Does Jesus refer to the Jews who believed in him as children of the devil? John's Gospel 8:31, 33 and 44

Abstract: *Jesus addresses different groups in John 8:31-44. He speaks in 31-32 to those who believed, emphasizing discipleship and truth, but in 33 and following verses he condemns the unbelieving Pharisees, calling them children of the devil. The passage highlights the conflict between Jesus and hostile Jewish leaders. It is crucial to understand how pronouns are used in Greek storytelling, because this is different from English.*

In John 8.31-33 we read (quotes from NIV):

31 To *the Jews who had believed him*, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” 33 *They* answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

It looks like the people who answered Jesus were the Jews who had believed. The dialogue continues as follows:

34 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. 37 I know that you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word.”

Is Jesus still speaking to *the Jews who had believed him* and repeating the statement about being set free? Or is he talking to the Pharisees who did not believe in him?

The dialogue continues a bit later:

44 You belong to *your father, the devil*, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!

It becomes more and more clear that Jesus cannot be talking to *the Jews who believed in him*, so what is happening?

When we study the gospel of John, we will many times find a conflict between Jesus and the "Jews" (i.e., Jewish leaders, especially Pharisees, hostile to Jesus). This conflict grows in intensity as the gospel story unfolds.

In chapter 8, Jesus is teaching in the temple courtyard (v. 2). When he teaches here, he would always be surrounded by a small group of hostile Pharisees and a larger group of common people who are more positive. Now, in Greek storytelling, the main participants

in the story are referred to by pronouns. This is different from English. The main participants in this chapter and the following two chapters is Jesus on one hand and the unbelieving Pharisees on the other. A minor group in the background is the crowd of common people. Think of a theatre stage, where Jesus and the Pharisees are in front arguing and some other people are silent in the background, but listening in.

Let us try to identify the participants:

30 As *he* was saying these things, *many* believed in him. 31 So Jesus said to *the Jews who had believed him*, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." 33 *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'?"

The pronoun "he" in v. 30 refers to Jesus. In v. 31 Jesus is no longer talking to the "Jews" (the hostile Pharisees), but to those Jews who had believed in him among the crowd. The pronoun "they" in v. 33 refers to the hostile Pharisees, because they were the main participant. Verses 30-31 is a parenthesis in the story which is about the conflict between Jesus and the "Jews". If John had wanted us to think of the Jews who had believed, he would have needed to say "Those Jews who had believed answered..." When he says "They answered", it means he is back to the main participant.

So, if one understands how the Greek language works, the problem is solved. But it is very unfortunate that all English translations are literal and unclear and give the wrong impression. Even most commentators do not understand what is going on. I found one commentary saying: "**They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man,** —Who said this? Not surely the very class just spoken of as won over by His divine words, and exhorted to continue in them. Most interpreters seem to think so; but it is hard to ascribe such a petulant speech to the newly gained disciples."[1]

[1] Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Vol. 2, p. 144). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.