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«τῶν Ἰουδαίων»:  
**Another Piece to the Johannine Puzzle?**

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There are few topics in New Testament studies whose examination are more urgent or more fraught with challenge than the identity of and correct understanding of the Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel according to John. During much of history, this question has not been the subject of great reflection: the basic translation and meaning of the Greek term Ἰουδαῖοι was agreed on by all. It was used by the evangelist to indicate the “Jews” in his Gospel, albeit with something of a range of meanings in his work. Given that the earliest Christian community – and presumably the fourth evangelist himself – were all Jewish-Christians<sup>1</sup>, both the composer and audiences of the Gospel would have understood instinctively the meaning of the term and the connotations which it carried during the first century A.D. Here then is the rub. The fourth evangelist not infrequently uses the Ἰουδ-family of words in a sense which might be described as “neutral,” simply as a descriptor of a person, place, or thing. However, his overall presentation leaves his audience, ancient or modern, with the impression that the Ἰουδαῖοι are more specifically those who have failed to arrive at faith in Jesus and, more ominously, those who represent for him the concretization of opposition to the Word Incarnate, the symbol of the struggle of darkness against the light<sup>2</sup>. The ramifications of this interpretation have been profound and long-enduring

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<sup>1</sup> D. Boyarin advances the hypothesis that the Johannine Christians did not stem from “mainstream” Judaism but originated as “members of that semi-out-group known as ‘the People of the Land’.” (ID., “The Ioudaioi in John and the Prehistory of ‘Judaism’,” in *Pauline Conversations in Context*. FS Calvin Roetzel. eds J.C. Anderson *et al.* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2002) pg. 234). This would explain their hostility to the Ἰουδαῖοι. Though not impossible, this hypothesis has not been widely accepted by Johannine specialists.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. BLOCH, “Israélite, juif, hébreu” *Cahiers Sioniens* 5 (1951): 30.

over the past centuries. Some Fathers of the Church absorbed this interpretation of the Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel and both transmitted and expanded upon it with ultimately tragic consequences. Jewish biblical interpreters, particularly those writing in a world after the experience of the *Shoah*, have labeled the Fourth Evangelist as no less than “the father of anti-Semitism<sup>3</sup>” and his Gospel is described as a “gospel of Christian love and Jew hatred.<sup>4</sup>” Contemporary Christian scholars have offered a spectrum of responses to this state of affairs, from stout defenses of John’s use of Ἰουδαῖοι as perfectly appropriate intra-Jewish polemic of the period [cf. e.g. L.T. Johnson], to explorations of alternate meanings of the term such as “Judeans,” “Jerusalemites,” “Temple authorities,” “other [heterodox] Christians” etc. [cf. e.g. M. Lowe, U.C. von Walde, M. de Jonge, G. Sloyan], to serious consideration of whether or not the Gospel of John, as a “text of terror,” ought to retain any longer its canonical authority in the New Testament [cf. e.g. N. Beck and R.R. Ruether]. Obviously the present work cannot attempt to resolve this issue, so enmeshed and inter-woven with a wide range of exegetical, theological, sociological, and inter-religious issues. My hope rather is to offer a very modest contribution to the dialogue through the placing into evidence of a piece of archaeological data which, though known for several decades, does not seem to have been widely taken up by commentators and specialists.

This presentation will unfold in three general parts. In the first part, a general review of what might be meant by Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John as well as the use of the phrase [τῶν] Ἰουδαίων will be undertaken. This latter phrase appears occasionally in the Synoptic Gospels, usually in the Passion Narratives. It appears with greater frequency in the Gospel of John. In that Gospel, it often seems to serve to describe and explain for its readers traditions, customs, and practices with which they may be unfamiliar. Some writers and scholars also detect in this phrase a qualifying by the evangelist of these traditions, customs, and practices so as to distinguish – and distance – them from Christian praxis. Those things described are “of the Jews” and so in some sense not “of the Christians.<sup>5</sup>” Τῶν Ἰουδαίων thus becomes for the authors in question a specific subset of the whole Johannine Ἰουδαῖοι question, another tangible marker along the unfolding path of separation between Synagogue and Church.

In the second part of the presentation, this proposal will be critically evaluated through an analysis of the evidence offered by means of the similar descriptive use of the phrase [τῶν] Ἰουδαίων in one of the Bar Kokhba letters. The use of the same phrase, in the same context, in the same written language, at roughly similar times of composition, by an individual who, emphatically, could not be charged with anti-Semitism is – I believe – worthy of note by commentators and Johannine specialists.

