The Attitude of Early-Christians toward Unbelievers and Semi-Believers

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PREFACE

This volume brings together four previously published essays that deal with the attitude of some early-Christian writers and communities towards (Jewish) unbelievers and (Christian) semi-believers. The essays were written by the author himself, and published between 1995 and 2018. They have been slightly revised for inclusion in this volume; additions (in the footnotes) are denoted by square brackets.

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—The Author

INTRODUCTION

Around the year 30 of the first century C.E., some of the Jews in Galilee, and later also in Judea, came under the influence of a certain Jesus of Nazareth. They believed that this "son of a carpenter" was the promised Messiah; the one who would deliver the Jews from the power of the Romans, who occupied the land of Israel at that time. He proclaimed that the end of times was near and that God would soon establish his kingdom on earth and would reign forever. Moreover, he called for repentance and for leading a life according to the will of God. His followers formed a small community in Jerusalem and did not give up, but continued to believe in his message even when he had been crucified as a troublemaker by the Romans. They believed that he was a martyr who had died "for our sins" in order to restore mankind's relationship with God, that he had been raised up by God and lifted up to heaven, and that he would shortly come back down to earth, at which point all mankind would be judged and God's kingdom would be established.

This differed from other messianic movements of the time, which died out after the Romans had killed or taken captive their leaders and some of their followers; in contrast, the "Jesus movement" did not cease to exist, but grew instead. However, the followers of Jesus Christ had to face much opposition from their fellow-Jews, who did not believe in Jesus but considered him to be a religious maniac and a charlatan. The Jewish political and religious leaders, in particular, were afraid of the reactions of the Romans, who did not tolerate any kind of rebellion. The Jewish opposition was so severe that some of the

first Christians had to flee to cities in Syria, such as Antioch and Damascus, and to a number of other places across the Roman Empire.

One of the fiercest opponents of the "Jesus movement" was without any doubt a certain Saul (or Paul), a Jew from the city of Tarsus, who, in his own words, "was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it" (Gal 1:13; NRSV). But "Jesus Christ appeared to him" one day as he was on his way to Damascus, and he was called by God to become his "apostle," that is, to proclaim Jesus Christ and his message all over the world. And while some Christians in Jerusalem tried to convince fellow-Jews of the Gospel, Paul's task turned out to be to proclaim Jesus Christ among the Gentiles, the non-Jews (1 Cor 15:8, Gal 1:16). Thanks to the missionary activities of Paul and his co-workers in many places across the Roman Empire, particularly in Asia, Macedonia and Greece, there arose a number of small Christian communities, and although there were certainly also Jews who became followers of Jesus Christ, the great majority of those who converted to Christianity were non-Jews. In his letter to the Romans, Paul explicitly expresses his feelings of sadness about the fact that only a limited number of Jews were willing to listen to the message about Jesus Christ: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people" (Rom 9:2-3; NRSV).

As the "Jesus movement" grew and the number of Christian communities in many regions of the Roman Empire increased, Christians had to face opposition not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles–the non-Jews–and the Greco-Roman authorities. They found themselves "a new way," different from Judaism as well as from "paganism." They felt the need to find a new identity for themselves, and the authentic letters

of the apostle Paul (Rom, 1-2 Cor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thess, Phlm) in particular show this search for their identity.

In the search for their Christian identity, all first and second century Christians were critical of both Judaism and paganism, but there were differences in their approaches. Of course, they all rejected any form of paganism, with its worship of "idols" or Greco-Roman gods, and with its veneration of the Roman emperors; a rejection which they shared with the Jews. However, their stand towards the Jewish religion was somewhat more complicated, above all since Christianity had found its very origin in Judaism. Jesus' disciple Peter, for instance, "used to eat with the Gentiles" in the "mixed" Jewish and non-Jewish Christian community in Antioch, but after "certain people came from James," one of the leaders of the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem, "he drew back and kept himself separate" (Gal 2:12; NRSV). That is: in the end, the apostle Peter attempted to remain an adherent of Judaism and to observe the Jewish law (including the dietary rules about food) and to be a follower of Jesus Christ at the same time. The apostle Paul, on the other hand, was much more radical. In his view, Christians were the "new Israel," the only true continuation of Judaism, whereas Judaism itself had failed to accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah and the Son of God. He also rejected the Jewish law (including typical Jewish identity markers such as all kinds of dietary rules, circumcision and observance of the Sabbath) as an authority in his life and in the lives of his fellow-Christians, regardless of whether they had once been Jews or non-Jews. Nevertheless, convinced that God would keep his promise to Abraham and the people of Israel, he was sure that one day: "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26; NRSV).

