Shared Scriptures, Shared Questions: Jewish Readings of the Christian Testament

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Introduction



In 2015, a new sculpture was unveiled at Saint Joseph University in Philadelphia. 'Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time', by artist Joshua Koffman, was commissioned by Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Second Vatican Council declaration *Nostra Aetate* and the 1967 founding of the university's Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations.

The Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*, meaning 'In our Time' in Latin, is officially described as a declaration on The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. This document, especially, its fourth paragraph, transformed Catholic-Jewish relations by focusing on the many ties between Catholics and Jews, and by rejecting the idea that all Jews everywhere and for all time bear the responsibility for Jesus's death. In doing so it created new avenues for fruitful dialogue between Jews and Catholics.

Koffman's depiction of Synagoga and Ecclesia 'in our time' departs from the traditional representations of Ecclesia as regal and triumphant, and Synagoga as blind and downtrodden. In our time, after *Nostra Aetate*, the statue expresses the conviction that the church and synagogue must be portrayed as equal in every way. Both are both royal figures; their garb is the same; and they have an identical, if reversed, posture. Their faces are also identical – they are sisters, or perhaps even twins. They sit so close together that they appear to be joined at the hip,

symbolising, as stated in *Nostra Aetate*, 'the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock'.

Although their bodies are angled away from each other, perhaps symbolising the different direction that each has taken throughout history, they face towards each other. More precisely, each is looking towards, or perhaps even into the scriptures held by the other. In that sense, they are sharing their respective scriptures with one another. The depiction does not imply that one must adopt the scriptures of the other. Rather, each is secure in her own faith and can therefore encounter her sister's scriptures with respect and equanimity. The statue thereby conveys the message that Jews should not fear reading the Christian scriptures; and Christians should understand that Jews read the Hebrew Scriptures differently than Christians do. Jews can read the New Testament not only in order to refute its claims about Jesus, but also in order to study how the first generations of Jesus followers made sense of the world. Christians can read the Hebrew Bible as prophesying the life and death of Christ, but they can also take interest in the scriptural interpretations of ancient rabbis and medieval Jewish commentators.

Whether we are pastors, scholars, or interested laypeople, there is no end to the questions one might ask of the Jewish or the Christian scriptures. But perhaps the most fundamental and difficult question we must each answer is this: what do these scriptures mean for me? This question lends itself to numerous answers; and each person might answer it in different ways at different times. When I am reading the Torah as a Bible scholar, I might situate its meaning in the ancient contexts in which it was written, or perhaps in the second temple or rabbinic Jewish contexts in which it came to be read. When I am following the weekly Torah reading in synagogue, I might situate its meaning with respect to contemporary Jewish values about the poor, the hungry, and the strangers in our midst. Christian scholars of the New Testament might situate its meaning in the evidence the Gospels may or may not provide about the historical Jesus. But when preparing a sermon or leading, or taking part in, a bible study they may seek meaning in how the sayings attributed to Jesus can shape an ethical response to modern issues.

As a Jewish scholar of the New Testament, I am always in the position of Synagoga, gazing over at the scriptures held, and held dear, by Ecclesia. Sometimes I do so in order to compare New Testament concepts and expressions with those found in ancient Jewish sources. Less happily, I also do so in order to discuss Christian anti-Judaism, by asking: are the Gospels themselves anti-Jewish or were they merely interpreted that way by later Christian authors? And did Paul turn his back on Judaism or was he 'within Judaism'? If I remove my scholarly hat, however, I might ponder, in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, whether there are positive meanings that non-Christians might draw from the scriptures that Christians hold so dear. Are there ways that Jews, or at least, this Jew, can relate more personally to the Christian Testament despite the fact that it is sacred neither to her nor her community?

