

Ruth Sheridan
***The Figure of Abraham in John 8:
Text and Intertext***

(London: T & T Clark, 2020), hardcover, xv + 452 pp.

JEFFREY S. SIKER

jeffrey.siker@lmu.edu

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA 90045

Ruth Sheridan, a research professor at Western Sydney University in Australia, has been publishing on the topic of Jews and the Gospel of John for nearly a decade. The present volume is in many ways a continuation of her previous work. This includes her monograph *Retelling Scripture: The Jews and the Scriptural Citations in John 1:19-12:15* (Leiden: Brill, 2012) and chapters in two edited volumes, *How John Works: Storytelling in the Fourth Gospel* (2016) and *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context* (2017). Methodologically, she employs comparative literary analysis, especially structuralist and post-structuralist readings, as opposed to traditional source or redaction criticism that was the dominant approach of past generations of biblical scholars.

In *Retelling Scripture* (a revision of her 2010 doctoral thesis) Sheridan argued that John uses scripture in order to lead an ideal reader to a negative characterization of “the Jews.” In *The Figure of Abraham in John 8* Sheridan develops her literary analysis with particular appeal to the work of Roland Barthes, the French literary critic, whose most influential work included the 1967 essay “The Death of the Author.” Sheridan is thus concerned not with authorial intent of the Fourth Gospel (which is inaccessible) but with the rhetorical strategies the author employs to construct an understanding of Abraham and “the Jews” in John 8. Her most original contribution is not so much in how John develops an understanding of Abraham in relation to “the Jews” but in her adopting a resistant reading of John that seeks to rehabilitate the Jewish voice in the text over John’s pejorative depiction of “the Jews.” By meticulously exploring the many intertextual allusions to Abraham in John 8, Sheridan examines metaphors of the “seed of Abraham” (in relation to slavery and sin), the “works of Abraham,” and the “seeing and rejoicing” of Abraham, all overtly developed in John 8. In each instance she presents a detailed description of these motifs in the Hebrew Bible, Pseudepigrapha, writings by Philo and Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament, and Rabbinic literature. Her subsequent intertextual reading of Abraham in John 8 results in a positive self-

affirmation of “the Jews” as the children of Abraham who benefit from father Abraham’s vicarious merit. This positive Jewish embrace of father Abraham thus presents a resistant reading and hence a counter-narrative to the historically Christian obsession with John’s portrayal of “the Jews” as children of the devil (8:44).

One of the strengths of the book is Sheridan’s insistence on reading John 8 as a literary whole, which results in her firm anchoring of the narrative within the traditions associated with the festival of Sukkot. She also has clearly mastered virtually all of the secondary literature on Abraham in early Jewish and Christian literature (including the present reviewer’s 1991 book *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy*), and she presents extensive summaries and appropriate critiques of the relevant secondary literature. At times her detailed discussions of the various Abraham traditions from the Hebrew Bible through other early Jewish and Christian literature amount to more trees than one can reasonably absorb in search of a forest. However, for a nearly exhaustive presentation of Abraham traditions related to the “seed,” “works,” and “seeing” of Abraham in antiquity, this is the best resource. Her extensive exegetical work is solid. I do however question how important it is for her to adopt Barthes’s “death of the author / birth of the reader” approach for reading John. What struck me as perhaps the most ironic aspect of this is that Sheridan gives no attention to what appears to be John’s reference to the actual death of the author (the Beloved Disciple) in John 21:20-23. Surely it is possible for more historicist and more literary critical approaches to be mutually fruitful ways of investigating texts.

Sheridan’s work is another important contribution by a Jewish scholar of early Christianity to a deeper understanding of contested readings of John in light of the history of Christian anti-Judaism. In this regard her work is very much in keeping with the work of one of her mentors, Adele Reinhartz, whose book *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (2002) provides a model of a resistant reading of John from a Jewish perspective. Sheridan has ably found a more positive voice of “the Jew in the text,” and it is to be hoped that this will result in still greater understanding and mutuality among Jews and Christians in our own age.