Somewhat later, towards the end of the first century C.E., the (unknown) author of the Letter to the Hebrews warns his readers not to seek affiliation with the Jewish communities or

to fall back into Judaism, but to stick to Jesus Christ, the great High priest and "pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:2; NRSV). According to the author, the Jewish religion is completely outdated in the light of Jesus Christ's sacrificial death (and resurrection), which made him "the mediator of a second, a better covenant" (cf. Heb 8:6-7).

At the end of the first or the beginning of the second century, the (unknown) author of the Epistle of Barnabas warns his Christian readers against a Judaistic conception of the OT. He does so very seriously, telling his readers that they themselves are the heirs of the covenant of the Lord, not the Jewish people. In this context, he rejects any Jewish interpretation of the OT texts.

Finally, in Justin Martyr's *Dialogus cum Tryphone* (written around 160 C.E.), we find an intellectual conversation between the Christian Justin and Trypho, a Jew, in which Justin tries to convince Trypho of the Christian truth in a rather careful and diligent manner. He too refers to a number of OT passages in order to demonstrate that he, rather than the Jew Trypho, is right.

The authors of these three writings (Heb, Barn, and Justin's *Dial*.), share the view that the Jews are unbelievers, people who are not willing to accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Saviour of the world. They all criticise the Jewish religion, but each of them does so in his own specific way.

This volume brings together four essays dealing with three other early-Christian writings, i.e. the Gospel of John (Ch. 1), *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Chs. 2 and 3), and the Letter of Jude (Ch. 4). In all three writings, we find the authors' search for a Christian identity, as well as their attitude toward Jewish unbelievers on the one hand, and toward semi-

believers–fellow-Christians who, according to them, did not adhere to the pure and true faith in Jesus Christ–on the other.

The first chapter deals with the Gospel of John, a Gospel most probably composed around 100 C.E. It is, either rightly or wrongly, often considered the most anti-Jewish NT writing. The passage investigated in detail in this chapter, that is, John 8:31-36, clearly shows the evangelist's attitude toward unbelievers or semi-believers, which is found throughout the Gospel. It is (almost) generally accepted that the author of the Gospel himself belonged to a particular group of Christians, the so-called "Johannine community," who believed in a realised eschatology and who projected the role of Jesus Christ as the eschatological Saviour back to the earthly Jesus.

Throughout the Gospel of John, we find a number of theological disputes between Jesus and the Jews in which Jesus claims again and again to be "the Son of God." The Jews, however, do not believe him and consider his claim to be a form of blasphemy. It is not likely that the author of the Gospel intended to give a historical account of particular events from the time of Jesus; these encounters between the earthly Jesus and the Jews as narrated in the Gospel of John seem rather to be a reflection of the polemics of the Johannine Christians with other Christians, people who did not belong to the Johannine community, projected back to the time of Jesus. Perhaps these non-Johannine Christians were Jewish-Christians, who believed in Jesus in one way or another but who refused to relinquish their Jewish heritage, and who could not bring themselves to accept Jesus' claim to be the Son of God the Father. According to the evangelist, these non-Johannine Christians were no better than the Jews at the time of the earthly Jesus. Therefore, the evangelist found it quite appropriate to describe his Christian opponents as Jews, to project the disputes between the members of the Johannine community

and the other Christians back to the time of the earthly Jesus, and to present them as disputes between the earthly Jesus and the Jews. By labelling his opponents as "Jews," that is, people who once refused to accept Jesus as the Son of God, he repudiates them as semi-believers or false Christians.

In the passage John 8:31-36, the evangelist argues that these "Jews"–Jewish-Christians of inadequate faith and the semi-believers of his own time–are not the true descendants of Abraham, the forefather of the people of Israel; only the members of the Johannine community are the legitimate continuation of Israel and the true people of God.

Chapters Two and Three focus on *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (= *Testaments XII Patriarchs*), a document usually classified among the so-called "Old Testament Pseudepigrapha." Although they were well-known among early-Christian church fathers like Origen and Jerome, they are hardly known to Christians of our time, and are an object for serious research only among a limited number of scholars in the fields of early-Judaism and early-Christian literature. Since both chapters deal with the same early-Christian document, it has not been possible to avoid some overlap in the two essays; however, this overlap in no way prevents each of the essays being read independently of the other.

The text of *Testaments XII Patriarchs* consists of twelve parts or "testaments," also referred to as "farewell discourses," each of which contains the last words of one of the twelve sons of Jacob as addressed to their sons (and sometimes also to their grandsons and other relatives) at the end of their lives. They were composed by an unknown writer (or redactor) at some time during the second half of the second century C.E. Many scholars argue that *Testaments XII Patriarchs* derive from a document that was originally Jewish, but which was thoroughly

Christianised in later stages of redaction. By distinguishing different stages in the making of *Testaments XII Patriarchs*, they have eagerly looked for the oldest (Jewish) layer of the text. On the whole, however, these scholars have reached completely different conclusions, which, in my opinion, demonstrates the impossibility of applying our modern *Literarkritische* criteria to an ancient document. I find it much more plausible that *Testaments XII Patriarchs* are an originally Christian document into which a number of Jewish (written) sources and (oral) traditions have been incorporated by the Christian author (or redactor). It therefore seems wise to interpret the text of *Testaments XII Patriarchs* as it stands before us, that is, as a document composed by a Christian for the benefit of certain Christian communities.

Testaments XII Patriarchs are a fine example of the genre of "last words" or "farewell discourses" which was rather popular at the time. In all instances of these farewell discourses, the emphasis undeniably lies upon the parenesis, and *Testaments XII Patriarchs* are no exception to this rule. Next to the many parenetic passages there are a number of sections in which the patriarchs refer to their own lives in the past and to the future of the twelve tribes of Israel. On their deathbeds, they make a final call on their sons, their grandsons and other people present, to be obedient to God and to live according to his commandments. The Christian author of *Testaments XII Patriarchs* wants his (Christian) readers to realise that Jesus' message about loving God and loving one's neighbour (as we find it in the writings of the NT) is wholly in accordance with the moral teaching of the patriarchs. Both Jesus and the twelve famous sons of Jacob taught the same essentials of the universal and eternal (moral) law of God. However, if we look at the history of Israel, it becomes clear that most of the descendants of the patriarchs were disobedient to these moral teachings and transgressed against the law of God. In this context, the

Christian author has the patriarchs predict again and again the future misdeeds of their descendants, and above all, the moral misbehaviour of the descendants of Levi, whom both the patriarch Levi and the author of *Testaments XII Patriarchs* held to be responsible for the death of Jesus Christ.

Apparently, the author wanted his readers to realise that the patriarchs foretold Israel's misbehaviour and refusal to believe in Jesus Christ. Their rejection of the Saviour of the world is sharply criticised, not in order to persuade the Jews to repent or to convince them of the truth of the Christian message– *Testaments XII Patriarchs* are certainly not a missionary text– but to give Christian readers an illustrative example of disbelief and objectionable moral behaviour.

With his use of written and oral Jewish and Christian sources and traditions, the author of *Testaments XII Patriarchs* makes no attempt to write a coherent and consistent story. Nevertheless, his message is clear: he wants to repudiate the Israelites or Jews for their moral misbehaviour and their refusal to believe in Jesus Christ, to show his fellow-Christians the right way of living and to make them aware that the twelve patriarchs foretold the coming of Jesus Christ and the future salvation of all the righteous. The author of *Testaments XII Patriarchs* does not exactly give us a clear picture with regard to the final destiny of the people of Israel at the moment when God will judge the whole of mankind. On the one hand, we find a prediction of a bleak future for the people of Israel; on the other hand, however, God's eschatological agent Jesus Christ will be "the Saviour of the *world*," which also includes the Jewish people.

Over and over again, the author of *Testaments XII Patriarchs* points to the disbelief and moral misbehaviour of the Israelites (the Jews) as a warning to his Christian readers, but, like the

apostle Paul before him, he seems to be sure that one day the people of Israel will believe in Christ and will be saved at the end of time.

The final chapter, Chapter Four, deals with the Letter of Jude, a pseudepigraphic NT letter most probably written by an unknown author at the beginning of the second century C.E. The main reason for writing the letter appears to have been the danger that the Christian communities would be split up as a consequence of the activities of false teachers.

So far, no consensus about the identity of these false teachers has been reached; we do not even know whether they were Jewish-Christians or non-Jewish-Christians. According to the author of the Letter of Jude, they "pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" and "defile the flesh, reject authority, and slander the glorious ones" (vv. 4 and 8). In his view, they are semi-believers, or worse: "heretics" or even unbelievers.