In the third part of the presentation, by way of conclusion, the data generated by the first two parts will be generalized into what is hoped to be a helpful methodology for dealing with controverted biblical questions with students. In particular, the correction of biblical “knowledge” imparted by the prevailing culture, the importance of “incarnational hermeneutics”

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. L.C. FREUDMANN, *Antisemitism in the New Testament* (Lanham: University Press of America 1994) pg. 265. Here Freudmann is citing with approval A.T. DAVIES, *Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind* (New York: Herder 1969) pg. 60. The quotation does not appear on this page in the edition of the work which was available to me. Samuel Sandmel notes, “John is widely regarded as either the most anti-Semitic or at least the most overtly anti-Semitic of the Gospels (ID. *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1978) pg. 101).

<sup>4</sup> G.M. SMIGA, G.M. *Pain and Polemic. Anti-Judaism in the Gospels* (New York: Mahwah 1992) pg 134. Smiga is quoting the words of Kaufmann Kohler, although without citing a specific work.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. M. LOWE, “Who were the ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ?” *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1976): 115. Lowe hypothesizes that perhaps the nuance might also be “not of the Samaritans.

in Catholic biblical studies, and the construction of an accessible, holistic educational project for our seminarians, religious, and lay students will be highlighted.

Having explained this project, I would like offer my readers some basic caveats. I am not a specialist in the Gospels generally or in the Gospel of John specifically. Those who are must accept my apologies for the inevitable limitations and lacunae inherent in the work of an interested, perhaps over-enthusiastic, amateur. The time demands of teaching, formation, and administration have also had an inescapable effect on this work. The vast scope of both primary and secondary literature on the Fourth Gospel and the question of “John and the Jews” has, despite the yeoman efforts of my university’s libraries, left much worthy material un- or under-used. Notwithstanding these inadequacies, I believe this topic to be well worth our reflection and consideration. So, permit me to rush in where angels fear to tread.

### 1. The Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John.

As previously noted, the traditional and accepted understanding of the Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel is the “Jews.”<sup>6</sup> While the origins and meaning of the term are not entirely clear, it is certainly related to the nation’s eponymous ancestor Judah, took on growing significance following the return from Babylonian Exile, and became entirely common by the time of the composition of the New Testament<sup>7</sup>. Specialists in the Gospel of John have often attempted to discern if the referent(s) for this term, as used by the Fourth Evangelist, may be distinguished with greater specificity, particularly given the diversity found with first century Judaism<sup>8</sup>. Five main alternatives may be distinguished. First, in recent years it has become particularly popular to hold that the Ἰουδαῖοι of the Fourth Gospel are not “Jews” in a religious sense, but rather “Judeans” in a geographical or ethno-political sense. Given that many of the original disciples of Jesus originated in Galilee, some tension between the groups might be presumed. This understanding was popularized in recent decades by M. Lowe in a pair of extended studies<sup>9</sup>. After reviewing the range of potential translations, Lowe concluded that, while almost every people in antiquity had their own national religion and therefore the religious and geographical meanings could be at times coterminous in substance, “the geographical sense indeed formed the

<sup>6</sup> There are a number of examinations available. One relatively recent and full treatment is that of G. HARVEY, *The True Israel. Uses of the Names Jew, Hebrew and Israel in Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill 1996). Another excellent summary, prepared for a different context, is P.T. GADENZ, “Definitions: Jew and Gentile, Israel and the Nations,” in *Called from the Jews and from the Gentiles* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2009) pp. 64-82. A brief, but synthetic, treatment of the options which will be herein reviewed can also be found in The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 2002 document *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, § 77.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the review of H.-J., ZOBEL, “יהודים *yêhūdâ*,” in *TDOT* 4 (1980): 482-499.

<sup>8</sup> In considering the group(s) with which the Fourth Evangelist is interacting, “at this stage we have to ask, ‘Which Judaism?’ ‘Whose Judaism?’ The failure of the Jewish revolt in the destruction of the Temple both simplify the picture and it is more complex.” [italics original] J.D.G. DUNN, “The Embarrassment of History: Reflections on the Problem of ‘Anti-Judaism’ in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*. eds. R. Bieringer et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2001) pg. 45.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. LOWE, “Who were the IOYΔΑΙΟΙ?” *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1976): 101-130, and ID. “IOYΔΑΙΟΙ of the Apocrypha” *Vetus Testamentum* 23 (1981): 56-90. One notes that, interestingly enough, throughout his early study of this subject, Solomon Zeitlin uses the double term “Judeans – Jews.” Cf. ID. “The Names Hebrew, Jew and Israel” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 43 (1953): 365-379.

primary meaning of the term in New Testament times.<sup>10</sup> This view has won a number of followers<sup>11</sup> but trenchant critics as well<sup>12</sup>. While at times the term Ἰουδαῖοι does seem to be used in this sense, it is difficult to see how this thesis can be defended globally, particularly when one would be referring to the feast of the “Judeans,”<sup>13</sup> or in cases such as Jn 6:41 and 6:52, when the “Judeans” are found in Galilee and not in the southern part of the Holy Land.

