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Journal of Religion and Culture  
Department of Religions and Cultures (FA-101)  
Concordia University  
1455 de Maisonneuve O.,  
Montreal, Quebec  
H3G 1M8

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## Content

- 9      *Change and Transition: An Introduction by the Editor*  
Joseph E. Brito

### Articles

- 15      *Religion in the Art of Colonial Resistance: Hinduism  
and the Struggle for Indian Sovereignty, 1870-1920*  
Katja Rieck
- 50      *Twenty-First-Century Looting, Academic Ethics,  
and The Antiquities Market in Egypt*  
Chance Bonar
- 81      *Take it Like A Man: The Marriage Commissioners Reference,  
Masculinity, and Law's Private/Public Parts*  
Connor Steele

### In Conversation

- 105      *Emily Suzanne Johnson, Ball State University*  
By Lindsey Jackson

### Book Reviews

- 113      *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings,  
Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture*  
Alexander Nachaj, reviewer.
- 116      *Practices of Selfhood*  
Elliot Mason, reviewer.

## Content

### *Articles*

- 123    « *Se changer soi pour changer le monde* », *entre spiritualité et innovations sociales: Le cas des créatifs culturels*  
Julia Itel
- 139    *Black Femmes Black Gods: Magic as Justice*  
Marcelitte Failla
- 156    *Monster Theory and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John*  
Tyler Smith

### *In Conversation*

- 178    *Melissa M. Wilcox, University of California*  
Laurel Andrew

### *Book Reviews*

- 186    *Jewish Radical Feminism: Voices from the Women's Liberation Movement*  
Lindsey Jackson, reviewer.
- 189    *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought*  
Joseph E. Brito, reviewer.

# *Monster Theory and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John*

Tyler Smith, *Universität Salzburg / University of Salzburg*

## *Abstract*

Monster theory illuminates the dynamics involved in the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus and the Jews. On the one hand, there is Jesus, the pre-existent, alien protagonist, who in the programmatic words of the prologue, "came to what was his own, but his own people did not receive him" (John 1:11). On the other hand, are "the Jews" who antagonize the Johannine Jesus, seek to do him harm, and terrify his followers. Fulfilling the prologue's programmatic statement that they do "not receive" Jesus, the Johannine Jews monsterize him. From the perspective of the Johannine narrator, however, their rejection of Jesus removes them from the in-group known in Johannine parlance as the "children of God" and relegates them to the monstrous out-group, "children of the devil." This ironic reversal—those who monsterize are revealed to be monsters themselves—squares with the Johannine predilection for developing ironies connected to the themes of truth, belief, recognition, and identity.

Keywords: Gospel of John, Monster Theory, Johannine Jesus, Jews, Anti-Judaism.

Johannine scholars have long recognized that "anti-Judaism" in some fashion is at work in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>1 2</sup> An important milestone in the history of scholarship was a Leuven University Colloquium on the Fourth Gospel and Anti-Judaism in 2000, papers from which were published the following year.<sup>3</sup> The most recent significant publication on the subject was a monograph written by Canadian Johannine scholar Adele Reinhartz with the title, *Cast out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John*.<sup>4</sup> Around the time that the present issue of the *Journal of Religion and Culture* goes to print, the topic "The Gospel of John: Anti-Jewish or Radical Jewish Sectarianism?" will be revisited at



the third Enoch Colloquium of the Enoch Seminar, in San Diego at the Society of Biblical Literature's Annual Meeting (November 2019). To the best of my knowledge, however, at no point in the history of scholarship have researchers drawn on monster theory to characterize or frame the Fourth Gospel's anti-Judaism.<sup>5</sup> The present paper draws upon Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seminal essay, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," to cast the Fourth Gospel's anti-Jewishness in sharp relief.<sup>6</sup> We begin not with the Johannine Jews, however, but with the Johannine Jesus, whose appearance in John among the Jews creates ripples of confusion and crisis. Like a divine portent, Jesus unsettles and provokes, eliciting resistance and hostility. In the ideological perspective endorsed by the implied author of the Fourth Gospel, however, this is a deeply ironic misperception: those who receive Jesus as monstrous and disruptive are in the course of the narrative made out to be the "real" monsters. That reversal and what it says about Johannine anti-Judaism will be the subject of this paper's second part.

