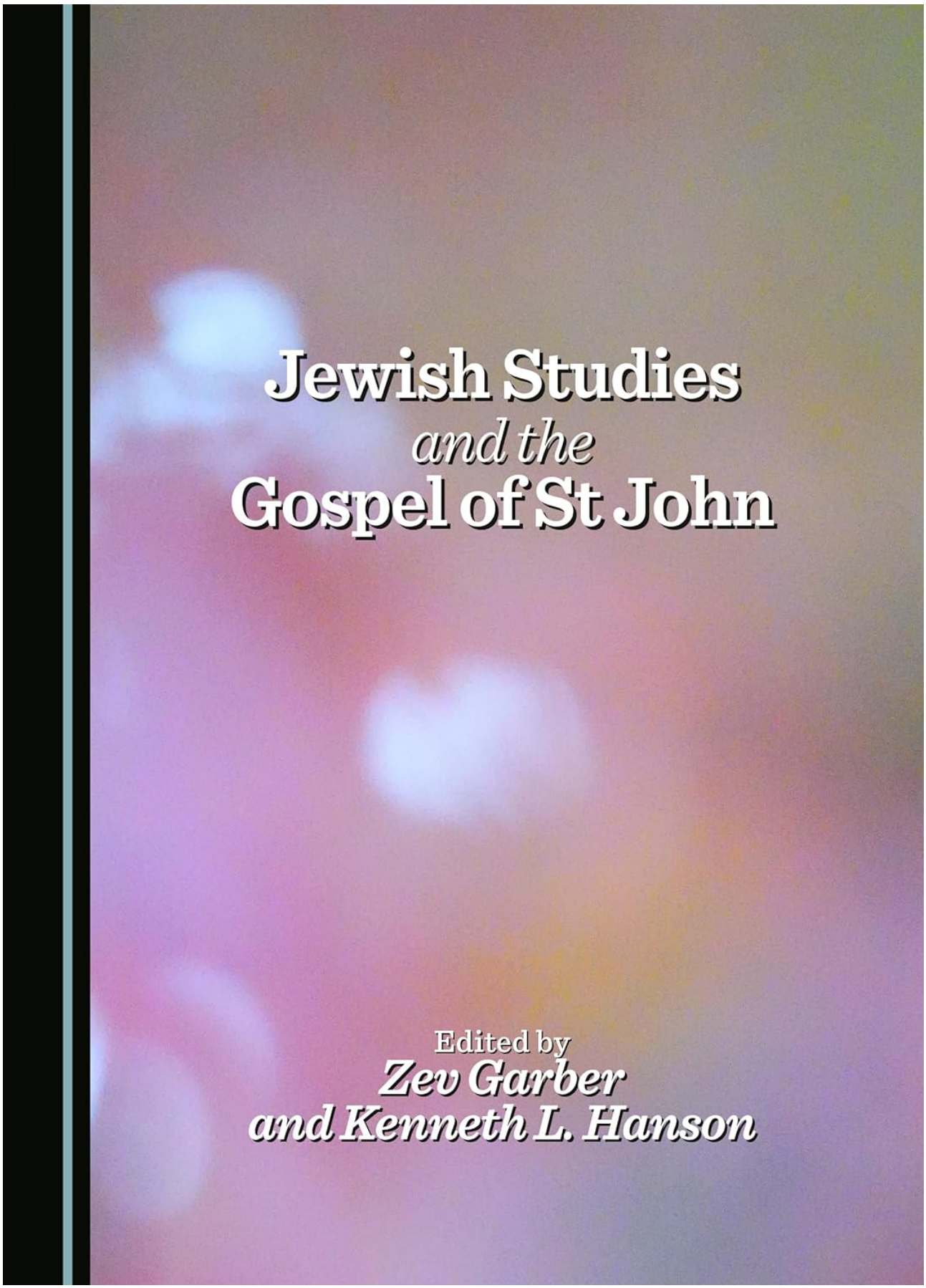
Zev Garber and Kenneth L. Hanson (Ed.):Jewish Studies and the Gospel of St John. Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 2025. Hardcover, 200 Pages. $84.00



In today's world of polarized discourse, *Jewish Studies and the Gospel of St. John* provides a much-needed third way. The laudable work of editors Zev Garber and Ken Hanson presents a close reading of the anti-Jewish polemics of the four Gospels (particularly the Gospel of John) and their theological reverberations through the millennia. The collection also reveals the innumerable

intersections of those same Gospels with Jewish values, texts, and practices contemporaneous to their creation and reception.