This is not exactly a new question for me. Some twenty-five years ago I wrote a book called *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John*.[1] My point of departure was Wayne Booth's thought-provoking book called *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*.[2] Booth argued that when we read a book we enter into a relationship with its implied author – the author as we imagine or construct them on the basis of the book we are reading. In that spirit, I gave thought to my relationship to the implied author of the Fourth Gospel, which has been my main research area since my doctoral days.[3]

I suggested that when we read a book, any book, we inevitably situate ourselves in a certain position with respect to what we are reading – and to the author's persona as we have imagined it. When it comes to reading the Gospel of John, I argued, we readers have choices. We can choose a compliant reading stance, in which we accept the theology, ideas, and overall perspective that the implied author puts forth in the Gospel. Alternatively, we can choose a resistant stance; for example, by identifying with the characters who oppose Jesus, such as the 'Jews'.[4] We take a

sympathetic stance when we try understand where the implied author is coming from even if we do not agree with their position. We can also choose an engaged stance by entering into dialogue with the implied author with regard to their most fundamental assertions. In practice we often combine two or more of these positions as we work our way through a particular text, but it deepens our thinking to consider them separately.

In this article, I add a fifth approach to the four I proposed a quarter century ago. I call this approach empathy. This approach does not relate so much to the implied author as to the characters in the Gospel narratives. Can they come alive to us as human beings, and if so, how might we relate to them?

An Empathetic Reading of the New Testament Gospels

The first step in this approach is to bracket theology, including christology, eschatology, and soteriology, that is, the elements that expressed the faith of the early Jesus movement and became foundational for Christianity. For Christians these elements may be central, but for me as a Jew they stand in the way of a more direct connection with the Gospels. This is because they express beliefs and truth claims that I do not share. In doing so, they evoke in me the impulse to foreground my dissent. The fact that some of these ideas originated in, or correspond to Jewish ideas and beliefs does not neutralise their disturbing effect. But even for believing Christians, it may be useful temporarily to bracket these theological elements in order to relate to the Gospels' characters on a human level.

The second step is to discern the emotional underpinnings of the narrative. The Gospels generally do not describe emotions but the stories they tell allow us to infer them. We might infer, for example, that a person who asks Jesus for healing is in physical pain and also emotionally distressed about their injury or disease. Similarly, we might infer that those who seek an exorcism are deeply disturbed by the idea that they are possessed by a demon.

The third step is to consider how these emotions resonate in one's own life and experience. Underlying the entire exercise is the assumption that although the Gospels were written almost two millennia ago in places and circumstances far different from our own, their authors crafted their characters in ways that are familiar to us today. The point is not to erase or minimise the ways in which, to quote L. P. Hartley, 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'[5] But it is to suggest some degree of continuity in human nature and human emotion between past and present.[6]

Once we put theological and historical considerations aside, we are left with a wealth of material that speaks to values, behaviours, and feelings that transcend time and space. I will illustrate the empathetic approach, first, with two stories in which the characters' emotions are transparent. I then move on to a potentially more delicate enterprise: empathetic analysis of the Gospel passages about the relationships between Jesus, his friends, and his family.

The Disabled man of John 5

The story of the disabled man in John 5 is a testament to resilience in the face of adversity. The main character in this story is a man who for thirty-eight years has suffered with severe mobility issues that prevent him from walking. When we meet him, he is lying near the Beth-Zatha pool near the Sheep's Gate to the Jerusalem Temple. He believes that if he can be put into the pool before anyone else enters, he will be cured. Unfortunately, to this point, no one has done so. Along comes Jesus, who is sympathetic to his plight. But Jesus does not help the man into the pool. Rather he simply tells him: 'Stand up, take your mat and walk' (5:8). And the man does.

Jesus's actions prompt a contentious discussion between Jesus and a group of Jews (5:10–29). The Jews accuse both the man and Jesus of violating the sabbath: the man for picking up his pallet and Jesus for healing him. Obviously the Gospel writer's aim is to accentuate Jesus's miraculous deed and to respond to his critics. But if we focus on the newly healed man himself, we might find ourselves caught between two contrasting responses. On the one hand, his belief in the healing powers of the pool seems completely misguided. Even if one takes into account ancient beliefs or superstitions, surely his past experience over thirty-eight years should have taught him that he will never make it into the water before everyone else, never mind the possibility that his belief may be mistaken. On the other hand, one cannot help but admire his persistence. Perhaps his ability to remain poolside day after day is not a testament to despair but an offering of hope – and an ode to the value of grit.

