

To Be 'An Out-of-the-Synagogue'

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J. Andrew Doole

University of Innsbruck, Biblical Studies and Historical Theology

Abstract

Since J. Louis Martyn proposed that John reflected a two-level drama, there has been much criticism of his (anachronistic?) use of the *Birkat Ha-Minim* to explain the expulsion of Christians from the synagogue. Adele Reinhartz maintains that this is really a case of anti-synagogue propaganda on the part of the evangelist. Yet, in all the exegetical discussion, one aspect which is rarely examined is the nominal form of ἀποσυνάγωγος (Jn 9.22; 12.42; 16.2a), a strange term which Bible translations have to turn into a verb. This label appears to come from a Greek-speaking Jewish milieu, and its negativity is re-appropriated by the author of this Christian text. Social identity research provides an insight into how a positive approach to stigmatizing labels can allow a community to thrive. This can be applied to ἀποσυνάγωγος in John, an insult which actually demonstrates the validity of one's faith and identity. It is good to be a reject.

Keywords

John, synagogue, group identity, appropriation, stigma

1. Who – if Anyone – Was Kicked out of a Synagogue?

Both Louis Martyn and Raymond Brown understood the references to people who confess, believe or follow Jesus being expelled from a synagogue (Jn 9.22; 12.42; 16.2a) as reflecting the real experiences of the Johannine community. Brown (1966: 380) dates such an experience to around 90 CE and states: 'It is almost unbelievable that during Jesus' lifetime a formal excommunication was leveled against those who followed him'.¹ As Martyn (2007: 186) summarizes

1. Cf. Brown 1966: 487 and 1970: 702. Barrett (1955: 299) and Kloppenborg (2011: 1) go further than Brown's 'almost unbelievable' and declare it 'unthinkable'.

Corresponding author:

University of Innsbruck, Biblical Studies and Historical Theology, Karl-Rahner-Platz 1 Innsbruck 6020, Austria.
Email: andrew.doole@uibk.ac.at

his original (1968) publication, Jn 9 reveals a ‘two-level drama ... that to some extent told the story of the Johannine community while narrating the story of Jesus of Nazareth’.² Martyn (1968: 31–41) connected the expulsion of Johannine Christians from synagogues to the *Birkat HaMinim*. The ἡδὴ of Jn 9.22 betrayed that a policy in effect in John’s day was being retrojected onto the time of Jesus.

This position has since been both heavily criticized³ and subsequently defended.⁴ One major issue with it is that it assumes a standardized and widespread policy under a certain political party that had a high level of authority.⁵ But Cohen (1999) argues that the Pharisees or rabbis had minimal influence if any at all in synagogues.⁶ Isolated instances of mob violence (as depicted in Lk. 4.28–29; Acts 13.50; 14.19; 17.5–9; 18.17) are more likely (Bernier 2013: 68–74).⁷ Others suggest it was a general Jewish reaction to Roman imperial policy.⁸ Yet the