The collection, comprising eleven chapters by nine contributors (including two each by Garber and Hanson), makes clear that fostering meaningful and effective interfaith dialogue is an essential endeavor. In the introduction, Garber provides some history of interfaith efforts within scholarly environments during the last half-century.

“Since the 1970s,” Garber writes in chapter 1, “Jews and Christians in dialogue have cast as wide a net as possible in speaking about and correcting important facets of Christian *Adversus Judeo* (against the Jews) teachings and the responsibility of the Church to correct old-new teachings of contempt in the teaching and portrayal of the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (5). Garber and Hanson have committed this collection to further that aim, offering detailed analyses of the words of the Gospels, particularly those of the Gospel of John. The anthology seeks to contextualize the language, polemics, and historical moment of the Gospels, not to erase the anti-Judaic speech, but to remove its power as a theologically and institutionally approved position. This reframing enables interfaith dialogue and shared values

In chapter 2, Garber suggests that much of the Gospel of John is not in fact dominated by the demonization of the Jews but rather expresses many Jewish theological and ethical values. Although his most powerful contribution is the close readings of anti-Jewish diatribes in the Gospel of John, Garber asserts that, while Judaism sees the divine completeness with the Torah and Christianity with Christ , both faiths honor the divinity, acknowledging its salvific nature, and receive joy and inspiration in so doing (25).

Like most of the chapters that follow, Norman Simms’ third chapter provides readers with a sophisticated reading of the Gospel that mixes cultural, literary, and theological exegesis. He acknowledges the anti-Jewish polemics but frames them in an ironic and satiric—even comedic—frame. Steven Leonard Jacobs points out in chapter 4 that “The Gospel of John uses *hoi Ioudaioi* (“the Jews”) seventy-one (71) times while the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke only sixteen (16) times collectively!” (51). This collective of Jews is then denigrated, demonized, and judged. The text may be referring to a very small number of Jews, possibly those in leadership positions, and not to all Jews collectively, but this nuanced point is missed by the generations of readers who read that “the Jews” were responsible for killing their messiah

Several additional chapters provide close readings that reveal brazen anti-Jewish polemics in the Gospel. In chapter 5, Chris Seeman explains that the use of the phrase “the Jews” is a metaphor for any opposing person or group, establishing a radical good-evil binary in canonized writing. In chapter 6, Eugene Fisher opines that the polemics of the Gospel of John are best understood in their historical context—one hundred years after the death of the historical Jesus, when the young faith was defining itself. “The Christian community ‘replaced’ the sacrifices of the Temple with an understanding of Jesus’ death as a sacrificial act for all humanity,” he writes (81). Fisher advocates several strategies in the spirit of interfaith understanding that Christian leaders can do:

(1) Affirm the value of the whole Bible.

(2) Stress the profound Jewishness of Jesus and his teachings.

3) Develop the ability to understand and use Jewish sources (87).

(4) Avoid positing the two portions, Hebrew and New, of the Bible against one another.

(5) Follow the 1974 Vatican Guidelines, which state that “the existing links between the Christian

liturgy and the Jewish liturgy will be borne in mind" (88).

(6) Also follow the next part of the Guidelines, which "emphasize the continuity of the faiths" (88).

Thus, the chapters provide specific and realistic suggestions to build future understanding and respect.

The anthology continues reminding readers of the Jewish ethical heritage expressed in the Gospel of John, often and sometimes ironically placed side-by-side with instances of demonization. In chapter 7, Yitzchak Kerem also reminds us that John 4:2 reads "salvation comes from the Jews," words Jesus speaks to the Samaritan. In the same spirit of both/and, in chapter 8, Hanson revisits the messianism of Second Temple Judaism, a phenomenon from which Christianity develops. In the following chapter, Hanson suggests that Jesus' compassionate response to the adulterous woman, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone" (138), suggests that moderate, proto-rabbinic judgments are developing at about the same time as the Gospels, and both in a post-Second Temple destruction world. Herbert W. Basser highlights similar intersections of early Jewish and Christian communities while reconsidering strict rules of Sabbath observance in chapter 10.

Finally, in chapter 11, Nathan Harpaz reviews negative images of Jews beginning in the medieval period, whether on cathedral facades, inside churches, or in paintings. Often, Judaism is represented as a defeated enemy alongside the triumphant Church. Harpaz writes that the practice continues into the German Nazi period, when ancient Christian iconography served genocidal goals (185).

Ultimately the book is a sobering testament to how institutional endorsement of demonization creates devastating historical consequences. Yet, there is hope. In 1965, the Catholic Church released *Nostra Aetate* ("In our time), declaring that Jews were not responsible for the death of Jesus, denounced hatred, and called for dialogue. This collection continues in that tradition of scholarly work and dialogue.

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