One of the most characteristic features of the Letter of Jude is the author's familiarity with OT and Jewish sources. Although he almost never quotes a passage explicitly, echoes of and allusions to OT and Jewish texts and motifs are numerous. The author uses this source material to apply lessons from the past to the present situation, and thereby to convince his readers to stick to the true doctrine and to be wary of false teachers who try to deceive members of the Christian communities.

For the author of the letter, there are three groups of people: (a) people who believe, such as the readers of the letter; (b) unbelievers, semi-believers or heretics, such as the false teachers; and (c) Christians who doubt. The first group must try to prevent the third from joining the second. That means that the addressees of the letter should stick to the true Christian doctrine, and that they should have sympathy with, have mercy

on, and help those fellow-Christians who "are doubting," who are inclined to believe the words of the false preachers. Lastly, they should hate the adversaries, the false teachers with their unorthodox doctrines and actions, who do their best to mislead Christians and split the Christian Church.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALD	*Aramaic Levi Document*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library. London: Heinemann
LXX	Septuagint
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
OTP	Charlesworth, J. H. (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. 2 vols. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983-1985
REB	Revised English Bible

CHAPTER ONE

MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT "FREEDOM" IN JOHN 8:31-36

Whereas the concept of freedom plays a secondary role in the letters of the apostle Paul, and an even smaller part in the other NT writings, it is almost completely absent from the four Gospels. The only exception is the pericope John 8:31-36.[1]

In Hellenistic literature, both "freedom" (ἐλευθερία, and cognates) and its opposite, "slavery" (δουλεία, and cognates), are used in both a literal and in a figurative sense; that is, in a political-social sense and in a theological-philosophical-ethical sense (some sort of "mental" freedom or slavery). The same is true in the NT writings. In particular, the apostle Paul uses "freedom" and "slavery" in just such a figurative sense when he states that Christians are people who have been "liberated" by Jesus Christ and who, as a consequence, have become "free."[2] According to him, Christians have become people who are no longer slaves to human laws, including the Jewish law; they are free persons, having the power to live as they want; the only

[1] This essay has been written in grateful memory of Prof. Dr. Marinus de Jonge (Leiden), who died on December 26, 2016. It is a completely new and fully elaborated version of an earlier paper of mine, entitled " 'Vrijheid' en 'slavernij' in Johannes 8:31-36." I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Martin C. de Boer (Amsterdam) for many helpful suggestions and corrections.

[2] See esp. Jones, *"Freiheit"*; Vollenweider, *Freiheit*; and cf. Coppins, *Freedom*.

law that they have to observe is the–unwritten–law of God, or "the Law of Christ."[3]

One might–rightly–conclude from the fact that there is only one passage in which the term "freedom" occurs in the Fourth Gospel, that the idea of freedom did not play an important role in the author's mind, nor in the so-called "Johannine community" as a whole.[4] But if this is true, the question of course arises of why the author of the Gospel introduces the term "freedom" in this particular part of his story about Jesus. In the following pages, I hope to demonstrate that the author has introduced the term "freedom" along with its opposite, "slavery," in this passage not for its own sake; instead, he uses them only as a literary means to make another, more important statement, namely, to present once again his message that Jesus Christ should be accepted unconditionally as the "Son of God" by his Jewish interlocutors. According to the author of the Gospel, their claim to be the descendants of Abraham appears to be an obstacle to such acceptance.

In order to reject the Jews' claim of being the descendants of Abraham, Jesus (as the author of the Gospel portrays him) first introduces the Hellenistic *topos* of freedom and the lack of connection between being free and one's birth or the social status of one's ancestors. In this context, he makes use of the

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[3] See esp. Rom 6:18-22, 7:1-6, 8:2, 21, 1 Cor 6:12, 8:9, 9:1, 4-6, 12, 18-19, 10:23, 29, Gal 2:4, 4:22-31, 5:1, 13, and 6:2. Cf. Hollander, "Meaning" [= Hollander (ed.), *Tradition*, 117-43].