2. Cf. Martyn 1968: 17: ‘Presented as a formal drama, and allowed to mount its actors, so to speak, on a two-level stage so that each is actually a pair of actors playing two parts simultaneously, John 9 impresses upon us its immediacy in such a way as strongly to suggest that it reflects actual experiences of the Johannine community.’ Reinhartz (1992: 100) initially extended this by adding a cosmological *third* level, but later (2005: 111) decided there was no *community* level.
3. Most significantly and famously by Kimelman 1981 and Katz 1984, but see also McCready 1990: 152–60, Reinhartz 1998, van der Horst 1998, Hakola 2005: 41–55, Kysar 2005, Langer 2012, and Reinhartz 2018, among a plethora of others. Meeks (1985: 102) describes the *Birkat Ha-Minim* as ‘a red herring in Johannine research’. See also the critique of Martyn and those who followed him in Bernier 2013: 28–49. Hägerland (2003) argued that there was no genre of two-level drama in antiquity and that neither the author nor the audience would have thought in this way, but as de Boer (2018: 216) points out, Martyn at no point claimed that either the evangelist or his audience would be aware of the two levels.
4. Marcus (2009) defends the link to the *Birkat HaMinim* and adds evidence for a curse on the Romans at Qumran. Heemstra (2010) links the *Birkat HaMinim* to the reform of the *fiscus judaicus* in the reign of Nerva. Most recently, de Boer (2018) has mounted a strong defence of Martyn’s proposals against his critics.
5. Martyn (1968: 19) states: ‘We are not dealing with an ad hoc move on the part of the authorities who happen at the moment to be questioning the beggar and his parents.’ Marcus (2009: 551) refers to ‘places in which the rabbis were able to establish substantial control over the synagogue and Jewish religious life in general’. In Acts (9.1–2; 22.19; 26.11) Paul seems to be acting in a semi-official capacity. The punishment of 39 lashes that he mentions (2 Cor. 11.24) appears to be a specific disciplinary measure.
6. Josephus, *Ant.* 18.17, claims that Sadducees are incapable of influencing public opinion in the face of the popularity of the Pharisees. Nevertheless, Cohen (1999: 105) concludes: ‘As their name indicates, synagogues belonged to the community’.
7. Pace Keener (2012: II, 1023), who feels the term ἀποσυνάγωγος implies a ‘judicial context’ with ‘witnesses’.
8. Visotzky (2005: 103–104) dates it to persecution under Trajan. For Heemstra (2010: 176–87), Nerva’s changes to the *fiscus judaicus* to apply only to Jews who practised traditional Jewish customs rather than to those of Jewish parentage meant that Jewish Christians throughout the Roman Empire were affected from 96 CE.

policy reflected in John could have been restricted to a more local area, such as one region, one city, one town, one village, one synagogue.⁹ This is why I will refer to expulsion from *a* synagogue. The historical phenomenon of the synagogue remains shrouded in mystery, and attempts to define and describe it continue to emerge.¹⁰ Yet for the Christians behind the gospel, all that is required is a single synagogue. That is why it is helpful to speak neither of ‘the synagogue’ as a united network under certain overarching authorities, nor of ‘synagogues’ across a geographical distance covering anything from a province to the Roman Empire. In the case of John, there is reference to expulsion from at least *one* synagogue.

Or was there an expulsion at all?¹¹ An alternative theory posits that the *ἀποσυνάγωγος* passages themselves were an *attempt* to separate.¹² In other words, this was anti-synagogue propaganda on the part of the evangelist.¹³ Margaret Davies, in her study of rhetoric in John (1992: 299), argues:

9. Brown 1970: II, 690: ‘It is impossible from the adjective *aposynagōgos* to be certain that John is not referring to one local synagogue’. Kimelman 1981: 234: ‘The context of the mention of ‘Pharisees’ (12.42) indicates that it is a derogatory reference to local leadership’. Reinhartz 2005: 112-13: ‘[T]he expulsion theory continues to hold sway, though with more hesitation, and perhaps with the caveat that this was a local Jewish persecution and not a universal decree’. Theobald (2010: 243-44) sees it as a local phenomenon which the evangelist attempts to universalize. While Wengst (1981: 80-96) argues for the southern regions of the kingdom of Herod Agrippa II in the 80s, and Theobald (2010: 226-41) sees a connection between the evangelist and Jerusalem, for Frey (2013: 365-72) the regional context is still the traditional Asia Minor in the 90s.
10. The term *συναγωγή* reflects a *gathering* (cf. *συναγώγιον*, ‘picnic’) and thus Cohen (1999: 91) stresses ‘the range of social activities’ that took place there, which may be why Diaspora Jews used the term *προσευχή* ‘to designate a place (usually a building) of prayer’. Olsson (2005: 203) understands it ‘as both a community and as a place where the community came together’. See especially Hengel 1971, Kasher 1995, Binder 1999, Miller 1999, Levine 2000, Runesson 2001, and most recently Matassa 2018. In Mt. 26.6b, scribes and Pharisees are criticized for wanting *the best seats* in synagogues, implying a well-organized meeting-place.
11. Lagrange (1927: I, 266) for example, attributes the practice of ostracizing a member of the community to Christian circles (with reference to 1 Cor. 5). Yet there is a potential Jewish precedent – albeit much earlier! – in Ezra 10.8: ‘If anyone does not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all their property shall be forfeited and they themselves banned from the congregation of the exiles (καὶ αὐτοὶ διασταλήσεται ἀπὸ ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἀποικίας, LXX)’.
12. See, e.g., Reinhartz 2008: 72-76 and Reinhartz 2013.
13. Kimelman 1981: 234-35: ‘It is even possible that the whole charge was concocted to persuade Christians to stay away from the synagogue by making them believe that they would be received with hostility.’ This idea was developed by Hakola and Reinhartz (2007). Carter (2008: 19-26 and 43-45) applies it to a Christian criticism of the way in which synagogues fell into line with Roman imperialism. See the helpful summaries of such proposals: ‘Two-Level Reading, without Expulsion’ in Bernier 2013: 15-18 and ‘Allegory and the Turn to Identity’ in Bernier 2013: 49-52.

