“Children of the Devil”: John 8:44 and its Early Reception

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In 1971, the first year of my BA studies at the University of Toronto, I read a powerful book that has stayed with me all these years: The Devil and the Jews, by Joshua Trachtenberg.[1]

Trachtenberg wrote this book in 1943. Although he was living in the United States, he, like most Jews around the world, was alarmed and upset about what his fellow Jews were enduring in Europe, even though the full extent of those horrors were not yet known. As a child of Holocaust survivors, born some ten years after Trachtenberg’s book was published, I did not need a university reading list to introduce me to the idea of antisemitism. But what struck me about Trachtenberg’s book was the central role played by the association between the Jews and the devil, and its integral relationship to a host of other antisemitic tropes such as deicide, the blood libel, witchcraft, and sorcery.

Although Trachtenberg acknowledges that Jews became associated with Satan in the first centuries of Christianity, his focus is primarily on the medieval period. It was not until I began my doctoral work on the Gospel of John a few years later that I realized that this association was present in John 8:44, in which Jesus declares to the Jews: “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires.” And why? Because, asserts Jesus, the Jews, like the devil, are murderers and liars.

The historical Jesus did not actually utter these words. Rather, they were scripted for him by John’s author or authors as part of an anti-Jewish rhetoric that pervades this Gospel. Nevertheless, they were understood by the early readers of John as the authentic words of Jesus, and, for that reason, they were all too easily mobilized for anti-Jewish purposes. In this article, I will examine what just a few of these early readers made of Jesus’ declaration, and how, if at all, one might disarm the antisemitic power of this verse. Before doing so, however, let us look a bit more closely at the passage itself, which will be quoted first in Greek and then in an English translation.

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> You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

Most translations, and most scholars, view “father” and “devil” as nouns in apposition, that is, they are grammatically parallel and they have the same referent. If so, the verse is stating here that the Jews’ father is the devil. April DeConick has argued for a different translation that actually gives semantic weight to the genitive ???. She translates the phrase not as “you are of your father

the devil” but as “you are from the father *of* the devil.” This reading allows her to consider the differences between the “catholic” and “gnostic” readings of the verse, a conflict that she argues underlies 1 John.[2]

I do not find this argument to be compelling, and neither, apparently, did most of the early commentators. Origen commented on this issue directly. Taken literally, he acknowledged, the verse implies that the devil has a father. Preferable, however, is the following interpretation: “You are of this father, concerning whom the title ‘devil’ is predicated.”[3]

John 8 is not alone in associating the Jews and Satan. The association is explicit in the phrase “synagogue of Satan” that appears in the book of Revelation. In Rev 2:9, the Son of Man, via the seer John of Patmos, assures the church in Smyrna that “I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” and warns them that “the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested” (Rev 2:10). In Rev 3:9, he promises the church in Philadelphia that “I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying —I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.” The identity of those who say they are Jews but are not is a matter of ongoing debate, but the phrase “synagogue of Satan” suggests that by the time Revelation was written, the association of Jews and Satan is firmly established.

1 Early Reception of John 8:44

1 John

The earliest commentary on John 8:44 is found in 1 John 3, in which John the Presbyter tells his congregation:

> Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters. (1 John 3:7–10)

After having established the connection between sinners and the devil, the letter then—following the sequence of ideas in John 8:44—moves to a discussion of murder, into which it inserts the biblical figure of Cain, a link that persists in the patristic and medieval commentary tradition:

> For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous. (1 John 3:11–13)[4]

It is striking, however, that 1 John does not associate the devil with the Jews but rather with those who do not exhibit love, specifically, a group of people that has left the church. Indeed, the Jews are absent from the entire letter, which is concerned primarily with this specific situation.[5] The letter sets the stage for the two trends in interpretation that we find in patristic and later literature. As we shall see, some authors interpret John 8:44 without specific reference to the Jews, while others use it to support anti-Jewish vitriol.

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Church Fathers

Most prominent in the former category is Origen (185–254), who wrote the first extant patristic commentary on John's Gospel. Origen's comments on 8:44 begin with some reflections on the commentary of the Valentinian Gnostic Heracleon,[6] which is known only through the fragments that Origen quotes.

According to Origen, Heracleon understood John's statement "you are of your father the devil" to mean: "you are of the substance of the devil."[7] With regard to the phrase, "and your wish is to do your father's desires" in that same verse, Heracleon explains that this phrase was not said to those who are by nature children of the devil but to those "who have become children of the Devil by intent […]. Because they have loved the desires of the Devil and performed them, they become children of the Devil, though they were not such by nature." He then specifies that one can be a child by nature, by inclination, or by merit: "(A child) by nature means (the child) is begotten by someone who is himself begotten, and is properly called 'child.' (A child) by inclination is when one who does the will of another person by his own inclination is called the child of the one whose will he does. (A child) by merit is when some are known as children of hell, or of darkness and lawlessness, and the offspring of snakes and vipers."[8] In this case, Jesus "calls them children of the Devil, not because the Devil produces any of them, but because by doing the works of the Devil they became like him."[9]

In his comments on John 8:44, Origen critiques Heracleon's claim that one can be a child of the devil by nature. Although he does not acknowledge it, Origen does agree with Heracleon that one can be a child of someone by doing their will or fulfilling their desires. Indeed, Origen argues that "Any son, then, of anyone wishes to do the desires of his own father, and any son of anyone does the works of his father. In the same way, the Savior wishes to do the desires of his own Father, and does the works of his own Father."[10] The take home message? "If we do the works of God and wish to do his desires, we are sons of God; but if we do the works of the devil, and wish to do what he desires, we are of our father, the devil."[11] For that reason, urges Origen, "Let us pay attention, then, not only to what we do, but also to what we desire. For even to wish to do the desires of the devil is sufficient to be his son."[12] Origen, then, recasts John 8:44, which is explicitly about the Jews, as a statement about the options open to humankind.

Most later commentators agreed with Origen that the Jews were children of the devil not by nature but by deeds. But they generally deviated from his approach by viewing Jesus' words as directed specifically at the Jews and not at humankind more generally. In his commentary on John, Cyril of Alexandria asserts that "Cain was given to the Jews as their father," just as Satan was given to Cain as his father. Here, it would seem, Cyril supports April DeConick's reading of 8:44 as referring to the father of the devil and not the father, the devil. On this basis, Cyril continues, "Let our discourse therefore go forward to the impiety of the Jews, and putting around them the likeness of Cain's villainy, let us shew that they essayed those things against Christ, which he did against Abel, that rightly and fitly he may be termed their father." Just as Cain deceived Abel, says Cyril, so did the Jews deceive Christ, sending Judas as an ostensible friend, to betray Jesus to the authorities.[13] For Cyril, as for Origen, it is deeds rather than nature that determine one's parent. "Having shewn that the Jews are utterly of other manner than their ancestor, and far removed from his piety, He with good reason strips them of their empty fleshly boast [to be God's children]."[14]

Chrysostom adopts the same line of thinking, though for different purposes.[15] In warning his Christian audience of the dangers of attending synagogue, Chrysostom puts before them the following scenario: "Tell me this. If a man were to have slain your son, would you endure to look upon him, or accept his greeting? Would you not shun him as a wicked demon, as the devil himself? They slew the Son of your Lord; do you have the boldness to enter with them under the same roof?" He then compares going to synagogue with sharing in the devil's table: "You dishonor him so much that you pay honor to those who slew him on the cross, that you observe

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with them the fellowship of the festivals, that you go to their profane places, enter their unclean doors, and share in the tables of demons. For I am persuaded to call the fasting of the Jews a table of demons because they slew God. If the Jews are acting against God, must they not be serving the demons?” Although Chrysostom does not explicitly quote John 8:44 here, he makes use of its association between the Jews and the devil, and he alludes also to Rev 2:9 and 3:9, which refer to the synagogue of Satan.

