

# Does John 8:44 mean the Jews are of the Devil?

By Craig M. White  
Version 1.0

"... for salvation is from the Jews." (John 4:22, ESV)  
"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:16, ESV)  
"So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!" (Romans 11:11-12, ESV)

## Introduction

Let us read this verse in context in the first instance:

"So Jesus said to the Jews [in his immediate hearing – not every Jew who ever lived] **who had believed him**, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,

and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever.

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

**I know that you are offspring of Abraham;** yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you

I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children [spiritually in context], you would be doing the works Abraham did,

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but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.

You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.”

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father [spiritually], you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.

**Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.**

**You are of your father the devil, and your will is 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. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.

Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?

Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.” (John 8:31-47)

This verse has been twisted and misused for centuries to persecute the Jews.

### Christ's condemnation of Jewish Leadership

Jesus is depicted as speaking to "the Jews" (Greek *Ioudaioi*) which in the Gospel of John frequently denotes religious leaders or adversaries, rather than *all* Jewish individuals. This verse has been distorted into an assertion that all Jews are inherently "children of the devil" portraying *all* Jews as malevolent or even satanic. It is even used to try and 'prove' that they are Edomites.

Refer to 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16; Acts 3:14-16; 13:10; Matthew 23:23-36 for proof that often this sort of speak refers to leaders and not necessarily *all* of the people. This appears to be a *metonymy* – sort of opposite to a *synecdoche* (a part for the whole). In other words the term Jew here may refer to the leadership.

Note how Christ condemns the Jewish leadership in the following verses (all ESV):

**“The scribes and the Pharisees** sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.” (Matthew 23:2-4)

**“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,** hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

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**“Woe to you, blind guides,** who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,** hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,** hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,** hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,** hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.” (Matthew 23:13-36)

**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,** hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:27-28)

**“You serpents, you brood of vipers,** how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (Matthew 23:33)

Christ is condemning the leadership, not all the people. In fact, some of the leadership were favourable to him. John 8:44 must be seen in this light.

In contrast:

“I am the good shepherd. **The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.** He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, **and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.** He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.” (John 10:11-13).

### **Misuse of the Verse:**

Advocates of this incorrect viewpoint are either anti-Jewish or gradually fall into the trap. They assert that:

All (or ethnic/racial) Jews are intrinsically the "children of the devil" by their very nature, rather than by choice. This depicts Jewish identity as inherently evil – as deceivers and murderers by lineage, akin to the devil (sometimes the Jews are labelled the "seed of the serpent" from Genesis 3:15 or traditions that identify Cain as the offspring of the devil). Many from the Christian Identity movement (an offshoot and perversion of British-Israelism) adhere to such views. Some have become explicitly Nazi!).

Nazi-era children's literature even proclaimed: "It means that the Jews descend from the Devil. And because they descend from the Devil, they can but live like devils. So they commit one crime after another." See analysis of this by:

- Daniel Green (2023), "The Discursive Construction of Antisemitism in Nazi Children's Books: Elvira Bauer's *Trust No Fox* (1936) and Ernst Hiemer's *The Poisonous Mushroom* (1938)", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, Vol. 36, pp. 2355–96.
- Kathleen Elkins (2022), The Jews as "Children of the Devil" (John 8:44) in Nazi Children's Literature. *Biblical Interpretation*, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 374-90.

Martin Luther referred to Jews in various ways such as 'wicked children of the devil'. See his book *The Jews and Their Lies* (1543 AD).

In more recent years, the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooter adopted John 8:44 as a slogan ("Jews are the children of Satan"). And in Charlottesville (2017) banners were displayed referring to it.

These assertions frequently overlook the nuances of the dialogue, treating "the Jews" (Greek *Ioudaioi*) as a racial grouping instead of a reference to a hostile subgroup, and extend into conspiracy theories regarding an inherent Jewish evil.

### Academic counter-arguments:

From my readings, main counterarguments include:

- A specific audience is referred to, rather than all Jews: Jesus speaks to a group of Jews who had initially placed their faith in him (John 8:31) but later opposed him which are probably Pharisees, religious leaders, or others conspiring against him (John 8:13, 37, 40). Today we would call them apostates (see Revelation 2:9; 3:9). In other words they apostatised.
- Ethical and behavioural issues are addressed rather than ethnic. The accusation of Christ refers to actions such as rejecting truth, attempting to kill Jesus, and mirroring the devil's lies and murder. Let's be frank, anyone (Jew, Israelite or Gentile) who engages in the works of the devil can be considered "of the devil" by choice, not by birth (cf. 1 John 3:8–10). Note the Qumran/Dead Sea Scrolls which refer to adversaries as "children of Belial/the Devil":

4Q174 (*Florilegium* or *4QMidrEschat<sup>a</sup>*, a Midrashic text from Cave 4): "... this means that He will give them rest from all the children of Belial who cause them to stumble so that they may be destroyed [by their errors,] just as they came with a [devilish] plan to cause the [sons] of light to stumble and to devise against them a wicked plot, that [they might become subject] to Belial in their [wicked] straying."