It is just possible that the Johannine community knew about a very exceptional synagogue, but the hypothesis is hardly compelling. It is more likely that the Evangelist is not reflecting the practice of contemporary Jews at all, but is extrapolating from Scripture in order to justify the fact that the Christian community has nothing to do with the Jewish community.

Adele Reinhartz has dedicated much of her career to this theory, according to which, 'The largely negative portrayal of Jews and Judaism within the Gospel must therefore be grounded not in a specific experience but in the ongoing process of self-definition and the rhetoric which accompanies it' (Reinhartz 1998: 137). The evangelist can talk about expulsion without there ever having been any, as 'Strong feelings of exclusion do not arise only or necessarily from overt acts of exclusion or persecution' (Reinhartz 2007: 193).¹⁴ If this were the case, then John has created the threat of being labelled an Out-of-the-Synagogue in order to keep people away from a place where they are essentially welcome.¹⁵

A third option is to date an expulsion to the time of Jesus himself.¹⁶ This is exemplified in Jonathan Bernier's 2013 monograph *Aposynagōgos and the Historical Jesus in John: Rethinking the Historicity of the Johannine Expulsion Passages*. For Bernier, expulsion was a real threat for the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem before his crucifixion.¹⁷ He concludes (2013: 138):

Sometime around 30 CE, Jesus began his ministry. Whether or not he conceived of himself as the messiah, others thought that he was claiming to be such. He attracted a sufficient following that certain Pharisees as well as members of the priestly establishment became concerned. In part, their concern was what we might call religious, insofar as he was seen to teach things antithetical to the Torah. In part, it was what we might call political, insofar as there developed a fear that the popularity of his movement might lead to Roman intervention. To counter these perceived threats, a coalition of Jerusalem-based elite persons entered into a probably informal agreement to pressure those who were sympathetic to Jesus to abandon those sympathies. One of the ways in which they did this was to exert their informal influence such as to exclude those who appeared sympathetic to Jesus from Jerusalem's public assembly.¹⁸

14. In Acts 19.8-9 Paul voluntarily leaves the synagogue in Ephesus.

15. This of course implies that some form of separation had already occurred, as Reinhartz (1998: 135) observes.

16. Ridderbos 1997: 343. Carson (1991: I, 371) points particularly to the ἡδὴ of Jn 9.22b as evidence of memory of earlier expulsions; Klink, who pushes the idea back to the time of Jesus, is nevertheless also willing to admit (2009: 184): 'This does not take away from the fact that real 'expulsions' of whatever kind were taking place behind the Johannine narrative'.

17. Bernier 2013: 12: 'John wrote the aposynagōgos passages in order to describe actions taken against Christians c. 30 CE'.

18. Bernier places the aposynagōgos passages within the modern discussions of synagogue studies, but mentions only in passing the Jerusalem synagogue which would be *the* synagogue in question for his proposal of historicity (54-68); for a discussion of these texts within the context of a Jerusalem synagogue, see Runesson, Binder and Olsson 2008: 42-44. Yet, if – as

Within the gospel, Jesus apparently teaches in the Capernaum synagogue (Jn 6.59) – though the scene begins on the shore of Lake Galilee (Jn 6.22-25)¹⁹ – and claims to have spoken openly in other synagogues (Jn 18.20) (see Olsson 2005: 222-23). Yet there are no examples of anyone actually being expelled from a synagogue in the narrative (as there are, for example, in Luke–Acts), and indeed Jesus’ words suggest that such events are yet to come (Jn 16.2a).