Cyril and Chrysostom are typical of the patristic commentators, who, aside from Origen, are only too happy to describe the Jews as Satan’s spawn. Even more virulent, however, are the words of later medieval and early writers, perhaps none more so than Martin Luther. Luther’s comments on John 8 draw not only on 8:44 but also on 8:47: “Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.” Luther takes this as a reiteration of 8:44, that is, as an assertion that the Jews are not from God but from the devil. He adds, however, that Jesus’ statement was inimical to the Jews. The Jews, Luther states, “could not stand this, for they wished to be God’s children and people.”

In his virulently antisemitic work, *On The Jews and Their Lies* (1543) part 11,[16] Luther draws 8:44 together with the standard antisemitic accusations that the Jews “have poisoned wells, made assassinations, kidnapped children […] I have heard that one Jew sent another Jew, and this by means of a Christian, a pot of blood, together with a barrel of wine, in which when drunk empty, a dead Jew was found.” These and many other stories, says Luther, are consistent with the judgment of Christ

> which declares that they are venomous, bitter, vindictive, tricky serpents, assassins, and children of the devil who sting and work harm stealthily wherever they cannot do it openly. For this reason I should like to see them where there are no Christians. The Turks and other heathen do not tolerate what we Christians endure from these venomous serpents and young devils. Nor do the Jews treat any others as they do us Christians. That is what I had in mind when I said earlier that, next to the devil, a Christian has no more bitter and galling foe than a Jew. There is no other to whom we accord as many benefactions and from whom we suffer as much as we do from these base children of the devil, this brood of vipers.

Any Christian who associates with these “venomous serpents and devil’s children” will be “rewarded” “on the Day of Judgment, together with the Jews in the eternal fire of hell!” A quick search in Google images reveals dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of images from contemporary websites of Jews as Satan. And if we needed further evidence of the ongoing antisemitic reception of John 8:44, posters from the white supremacist march in Charlottesville most recently (in August 2017), stated that “the Jews are Satan’s children” and cited John 8:31–47.

2 John 8:44 and an End to Antisemitism

It is important, however, not merely to document antisemitic discourse but to address it in some fashion. It would be naïve to believe that the academic study of ancient sources can indeed put an end to antisemitism. Despite its seminal role in antisemitic discourse, no attempt to reinterpret or contextualize John 8:44 can undo two millennia of anti-Jewish interpretation, or eradicate the deeply integrated ideas of Jews as children of the devil and Christ-killers. Nevertheless, I believe it can be valuable to take a closer look at the two points: first, the underlying premises of the description of the Jews as having Satan as their father, and, second, the role of this claim in the overall rhetorical program of John’s Gospel.

Epigenesis

In my own work on John over the years, I have become convinced that, contrary to the views of Origen and other church fathers, the Gospel writer—the one who scripted Jesus’ words—viewed the Jews quite literally as the children of the devil, just as he viewed Jesus, quite literally, as the Son of God. Underlying both these claims is the Aristotelian theory of epigenesis, the most popular theory of reproduction from the classical through to the early modern periods.[17]

According to this theory, animals and human beings grow organically—not part by part—from the sperm of the male as set within the medium of growth provided by the female. The male semen determines the form of the embryo as well as the process by which it reaches maturity. The female semen, that is, the menstrual fluids (also called ??????), provides the matter of generation, the substance from which the offspring is made. Both male and female semen are residues of blood, the ultimate food of the body.[18] The most important difference between male and female semen lies in their consistency. As weaker creatures than males, females produce semen that is thinner and has less form than that of males.

For Aristotle, the fact that the male generates in the body of another and the female generates in her own body explains “why in cosmology too they speak of the nature of the Earth as something female and call it ‘mother,’ while they give to the heaven and the sun and anything else of that kind the title of ‘generator,’ and ‘father.’” Furthermore, males are described as more “divine” than females due to their active role in the process of creation.[19] In this way, Aristotle’s theory of epigenesis does not limit itself to the mechanical and physical aspects of reproduction but also places reproduction in a broader, even cosmic, context.