The Syro-Phoenician Woman

The Gospels occasionally describe Jesus's encounters with strangers, meaning non-Jews. In these encounters Jesus is generally courteous and helpful, as in the case of the Samaritan woman whom he meets at a well in John 4, or the nobleman whose son he heals in the Galilee in 4:46–53. There is one notable exception, however: the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, recounted in Mark 7:24–30 and Matthew 15:21–28. As the story begins, Jesus has travelled to Tyre. There he enters a house. It must have been a pretty big house, as he thought he could enter without anyone knowing that he was there (7:24b). Despite his best efforts, however, he was spotted by a woman who was either Canaanite (according to Matthew) or Syro-Phoenician (according to Mark). The woman was highly distressed because her young daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit. She 'begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter' (Mark 7:26) but Jesus refused, saying 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' (Mark 7:27).

By any criterion, this response is a rude put-down, not at all what one would expect of anyone, let alone Jesus. But the woman was quick on her toes, and highly motivated by her daughter's condition. She answered back: 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs' (Mark 7:28). To his credit, Jesus acknowledged the wisdom, and wit, of her response, and changed his mind: 'For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.' In Matthew's version, Jesus responds rather more piously: 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish' (15:28). In neither Gospel does Jesus apologise. But he does implicitly acknowledge that he was wrong to refuse the woman's heartfelt plea.

Here is a person who is doubly marginalized – as a woman and as a gentile – and yet she calls Jesus to task. For his part, Jesus accepts the criticism even if he does not say so outright.[7]

Jesus and Lazarus

There is little at stake when we empathise with the disabled man of John 5 and the gentile woman of Mark 7 and Matthew 15. The empathetic approach becomes more sensitive, however, when applied to stories about Jesus's relationships with, and behaviour towards his closest friends and family.

The Gospels are almost entirely silent on the question of whether Jesus had close personal friends aside from the disciples. Perhaps so; he seems to have places to go and people to see in various parts of the Galilee and Judea. Further, we may surmise that as they were hardly wealthy, Jesus and his entourage would have stayed with friends rather than paying for accommodation during their wanderings.

The most detailed story of friendship is found in John 11.[8] At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus

is in the Galilee with his disciples when he receives a message from Mary and Martha of Bethany, saying that their brother Lazarus is ill (11:3). According to 11:5, Jesus loved these siblings. And although their message did not say so, the sisters clearly expected Jesus to depart immediately for Bethany. And yet, Jesus lingers in the Galilee for two more days.[9] By the time he gets to Bethany, Lazarus has died. We are left with the uncomfortable thought that Jesus delayed his trip in order to make sure that Lazarus is good and dead – all so that Jesus could perform the spectacular miracle of resurrecting him.

For the Gospel writer, the ultimate aim – the glorification of the Son of God – may have justified the delay. But one wonders what Lazarus and his siblings would have thought. My guess is that, happy as they were about Lazarus's restoration, they knew that Jesus could have spared them the pain and anguish of death and loss. Jesus has not denied the ethical obligation of friendship but he has relativised it: his obligation to help was less important than the opportunity to glorify God and his own sonship. Is it a stretch to see Jesus's behaviour as ego-gratification at the expense of friendship?

Jesus and his Brothers

According to John 7:8–10, Jesus's brothers urge him to go up to Jerusalem just prior to the Feast of Tabernacles, 'so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants to be widely known acts in secret' (7:3–4). The narrator interprets their comment as hostile, adding parenthetically: 'For not even his brothers believed in him' (7:5). Jesus resists their suggestion, and tells them to 'Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come' (7:8). Yet after his brothers departed, Jesus also went 'not publicly but as it were in secret' (7:10). Jesus has both lied to and deceived his brothers, thereby violating not only the expectations of familial relationships but also the biblical commandments in Leviticus 19:11: 'You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.'

On the face of it, the brothers' suggestion that Jesus go up to Jerusalem seems eminently reasonable. One might infer that they knew about his various powers, and that he wanted to gather a large following. On this basis they may have concluded that the most efficient way to achieve that goal was to show up in Jerusalem during the festival when many thousands of pilgrims were gathered there. The narrator justifies Jesus's initial refusal on the grounds that the brothers did not really believe him. The implication may be that they were taunting him, or, perhaps, trying to entrap him by suggesting that he go on pilgrimage with them. Yet we only have the narrator's word for it. As to why Jesus lied to them, one can only speculate. Perhaps he, like the narrator, suspected baser motives on their part. Or perhaps he simply wanted to assert his independence by going on pilgrimage on his own.