In modern Bibles the ἀποσυνάγωγος passages are rendered with verbs,²⁰ and in modern scholarship one talks about ‘expulsion’ or ‘excommunication’ or some similar activity. What is overlooked is that John does not use a verb, rather a label: to be an ἀποσυνάγωγος. The formulation itself is not considered in discussions of the possible historical or literary context of the verses in question. Does not the formulation ‘to be an Out-of-the-Synagogue’ itself reveal something about John’s circumstances? Might not this very odd and otherwise unprecedented term be a clue as to what was actually going on when the evangelist wrote?

I will first describe the three ἀποσυνάγωγος passages to see what is actually said and how it is formulated, before looking more closely at the term itself and proposing the group identity strategy of re-appropriation as the background which best explains how the evangelist took over a negative term in his immediate context and used it for his own political, social and theological purposes.

2. The Three ἀποσυνάγωγος Passages in John

2.1. The Parents of the Man Born Blind (Jn 9.22)

His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would become an ἀποσυνάγωγος.

It is in Jn 9.22 that the formulation is found in its most general terms: ἐάν τις αὐτὸν ὁμολογήσῃ χριστόν, ἀποσυνάγωγος γένηται. The apodosis is γίγνεσθαι +

Jn 11.48 suggests and Bernier (2013: 105-106) argues – ‘fear of Roman intervention’ was a motive behind ‘efforts to make those sympathetic to Jesus aposynagōgoi’, would these measures suffice as ‘attempts to curb his popularity’?

19. For discussion of this vague reference to a Capernaum synagogue, see Olsson 2005: 220-22.

20. NRSV, NIV, ESV, KJV: ‘be put out of the synagogue’; Wycliffe: ‘to be done out of the synagogue’; The Living Bible: ‘to be excommunicated’; Good News Bible, New Living Translation: ‘to be expelled from the synagogue’; The Message: ‘to be kicked out of the meeting place’; Orthodox Jewish Bible: ‘to be put under cherem ban from the shul’; Luther 1545: ‘in den Bann getan werden’; Luther 2017, Einheitsübersetzung 2016: ‘aus der Synagoge ausgestoßen’; Elberfelder, Zürcher, Schlachter, Hoffnung für Alle, Genfer: ‘aus der Synagoge ausschließen’; Segond, Genève: ‘être exclu de la synagogue’. And so on.

ἀποσυνάγωγος, ‘to become an Out-of-the-Synagogue’. No verb of expulsion is employed, or any description given. The scene ends and the epilogue begins with the verb ἐκβάλλω (Jn 9.34-35). Joel Marcus (2009: 533 n. 42) suggests that there is a connection to be found here, but it is the man born blind who is thrown out, and it is not clear what he is thrown out of. Warren Carter (2008: 24) is therefore sceptical: ‘[I]f the driving out of 9.34-35 were to be understood as enacting 9.22’s driving out of the synagogue, we would expect the narrative to highlight the link by using the same language in both places, to draw the threat and its accomplishment together’. Crucially, the man born blind confesses πιστεύω, κύριε *after* he has been thrown out (Jn 9.38), and he never receives the label ἀποσυνάγωγος.

It is the adverb ἤδη (‘already’) which appears to reveal two levels, two points in time: the time of Jesus and the time of the evangelist. On the narrative level, it is the story of a poor family in fear of further suffering.²¹ On the ‘community’ level, the parents’ fear is criticized only implicitly in their decision to deflect the question to their son (Jn 9.21.23). They fear becoming Out-of-the-Synagogues.

2.2. Many Leaders (Jn 12.42)

Many of the authorities (ἐκ τῶν ἀρχόντων πολλοί) believed in him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would become ἀποσυνάγωγοι.

In Jn 12.42, the second of the ἀποσυνάγωγος references in the gospel, it is explicitly several among the community leaders (μέντοι καὶ ἐκ τῶν ἀρχόντων πολλοί) who believe in Jesus²² but are too afraid of the Pharisees to confess.²³ The difficulty in this passage is the idea that it is the *leaders* who are afraid of a particular party (the Pharisees). What have they to fear? Douglas Carson (1991: I, 451) refers to the risk of losing ‘their position in the synagogue’.²⁴ But what kind

21. Keener (2012: I, 787) notes that the family is clearly poor (as the son is begging), so expulsion from the synagogue could entail further loss of income for both parents and child.