### ***The Johannine Jesus as Monster***<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which narrate Jesus's birth, the Gospel of John presents Jesus as the pre-existent Logos or Rational Principle of God (John 1:1), who "became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14).<sup>8</sup> Jesus walks onto the stage of the Fourth Gospel as a fully grown man, where he is identified by John (the Baptist) as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" and "a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me" and "the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit" and "the Son of God" (1:29–34). He is then recognized by the incipient disciples Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael as "the Messiah" (1:41), as "him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" (1:45), and as "Son of God, . . . the King of Israel" (1:49), respectively. Not long after this initial string of recognitions, Jesus begins to unsettle people.

Whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke have Jesus "cleansing the temple" near the completion of Jesus's public ministry and even use this episode to show how he set in motion the chain of events that would

culminate in his crucifixion, the Fourth Gospel begins Jesus's public career with a "cleansing the temple" episode (2:13–16; cf. Matt 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48). "Making a whip out of cords, he [Jesus] drove them all out of the temple, both the sheep and the people. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables" (2:15). Jesus's actions draw the attention of "the Jews," a character group that will prove increasingly hostile to Jesus as the narrative progresses.<sup>9</sup> "What sign can you show us for doing this?" they ask, to which Jesus offers the cryptic and unsettling response, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews are confused. "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" (2:20). So as not to risk leaving the reader or hearer in the state of confusion that characterizes the Jews, the narrator interjects with an explanatory aside: "But he was speaking of the temple of his body" (2:18–21). Monsters destroy things, confounding the people in harm's way. And monsters portend, they *demonstrate*, they warn, they signify. In light of these two observations—that monsters destroy and that monsters portend—it is noteworthy that the initial response of the Jews is to ask for a sign.<sup>10</sup>

The antagonism characterizing Jesus's relationship with the Jews escalates over the coming chapters and reaches a fever pitch by chapter 8. Jesus here accuses the Jews of harboring murderous resolve: "you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God" (8:40). Jesus continues: "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" (8:44). The Jews are baffled. They answer, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answers, "I do not have a demon; but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me." A little later, the Jews say to Jesus, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died?" The dispute about Abraham continues until Jesus, echoing YHWH's divine self-disclosure to Moses, says "Very truly, before Abraham was, I am (ἐγὼ εἰμὶ, *ego eimi*)."<sup>11</sup> At this

blasphemous utterance, the Johannine Jews pick up stones to throw at him but Jesus “hid himself and went out of the temple” (8:53–59).

In what sense is it illuminating to think of Jesus as monstrous in these narrative developments? The answer will depend on what we mean by “monstrous.” Monsters are notoriously difficult to define. For the purposes of this essay, I take as a starting point Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s seven theses on monstrosity, which he refers to as “breakable postulates in search of specific cultural moments.”<sup>12</sup> Built into that caveat is the recognition that there are very few things one could say which would “fit” monsters and the kinds of discursive work they do in all cultures at all times.

In what remains of this section, I will develop three of Cohen’s theses that illuminate Jesus’s reception by the Johannine Jews. Cohen’s second thesis, “The Monster Always Escapes” outlines a pattern in which a monster inflicts damage while the monster itself vanishes, only to reappear again later, in another place or time. Jesus’s encounters with the Jews in the first half of John inevitably end with him slipping away, as when the Jews attempt to stone him to death at the conclusion of chapter 8. The pattern recurs at 10:31 and 10:39, and may reflect a Synoptic tradition found, for example, at Luke 4:29. Furthermore, although the Evangelist does not say so explicitly, such an escape seems to have transpired also after the “cleansing of the temple” episode described above.<sup>13</sup>

The elusion motif is extended beyond Jesus’s own person. When Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead, the Jews are divided: some of them turned to Jesus and put their trust in him, while others went to the Pharisees and told them what had happened. At this, in John 11:47–53,

The chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, ‘What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.’

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.’ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Later, when a great crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was nearby, they went “not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus” (12:9–11). Like Jesus, Lazarus apparently eludes them. In the second half of the gospel, these attempts on Jesus’s life reach a crescendo with the Jews’ successful bid to have Jesus executed. Even here, however, Jesus “escapes” their machinations by returning to life. Even death in John does not hold Jesus.