In this story, we can empathise both with the brothers and with Jesus. Perhaps the brothers were only trying to help Jesus spread his message by providing marketing advice as how best to reach a large audience. If so, they may have felt rebuffed and hurt when Jesus rejected their idea, and, even worse, showed up in Jerusalem after saying he would not be going. For his part, Jesus may have suspected his brothers of mocking him, or perhaps trying to entrap him.

Jesus and his Mother

Occasional friction between parents and their adult children seems inevitable in even the most harmonious of families. Why should Jesus's family have been any different? According to the Gospels, they weren't. Besides Jesus, Mary is no doubt the person whom most Christians revere the most. Her beauty, wisdom, piety, strength of character and devotion to her son are on display in churches and art museums around the world. In the Gospels, however, it is unclear whether Jesus reciprocates that devotion. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke describe a situation in

which Jesus apparently rejects his mother and siblings. As he is speaking to the crowds, someone tells him: ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you’ (Matthew 12:47). Presumably the family wants Jesus to come out to talk to them, or else to invite them into the location where he is holding forth. Instead, Jesus asks the messenger: ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ The question is rhetorical, and Jesus answers it himself. As the narrator explains, ‘pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”’ (Matthew 12:46–50; see also Mark 3:31–35 and Luke 8:19).

Here Jesus redefines family as the community of faith. But his behaviour is less than admirable. It is all very well and good to have a chosen family based on values and beliefs. But does having a chosen family require one to reject one’s mother and siblings? The narrator does not explain Jesus’s response, but the implication is that Jesus did not consider his mother and brother siblings to be believers. Yet Matthew and Luke both portray Mary as a pious God-fearing woman. Christian tradition and art places her alongside Jesus as exalted in heaven. Similarly, according to Paul, Jesus’s brother James became one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church, hardly a role for a non-believer.[10] I can understand that Jesus, like other young men, might not have wanted his mother and siblings barging in when he was spending time with his friends, but they hardly deserved the cold shoulder.

Jesus’s behaviour towards his mother at the wedding at Cana is equally puzzling. At some point during the wedding, Jesus’s mother realises that the wine has run out. When she mentions this to Jesus, he replies, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come’ (2:4). One might be taken aback when a son calls his mother ‘woman’. In fairness, however, for the Johannine Jesus, ‘woman’ is a marker of revelation; John’s Jesus uses it to preface revelatory statements to the Samaritan woman (4:21) and to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb (20:15). Nevertheless, in responding to his mother in this way, Jesus comes very close to violating the command to honour (or at least be polite to) one’s parents (Exodus 20:12).

In asking ‘What concern is that to you and to me?’ Jesus is essentially saying, ‘Not my problem.’ In referring to his mother as ‘woman’, Jesus creates distance between them. One can only admire her restraint in not reprimanding him out for speaking to her this way. Instead, she wisely ignores his outburst, and simply assumes that obligation will win out, as indeed it does. In mentioning to her son that the wine has run out, she is not just engaging in idle gossip. She clearly expects him to do something about it. Does she think he will slip out of the wedding festivities and go out to the local off-licence? Hardly. She knows he can do better than that. She tells the servants to follow Jesus’s instructions. And lo and behold, he turns water into wine of the highest quality. By ceasing to engage with her son, and simply telling the servants to ‘do whatever he tells you’, she cuts the scene short and shames him into acting.

In contrast to Matthew 12:46–50 and parallels, the passage in John 2 implies that Jesus’s mother is fully aware of Jesus’s abilities and also believes in them. This discrepancy does not necessarily tell us anything about the relationship between the historical Jesus and his mother. Rather, it may signal the different traditions received by the Synoptics, who tell of Jesus’s refusal to see his mother and siblings but are apparently unaware of the story of the wedding at Cana. All four gospels, however, convey some tension between mother and son.