[4] Pace, e.g., Schnackenburg, who refers to "die Freiheitsbotschaft Jesu," which should be accepted by "the Jews" (*Johannesevangelium*, vol. 2, 263). Dealing with John 8:32, De la Potterie devotes dozens of pages to the concept of freedom in the Gospel according to John (*Vérité*, vol. 2, 789-866). Also Lona is fully convinced of the importance of the concept of freedom in the Gospel according to John (*Abraham*).

ambiguity of the terms "freedom" and "slavery." Jesus' objectors understand both freedom and slavery in their literal, political-social sense, claiming to be free men as the descendants of Abraham, whereas Jesus uses the terms in a religious-ethical sense, telling them that they are slaves in spite of their "noble" birth. Other Hellenistic writers present a somewhat similar argument; like the author of the Fourth Gospel, they introduce the contrast between freedom and slavery in order to demonstrate that there is no connection between people's birth and their status as either free people or slaves, and as such, they are helpful in shedding light on the dialogue in John 8:31-36. However, in his dialogue with the Jews, Jesus gives a unique twist to this Hellenistic *topos*; he goes one step further, for he rejects not only the Jews' claim to be free persons, but also their claim of being true descendants of their ancestor Abraham.

Structure and function of John 8:31-34, 36

The passages John 8:31-36 and 8:37-41a form a unit within the section John 8:31-59, which in turn is part of the story about the discussions between Jesus and the Jews at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem (7:1-10:21). The issue central to the discussions in 8:31-59 is the question of Jesus' real nature, or identity, and the refusal of the Jews to accept him as the Son of the Father–the Son of God. The discussions end with an implicit charge of blasphemy against Jesus and an unsuccessful attempt to stone him to death (v. 59; cf. 10:31-39).

In verses 31-41a, the claim of Jesus' interlocutors that they are Abraham's descendants appears to be a major topic;[5] in this passage, they explicitly state no less than twice that they are descendants of Abraham (v. 33) and that Abraham is their father (v. 39). It is not clear from this passage exactly who

[5] See Brown, *John*, vol. 1, 361-63.

Jesus' opponents are. In verse 30, which immediately precedes verses 31-41a, we read that "many put their faith in him," after which, in verse 31, Jesus addresses his remarks to "the Jews who had believed him."[6] However, in the verses which follow, it looks as though Jesus' interlocutors are the Jews in general. In any case, they seem to be portrayed by the evangelist as Jewish-Christians, who believed in Jesus in one way or another but who refused to relinquish their Jewish heritage, and who could not bring themselves to accept Jesus' claim to be the Son of God the Father. According to the author of the Fourth Gospel, they were "(Jewish-) Christians of inadequate faith" or semi-believers. It is very likely that they represent a group of Christians of the author's own time and that the polemics of the earthly Jesus with "the Jews" as narrated in the Fourth Gospel are a reflection of the polemics of the author and the members of the so-called "Johannine community" with other Christians, projected back to the time of Jesus.[7] Whoever they are, Jesus tells "the Jews" that if they stand by his teaching they will be his disciples and they will know the truth (vv. 31-32a); that is, they should not only have faith in Jesus but they should also fully accept his message, namely, his claim to be the Son of

[6] Bible quotations are taken from the Revised English Bible (REB).

[7] Cf. esp. De Ruyter, *Gemeente*, with an English summary ("The Community of the Fourth Evangelist. Its Polemics and Its History"), 198-203. For similar and other suggestions concerning the identity of Jesus' opponents (called "the Jews" by the author of the Fourth Gospel) that have been made in the course of time, see the commentaries, ad loc.; for some more recent comments on this item, see, e.g., Dozeman, "*Sperma Abraham"*; Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?*; several articles written by H. J. de Jonge, M. C. de Boer, R. F. Collins, P. J. Tomson, and A. Reinhartz in Part II (pp. 121-230) of Bieringer, Pollefeyt and Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (eds.), *Anti-Judaism*; Hunn, "John 8:33"; Hakola, *Identity Matters*; Sheridan, "Issues"; and Von Wahlde, "Narrative Criticism."

God. A dialogue between Jesus and his Jewish interlocutors about becoming "free" as a consequence of being a disciple of Jesus, and about knowing "the truth" follows in subsequent verses:

> (32b) and the truth will set you free (ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς). (33) "We are Abraham's descendants," they replied; "we have never been in slavery to anyone (οὐδενὶ δεδουλεύκαμεν πώποτε). What do you mean by saying, 'You will become free (ἐλεύθεροι γενήσεσθε)'?" (34) "In very truth I tell you," said Jesus, "that everyone who commits sin is a slave (δοῦλός ἐστιν τῆς ἁμαρτίας, lit. 'a slave to sin'). (35) The slave has no permanent standing in the household, but the son belongs to it forever. (36) If the Son sets you free (ὑμᾶς ἐλευθερώσῃ), you will indeed be free (ὄντως ἐλεύθεροι ἔσεσθε)."

