CHAPTER THREE

APOSYNAGÔGOS AND JESUS’ MESSIANIC IDENTITY

3.1 An Initial Orientation

Each of the aposynagōgos passages attests to conflicts of some sort, and indicates unequivocally that Jesus’ identity was integral to those conflicts. In 9:22, we are informed that the blind man’s parents feared being made aposynagōgoi, and this because hoi Ioudaioi had decided that this should be the fate of any who confessed that Jesus was the messiah. 12:42 tells us that whilst many of the rulers believed in Jesus, they remained silent because they feared being made aposynagōgoi. In 16:2 we are told that Jesus’ followers would be made aposynagōgoi in the future, relative to the narrative, because others do not know either him or the Father. The aposynagōgos passages represent Jesus’ identity as the primary issue under contention, with 9:22 suggesting that the issue is more specifically Jesus’ messianic identity. Employing what Meyer calls an oblique pattern of inference,1 this chapter argues contra the Martynian tradition that the aposynagōgos passages’ accounts of conflict over Jesus’ messianic identity during his lifetime are plausible.

3.2 Bultmannianism Today: The Martynian Traditions

The argument that the aposynagōgos passages could represent actual conflicts over Jesus’ messianic identity during his lifetime is made over and against the Martynian tradition, which supposes that most if not all such conflicts depicted by John’s Gospel are properly construed as evidence for Christological controversies within the life of the Johannine community rather than as evidence for Christological controversies during the lifetime of Jesus.

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The Martynian traditions formulated this conviction as part of broader Bultmannian commitments. In a recent discussion of the influences upon his work and thinking, Martyn has described how Bultmann’s “both enormously impressive… and seriously inadequate” commentary on John was the primary impetus for his own History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel. Bultmann was convinced that belief in Jesus as the messiah emerged only in the post-Easter period. In Jesus and the Word, after arguing strenuously that we can know nothing about the personality of Jesus, in part because we cannot conclude with any confidence whether Jesus thought himself to be the messiah, Bultmann states that he is “personally of the opinion that Jesus did not believe himself to be the messiah.” Elsewhere, in a more extended discussion of Jesus’ “messianic self-consciousness” in his Theology of the New Testament, Bultmann argues from Acts 2:36, Philippians 2:6–11, and Romans 1:4, that Jesus was construed as messiah only subsequent to his death and resurrection. Thus does Bultmann conclude that there was no messianic discourse surrounding Jesus during his own lifetime. The present study contests Bultmann’s conclusion.

Consequent to Bultmann’s conviction that Jesus was recognized as messiah only subsequent to Easter, he must suppose that any messianic discourse present within the Jesus tradition was necessarily and anachronistically retrojected from the beliefs and experiences of later Christ-believing communities on to the life of Jesus. Moreover, Bultmann and his disciples suppose the existence, already in the first century, of multiple “Christianities,” each with its own distinctive and at times antagonistic theology (including Christology). Bultmann draws a distinction between

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5 Cf. Bultmann, Jesus and the Word, 12–13; Bultmann, Theology, 1:26–27.
6 Particularly influential upon Bultmann’s thinking in this regard was Walter Bauer, Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity (trans. Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); cf. esp. the excursus on the “Bauer thesis” in Bultmann, Theology, 2:337. The influence of the Bauer thesis upon not only Bultmann but also Martyn and the Martynian traditions of Johannine scholarship in addition to other Gospel community criticism is an aspect of modern gospels studies that begs for closer