The Gospel of John recuperates the mother-son relationship in Jesus’s final moments. As he is hanging on the cross, Jesus sees his mother and another disciple, described by John as the disciple whom Jesus loved, standing together. He then says to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ And to the disciple he says, ‘Here is your mother.’ The narrator tells us that from that hour the disciple took her into his own home (John 19:25–27). According to Christian tradition, the Beloved Disciple and Mary eventually went off to live in Ephesus in Asia Minor, on the west coast of what is now Turkey.[11]

An empathetic reading of the stories about Jesus and his family would consider the expectations and emotional needs that underlie the actions of each party to the relationship. It is easy to imagine the hurt that Jesus's mother and siblings might have felt when Jesus rejected them in front of his disciples, and in effect denied the importance of their familial relationship. In contrast to his behaviour towards the Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus here shows no remorse and no understanding of the consequences of his behaviour. If one is inclined to be charitable, one might say that he needs to assert his independence in order to pursue his mission. Still, a young man can surely make room in his life and his heart for both his biological family and his chosen family.

Aside from Luke's brief account of Jesus's visit to the Jerusalem temple at the age of twelve, the Gospels do not recount Jesus's life prior to his ministry. If we combine the stories from the Synoptics and John (a dubious practice when engaged in historical-critical study of the New Testament but perhaps less dubious when exercising empathy and imagination) we can imagine that Jesus, like other young people, underwent a process of maturation from adolescent rejection of family to acceptance of the responsibility a son might owe his mother.[12] Of course, the chronology does not quite work. Even if we accept John's chronological framework within which Jesus's ministry is spread over approximately three years instead of the single year as in the Synoptics, he is already an adult at the outset, assuming that he was approximately thirty years old at his death. Still, I can feel more empathy for Jesus if I picture him as a young man whose pre-frontal cortex has not fully matured rather than as someone who rejects without cause – and apparently without a thought as to the hurt he has inflicted.

Humanity and Christology

As noted at the outset, an empathetic reading requires us to bracket Christology, especially when applying this approach to Jesus. But in fact this is true only of high Christology, which focuses on Jesus's divine nature. As Christian theology developed, it focused increasingly on the belief in Jesus as the sinless, perfect, and divinely engendered son of God.[13] But while, according to John, Jesus was the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world (1:29), the Gospel writers do not claim that Jesus himself was free of human foibles, that he never erred, or that he always behaved towards others in accordance with the ethical norms of his era. They did not view Jesus's humanity as compromising his identity as God's son and universal saviour. To assert that Jesus was both human and divine meant that while he could perform miracles, he also possessed and acted on the emotions and the imperfections that are part and parcel of human nature. It is only in later centuries that Jesus's messianic identity was seen as conferring upon him a standard of perfection that no human being could possibly live up to.

Viewing Jesus with empathy is simply a way of drawing attention to his humanity. But let me be perfectly clear. Although Jesus was himself a historical figure, the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels is a fictional character, in the sense that he is portrayed in ways that suited the agendas of the Gospel writers, and not necessarily the way he really was. Whether he really talked back to his mother, rejected his biological family, or wanted to deny help to a Syro-Phoenician child is anyone's guess.

As a Jew, I do not share the Gospel's view of Jesus as the messiah and Son of God. I do not believe he performed miracles or that he was raised from the dead and ascended to God the Father. On the other hand, I am perfectly willing to believe that the historical Jesus was rather like a Canadian, or, more precisely, the stereotype of a Canadian: a nice person who was good to his mother, kind to his brothers, and helpful to friends and strangers alike. But a flawed Jesus is a far more interesting figure than the perfect, sinless Christ he became in the hands of later interpreters who may have lost sight of what truly makes a person human.

Empathy Alongside Other Reading Strategies

An empathetic reading, like the compliant, resistant, sympathetic, and engaged reading positions, focuses first and foremost on the Gospels as artistic literary works. As such, they tell their stories and describe their characters in order to present and promote their particular vision of the world.

The passages I have discussed are amenable to all five reading strategies, though to different degrees and in different ways. A compliant reading of the story of the disabled man in John 5, for example, would affirm Jesus's power to heal. A resistant reading would stand with the Jews who interrogate Jesus in the aftermath of the healing, and question why a man suffering from a chronic disability could not have been healed on a Friday or Sunday instead of on the sabbath. A sympathetic reading would link this healing story with the healings attributed to Elisha in 2 Kings 2–5, while an engaged reading might require me to recognise the impact that Jesus had on the disabled man – not only because he healed his disability but because of the glimpse of eternity that Jesus offered.