Second, some scholars hold that the Ἰουδαῖοι of John do not necessarily have a historical referent but are used simply as a literary device by the evangelist to advance his narrative<sup>14</sup>. “They [the Ἰουδαῖοι] are ‘representative’ not in the sense that they sum up typical beliefs of actual Jews in Jesus’ time or even toward the end of the first century when the gospel was written, but in the sense that they represent the *Johannine* conception of the Jewish beliefs that are obstacles to Christian faith, in a form which can serve as a foil to the Gospel’s reputation for irony.<sup>15</sup>” Without a doubt, the evangelist often uses the Ἰουδαῖοι in a rhetorical sense to advance the narrative program of his gospel. However, rhetoric and history are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Moreover, it has become increasingly recognized that the historical witness of the Gospel of John to actual events which transpired during the life and ministry of Jesus, ought not be unduly minimized<sup>16</sup>.

Third, some scholars hold that the Ἰουδαῖοι may “represent Christian contemporaries of the evangelist: Christians against whom he polemicizes.”<sup>17</sup> And, indeed, in Jn 8, Jesus takes to task

<sup>10</sup> M. LOWE, “Who were the ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ?” pg. 105. Lowe summarized the conclusions of his first article at the beginning of his second: “Ἰουδαῖος then had primarily a geographical meaning – it signified principally the inhabitants of ἡ Ἰουδαία or people originating from the latter, i.e. “Judeans” as dwellers in or emigrants from “Judea”; only secondarily did it have a religious significance as denoting individuals of any nation who had adopted the religion of Judea” (Id. “ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ of the Apocrypha” pg. 56).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. e.g. S.J.D. COHEN, “Ioudaios: ‘Judaean’ and ‘Jew’ in Susanna, First Maccabees, and Second Maccabees,” in *Geschichte – Tradition – Reflexion*. FS Martin Hengel. eds. H. Cancik, *et al.* vol. 1. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1996) pp. 211-212. Cohen however notes the challenge provided to this hypothesis by LXX texts such as 2Macc 6:6.

<sup>12</sup> “In the NT, Ἰουδαῖος is never limited to the inhabitants of Judea, nor is this general elsewhere. Even Jn. 7:1 is no true exception...” (GUTBROD, pg. 375 n. 99). “This solution has on the whole been poorly received by professional *Neutetamentler*.” (J. ASHTON, “The Identity and Function of the ἸΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ in the Fourth Gospel” *Novum Testamentum* 27 (1985): 41). Smiga notes that, even if the primary meaning of Ἰουδαῖοι is “Judean” or something of the like “the theological sense overwhelms the terminological reference” and therefore a case could be made for translating Ἰουδαία, not as “Judea” but as “Jewry.” Cf. SMIGA, pg. 169.

<sup>13</sup> A point well made by D. RENSBERGER, “Anti-Judaism and the Gospel of John,” in *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels*. ed. W.R. Farmer (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International 1999) pg. 123. He observes that, in fact, the purification rites “of the Judeans” in Jn 2:6 actually take place in Cana of Galilee (*ibid.*).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. eg. J. ASHTON, *op. cit.* and R.A. CULPEPPER, “Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel as a Theological Problem for Christian Interpreters,” in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*. eds. R. Bieringer *et al.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2001) pp. 61-82.

<sup>15</sup> W.A. MEEKS, “‘Am I a Jew?’ – Johannine Christianity and Judaism,” in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults*. FS. Morton Smith. vol. I. ed. J. Neusner (Leiden: Brill 1975) pg. 172. The hypothesis, popular since the time of Bultmann, that the term Ἰουδαῖοι stands for all who are opposed to faith in Jesus, may be included as a subset of the rhetorical understanding of this term.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the classic study of C.H. DODD, *Historical Tradition and the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1963), C.L. BLOMBERG, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2002), or the more recent collection of R. BAUCKHAM, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2007). Cf. more specifically on the history and subject of the Jews in the Gospel of John e.g. P.S. KAUFMANN, “Anti-Semitism in the New Testament: The Witness of the Beloved Disciple” *Worship* 63 (1984): 395.

<sup>17</sup> M. DE JONGE, “‘The Jews’ in the Gospel of John,” in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*. eds. R. Bieringer *et al.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2001) pg. 139.

a group of individuals who had, at least at one time, come to have “believed in him” (Jn 8:31-32) but no longer do so. In this case, those in question are Christians, but they do not share or are in danger of falling away from the evangelist’s high Christology. While interesting, this hypothesis has not commanded much assent by specialists.

Fourth, noting that, in contrast to their leaders, the common Jewish people responded positively to Jesus, if at times though, they misunderstood the nature of his messiahship,<sup>18</sup> some scholars have attempted to narrow the semantic range of Ἰουδαῖοι to the authorities of Jerusalem and/or the Jerusalem Temple<sup>19</sup>. Due to corruption and collaboration, anti-Jerusalem and anti-Temple polemic was certainly current in Judaism, as abundantly attested to by the Dead Sea Scrolls and later rabbinic sources. However, if the Fourth Evangelist wanted to focalize his critique on these authorities, he had available and, in fact, made use of a wider range of more specific and appropriate terms to do so, such as ἄρχοντες, ἀρχιερεῖς, and Φαρισαῖοι. This indicates that “authorities” is unlikely to be the comprehensive meaning of Ἰουδαῖοι in John<sup>20</sup>.