Jesus continues to elude also in the narrator’s present, which—if we assume a composition date of around the end of the first century CE—is considerably later than the events described in the narrative. When present with the disciples, he predicts that “I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come” (7:33–34). This saying has the effect of confounding the Jews, who say to one another in the next verses, “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, ‘You will search for me and you will not find me’ and ‘Where I am, you cannot come?’” (7:35–36). This is one of many instances in which John casts the Jews as misunderstanding Jesus but ironically, unknowingly, articulating a Johannine truth.<sup>14</sup>

A second sense in which “the monster” continues to elude the Jews in the narrator’s present has to do with the overlap of identity

between Jesus and his followers. Before re-ascending to the Father, the Johannine narrator has Jesus impart his spirit to his followers and promises the gift of the Paraclete (παράκλητος; *paraklētos*; often translated “Comforter” or “Advocate”). Jesus promises to send the Paraclete to dwell in the disciples after he ascends to his Father (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). The Paraclete represents Jesus and in some sense is to be identified with Jesus.<sup>15</sup> He will be with the disciples even when they are persecuted, as Jesus had been persecuted first (15:20). The established structure, then, has two movements: in the first, the Jews are imagined as continuing to hunt Jesus after his departure by targeting his followers. In the second movement, Jesus-in-his-followers continues to elude the Jews. Even if and when the Jews kill individual followers, the elusive Paraclete-Jesus will live on in other followers. The followers are therefore freed to be unafraid of death, which the Evangelist has relativized as inconsequential when compared with the eternal life Jesus promises to those who put their trust in him (cf. 3:16).

Cohen’s third thesis, “The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis,” explores how monsters resist categorization, how monsters refuse “to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’... They are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.”<sup>16</sup> Cohen appears to be thinking here primarily of monsters with “unnatural” or unhuman bodies, especially the grotesque and uncanny bodies most people instinctively associate with monsters: werewolves and sirens, Polyphemus and Frankenstein’s monster.<sup>17</sup> While John offers no suggestion that Jesus’s pre-resurrection body appeared as anything other than that of a regular human, the thesis helps make sense of what some have noticed about the Johannine Jesus’s physicality. Ernst Käsemann famously described John’s Jesus as “God going about on the earth” and said that the Christology of the gospel was “naïvely docetic,” suggesting that Jesus only “seemed” (Greek δοκεῖν, *dokein*) to be human, when in fact his physicality could be better described as celestial or phantasmic.<sup>18</sup> Whether or not John’s earliest readers would have envisioned Jesus’s pre-resurrection body as “externally incoherent”

is difficult to say. What is less in doubt is that his post-resurrection body—able to pass through walls (20:19) and unrecognizable to his disciples until after examining proofs of his identity (20:15, 20)—is “externally incoherent” and resistant to “attempts to include [it] in any systematic structuration.”<sup>19</sup>

The status of his material body notwithstanding, the Johannine Jesus unquestionably ushers in other kinds of category crisis for those he encounters. I would like to draw attention to two in particular. First, he upsets the Jews’ categorical expectations about where the Messiah should come from and what the Messiah should do upon arrival (see especially the dispute described in John 7). Second, the Johannine Jesus rebukes the Jews’ traditional methods of organizing knowledge about themselves and their place in the order of things. When the Jews claim to be the “children of Abraham” who “have never been slaves to anyone” (8:33, 39), Jesus intimates that they are “slaves to sin” (8:34) and questions their affiliation to Abraham, since “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me. . . . This is not what Abraham did” (8:38–39). When the Jews claim to be the children of God (8:41), Jesus denies that they belong to this category, claiming it for himself and re-labeling them children of the devil (8:44). From the perspective the Johannine Jews, Jesus presents an assault on their self-categorization as God’s children. They resist this attempt at re-categorization, accusing Jesus of being a Samaritan and having a demon. These othering techniques distance Jesus from the Judean land, his Jewish identity, and his rational faculties. To accuse someone of “having a demon” was to question that person’s rationality (cf. 10:20, “Many of them [i.e., the Jews] were saying, ‘He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?’”). The irony, from the perspective of the Fourth Evangelist, is that Jesus is Logos embodied: he is the “Word,” the principle of rationality, made flesh.

“The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us.” These words, which Cohen offers as a partial explanation of his fourth thesis, “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference,” evoke the Fourth Gospel and its presentation of Jesus as the extra-worldly divine

Logos “made flesh” and come to live among us (1:14). Throughout the Gospel, Jesus refers to himself as having descended from the Father above and planning to re-ascend to where he was before.<sup>20</sup> He occupies a liminal space: even when he is with the disciples, he speaks of being present simultaneously “with the Father,” and when he anticipates a future state in which he is “no longer with” the disciples, he promises to be with them in the guise of the Paraclete.

In at least these three senses, then, it is illuminating to consider the Johannine Jews’ reception of Jesus. In these ways, he is for them a monster, an outsider they do not and apparently *cannot* understand. But here’s the rub: the Fourth Gospel is not the Jews’ account of how Jesus was a monster. The Fourth Gospel, rather, is Jesus’s followers’ account of how their savior and Christ showed himself to the world and of how people succeeded or failed at recognizing and entrusting themselves to him. The gospel’s explicit goal is “that you [the reader/hearer] may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).<sup>21</sup> From the perspective of these followers, the real monsters are the dangerous and frightening Jews.