An empathetic reading stance has much in common with a resistant reading stance in that it focuses on elements of the Gospel narratives that compliant, sympathetic or engaged readings might need to explain, or perhaps explain away.[14] But whereas a resistant reading takes the perspective of those whom the Gospels label as Jesus's enemies or opponents, an empathetic reading does not situate itself over against Jesus. Rather it lifts up elements that might sit uncomfortably alongside the exalted image of the sinless Christ of modern Christianity but are nevertheless important to the representation of Jesus as a fully human being. It is these elements that allow us not only to empathise with him, as we might also with other figures in the Gospel narrative, but also to understand that he was a real, three-dimensional character rather than the flat character he appears to be in many theological representations.[15]

In some cases, scholars themselves resist readings that focus on Jesus's human failings. Interpretations of John 11 almost always justify Jesus's delay in going to Bethany to heal Lazarus by arguing that the family's distress was a small price to pay in order to demonstrate Jesus's glory. In the end Lazarus's life was restored, so where is the harm? Craig Keener, for example, emphasises Jesus's love for the Bethany family:

> Lest readers misunderstand the reason for Jesus' delay (11:6), John explicitly emphasizes Jesus' love for the family . . . Assurance that Jesus did care, that God did have long-range purposes in the suffering, even that Jesus joined in weeping with the bereaved as well as ultimately held power over life and death, would mean much to believers facing that universal human predicament of death, whether or not related to persecution.[16]

These comments urge readers to focus on the greater good: what counts is that Jesus restored Lazarus to life and thereby demonstrated his identity as God's Son. No doubt this theme is present in the Gospel account, but it seems to me that the exegetes who focus on this point exhibit a lack of imagination and empathy for the pain caused to Lazarus and his sisters in the days between Lazarus's illness and his revivification.

Similarly apologetic are many interpretations of John 7:8–10. Discomfort with Jesus's apparent deception of his brothers is not a modern phenomenon but can be seen in the manuscript tradition. For John 7:8, Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Bezae, the Latin, and the Old Syriac read: 'I am not going up [to Jerusalem; *eg? ouk anabain?*; emphasis mine]'.[17] Some early manuscripts, such as P66 and P75, however, read: 'I am *not yet* going up [to Jerusalem; *eg? oup? anabain?*; emphasis mine]'.[18] This latter reading resolves the ethical conundrum and affirms that Jesus did not after all lie to his brothers. According to the text-critical criterion of *lectio difficilior probabilior* (the more difficult reading is likely to be the more authentic), however, most scholars consider *ouk* to be the likely reading. It is easier to understand why a scribe would change 'not' to 'not yet' than it is to

understand why a scribe would change ‘not yet’ to ‘not’.[19]

Yet there are modern interpreters who argue that ‘I am not yet going up’ [*eg? oup? anabain?*] is the correct reading. Chrys C. Caragounis suggests that those who prefer the ‘not’ reading have applied the criterion of *lectio difficilior probabilior* too rigidly. They have thereby misunderstood the textual history of the passage and created an ‘unsolvable problem’ by portraying the perfectly sinless Jesus as a liar.[20] C. K. Barrett excuses Jesus’s negative response on the grounds that it did not refer to his plans regarding Jerusalem but rather signified his rejection of the brothers’ request.[21] Raymond Brown argues that Jesus’s words to his brothers are an example of the two-level meaning that is characteristic of Johannine narrative technique:

On the purely natural level, it appears to the brothers that Jesus does not find this an opportune time to go up to the festival at Jerusalem. Jesus’ subsequent behavior in going up to the festival shows us, however, that this was not really what he meant. John has prepared the reader to understand Jesus’ real meaning by the reference to death at the hand of ‘the Jews’ in vs. 1. When Jesus speaks of his ‘time’, he is speaking on the level of the divine plan. . . . At this festival he will not go up (vs. 8), that is, go up to the Father.[22]

These proposals do not address the problem of Jesus’s deception head on; rather, they explain it away by offering interpretations that contradict the commonsense meaning of the passage. This amounts to an implicit acknowledgment that (a) Jesus has misled his brothers, and (b) that such behaviour goes against Jesus’s perfection. The tension between these two points elicits an apologetic response so as to negate (a) in favour of (b).