1QM (*War Scroll* or *War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness*, from Cave 1, with copies in Cave 4): "the forces of the Sons of Darkness, the army of Belial: the troops of Edom, Moab, the sons of Ammon, the [Amalekites], Philistia, and the troops of the Kittim who have violated the covenant."

- The anti-Jews do not look at this verse in context. Instead, they extract it so that it stands alone and thus overlook the rest of the book of John and Christ's own Jewish background and His calls for unity and love within it.
- The use of harsh language was commonplace in the first century according to scholars. They also regard John's work as "the most Jewish of the gospels," and thus one would expect such strong language.

Academics have taken a deep dive into this verse by looking at history, archaeology, linguistics and of course, the context of it.

CBS News (2018) presented insights from Harold Attridge, who examines the Gospel of John within the Jewish issues of the first century. He points out that the text infers conflicts among factions rather than condemning all Jews. After all the same Gospel asserts that "salvation comes from the Jews"!

The Catholic Church itself in a piece written by Pino Di Luccio and Étienne Vetö argues for John 8:44 as regarding fidelity to God, rather than as a justification for anti-Semitism.

Similarly, Lieve Teugels, in a 2024 blog post for the Protestant Theological University, interprets it as a form of rhetorical exaggeration characteristic of ancient arguments. She warns that literal interpretations have perpetuated myths, including medieval blood sacrifice accusations and modern conspiracy theories.

Steven Motyer's article published in The Gospel Coalition's journal *Themelios*, contends that the allegations of anti-Jewishness completely misinterprets its rhetorical and ethical aspects. He argues that the verse should be interpreted as a critique of actions rather than of ethnic identity.

Another is Adele Reinhartz who investigates how John 8:44 was used by figures such as Origen and Martin Luther, illustrating how theological disputes and translations led to its subsequent misapplication.

*Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000*, assembled by Reimund Bieringer et. al., brings together scholars to examine the historical, literary, and ethical aspects of John's Gospel. It discusses the ancient intra-Jewish arguments and later, unfortunate, anti-Semitic applications of this verse.

Finally, Matthew Litwa analyses its impact on early theological beliefs concerning evil and the character of the devil.

Collectively, these sources demonstrate and prove that John 8:44 should be understood within its historical, literary, and linguistic context. And that goes for all Biblical teachings.

References to the above:

1. Harold Attridge (2018), "Jews are the children of Satan' and the danger of taking biblical passages out of context" (or slight variations: "Jews are the children of Satan' and the dangers of taking John 8:44 out of context"), *CBS News*, 31 October.  
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jews-are-the-children-of-satan-john-8-44-danger-of-taking-biblical-passages-out-of-context/>
2. Fr. Pino Di Luccio, S.J. and Bishop Étienne Vetö, I.C.N. (2024), "John 8:44: A frequently misunderstood verse," *Vatican News*, 4 December.  
<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2024-12/john-8-44-frequently-misunderstood-verse-pope-francis.html>
3. Lieve Teugels (2024), "Jews as children of the devil?," *PThU Bibleblog* (Protestant Theological University, Netherlands), 9 May.  
<https://www.pthu.nl/en/bibleblog/2024/05/jews-as-children-of-the-devil/>
4. Steven Motyer (1998), "Is John's Gospel Anti-Semitic?," *Themelios*, Vol. 23, No. 2  
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/is-johns-gospel-anti-semitic/>
5. Adele Reinhartz (2020), "Children of the Devil': John 8:44 and its Early Reception," in *Confronting Antisemitism from the Perspectives of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism*, eds. Armin Lange, Kerstin Mayerhofer, Dina Porat, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter)  
<https://www.jcrelations.net/articles/article/children-of-the-devil-john-844-and-its-early-reception.html>

6. Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuille (eds.) (2000), *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000* (Jewish and Christian Heritage Series, Vol. 1; Leuven Colloquium papers 2000).
7. Matthew Litwa (2020), "The Father of the Devil (John 8:44): A Christian Exegetical Inspiration for the Evil Creator," *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 74, No. 5, pp. 540–565.