### ***The Monsterization of the Jews in the Fourth Gospel***

The constitution, identity, and narrative function of *hoi Ioudaioi* (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, “the Judeans” or “the Jews”) in the Fourth Gospel is a robust domain of inquiry among scholars of early Jewish and Christian literature. There are major and unresolved questions about how best to translate this term and what its historical referent is, both in the Fourth Gospel, where it features prominently, and in ancient literature more broadly.<sup>22</sup>

While the term is used only a handful of times in the Synoptic Gospels, it appears approximately seventy times in John.<sup>23</sup> In John’s case, there is an additional question about whether the term is used consistently throughout the narrative to refer to the same character group. Arguments have been put forward advocating prioritization of ethnic, social, and/or geographical connotations (hence “Judeans”



as the translation preferred by some), while dissenters have shown that *Ioudaios* carried a broader range of meanings in antiquity, just as “Jew” and “Judaism” today are complex identity markers, encompassing cultural, political, and religious connotations in addition to ethnic and geographical ones. Within the narrative of the gospel, there is some question about whether the term stands in for those in a leadership class (*hoi Ioudaioi* as “the authorities”), whether it involves the common people who identified as Jews/Judeans as well, or whether the usage shifts from scene to scene. Ruben Zimmerman, in a recent essay on the Johannine Jews, outlines a five-part semantic outline, where *hoi Ioudaioi* means (1) “an ethnic-cultural group (i.e., ‘the Jews’ in contrast to the Romans),” (2) “a geographical group (i.e., the people of Judea in contrast to the Galileans),” (3) “a traditio-historical group” (i.e., descendants of the line of Judah),” (4) “a religious-theological group (e.g., ‘adherence to the Judean religion’),” and (5) “a functional group (e.g., the religious authorities in Jerusalem).”<sup>24</sup> Zimmerman presents this outline as generally agreed upon by “most exegetes,” although he correctly notes that others would add further specific meanings, such as “Jesusfiende und Repräsentanten des Unglaubens” or “Dialogpartner bzw. Stichwortgeber.”<sup>25</sup> I would add that most readers—especially those of us who are more interested in how the Fourth Gospel works rhetorically and literarily than in trying to use it as a portal for access to “real history” about Jesus and the Jews behind the text—agree that *hoi Ioudaioi* are painted negatively in John and function throughout the gospel as opponents of Jesus: first as hostile dialogue partners and ultimately as the group plotting to have Jesus killed. That is the point of departure for the rest of this discussion, in which I show how reading the Johannine Jews with monster theory reveals more about the implied author and his ideal reader or hearer than anything to do with real or imagined first century Jews.

Monsters, Cohen reminds readers, are constructs and cultural projections: “the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns,’ a glyph that seeks a hierophant.”<sup>26</sup> The most common Greek analogue to the Latin *monstrum* is the *teras* (τέρας, “sign,” “wonder,” “marvel,” “portent,”



“monster”).<sup>27</sup> This term appears only once in the Fourth Gospel, when Jesus is approached by a royal official whose son lies ill in Capernaum. The official begs Jesus to come down and heal his son, who is at death’s door. In response, Jesus says “Unless you see signs and wonders (τέρατα, *terata*), you will not believe” (4:38). The man persists, “Sir, come down before my little boy dies.” Jesus says, “Go; your son will live.” Here the narrator interjects to inform the reader or hearer that the man believed Jesus and went away (see 4:46b-53).

As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, ‘Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.’ The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, ‘Your son will live.’ So he himself believed (ἐπίστευσεν), along with his whole household.

No one, as far as I know, has argued that τέρατα in Jesus’s saying should be translated “monsters,” and nor am I suggesting that we modify existing translations to reflect this possibility. I simply note that “monsters” or “monstrous portents” lies within the broad semantic domain of the Greek word used. Again, at issue is the ability of abnormal or uncanny τέρατα to signify, to point beyond themselves, and so to elicit belief. This narrative is deeply invested in signification, in *monstra*-fication, and so the motif of “signs” (σημεῖα, *sēmeia*) in John has rightly received a great deal of attention.<sup>28</sup> Jesus’s words and deeds in John have rightly been interpreted as signs, but I would contend that the characters of the Fourth Gospel can also be read fruitfully as *sēmeia*. Jesus and his dialogue partners, especially the Jews, are signs and *terata* for the reader.<sup>29</sup>