Similarly, interpreters from the patristic period to the present express discomfort with Jesus’s abrupt words to his mother in John 2:4. Chrysostom says that Jesus was upset because the request ‘ought to have come from those who needed, not from His mother’.[23] Augustine agrees that Jesus’s words were for his mother’s own spiritual good: ‘He does not repel her of whom He received the flesh, but means to convey the conception of His divinity with special fitness at this time, when He is about to change the water into wine; which divinity, likewise, had made that woman, and had not itself been made in her.’[24] In other words, the woman who told him about the wine was not actually his mother, because divine beings are not gestated as normal human beings are. Augustine insists that Jesus’s words to his mother are intended to convey that ‘in respect of His being God, there was no mother for Him’.[25]/p>

Modern scholars also excuse the behaviour. Raymond Brown insists that the unusual use of ‘woman’ ‘is not an attempt to reject or devalue the mother-son relationship, for Mary is called the “mother of Jesus” four times in vss 1–12’.[26] Keener agrees with Augustine that Jesus’s response to his mother is meant to deepen her faith. At this stage, Keener suggests, she ‘does not understand what this sign will cost Jesus: it starts him on the road to his hour, the cross’.[27] By contrast, Bultmann does not see Jesus’s comment as a reflection of concern for his mother’s spiritual understanding. Instead, he argues that the reply signifies that ‘Human ties and obligations in no way influence Jesus’ action; the miracle worker is bound to his own law and must listen to another voice …’.[28]

Conclusion

My empathetic readings of these Gospel stories may not resonate with everyone. No doubt there are many who are not willing or able to bracket the theological elements of the Gospel, or for whom the focus on Jesus as the Christ is what makes the Gospels powerful and meaningful. But for me as a Jew the empathetic approach permits me to set aside, at least for a time, the bleak topic of anti-Judaism and the negative feelings about the New Testament that this topic arouses. Empathy allows me to imagine Jesus, his mother, the Syro-Phoenician woman, and the others as real

people rather than flat stereotypes. It also reminds me of an important feature that the Jewish and Christian scriptures share: the ability to see the heroes of our traditions as fully human, with both the gifts and the flaws that make them unique. Jews – in the persona of Synagoga – can claim Abraham as our patriarch even as we criticise him for trying to pass his wife Sarai off as his sister in Genesis 12 and Genesis 20. We can revere King David even as we frown upon his shenanigans with Bath Sheba and his ruthless behaviour towards Uriah (2 Samuel 11–12). Similarly, I suggest, Ecclesia and Christians are capable of believing in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God even as they remain aware that he was a human being who may well have behaved badly on occasion. Perhaps, indeed, when Synagoga and Ecclesia are gazing into each other's open scriptures, they are seeing not only the one God and the ethical teachings that they have in common, but also the humanity that we all share with one another.