Finally, a number of specialists concentrate on the religious and sociological connotation of the terms “Jew” and “Israel” which had developed by the time of Jesus. From this perspective, Ἰσραὴλ serves as the preferred “inside” name used for self reference by members of the community in question. On the other hand, Ἰουδαῖος seems to have been used primarily by Gentiles – or by Jewish authors in a Gentile-oriented literary context – to designate identity by and for those on the “outside<sup>21</sup>.” This thesis was most comprehensively articulated twenty-five years ago in a pair of studies by P.J. Tomson<sup>22</sup>. Although not monolithically uniform, the usage of the inner self-designation as Ἰσραὴλ, to be distinguished from an external other-designation of Ἰουδαῖος, seems to be an accurate description of the genuine usage of these terms in the deuterocanon, inscriptions, pseudoepigrapha, at Qumran, by Josephus and Philo, in early rabbinic literature, and in Christian literature through late antiquity<sup>23</sup>. This seems to be the most appropriate and adequate understanding for the use of the term in the Fourth Gospel as well. In

<sup>18</sup> T.L. DONALDSON, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament* (Waco: Baylor University Press 2010) pg. 81.

<sup>19</sup> U.C. von Wahlde notes “If the polemic of the gospel as indicated by the Jews passages is directed exclusively at the authorities, the context of intra-Jewish debate remains a possibility. If on the other hand the Johannine Jews comprise both authorizes and common people [...] then one has the further problem of determining whether this is indicative of anti-semitic bias. (ID., “The Johannine ‘Jews’: A Critical Survey” *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982): 33). Von Wahlde however, notes that the current trend of Johannine scholarship is to understand the Jews in the Fourth Gospel as comprising both the common people and the authorities. (cf. *Ibid.*, pg. 54 n. 39).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. in this regard the effective critique of von Wahlde in ASHTON, pp. 56-57.

Beyond the testimony of literary fonts, archaeological data – particularly from funerary inscriptions – has been analyzed regarding the use of the term “Jew” whether in Greek or in Latin. These are quite rare, occurring in only 34 epitaphs and 10 miscellaneous inscriptions out of some 1700 extant Jewish epigraphs. Cf. R.S. KRAEMER, “On the Meaning of the Term ‘Jew’ in Greco-Roman Inscriptions” *Harvard Theological Review* 82 (1989): 37. Kraemer notes that this rarity (54/1700) should not be off-putting as, in most cases the “Jewishness was either manifestly apparent or through the use of incontrovertibly Jewish symbols” (*ibid.*, pg. 38) such as the menorah, etc. The term has a range of meanings, from indicator of geographic origin, a sign of pagan adherence to Judaism, a proper name, or religious affiliation. Cf. M.H. WILLIAMS, “The Meaning and Function of *Ioudaios* in Graeco-Roman Inscriptions” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 116 (1997): 249. In most cases, however, the religious connotation is in the forefront, where “Jew” may stress similarities or emphasize differences, depending on the dating and place of origin of the inscription.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. already K.G. KUHN, “Ἰσραήλ, Ἰουδαῖος, Ἑβραῖος in Jewish Literature after the OT,” in *TDNT* 3 (1965): 359.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. T.J. TOMSON, “The Names Israel and Jew in Ancient Judaism and in the New Testament,” *Bijdragen* 47 (1986): 120-140; 266-289.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. HARVEY, pp. 267-273. In late antiquity, Ἑβραῖος began to supplant Ἰουδαῖος as the usual “outsider” designation of this community.

this case, the appellation Ἰουδαῖοι found in the Gospel of John is in fact the designation most appropriate for Hellenistic literature while holding within it at least the latent, or perhaps residual, potential for the “otherization” of the opponents of Jesus<sup>24</sup>. Although hyperbolically stated, there is a sense in which the Fourth Gospel can be described as “both thoroughly Jewish and trenchantly anti-Jewish.”<sup>25</sup>