Of further interest in the passage just cited is the official’s two-stage process of belief. Jesus initially appears to question the man’s ability to believe apart from seeing *sēmeia* and *terata*. When the man continues to implore Jesus and receives a promising declaration (“Go; your son will live”), the official “believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way” (John 4:50b). Upon learning

of his son's recovery, however, he seems to undergo a second (and more profound?) experience of recognition and belief; "The father realized. . . so he himself believed, along with his whole household" (John 4:53). He thus stands in contrast to the Johannine Jews, described by Udo Schnelle as the "Jesusfiende und Repräsentanten des Unglaubens." It is worth observing that—unlike other authority figures Jesus has encountered in the narrative (especially Nicodemus in chapter 3)—this royal official is not a Jew.<sup>30</sup>

Cohen's fifth thesis, "The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible," observes that monsters limit mobility in various domains, "delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself."<sup>31</sup> We have already seen the Johannine Jews attempting to limit Jesus's mobility. In chapter 7, Jesus is in Galilee and "did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him" (7:1). When they eventually do find him, they try to arrest him but fail (just as they will fail in chapter 8 when they attempt to stone him), "because his hour had not yet come" (7:30; cf. 7:32, 44–45). The Johannine Jews also try to contain and police Jesus's message, as for example when they agree that "anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (9:22) or when they determine to kill Lazarus, "since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus" (12:9–11). Of course, from the perspective of the implied author, the fact that "you" are reading an account of Jesus's many signs (cf. 20:30–31), suggests that the Jews of the narrative ultimately failed in attempting to limit the spread of Jesus's message.

### *The Anxieties of the Johannine Community*<sup>32</sup>

If Cohen is right that "monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them," then we ought to turn now to consider what is possible to say about the culture that monsterized the Johannine Jews.<sup>33</sup> We are not here in a position to say anything about a real, historical

Jewish culture that monsterized Jesus, since the portrait we have of the Jews in John is entirely a projection of Jesus's followers. If it tells us anything at all, it is something about how the Johannine Evangelist imagined his Jewish neighbors and/or predecessors relating to Jesus.

What function do these monsters serve for the culture that produced them? At the very least, the Johannine Jews function as an apotreptic model for the implied reader or hearer of John. They offer a cautionary tale of how things will be for him if he fails to believe. Some part of the audience might desire the apparent safety and establishment that would come along with taking the Jews' side in opposing Jesus and, by extension, Jesus's followers. After all, a time is coming, the Johannine Jesus proclaimed to his disciples, when not only will "they will put you out of the synagogues" as was feared by the parents of the man born blind (9:22), but "those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God" (16:2). All of this could create conditions in which a person might wish to keep his or her allegiance to Jesus secret, for fear of the Jews. The Gospel even offers an illustration of what such a person might look like: "Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, *though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews*, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body" (19:38; emphasis added). The character Nicodemus may well belong to this category also (cf. 3:1–21; 7:50–51; 19:39–42). In the Johannine theological paradigm, such characters illustrate what it looks like to be caught on the horns of fear and desire. Cohen's sixth thesis, "Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire," is germane. "The monster is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce."<sup>34</sup> The Johannine Jews notoriously determine that "anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (9:22). Joseph and Nicodemus's apparent fear of this outcome and, by extension, the Jews as the agents who could make it possible, betrays their desire to remain affiliated with the Jews and the synagogue.

The Johannine Jews produce fear for other characters too, including the parents of the man born blind (9:22) and the Roman governor

Pilate, who can find no reason to condemn Jesus, but is cowed by the Jews when they say, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.” Pilate’s response to this is to become “more afraid than ever” (19:4, 7–8). In his interview with Jesus, Pilate asks rhetorically, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” (18:35). The irony is that Pilate’s fear of the Jews will lead him to affiliate with them, acting as their instrument in condemning Jesus to death. In that sense, then, from the perspective of the implied author, the answer to Pilate’s question is an affirmative.

