RARELY A week goes by that I do not face the question, ‘How did you end up in New Testament studies?’ Behind this query often lies the assumption that there is a contradiction between my area of study and my Jewish identity. Interestingly enough, this query comes more often from Jews than from non-Jews. The notion that being Jewish is incompatible with a professional interest in the New Testament reflects two profound and rarely articulated views held by many Jews. One is the perceived theological gulf between Judaism and Christianity. Related to this perception is a suspicion of the New Testament itself, perhaps fuelled by the fear, or the suspicion, that reading this set of texts may cause Jews to question or even to reject their Jewish identities. A second is the view that the New Testament is inimical not only to Jewish faith but also to the Jews as a people. Many Jews believe that the New Testament is in some way implicated in the roots and development of anti-Semitism and therefore helped to lay the groundwork for genocide.

For many years I ignored these issues completely and simply did not consider the possibility that my Jewish identity had any bearing at all on my academic pursuits. Strongly committed to scholarly objectivity, I argued (to myself) that my preoccupation with the New Testament was no different from my brother’s dedication to the field of medicine, my cousin’s academic achievements in the area of English literature, or my daughter’s blossoming interest in autism and child development. As a New Testament scholar I had imbibed the values and methods of my field. That is, I saw my main task as the effort to understand how the New Testament, and, in particular, the Gospel of John, was read and understood by its earliest audience. I was much taken by the advice of J.L. Martyn, who urged Johannine scholars to make every effort to take up temporary residence in the Johannine community. We must see with the eyes and hear with the ears of that community. We must sense at least some of the crises that helped to shape the lives of its members. And we must listen carefully to the kind of conversations in which all of its members found themselves engaged. Only in the midst of this endeavour will we be able to hear the Fourth Evangelist speak in his own terms, rather than merely in words which we moderns want to hear from his mouth.¹

What this approach required, I thought, was complete disengagement between my personal identity and scholarly interests; the fact that I was Jewish, with all the particular meanings that that label had for me, was irrelevant to what I studied or how I studied it. In recent years, however, I have begun to question my complacency. In this process I have been spurred on by new streams of academic discourse, in particular, feminist and postmodern criticism which assert rather emphatically that scholarly objectivity is
impossible and indeed, undesirable. I began to consider that it may be no accident that I, a child of holocaust survivors, would be drawn to the Gospel of John in which the Jews play the role of Jesus’ quintessential enemies and are on the receiving end of some very harsh language. The changing norms of my field, including the growing interest in the ethical dimensions of biblical texts, encouraged me to look seriously at two questions: first; is the Fourth Gospel itself anti-Jewish, in the sense of expressing and fostering negative attitudes towards Jews and Judaism? Or has it simply been subjected to later anti-Jewish interpretations as it made its way into the Christian canon? Second, is there a way to read the Gospel that takes the questions raised by one’s Jewish identity seriously and yet does not compromise the scholarly integrity of the enterprise?

A passage that raises these questions most acutely is John 8:31–59. John 8:31–59 is a dialogue or, more accurately, an acrimonious argument between Jesus and an unspecified number of Jews. It begins with Jesus promising the Jews: ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples’ (8:31). At its conclusion, the Jews, far from continuing in Jesus’ word, pick up stones to throw at him, so that he must hide himself and leave the temple where their discussion had taken place (8:59). The accusations and counter-accusations fly back and forth rapidly and viciously. The most memorable of these occurs in 8:44 in which Jesus accuses the Jews of being liars and murderers and declares: ‘You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.’ This image of the Jews as children of the devil has echoed through the centuries in theology, art, literature and anti-Semitic invective, including its latest manifestations in the website materials of neo-Nazi groups.

In analysing this text we must recognize that the Gospel of John, like the other Gospels, is not a biography; it does not recount the factual history of a historical figure in Palestine in the early decades of the first century. Rather, it provides a fictionalized narrative of Jesus that reflects the traditions, theological perspective and the life experience of a particular community – generally referred to as the Johannine community – at the end of the first century in Asia Minor. Thus John 8:31–59 does not provide us with the transcript of an exchange between Jesus and the Jews that actually occurred. On the contrary, the roles of both Jesus and the Jews are scripted in order to serve the interests and agendas of the narrator and may have little – if anything – in common with the views and relationships of Jesus and the Jews as historical figures. Knowing all this, however, does not diminish the emotional impact of this dialogue. A Jew who reads this passage cannot help being aware of the pain and hostility that permeates the dialogue. Acknowledging the gap in distance, time and place that separates us from this text does not prevent us from identifying with the characters referred to as ‘Jews’; the very label ‘Jew’ binds us to them and to a common ethnic and religious identity.

One option for a Jewish reader is to close the book, never to open it again. But for a Jewish reader who also happens to be a Johannine scholar closing the book is not a viable option. Such a reader can take one of two paths. One is to turn away from John 8 and to focus on passages that are less painful: this was the choice I made for many years. A second option, however, is to focus precisely on the Johannine representation of the Jews. This possibility will be explored in the pages that follow. That is, I will attempt to read from a perspective first developed in the area of feminist literary criticism that explicitly focuses on those labelled as ‘the other’ within and by the text one is reading. In her book The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction, Judith Fetterley argues that the classics of American literature which attempt to come to grips with, or to explain, American identity, do so in terms only of male characters. These works, contends Fetterley, create a serious dilemma for women readers: