CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE APPEARANCE TO THOMAS:
NOT A BLASPHEMOUS CLAIM, BUT THE TRUTH

The structures of the Gospels of Mark and John seem to be built on the model of a professional person whose views lead to extreme crisis for himself and for others, but which nevertheless proves to be decisively beneficial. In John, some features suggest that it has its place within what may be vaguely called the time of church history. Scholars like M. Hengel, Frey and many others defend such a view. I will propose another understanding here, based on the response to the accusation that Jesus blaphemously claimed to be like God.

Can a Crucified Criminal Be Divine?

The appearance of the risen Jesus to Thomas, John 20:26–29, plays a role in John’s “theology” as well as the dating of the Gospel. Thomas’ words “My Lord and My God” are, by M. Hengel and others, understood to express Thomas’ personal faith and his confession of Jesus as God (Hengel 1992, 430–31). According to Hengel this designation of Jesus as God points back to the Prologue, John 1:1, where it is stated that “the Logos was God.” Thus, personal faith and its confession are shown to be the goal of the whole Gospel. With this title the Gospel of John provides the most important basis for the further Christological reflection of the ancient Church.

Hegel draws the following conclusion: “The confession of the divinity of Christ stands thus at the beginning and end of the Fourth Gospel. . . . The christological statements of the earliest church thus reach their climax in the Fourth Gospel” (Hengel 1992, 430–31).

Hengel relates this confession to the letter to the Emperor Trajan from Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia. The letter was written between 110 and 112 C.E. Pliny describes a worship service where Christians sing an antiphonic hymn to Christ, as “though he were their God (quasi deo)” (Hengel 1992, 425). Hengel writes: “This quasi deo appears in its fullest
form in the Prologue of John, likely written a bit earlier (between ten and twenty years) than Pliny's letter" (1992, 430).

In his essay “Christological Titles in Early Christianity,” Hengel does an interesting comparison between John 1:1–18, the opening verses in Hebr 11:1–3, and the so-called hymn in Phil 2:6–11" (Hengel 1992, 425–48). Hengel reached the following conclusion: “The comparison of the three hymns in the Johannine prologue, the Letter to the Hebrews and the Letter to the Philippians shows, first of all, that christological thinking between 50 and 100 C.E. was much more unified in its basic structure than New Testament research, in part at least, has maintained. Basically, the later developments are already there in a nutshell in the Philippian hymn. This means, however, with regard to the development of all the early Church’s christology, that more happened in the first twenty years than in the entire later, century-long development of dogma.

Secondly, it is clear that the glorification of Christ, the doctrine of his preexistence, creation mediation and exaltation, did not remove the scandal of his shameful death, but rather deepened it” (Hengel 1992, 443).

Thus, the hymn included by Paul in Phil 2:6–11 is important for the question of dating. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians can be dated to the fifties or early sixties C.E. (Kümmel 1965, 229–35; Fitzgerald 1992, 322–23; Brown 1997, 493–96).

Hengel translates the hymn in Phil 2:5–11 as follows (Hengel 1992, 440):

Who, though he was in the form of God,  
Did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped,  
But emptied himself,  
Have this mind among yourselves, which also was in Christ Jesus,  
Taking the form as a servant,  
Being born in the likeness of men.  
And being found in human form  
He humbled himself  
And became obedient unto death,  
Even death on a cross.  
Therefore God has highly exalted him  
And bestowed on him the name which is above every name,  
That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
In heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
And every tongue confess  
That Jesus Christ is lord,  
To the glory of God the Father!