What do people do with monsters? Classically, one runs from a monster or attempts to destroy it. Whether we think of St. George and the dragon, or the fictional Americans and the extraterrestrials of the 1996 film *Independence Day*, the “natural” human impulses in connection to monsters have been fight or flight. This can have disastrous consequences when the “monster” is a whole group, a culture. With reference to Israel’s conquest over the biblical Canaanites, the French crusades against medieval Muslims, and Serbian anxieties about imagined Muslim atrocities, Cohen observes that “representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic.”<sup>35</sup> This logic also informed European anti-Semitism and the colonial mindset of early modern European nation-states.<sup>36</sup>

Although the Fourth Gospel presents the Jews as terrifying (7:13; 19:38; 20:19), it also cultivates the reader’s hope that God will step in to turn the tables. Given that the Fourth Gospel was assembled in the decades following Rome’s brutal triumph over the Jews in the war of 66-70 CE, we have every reason to suppose that the Fourth Evangelist and his implied reader or hearer knew about that conflict and its devastating consequences for the Jews, particularly those in Jerusalem and its Judean environs. This is implicit in the ironic conclusions drawn by the council of the Jews in the text cited above: “If we let [Jesus] go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation” (11:48). Of course, this is precisely what

happened in 70 CE; not, from the Evangelist's perspective, because they had allowed Jesus "to go on like this," but rather because they mounted an opposition, refusing to receive him or put their trust in him. Where the Jews wielded the Roman governor Pilate as a weapon against Jesus, so the Evangelist concluded that God had wielded the terrible strength of Rome's legions against the Jews.<sup>37</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Monster theory is good to think with. In the case of the Fourth Gospel, reading with monster theory has helped illuminate the narrative mechanics of Johannine anti-Jewishness. The Gospel tells a story in which Jesus—the embodiment of God's reason—comes down to the earth and finds himself unwelcome amongst "his own," a group that is labeled "the Jews." By rejecting him, according to the Evangelist's logic, the Jews reveal their incapacity to understand the truth about God, the Messiah, the world, and their own place in the cosmic order. John makes his case with an abundant use of irony, some of which we have noted in this essay. Those who accuse the Logos-Jesus of having a demon and being out of his mind (10:20), are found to be "children of the devil," cognitively stunted, and guilty of terror and violence against Jesus and his followers. Those who received Jesus as a monster, in the Johannine narrative, turn out to be monsters themselves.

The anti-Jewishness latent in the Fourth Gospel has been used to justify terrible, incalculable violence against millions of Jews around the world in many tragic chapters of the past nineteen centuries. In concluding this exploratory essay, I think it is appropriate to suggest that the monsters we should most abhor are found not in the pages of ancient texts but in real life, and they include the anti-Semites who justify anti-Jewish hatred and violence by appeal to the Gospel of John. The Fourth Gospel is a difficult text, literarily complex and necessary for making sense of historical and theological developments in early Christianity. It deserves careful, critical readers who are able to appreciate its artful story, its provocative language, and its historical importance while at the same time recognizing and repudiating its anti-Judaism.

## Notes

- 1 The present paper was conceived in response to a *Journal of Religion and Culture* call for papers on the theme “Monsters and the Monstrous” in religious and biblical studies. I would like to thank my friends in Johannine studies, especially Adele Reinhartz and the Society of Biblical Literature’s Johannine Literature group for feedback on earlier iterations of this paper. My thanks also to the *JRC* editors and anonymous reviewers for feedback on the manuscript, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for financial support.
- 2 Phenomenologically and ideologically, first century anti-Judaism does not correspond one-for-one with modern anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism. But the two are in continuity with each other. So too with “Jew” as an identity marker: Jewish identity in antiquity and the modern period may be comprised of different religious, cultural, ethnic, geographical, and genealogical factors, but they nevertheless stand in continuity with each other. Furthermore, just so that there is no ambiguity on this critical point: Both anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism are abhorrent. The present paper’s exploration of the Fourth Gospel’s characterization of Jesus and the Jews with monster theory offering the guiding questions should not in any way be misconstrued as an endorsement of anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism.
- 3 R. Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, eds., *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000*, Jewish and Christian Heritage Series 1 (Assen, The Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001).
- 4 Adele Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Lanham: Lexington Books Fortress Academic, 2018).
- 5 The same could be said in connection to the prodigious body of work on Johannine characterization. Important recent contributions include Cornelis Bennema, “A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature,” *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009): 375–421; Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009); Cornelis Bennema, *A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, eds., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); Susan Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); Alicia D. Myers, *Characterizing Jesus: A Rhetorical Analysis on the Fourth Gospel’s Use of Scripture in Its Presentation of Jesus*, LNTS 458 (London: T & T Clark, 2012); Christopher W. Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, LNTS 461 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). Both Hunt et al. and Skinner offer detailed histories of scholarship on characterization in connection to John.
- 6 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory*:

*Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

- 7 The ancient world did not have a concept or category that matches the modern idea of the “monster” in every respect, although it did have a sprawling catalogue of hybrid, uncanny, and terrible creatures known both from the worlds of myth and lived experience. We also find a metadiscourse on monsters from at least the time of Aristotle. A large bibliography exists, both connected to individual monsters (Polyphemus, the Gorgon, etc.), on monsters as a category in the classical world, and in more recent years a growing bibliography on “monster theory” or “monster studies” as an interdisciplinary project where monsters are “good to think with” even apart from the representation of a being explicitly or traditionally categorized as a monster. The present essay is intended as a contribution to that latter set.
- 8 Unless otherwise noted, translations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and parenthetical chapter and verse references without book title refer to the Gospel of John. The terms Fourth Gospel, Gospel of John, and John are used interchangeably. The term Fourth Evangelist is used as a shorthand to refer to the person or persons who assembled the Gospel of John into its final textual form.
- 9 “The Jews” translates οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι. The question of this term’s historical and narrative referent(s), the question of how best to translate the term, and the question of whether the individuals included in the group are constant or shifting—these and related questions have generated a great deal of discussion. See the following section, “The Monsterization of the Jews in the Fourth Gospel,” and the works cited there.
- 10 “Signs” play a special role in the Fourth Gospel, both as a discursive motif and as part of the narrative plot as it unfolds. Traditionally, readers have recognized seven “signs” performed by Jesus, concentrated in the first half of the gospel (cf. 2:1–11; 4:46–54; 5:1–9; 6:1–14; 6:16–21; 9:1–7; 11:1–45). This is somewhat problematic, since the healing of the man at Bethesda (5:1–9) is called a “work,” not a sign; Jesus’s walking on water (6:16–21) is never called a sign; and Jesus’s resurrection (21:1–14), although narratively distant from the first set and not called a sign, seems to function as a sign, that is, it seems to point to a theological lesson beyond itself, in terms analogous to the changing of the water into wine at Cana (2:1–11; called “the first of his signs”) or the healing of the official’s dying son (4:46–54; called “the second sign that Jesus did”). See also note 27 below.
- 11 This is widely recognized as an intertextual allusion to the theophany at the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. In the Septuagint translation of Exodus, God says to Moses, “I am the Being (Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν).”
- 12 Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 4. The seven theses are, in order, “I: The Monster’s Body is a Cultural Body,” “II: The Monster Always Escapes,” “III: The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis,” “IV: The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference,” “V: The Monster Polices the



- Borders of the Possible,” “VI: Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire,” and “VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold . . . of Becoming.”
- 13 The fact that Jesus in John faces no immediate consequences for his actions in the temple has confounded Johannine scholars for generations, prompting all manner of theories about the composition history of the gospel. Most scholars find this placement so implausible that they use it as a lynchpin in arguments that John was either unconcerned with historical accuracy, an incompetent redactor, or a poor storyteller. For some discussion of the problems occasioned by the placement of the episode, see Paul N. Anderson, “Why This Study Is Needed, and Why It Is Needed Now,” in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher, SBLSymS 44 (Brill: Leiden, 2007), 13–70.
  - 14 The seminal study on this theme is Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985). For a discussion of how these cognitive failures are literarily constructed in the Fourth Gospel, see Tyler Smith, *The Fourth Gospel and the Manufacture of Minds in Ancient Historiography, Biography, Romance, and Drama*, BibInt 173 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 208–48.
  - 15 Indeed, in the first epistle of John, the author refers to a Paraclete he and his recipients possess. He identifies this Paraclete unambiguously as Jesus (1 John 2:1).
  - 16 Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 6.
  - 17 Such monsters were a perennial source of fascination in the ancient world, too. For an introduction, see Paul Murgatroyd, *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013). For a more critical discussion, focused on a narrower slice of the classical period, see Dunstan Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity in Augustan Poetry* (University of Michigan Press, 2015).
  - 18 “As God”: Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 9. The German expression “der über die Erde schreitende Gott” is more vividly rendered by most scholars as “God striding across the earth.” “Naively docetic”: Ernst Käsemann, “The Structure and Purpose of the Prologue to John’s Gospel,” in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia, 1969), 138–67.
  - 19 Ibid.
  - 20 On the descent-ascent schema, see Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72.
  - 21 My translation. The main verb in this verse is found in some manuscripts as πιστεύσητε (aorist subjunctive) and in others as πιστεύητε (present subjunctive). The former could suggest an initial summons to faith (and is reflected in the NRSV translation “...so that you may come to believe,” from which my translation departs); the latter a call to persevere in faith. The issue has consequences for how we think about the implied readers of the gospel. In this paper, following many scholars, I read the gospel as directed chiefly at the already-believing. See, *inter alia*, D. Moody Smith, *John*, Abingdon