When Jesus tells the Jews that the truth will set them free (v. 32b), they become angry and indignant. They fail to grasp what Jesus means by "freedom"; they clearly misunderstand Jesus' words, since they reply by saying that they are descendants of Abraham and have never been enslaved by anyone (v. 33). This is undoubtedly one of the many well-known instances of misunderstandings that can be found throughout the Gospel according to John. They are a literary device used by the author of the Gospel to explain his ideas about Jesus Christ and his message to his readers: a statement is made by Jesus, this is then misunderstood by his hearers, after which it is restated and explained by Jesus.[8] Here, Jesus starts telling the Jews that the

[8] The best-known instances of misunderstandings in the Gospel according to John are found in ch. 3 (Nicodemus) and ch. 4 (a Samaritan woman). On the misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel, cf. in particular Culpepper, *Anatomy*, esp. 152-65; Grayston, "Johannine Misunderstandings"; and Reynolds, "Misunderstanding," who–rightly–states that "Chapter 8 … is one long, unbroken series of misunderstandings" (154). On the conflict between Jesus and his

truth will set them free (v. 32b); next, the reaction of the Jews makes clear their misunderstanding about the term "freedom" (ἐλευθεροῦν) as used by Jesus (v. 33); finally, Jesus repeats and explains his statement by saying that they are sinners, and therefore slaves who are definitely in need of being set free, namely by "the Son" (vv. 34 and 36).

As to the reaction of the Jews in verse 33, the author of the Fourth Gospel introduces a well-known Jewish tradition, according to which their famous ancestors–Abraham and Joseph in particular, as well as the other sons of Jacob–were regarded as "noble" persons. And since "nobility" and "freedom" (εὐγένεια–ἐλευθερία or *nobilitas–libertas*) were thought to be closely connected, these famous ancestors were not only regarded as "noble," but also as "free" people in every respect.[9] Thus, in verse 33, the Jews first state that they are the descendants of their free and noble ancestor Abraham, which they feel implies that they themselves are also free men, meaning that there is no need for them to be set free, as Jesus has suggested.

Being proud to be descendants of Abraham and therefore to be free, Jesus' interlocutors continue by explicitly stating that they have never been slaves of anyone (v. 33). Many scholars think that the Jews mean by this last phrase that they have never been

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Jewish interlocutors in John 8, see finally also Myers, "Prosopopoetics."

[9] See, e.g., Philo, *Agr.* 59, *Ebr.* 58, *Migr.* 67, *Abr.* 38, 251, *Ios.* 106, *Prob.* 119, 123, 149, *Legat.* 332; and see esp. Philo, *Sobr.* 56-57, where it is said that Abraham was "noble" (εὐγενής) by birth, that he was the son of God, as it were, that he was a king, whose power extended over the entire world, and that he was the only one who was really "free" (ἐλεύθερος). Cf. also *T. Naph.* 1:10, Dio Chrysostom, *Orat.* 15.31-32, and Berger, "Abraham," 377. [On this theme, see esp. Byron, "Noble Lineage," 50-56.]

mentally enslaved by others, and that, in the eyes of the author of the Gospel, mental or internal freedom–spiritual independence–means little compared to the kind of freedom of which Jesus is speaking.[10] But this interpretation seems to me to be rather forced and far-fetched. The reason why these scholars resort to such an interpretation is that they realize that the Israelites endured real slavery in Egypt and later in Babylon, which, according to them, makes it unlikely that the Jews might have understood Jesus' words about freedom in a literal, political-social sense.[11] But most importantly, these scholars do not seem to sufficiently realize that it is the author of the Gospel who has put these words into the mouth of Jesus' interlocutors; and it also seems to me much more plausible that the Jews (as portrayed by the author of the Gospel) do indeed understand Jesus' words about freedom in a literal, political-social sense, and that they are really convinced that they have never been enslaved by any other nation.[12] Of course, the historical facts

[10] So, e.g., Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, vol. 2, 262-63; Wikenhauser, *Johannes*, 178; Schneider, *Johannes*, 180; cf. also De la Potterie, *Vérité*, 789-866. Lona (*Abraham*, 318-19) defines the Jewish concept of freedom in this context as "eine innere Haltung, die besonders durch die Einhaltung der Tora garantiert war," and argues that the author of the Gospel wants to explain "die wahre Tragweite der Befreiung nach joh. Auffassung." Keener mentions several ways of interpreting the reaction of the Jews in v. 33, but it is not clear to me which one he prefers (*John*, vol. 1, 748-52).