Given this review and basic understanding of Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John, then, it is not surprising that scholars have tended to understand the specific use of the phrase [τῶν] Ἰουδαίων in a variety of ways. On the one hand, a number of scholars hold that, notwithstanding what was articulated above, the phrase is an otherwise neutral, parenthetical remark describing Jewish customs or institutions to aid the non-Jewish audience of the Gospel, particularly those who may not be from Palestine<sup>26</sup>. This generally adopted “neutral explanation” has tended to exclude most of the [τῶν] Ἰουδαίων texts from discussions regarding John’s meaning in the term Ἰουδαῖος<sup>27</sup>. However, the opposite may well be true. D. Rensberger observes that, in John’s Gospel, “Jewish holy days and traditions associated with them are mentioned with such minimal explanation that readers not conversant with Judaism would be left largely in the dark.”<sup>28</sup> A more intimate familiarity with these aspects of Judaism would have been absolutely necessary for John’s audience to grasp his teaching in a fruitful way. On the other hand, still other scholars hold that the description of certain traditions, feasts, and activities as being [τῶν] Ἰουδαίων serves in fact to demarcate for the Gospel’s audience these customs, observances, and behaviors as to be avoided for belonging to an “out-group” of which they are – or are no longer – a part. Robert Kysar summarizes this view well:

The first impression the reader gains is the way in which the narrator is detached from and consequently distances the implied reader from Judaism. This is accomplished through such expressions as “the Passover of the Jews” (2:13; 11:55) and “[the] feast of the Jews” (5:1; 6:4; 7:2). Other examples of this detachment are found in 2:6 and 3:25. The effect is to align the reader with the perspective of the narrator, who is separated from Judaism. Those who “own” the festivals are “Jews,” and the narrator is neither Jewish nor leads the reader to Jewishness<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Tomson observes “The use the [fourth] gospel makes of the name ‘Jew’ and ‘Israel’ in effect signals not only a non-Jewish, but a decidedly anti-Jewish identification” (ID., 287)

<sup>25</sup> R.A. CULPEPPER, pg. 81. In this Culpepper is drawing on the previous insight of C.K. BARRETT, *The Gospel of John and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1975) pg. 71 [“The fact is that this gospel contains Judaism, non-Judaism, and anti-Judaism... John is both Jewish and anti-Jewish”]. Wayne Meeks expressed this sentiment memorably and pointedly: “To put the matter sharply, with some risk of misunderstanding, the Fourth Gospel is most anti-Jewish just at the point it is most Jewish.” (MEEKS, pg. 172).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. e.g. ASHTON, pp. 43-44; VON WAHLDE, “The Johannine ‘Jews’: A Critical Survey” pp. 33-60; HARVEY, pg. 85; L. KIERSPEL, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel*. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2006) pg. 63.

<sup>27</sup> The observation of L. Frizzell – summarizing the views of P. Grelot and G. Caron – regarding this “neutral” understanding is, however, important to recall: “The expression “the Jews” is invariably in a religious context, so John is dealing with “official Judaism”, associated with Jerusalem; each encounter of Jesus with “the Jews” is that the occasion of a feast. This means that Jn 2:13; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; and 11:55 are *not* simply neutral uses of the term.” (L. FRIZZELL, “‘The Jews’ in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Radici dell’antigiudaismo in ambiente cristiano*. ed. G. Cottier (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2000) pg. 134) emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> D. RENSBERGER, pg. 126.

<sup>29</sup> R. KYSAR, “Anti-Semitism and the Gospel of John,” in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity*. eds. C.A. Evans and D.A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1996) pp. 114-115. Kysar’s articulate summary draws together and builds upon the insight of previous scholars. The “general historical remoteness” discerned in this language was already noted by W. GUTBROD, “Ἰσραήλ, Ἰουδαῖος, Ἑβραῖος in Greek Hellenistic Literature,” in *TDNT* 3 (1965): 379. The “negative undertone” was found more specifically in the feasts τῶν Ἰουδαίων by D. GRANSKOU, “Anti-Judaism in the Passion Accounts of the Fourth Gospel,” in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*. eds. P. Richardson

One can certainly understand how critical scholars could arrive at and support these conclusions. At this juncture, however, it is, in my opinion, important to place these conclusions in dialogue with an archaeological datum, whose existence has been noted on occasion, but which has impacted the debate in any meaningful way<sup>30</sup>.

## 2. A Bar Kokhba Letter.

The events of the First Jewish Revolt – from the spiral downward in the years before A.D. 66, to the initial successes of the rebels, to the gradual unraveling of those successes, to the fiery end of Jerusalem and the drama of Masada – are quite familiar to most students of the Bible, thanks to the writings of Flavius Josephus. Lacking a historian with firsthand experience of the events of the Second Jewish Revolt, scholars had had to content themselves with brief and scattered references found in a few Roman historians and later Church Fathers and rabbinic sources<sup>31</sup>. Evidently the emperor Hadrian resolved to found in Jerusalem a new city to replace the one which had been destroyed two generations earlier and to erect on the site of the former Second Temple a new temple dedicated to Jupiter<sup>32</sup>. After an extended progress through Egypt, the Holy Land, and Syria during A.D. 129-131, Hadrian departed for Greece. At that time, under the unified military command of one Bar Kokhba/Bar Kosiba, the Jewish people rose in revolt once more, methodically seizing strategic points throughout the country and raising a vast army. Hadrian, recognizing the seriousness of the situation, summoned his best general, Julius Severus, from Britain and gave him command of twelve experienced legions and auxiliaries to crush the insurrection. With both efficiency and ferocity Severus put down the revolt, destroying over a thousand towns and villages in a bloody multi-year campaign that killed hundreds of thousands and rendered the land desolate<sup>33</sup>. Writing about the rebellion, Dio Cassius noted:

[The rebels] occupied the advantageous positions in the country and strengthened them with mines and walls, in order that they might have places of refuge whenever they should be hard pressed, and might meet together unobserved under ground; and they pierced these subterranean passages from above at

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and D. Granskou. (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier 1986) pg. 202. “These notes are commonly taken to indicate the distance of the author from Judaism, since only an outsider would presumably speak thus of Judaism’s customs.” (MEEKS, pg. 181).

<sup>30</sup> As far as I can tell, the existence of the Bar Kokhba letter which will be treated has been noted previously by two scholars. Cf. MEEKS, pg. 181 and TOMSON, pg. 130. Alas, few seem to have taken their lead.

<sup>31</sup> In fact, the most extensive classical source for the revolt of Bar Kokhba are those of the third century Roman historian Dio Cassius. However, the passage in which he deals with the revolt is only found in an epitome of his works prepared by the eleventh century monk Xiphilinus. Cf. Y. YADIN, *Bar-Kokhba* (New York: Random House 1971) pp. 19. M. MOR, “The Bar-Kokhba Revolt and Non-Jewish Participants” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (1985): 207.

<sup>32</sup> The Roman historian Spartianus ascribed the revolt to a decree by Hadrian prohibiting circumcision. Some rabbinic sources hold that Hadrian had agreed to rebuild the Jewish Temple of Jerusalem but then stopped when faced with opposition by the Samaritans.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the convenient collection of Jewish, classical, and Christian sources regarding the Bar Kokhba revolt assembled in Y. YADIN, *Bar-Kokhba*, pp. 255-259. The brutal nature of the campaign was revealed graphically during Yadin’s excavations of what came to be known as the “Cave of Horrors,” across the gorge from the “Cave of the Letters.” There, cornered by the Romans, some two dozen rebels died, apparently from dehydration and starvation. Cf. R.A. FREUND, *Secrets of the Cave of Letters* (New York: Humanity Books 2004) pg. 85.

intervals to let in air and light<sup>34</sup>.

In the spring of 1960, several of these underground lairs were discovered along the western shore of the Dead Sea near the Nahal Hever, evidently hemmed in by a Roman camp constructed nearby. One of the caves, to become known as the “Cave of the Letters,” yielded up a tremendous amount of archaeological material, including a dramatic set of letters from Simon Bar Kokhba, the leader of the revolt himself<sup>35</sup>. The principal excavator, Yigael Yadin recounted the story of the dig as well as a description of the principal finds in both a summarized<sup>36</sup> and extended fashion<sup>37</sup>. The cache of fifteen letters, composed in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, was written on papyrus and on wood and open a unique window on the actual life and administration of Bar Kokhba. They reveal a directive leader, who could be severe with shortcomings in his subordinates and particular about the manner in which his orders were carried out. In no less than three of the letters, he deals with the preparations for the upcoming feast of Sukkoth. One of these letters is written in Greek, a fact which is striking in itself. In the midst of a national revolt, the author of the letter “frankly prefers to write in Greek, or at least has to write in Greek.<sup>38</sup>” This says much for the advance of Hellenism in the Holy Land by the second century A.D. More important for the purposes of this paper, the author or scribe he speaks in an off-handed way, describing Sukkoth (the [χ]ιτρειαβολῆν) as being “of the Jews,” (Ἰουδαίων), utilizing precisely the same language as found in the Fourth Gospel to describe feasts. A transcription and translation of the letter follows:

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<sup>34</sup> DIO CASSIUS, *Roman History* 69.12. Cf. E. CAREY, *Dio Cassius. Roman History. Books 61-70*. (London: Heinemann 1927) pg. 448-449.

<sup>35</sup> “The most remarkable part of Yadin’s excavations was the discovery of letters from Shimon Bar Kokhba. Before this discovery, Bar Kokhba was as mythical as any other biblical figure from Abraham through Jesus [!].” FREUND, pg. 38.

<sup>36</sup> Y. YADIN, *The Finds from the Bar-Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society 1963) pp. 15-42. The Bar Kokhba letters were discovered in locus 7 of the cave, with a significant amount of metal, wood, and textile fragments.

<sup>37</sup> Y. YADIN, *Bar-Kokhba* (New York: Random House 1971) pp. 42-123.

<sup>38</sup> “He does not find the ὄρμαν, ‘impulse, desire,’ to compose the letter ἐβραϊστί. The cursive handwriting is not elegant and the spelling leaves much to be desired; if a scribe were employed for the writing of it, then he was not very well trained.” (FITZMYER, pg. 36).