- New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 386–87; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 1215–16; Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John*, Paideia Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 273–74.
- 22 See the series of CBR research articles by David Miller for a careful treatment of the evidence: David M. Miller, “The Meaning of Ioudaios and Its Relationship to Other Group Labels in Ancient ‘Judaism’,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 9, no. 1 (2010); David M. Miller, “Ethnicity Comes of Age: An Overview of Twentieth-Century Terms for Ioudaios,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2012): 293–311; David M. Miller, “Ethnicity, Religion and the Meaning of Ioudaios in Ancient ‘Judaism’,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 12, no. 2 (2014): 216–265. For a more accessible discussion, see also the online forum organized by Marginalia Review of Books in 2014: Adele Reinhartz et al., “Jew and Judean: A Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts,” August 26, 2014, <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/jew-judean-forum/>.
- 23 Sixty-seven times in the plural and three times (3:25; 4:9; 18:35) in the singular. The term appears six times in Mark, five times in Matthew, and five times in Luke, always in the plural.
- 24 Ruben Zimmermann, “‘The Jews’: Unreliable Figures or Unreliable Narration?,” in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 73.
- 25 Udo Schnelle, “Die Juden im Johannesevangelium,” in *Gedenkt an das Wort: Festschrift für Werner Vogler zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Christoph Kähler and Martina Böhm (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1999), 219.
- 26 Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 4.
- 27 Another ancient Greek term that might translate *monstrum* was πέλωρ (*pelōr*); this term, however, was used only in epic poetry to describe beings with frightening appearance, such as Homer’s Scylla or Polyphemus. See Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity in Augustan Poetry*, 8–9.
- 28 A major scholarly hypothesis, developed most elaborately by Robert Fortna and popular for most of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, held that behind the final text of the Fourth Gospel lay an (at least partially) recoverable source, the so-called Signs Gospel or Signs Source. See Robert Tomson Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). For critique, see Gilbert Van Belle, *The Signs Source in the Fourth Gospel: Historical Survey and Critical Evaluation of the Semeia Hypothesis*, BETL 116 (Leuven: Leuven University, 1994). Whether or not such a source is recoverable, however, is for us beside the point. The fact remains that σημεῖα play an important role in the Fourth Gospel and the narrative as a whole can be summed up as a collection of σημεῖα, written in order to foster the reader’s belief (cf. 20:30–31).
- 29 In this interpretive posture, I am not far from the widely-held position

on Johannine characterization that Jesus's dialogue partners in John represent possible responses to Jesus's self-disclosure as Messiah. The first major articulation of the view can be found in Raymond F. Collins, "The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel. Part I," *DRev* 94 (1976): 26–46; Raymond F. Collins, "The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel. Part II," *DRev* 94 (1976): 118–132.

30 While some have read this official as Jewish/Judean, (e.g., John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 722.), this is never made explicit in the text. More to the point, regardless of his origin as Jew or Gentile, his distance from the *Ioudaioi* is emphasized by the fact that he encounters Jesus in Galilee, not Judea. He is, like Jesus and the disciples, in this sense a nonJudean.

31 Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 12.

32 I am reluctant to use the term "Johannine Community," which has come to connote much more than I intend in the present context. For a critique of the Gospels community paradigm, see, *inter alia*, Stanley Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community' and the History of Early Christianity," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011): 238–56. The term is particularly fraught in connection to the Fourth Gospel, which since the 1970s has been thought by many Johannine scholars to tell a "two-storey drama," where the narrative about Jesus is simultaneously a vehicle that tells the social history of the Johannine community. This model of reading the gospel was developed initially by J. Louis Martyn and Raymond Brown, and widely adopted. See J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed., NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). For a critique, see Adele Reinhartz, "The Johannine Community and Its Jewish Neighbors: A Reappraisal," in *What Is John? Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, vol. 2, 2 vols., SBL Symposium Series 3 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 111–38. I use the expression "Johannine community" here as a shorthand for the elusive, largely invisible culture that produced the Fourth Gospel in the first century CE, without making any definite claims about the details of its social history.

33 Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 5.

34 Cohen, 16.

35 Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 7–8.

36 The Fourth Gospel, not surprisingly, played an important role in laying a foundation for medieval and modern European anti-Semitism. For a wide-ranging discussion, see Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

37 This theological interpretation of history, linking the death of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem, became popular among patristic writers in Late Antiquity. On my reading, this view is latent in certain books of the New Testament itself, particularly in John's treatment of the Jews.

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