According to the dictum of C. K. Barrett, the Gospel of John is both Jewish and anti-Jewish. That is, alongside the Gospel’s pervasive appeal to Israel’s Scriptures and traditions stands trenchant criticism of those whom the evangelist refers to as “the Jews” (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι). That the censure is so often directed toward them with a seeming lack of inner differentiation has suggested to many that the Gospel witnesses to a religious schism. Ethnically Jewish believers in Jesus, having been banned from the synagogue for their faith, renounced their own identity as Jews. What began as an intra-Jewish dispute now bore the character of an external assault.

In this study, I undertake a reexamination of the Fourth Evangelist’s social location, the aim being to determine whether the author writes about the Jews as an insider, that is, as a Jew, or as someone who is conscious of standing outside membership in the Jewish people. It is my contention that the obstacles to an intra-Jewish reading of the Gospel are not insuperable. The evangelist, at the crossroads of experience and tradition, portrays the relationship between Jesus and his own in mostly oppositional terms, but he does not essentialize Jewish unreceptivity or stereotype all Jews as unbelievers.

The Gospel’s simultaneous indebtedness to Jewish tradition and persistent criticism of the Jews arguably stem from a Jewish author who portrays Jesus’s contemporaries as recapitulating the failings of their Israelite forbears. Jesus manifests the glory of God, but just as the Israelites rebelled against God in the wilderness, so too Jesus’s contemporaries refused to believe in spite of the signs which he performed. This does not in itself establish that John thought of himself as a member of the Jewish people, but it discloses a vantage point from which that inference becomes more reasonable. As a Jewish author, John drew upon the stories that he knew best in order to frame Jesus’s ministry and the opposition it aroused.