5	Σου[μαῖ]ος Ἰωναθῆι Βαῖανου καὶ Μα- [σ]άβαλ χαίρειν. Ἐ[π]ηδὴ ἔπεμσα πρὸς ὑμᾶς Ἀ[γ]ρίππαν σπου- δ[ά]σατε πέμσε μοι σ[τε]λεοῦ[ς] καὶ κίτριά α[ὐτὰ] δ' ἀνασθήσεται ἰς [χ]ιτρειαβολὴν Ἰου- 10 <b>δαίων</b> καὶ μὴ ἄλλως ποιήσεται. Ἐγράφη δ[ὲ] Ἑλληνιστὶ διὰ τ[ὸ] ὄρ[μ]αν μὴ εὐρη- θ[ῆ]ναι Ἐβραεστὶ 15 γ[ρά]ψασθαι. Αὐτὸν ἀπ[ο]λῦσαι τάχιον δι[ὰ] τ[ὴν] Ἑορτῆν κα[ὶ] μὴ ἄλλως ποιή- ση[τα]ι.	Sou[mai]os to Jonathe, (son of) Baianos, and Ma- [s]abbala, greetings! S[i]nce I have sent to you A[g]rippa, make h[ast]e to send me b[e]am[s] and citrons. And furnish th[em] for the [C]itron-celebrations <b>of the</b> <b>Jews</b> ; and do not do otherwise. No[w] (this) has been writ- ten in Greek because a [des]ire has not be[en] found to w[ri]te in Hebrew. De[s]patch him quickly fo[r t]he feast, an[d do no]t do otherwise.	20 Σουμαῖος ἔρωσο Soumaios. Farewell <sup>39</sup> .
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Jonathan and Masabala are evidently the lieutenants of Bar Kokhba, who control the central sector of the desert of Judah, including the important agricultural supply center of Ein Ghedi and at least one harbor on the western shore of the Dead Sea. As those supervising the “supply depot” for Bar Kokhba’s own camp, the two were directed with no little insistence to send supplies for the feast. The Feast of Tabernacles was primarily a Temple pilgrimage feast which made use of a variety of branches in its ritual celebration – at least before A.D. 70. How precisely the supplies of Jonathan and Masabala would have been used for a Temple-less celebration must remain a matter of speculation. Evidently Bar Kokhba considered them of high importance<sup>40</sup>.

It may be noted that the author of this Greek letter is called Σουμαῖος. The original publisher of the letter held that Σουμαῖος is a Greek form of Bar Kokhba’s first name בַּר כּוֹחְבָּא<sup>41</sup>, and thus the author of the letter in Bar Kokhba himself. Yadin himself initially agreed,<sup>42</sup> although he later altered his view, ultimately holding the individual in question to be one of the Gentiles said to

<sup>39</sup> Emphasis added. This transcription and translation of the letter are from J.A. FITZMYER, “The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.” in *The Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1997) pg. 36. The *edition princips* is that of B. LIFSHITZ, “Papyrus grecs du désert de Juda” *Aegyptus* (1962): 240-256. Unfortunately I have not been able to obtain a copy of this article by the time of the preparation of this paper. A photograph of the letter is provided in Y. YADIN, *Bar-Kokhba*, pg. 131.

<sup>40</sup> One notes, in this regard, the use of palm branches to greet Jesus in Jn 12:13 when he arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate the pilgrim feast of Passover. In the case of Bar Kokhba – and given his repeated insistent commands – it is not impossible that the requisitioned branches, connected with another one of the great pilgrim feasts, may have served in some way to illustrate for him his own messianic identity.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. LIFSHITZ, pg. 242-252.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Y. YADIN, “More on the Letters of Bar Kochba” *Biblical Archaeologist* 24 (1963): 86.

have participated in the revolt<sup>43</sup>. J. Fitzmyer demurred, contenting himself with stating that the author, “if not Bar Cochba himself, then it is someone very closely associated with him”<sup>44</sup>. This prudence seems wise, but the essential incongruity raised by this letter remains: how can it be that the leader of the revolt – or one of his close associates – could describe one of the great feasts of the people involved in the revolt as being Ἰουδαίων, “of the Jews,” using the very same phraseology which has created such a discussion among Johannine scholars? One might suppose that, when used in connection with a feast, the phrase [τῶν] Ἰουδαίων was so stereotyped so as to no longer carry any potential connotations – positive or negative – at all<sup>45</sup>. If this were the case, however, one would also expect this phrase to have appeared with a certain regularity among Hellenistic Jewish authors. It simply does not.