## **Views from Commentaries**

There are a number of commentaries that can be used for a study of this topic. Below is a selection to help in understanding the context and real meaning of it.

### *Bridgeway Bible Commentary online:*

"Jesus used an illustration from slavery to show the people how he could help them in their need. They all knew that slaves could not free themselves. The only person who could free them was the owner of the house in which the slave worked, or the owner's son, acting on his father's authority. The Jews were slaves, in bondage to sin and unable to free themselves. The only one who could free them was God, acting through his Son Jesus. They would find their true freedom through faith in Jesus and continual obedience to his teaching. Again the Jews did not understand the spiritual truth Jesus was illustrating. Thinking only of ordinary earthly life, they argued that they had never been slaves of any nation. They had the freedom of sons, Abraham's sons ([John 8:31-36](#)). To explain further, Jesus told his Jewish hearers that spiritually they were not sons of Abraham at all, but sons of the devil. They were trying to kill Jesus, and murder was a characteristic inherited from their spiritual father the devil, not from their earthly father Abraham ([John 8:37-40](#)). Beginning at last to see that Jesus was applying the illustration to their relationship with God, the Jews argued with him accordingly, but again they missed his meaning. They thought, perhaps, that he was accusing them of being like the Samaritans, who were of mixed blood and mixed religion. They assured him that they were pure sons of Abraham nationally and pure sons of God spiritually ([John 8:41](#)). Jesus responded that if God was their Father they would welcome his Son as their Messiah, not try to kill him. They would believe his teaching, not dispute it. Truly, their father was not God, but the devil ([John 8:42-47](#)). The Jews gave further proof that God was not their Father when they insulted his Son and so guaranteed God's judgment upon them. The Son is not concerned with gaining honour for himself. His chief concerns are to give honour to the Father on the one hand, and life to believers on the other ([John 8:48-51](#)). The Jews objected that Jesus was boasting to be greater than Abraham. Jesus replied that he was not boasting but merely telling the truth: he was united with God ([John 8:52-55](#)). As for Abraham, he himself acknowledged Jesus to be greater by rejoicing when he foresaw the coming of the Messiah. The Jews objected that Jesus could not know Abraham's thoughts, because Abraham had died hundreds of years before Jesus was born. They were angered more

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when Jesus said that he existed even before Abraham. Jesus is the eternal God. The Jews considered such a claim to be blasphemy and immediately but unsuccessfully tried to kill him ([John 8:56-59](#)).”

### *Pulpit Commentary online:*

“In this way the great bulk of the best commentators translate this difficult clause, Hilgenfeld, Volkmar, and Davidson translate, "You are of the father of the devil;" and suggest that here the evangelist betrays his fierce Gnostic (Ophite) antagonism to the Jews, and adopts the view that the God of the Old Testament, the "Creator," was the Father of the serpent. This is surely untenable. The Creator of all things, in the prologue, is none other than the Father acting through the Logos. In the third, fourth, and fifth chapters, the greatest honours are ascribed to the God of the Jewish people, and not the faintest hint given of such radical divergence from the standpoint of Judaism...

"Brood of vipers" is a phrase used by John Baptist and Christ himself when addressing Pharisees. The well known imagery of the first promise, "I will put enmity between her seed and thy seed," etc., suggests the same thought. There is an awful significance in this power of the devil to sow his deadly seed in human life, and to produce thus, on the soil of human nature, "children of the wicked one" (cf. Paul's language, [Acts 13:10](#), addressed to Elymas, υἱὲ διαβόλου, "son of the devil"). Another translation makes αὐτοῦ refer to ψεῦδος: **He is a liar, and the father of falsehood, or thereof** (Revised Version)..."

I feel that these provide very good explanations.

### **Conclusions**

As we have seen, the statement does not serve as a comprehensive condemnation of all Jews, but rather one employing rhetorical language from the 1st century.

**“Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil**, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are **the children of the devil**: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.” (1 John 3:8-10)

Whoever means anyone – not only Jews – who falls into apostasy and turns against Christ and His truth may be considered “children of the devil”! We have seen these already in the 1990s operating as Satanic agents and tools of the devil in the 1990s. And they were not Jews.

### Recommended Reading

- *Jewish Origins* by Craig M White
- *Notes on the Bible and Genetics* by Craig M White.
- *The Sanctity of Nationhood in the Bible* by Craig M White.
- *The True Roots and Origin of the Scots* by Craig M White.
- *Where are the 'Lost' Tribes of Israel in the Modern World? An Introduction* by Craig M White.

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