[11] Cf. Keener, who states that "a claim that the Israelites had never been subjugated politically … would be absurd" (*John*, vol. 1, 749). Barrett uses the same term ("absurd") to characterize such a claim, although he refers to, and even quotes, Josephus, *B.J.* 7.323-24 (see below); instead, he interprets the words of the Jewish objectors in the sense "that they have never lost their inward freedom of soul" (*John*, 285-86).

[12] Cf. Brown, *John*, vol. 1, 355, 362-63.

refute their sentiments,[13] but the author of the Gospel has them simply forget the less glorious pages in their history and allows them to boast of their freedom. A similar argument is found in Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 7.323-24, where during the war against the Romans, Eleazar is said to have pointed out to his fellow-fighters that they and their ancestors have never submitted as slaves to a foreign nation:

> Long since, my brave men, we determined neither to serve (δουλεύειν) the Romans nor any other save God … we who in the past refused to submit even to a slavery involving no peril (πρότερον μηδὲ δουλείαν ἀκίνδυνον ὑπομείναντες), let us not now, along with slavery (μετὰ δουλείας), deliberately accept the irreparable penalties awaiting us if we are to fall alive into Roman hands.[14]

In a similar way, Jesus' interlocutors state that they have never been subjugated by anyone. As Abraham's descendants, they have been free from time immemorial. By this reaction, they show that they have completely misunderstood Jesus. For he is not speaking of freedom in a literal, political-social sense, but in a religious-ethical sense. In verses 34 and 36, Jesus explains his words of verse 32b by saying that they are definitely slaves; they are slaves to sin, because they are sinners. It is only the Son–that is, Jesus himself–who can set them free (again, in a religious-ethical sense). Although Jesus knows that it is indisputable that the Jews are the descendants of Abraham in the physical sense (see v. 37), their origin has nothing to do with their present status; on the contrary, whereas Abraham was a free man, Jesus' Jewish objectors are slaves.

Strikingly, other passages in Hellenistic literature show a more or less similar argument about the connection, or rather the lack

[13] Cf. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 157.
[14] Thackeray, LCL.

of one, between freedom (or slavery) and people's origins. The first text that I want to mention is found in Epictetus, *Dissertationes* 4.1.7-10.[15] In this passage, we find an imaginary dialogue with a Roman senator who has even formerly been a consul. When he is told that he is a slave, he becomes angry and reacts indignantly: he is of noble birth, all his ancestors were free people. This demonstrates that he understands the terms freedom and slavery in their literal, political-social sense. However, his interlocutor refutes his reaction by saying that only one who is not dominated by bad desires and passions, who is not compelled by anyone else, but who always does what is morally right, is really free; all others are slaves. It is not the status or the behaviour of one's ancestors that matters, it is one's own character and behaviour that counts, and it is these which make somebody either a free person or a slave (in the religious-ethical sense of the word). The text in question runs as follows:

> Yet if you tell him (= the senator) the truth, to wit: "In point of being a slave (δοῦλος) you are not a whit better than those who have been thrice sold," what else can you expect but a flogging?
>
> "Why, how am I a slave?" says he (πῶς γάρ … ἐγὼ δοῦλός εἰμι). "My father was free (ἐλεύθερος), my mother free (ἐλευθέρα) … and I own many slaves."

[15] Of course, this passage has not gone unnoticed in the history of the interpretation of the New Testament. A reference to it is already to be found in Wettstein's well-known *Novum Testamentum Graecum*. However, nobody seems to have elaborated on it, not even Bonhöffer in his book *Epiktet und das Neue Testament*, who in the context of Gal 3.28 and John 8.35-36, refers to Epictetus, *Diss.* 2.1.22 and following with the simple addition of the words "Vgl. die Ausführungen in IV 1" (306). Also Keener mentions the passage in a note but without any further comment (*John*, vol. 1, 748 n. 423).

> Now in the first place, most worthy senator, it is very likely that your father was the same kind of slave that you are (τὴν αὐτὴν δουλείαν δοῦλος ἦν), and your mother, and your grandfather, and all your ancestors from first to last. But even if they were free (ἐλεύθεροι) to the limit, what does that prove in your case? Why, what does it prove if they were noble, and you are mean-spirited? If they were brave, and you a coward? If they were self-controlled, and you unrestrained?[16]

The author later refers to the Cynic Diogenes as a fine example of somebody who, although not born of free parents, was nevertheless a free man–"free," that is, in the ethical sense of the word:

> Diogenes was free (ἐλεύθερος). How did that come? It was not because he was born of free parents (ἐξ ἐλευθέρων), for he was not, but because he himself was free, because he had cast off all the handles of slavery (δουλείας).
>
> "I do not regard my paltry body as my own … I need nothing … the law, and nothing else, is everything to me." This it was which allowed him to be a free man (ἐλεύθερον).[17]

Another Hellenistic text which speaks of freedom versus slavery demonstrates a similar argument: it is found in Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* 15. The oration starts with a dialogue between two men about freedom and slavery in a literal, political-social sense; one of them is called a slave by the other, who refers to his own noble birth and assures the first that he himself is a free man:

> I know at any rate that I myself am free (ἐλεύθερον) … but that you have no lot or share in freedom … Because … I know

[16] Oldfather, LCL.
[17] Epictetus, *Diss.* 4.1.152-58 (Oldfather, LCL).

> that my father is an Athenian … while yours is the slave of so-and-so.[18]

At the end of this oration, Dio Chrysostom tries to demonstrate that the terms "free" and "slave," as used to characterize someone, have nothing to do with their birth:

> the term "slave" was originally applied to the man who lacked a free man's spirit and was of a servile nature (ἀνελεύθερος καὶ δουλοπρεπής). For of those who are called slaves we will, I presume, admit that many have the spirit of free men, and that among free men there are many who are altogether servile. The case is the same with those known as "noble" and "well-born" (τοὺς γενναίους καὶ τοὺς εὐγενεῖς). For those who originally applied these names applied them to persons who were well-born in respect to virtue or excellence, not bothering to inquire who their parents were ... And so when a man is well-born in respect to virtue, it is right to call him "noble," even if no one knows his parents or his ancestors either.[19]

In Seneca's *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, we also find the idea that it is only behaviour that makes someone either a "free man" or a "slave":

> They (= Socrates and Plato) are all your ancestors, if you conduct yourself in a manner worthy of them (*si te illis geris dignum*) … Then who is well-born? He who is by nature well fitted for virtue … Suppose, then, that you were not a Roman knight, but a freedman, you might nevertheless by your own efforts come to be the only free man (*liber*) amid a throng of gentlemen. "How?" you ask. Simply by distinguishing between good and bad things.[20]

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[18] Dio Chrysostom, *Orat.* 15.2-3 (Cohoon, LCL).
[19] Dio Chrysostom, *Orat.* 15.29-31 (Cohoon, LCL).
[20] Seneca, *Ep.* 44.3-6 (Gummere, LCL).

Finally, Philo also emphasizes that it is not kinship but proper conduct that characterizes somebody as a "free" and "noble" person:

> We must give the name of noble (εὐγενεῖς) only to the temperate and just, even though their parents were slaves … In the court where truth presides, kinship is not measured only by blood, but by similarity of conduct (πράξεων ὁμοιότητι) and pursuit of the same objects.[21]

In conclusion, in John 8:31-34, 36, Jesus (as the author of the Gospel portrays him) rejects the claim of the Jews that they are a free people. Instead, he calls them sinners and slaves. The only way to become free is to accept the message of Jesus as the truth and to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. In the dialogue between Jesus and the Jews, the author of the Gospel introduces a motif that has turned out to be a *topos* in Hellenistic writings, used to demonstrate that being "free" or being "a slave"–free or a slave, that is, in the moral sense of the terms–has nothing to do with one's birth or the status of one's ancestors. Even if someone's ancestors were free in the sense of being politically or socially free, it is only proper conduct which makes him truly free.[22] In the case of the Jews as portrayed in John 8, there is no similarity of conduct between Abraham and the interlocutors of Jesus, since Abraham's descendants refuse to accept Jesus' message and are even

[21] Philo, *Virt.* 189 and 195 (Colson, LCL).

[22] This *topos* is, of course, a further elaboration of the popular Hellenistic, particularly Stoic-Cynic, idea that being truly free or being truly a slave have nothing to do with one's social status, but only with one's mental powers, one's character and one's behaviour; in this way, slaves can be considered free persons, whereas free men can be characterized as slaves. All this makes it rather unlikely that in John 8:31-36, we are dealing with "Oriental" influences or ancient Buddhist ideas (cf. Derrett, "Oriental sources").