[1] For detailed discussion and numerous examples of these reading strategies, see Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (Continuum, 2001).
[2] Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (University of California Press, 1988).
[3] Adele Reinhartz, *The Word in the World: The Cosmological Tale in the Fourth Gospel* (Scholars Press, 1992); Adele Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2018); Adele Reinhartz, *'John 20:30–31 and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel'* (PhD, McMaster University, 1983); Adele Reinhartz, *The Gospel of John and Jewish-Christian Relations* (Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2018); Adele Reinhartz, *Jousting with John: Essays on Jews, Gender, and Ethics in the Fourth Gospel*, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 264 (de Gruyter, 2025).
[4] Johannine scholars often put 'the Jews' in quotation marks to show that these are not necessarily 'real' Jews but rather Jews as the symbol of anti-Jesus enmity. For discussion, see Adele Reinhartz, '"Jews" and Jews in the Fourth Gospel', in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium*, 2000, ed. R. Bieringer et al. (Royal Van Gorcum, 2001); Adele Reinhartz, '"Jews," "Judaism," and "Jewish" in the Study of Antiquity', in *Within Judaism? Interpretive Trajectories in Judaism, Christianity and Islam from the First to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Karin Hedner Zetterholm and Anders Runesson (Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2024).
[5] L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (Penguin, 1953), 7.
[6] The question of whether human nature remains constant or changes over time remains controversial. Undoubtedly there is adaptation and change over time and differences between one locale and another, but common sense suggests that certain human experiences are universal, hard-wired into our brains and bodies, such as physical pain, social attachment, birth, disease, and death; and the emotions of relief, anger, resentment, and happiness or contentment.
[7] For a range of views on this passage, see, for example, Michael F. Bird, 'Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician Woman: A Story of Inclusion?' in M*any Believed Because of Her Testimony: Essays Celebrating the Scholarship and Service of Dorothy Lee*, ed. Robert A. Derrenbacker, Christopher A. Porter, and Muriel Porter (Wipf & Stock, 2023, 145–154); J. Duncan M. Derrett, 'Law in the New Testament: The Syro-Phoenician Woman and the Centurion of Capernaum', *Novum Testamentum* 15, no. 3 (1973): 161–86, ATLA0000745206; Hisako Kinukawa, 'De-Colonizing Ourselves as Readers: The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman as a Text', in D*istant Voices Drawing Near: Essays in Honor of Antoinette Clark Wire,* ed. Marvin L. Chaney and Holly E. Hearon (Liturgical Press, 2004), 131–44; James W. Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word in the Logos of Christ; or The Difference the Syro-Phoenician Woman Makes to Jesus', *Semeia* 75 (1996): 61–85, ATLA0001026168; Hal Taussig, 'Dealing under the Table: Ritual Negotiation of Women's Power in the Syro-Phoenician Woman Pericope', in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L Mack*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig (Trinity Press International, 1996), 264–79.
[8] For detailed discussion of this story, see Adele Reinhartz, 'Reproach and Revelation: Ethics in John 11:1–44', in *Torah Ethics and Early Christian Identity*, ed. Susan Wendel and David Miller (Eerdmans, 2016).
[9] There has been a considerable number of recent studies supporting the idea that the Gospel of John presents Jesus as an ethical actor. See, for example, Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner, *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John* (Fortress, 2017); J. G. Van der Watt, *A Grammar of the Ethics of John: Reading John from an Ethical Perspective*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament, 431, 502 (Mohr Siebeck, 2019); J. G. Van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, eds, *Rethinking the Ethics of John: 'Implicit Ethics' in the Johannine Writings*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 291 (Mohr Siebeck, 2012).
[10] See Gal 1:19 and Josephus, Antiquities 20.200.
[11] See Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, 1st ed., Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford University Press, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1093/0199250758.001.0001.
[12] Neuroscientists have established that the pre-frontal cortex is not fully mature in men until their mid-twenties. Sushil Sharma et al., 'Maturation of the Adolescent Brain', *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment* (2013): 449–61, https://doi.org/10.2147/NDT.S39776.
[13] For a range of views on the development of Christology, see Francesca Aran Murphy and Troy A. Stefano, *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford University Press, 2015).
[14] See, for example, Chrys C. Caragounis, 'Jesus, His Brothers and the Journey to the Feast (John 7:8–10)', *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 63 (1998): 177–87; Wayne Jackson, 'Did Jesus Deceive His Brothers?' Christian Courier, accessed 19 May 2016, https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/1327-did-jesus-deceive-his-brothers.
[15] The flatness of Jesus is even more apparent in most Jesus movies. See Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 43–64; Adele Reinhartz, '"Ronds" Ou "Plats" ? Les Saints Héros d'Hollywood', *CinémAction* 160 (2016): 82–91.
[16] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Hendrickson, 2003), 839.
[17] Wayne Campbell Kannaday, Apologetic Discourse and the Scribal Tradition: Evidence of the Influence of Apologetic Interests on the Text of the Canonical Gospels (Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 97.
[18] Raymond Edward Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Doubleday, 1966), 1:307. See also Caragounis, 'Jesus, His Brothers and the Journey to the Feast'.
[19] Schnackenburg notes that the *ouk* reading 'qualifies as a *lectio difficilior*, since it seems probable that the other was introduced to harmonise with v. 10 or by contamination from the *hupo* in v. 6'. He further notes that this example shows that the 'early Egyptian text [p66, p75] is not necessarily always the original'. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Seabury, 1980), 1:141. See also C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Westminster, 1978), 311.
[20] Caragounis, 'Jesus, His Brothers and the Journey to the Feast', 178, 181.
[21] Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 313.
[22] Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 1:308.
[23] John Chrysostom, Homily 21 on the Gospel of John, section 3, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240121.htm.
[24] Augustine, *On Faith and the Creed* 4.9, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1304.htm
[25] Ibid.

[26] Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 1:99 (n. 10).
[27] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 506, n. 8.
[28] Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Westminster, 1971), 117, n. 3.

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