One may consider that this letter is the “exception which proves the rule” to the whole Ἰσραηλ-Ἰουδαίος internal-/external- distinction noted above. This is not impossible. However, at the very least, the existence of this letter must invite students of the Gospel of John to seriously reconsider the nuances discerned or inherited in understanding the expression [τῶν] Ἰουδαίων. Just as it is completely implausible that this expression might serve to “detach” or “distance” or “hold aloof<sup>46</sup>” Bar Kokhba’s men from their own identity [τῶν] Ἰουδαίων, so too it may also be that this expression ought not be employed to detach or distance or hold aloof either Jesus from his people in the Fourth Gospel or the Johannine Christians for whom the evangelist prepared his work. It is certainly true that this is but one further piece<sup>47</sup> illustrating the mosaic of “Judaism” in the Gospel of John and therefore one needs to be tentative about any conclusions one wishes to draw from it. However, it is not a scholarly hypothesis or reconstruction: it is a piece of realia that stems from a similar time period, context, and ambient as the Fourth Gospel. We need to take its witness seriously. It may be, in fact, that the use of Ἰουδαίων by John, at least regarding feasts, does not necessarily carry the (negative) connotation which some New Testament specialists have recently attributed to it.<sup>48</sup>

### 3. John, Bar Kokhba, and our Students.

The initial invitation to this year’s Quinn Conference invited us in particular to consider the basic principles of the Catholic interpretation of Scripture as well as the goals of instructor and student in studying the sacred page. How might the present dialogue between the understanding of the Jews in the Gospel of John and this letter of Bar Kokhba illustrate these points?

Our students tend to come from a very diverse backgrounds, cultures and life experiences. While many may arrive at the seminary a bit later in later in life, bringing a maturity and wealth

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Y. YADIN, *Bar-Kokhba*, pg. 130. The Gentile nature of Σουμαίος might in part explain his use of the term Ἰουδαίων. Cf. also the critique of this view by M. MOR, pp. 201-202.

<sup>44</sup> “If not Bar Cochba himself, then it is someone very closely associated with him, who writes to the same two lieutenants to whom Bar Cochba wrote in other letters” (FITZMYER, pg. 36).

<sup>45</sup> In the same way that the title of the commemoration of Jesus’ birth as “Christmas” might not present any potential tensions to an otherwise conscientious Reformed Christian.

<sup>46</sup> To use expressions applied to the same phrase in the Gospel of John by several authors cited in section two of this paper.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as invaluable as the discovered letters of Bar Kokhba are, they total but 15 out of hundreds (perhaps thousands?) of pieces of correspondence from the leader of the Second Jewish Revolt.

<sup>48</sup> As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, I am an interested amateur when it comes to the study of the Fourth Gospel. Towards the completion of my work, I became aware of an earlier study done on this topic: L. DEVILLERS, “La lettre de Soumaïos et les Ioudaïoi johanniques,” *Revue biblique* 105 (1998): 556-581. While our conclusions are similar, I highly recommend this earlier study for the textual re-examination of the letter in question.

of world experience, and with great good will almost uniformly (though some notable exceptions) they bring very little biblical knowledge – as has been noted already by several presenters and our discussions. Moreover they bring a marked lack of tools and skills sets to gain any biblical knowledge. Interacting with written works in general (still less written works as specialized as biblical texts) is an event which their education and culture has not adequately prepared them. One is reminded of Mortimer Adler’s lamentation with which he began his work *How to Read a Book*. Seventy years later, the reasons for that lament have only been reinforced. . . . Moreover, some have absorbed a variety of pseudo-scholarly views from specials seen on cable TV, wherein the artifact always trumps the text and an exaggerated distrust of an ecclesial interpretation of Scripture has been absorbed from the prevailing culture. We can certainly bewail and work to change all of this but, pedagogically-speaking, we also can work within our students’ range of appreciable learning by giving to those who have grown up on the Discovery Channel and CSI what is comprehensible to them. A constant interplay with archaeological and historical data (“facts on the ground”) as we march them particularly through general survey or introductory courses not only piques our seminarians’ interests but educates them in a way that is accessible to them.

From the viewpoint of the instructor, two points. First, episodes such as this encourage us to read beyond our specialties and to look to make fruitful connections. I was reading Fitzmyer’s collection of articles not because it pertained to any coursework I was preparing or any immediate research interests, but simply because that book was next in my pile of “to-be-read.” When I happened on this phrase I think I actually rushed out into the hall of our seminary and accosted a passer-by in my excitement. The amount of data generated by the scholarly guild is indeed vast but, ideally, we have to make the time to break out of our own specializations to best see these fruitful connections.

Second, I think an authentically Catholic study of Scripture is synthetic rather than atomistic. It is always simpler to take apart rather than put together. All of us I am sure have witnessed exegetes perform vivisection on the Word. Our task (ideally) is rather is to unveil the Word of God in the fullest historical and theological context possible so that our students (and us may come to know and live it more deeply. Ultimately, we ought to do all of this because, as Catholic exegetes we want to take seriously the Incarnation of the Word and in a certain sense give Him flesh anew.