Most important for our topic is how the question of paternity was determined in this era, long before DNA testing or any genetic understanding of procreation. For Aristotle, the degree and nature of the resemblance between parents and offspring are determined by a competition between the male and female principles in the early stages of the generative process. In ideal circumstances, the male principle will father a son who is identical to himself in all respects. This means that the son will resemble the father not only physically but in personality and behavior. Aristotle expected children to be “chips off the old block.” To know the father is to know the son; conversely, the qualities of the child confirm the identity of the father. According to the first-century rhetor Quintilian, “persons are generally regarded as having some resemblance to their parents and ancestors, a resemblance which leads to their living disgracefully or honorably, as the case may be.”[20]

The Gospel provides ample support for my hypothesis that the theory of epigenesis underlies the portrayal of Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus’ actions and desires come only from God and resemble those of God. If Jesus’ words and works demonstrate that he is his Father’s son, the Jews’ repeated attempts to kill Jesus demonstrate that they have the murderous and deceitful devil as their own father.

John 8:44 and the Gospel’s Rhetorical Program

Most commentators recognize that the Gospel of John is a rhetorical document that aims to persuade its audience that a person can achieve a relationship with God only by believing in Jesus as the messiah and Son of God. Although the term for “covenant” does not appear in this Gospel, John’s entire rhetorical program is based on the concept of covenant, specifically, that the human desire for eternal life depends on being covenantal relationship with God through faith in Jesus. To execute this rhetorical program, however, the Gospel also has to address a competing claim: that it is the Jews who have long been, and continue to be, God’s covenantal partners, that is, God’s elect or chosen people. John must discount the claims of the Jews at the same time as it puts forth its own.

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John 8:31–59 is the key text in this effort. Here the Jews outline three claims as the foundation on which their covenantal relationship with God is based: first, they trace their origins back to Abraham, viewed by Jews in the Second Temple period as the first monotheist (8:33, 39); second, they have never served or been enslaved to foreign gods (8:33; cf. Ps 106:36; Gal 4:9; Jer 5:19);[21] and, finally, they are children of God (8:41). By describing themselves in this way, the Jews stake their claim to an exclusive and binding relationship with the one true God and in doing so also condemn Jesus’ claims to be the messiah and Son of God as a violation of the monotheism upon which this relationship is based.

The Johannine Jesus, however, argues against each of these three claims. When the Jews argue that they have Abraham as their father, he counters that if so, they would have done what Abraham did. He does not specify what that was, but the allusion is likely to Genesis 18, in which Abraham welcomed the three angels—one of whom was later identified as the Lord and, therefore typologically as Jesus—with refreshment and a sumptuous feast. As for enslavement, most commentators here suggest that the Jews are lying, or, if not actually lying, conveniently forgetting their centuries-long enslavement in Egypt prior to the Exodus. Parallels in the Septuagint, however, suggest that they are not referring to physical enslavement but to polytheism. As for God being their father, well, Jesus argues in our passage, far from it! Their father is not God but the devil. With these arguments, John’s Jesus presses home the point that a new covenant now exists, mediated through himself as the Son of God. Anyone who believes otherwise must relinquish their claim to a covenantal relationship with God and must therefore be a child of the devil.

If my reading of John 8:44 in context is correct, the statement that the Jews have the devil as their father, though grounded in the reproductive theory of epigenesis, is important for John not so much as a blanket statement about all Jews everywhere and for all time. Rather, it is part of an intricate rhetorical program that is designed to persuade its audience to accept its claim regarding faith as the key to covenantal relationship with God and thereby also to erect a wall between themselves and the unbelieving Jews. Ultimately, John uses rhetoric to promote a parting of the ways between those who follow his lead and the Jews who do not.

In its literary, historical, and cultural context, John 8:44 contributes to John’s efforts to stake out some conceptual territory for himself and those who, he hopes, will be swayed by his rhetoric. But when the Gospel became part of the Christian sacred canon, John 8:44, like the rest of the Gospel, came to be seen as a divinely inspired and eternally valid, and therefore, exceedingly dangerous text. It is time to put it back in its historical, literary, and rhetorical place, and to strip it of the destructive power that it has exercised for so many centuries.

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