22. See Theobald 2010: 206-13 for an examination of the narrative structure of John’s claim that ‘many believed’.

23. Olsson (2005: 215) understands that ‘these Jews denied their faith in Jesus as Messiah and left the Johannine fellowship’. This seems to go too far, as there is neither evidence for their ever having been part of a ‘fellowship’ nor of their having ‘denied’ their faith: they believe and are merely afraid to confess openly.

24. Calvin, in his commentary on the verse (CR 75.300), writes: *Observa etiam minus esse in principibus fortitudinis et constantiae, quia fere in illis regnat ambition, qua nihil magis servile est. Atque ut uno verbo dicam, terreni honores quasi aureis compendibus hominem ligant, ne libere officium suum faciat ... Magnos interea et nobiles cum sua luctari fortuna decet, ne ipsos impediatur quominus se Christo submittant.* / ‘It must also be observed that rulers have less rigour and firmness, because ambition almost always reigns in them, which is the most

of position can this be that is so weak? The idea that some leaders are afraid to become Out-of-the-Synagoguers is a good example of what could be Johannine propaganda.

2.3. Jesus' Prophecy (Jn 16.2a)

They will make you ἀποσυνάγωγοι.

The previous two instances of ἀποσυνάγωγος occurred as narrative commentary. Now it is Jesus himself who uses the term in telling his disciples what will happen.

In the debate on whether these passages reflect expulsion from a synagogue in John's community, Martinus de Boer points to these and the subsequent words of Jesus in Jn 16.4a: 'I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them'. If John's contemporaries were *not* being expelled from a synagogue, then Jesus' prophecy went unfulfilled (de Boer 2018: 228-29). De Boer (2018: 235) states, 'It is unlikely that such predictions would have been preserved or attributed to Jesus if they had not been fulfilled in the experience of the Johannine community'.

Yet the salient feature for this study is that here it is Jesus *himself* who uses the term in prophesying to his disciples that '*they*' will make you 'Out-of-the-Synagoguers'. As I will argue, it seems that Jesus is using 'their' term – 'their' label – before 'they' have the opportunity to do so.

3. The Term ἀποσυνάγωγος (Out-of-the-Synagogue)

It is my contention that examination of the term ἀποσυνάγωγος itself could help clarify what was going on when the evangelist uses this strange word. The problem lies in the word itself, not only 'What does it mean?', but, as Kloppenborg (2011: 5) asks, 'Whose term is it?' As Edward Klink (2009: 179) observes. 'The problem with the term ἀποσυνάγωγος is that we have no other literary evidence for its potential sense'. Warren Carter (2008: 23) is understating its rarity in describing it as a 'very uncommon Greek term'.²⁵ It is not a word that is attested in any other ancient texts independent of John.²⁶

slavish of all dispositions; and, to express it in a single word, earthly honours may be said to be golden fetters, which bind a man so that he cannot perform his duty with freedom ... The great and noble ought to struggle against their high rank, that it may not hinder them from submitting to Christ' (trans. William Pringle).

25. Frey (2013: 355) calls it 'der auffällige Terminus'.

26. Martyn (1968: 20) puts it nicely when he comments that 'the adjective ἀποσυνάγωγος has *not yet* been found in any document other than the Fourth Gospel' (my italics).

Furthermore, in her study of the synagogue and the temple in John, Judith Lieu (1999: 62) observes that ἀποσυνάγωγος 'is the more enigmatic, because within the narrative world of John the συναγωγή is so unimportant'. There is no mention of a synagogue in Jn 9 and no explanation of what exclusion will mean (until possibly the reference to being killed in Jn 16.2b, but that is surely not what ἀποσυνάγωγος alone means!). Indeed, 'The synagogue is not in John antithetical to Jesus; it is the locus neither of fundamental conflict with "the Jews" nor of behaviour which he condemns' (Lieu 1999: 62).²⁷ John is, of course, far more interested in the Jerusalem temple and gives his audience few clues as to what ἀποσυνάγωγος means. In other words, he assumes his audience understands.

Although Bibles are forced to use a verb in translating these passages to allow for readability, in commentaries there are various attempts to reflect the Greek, including: 'an excommunicate' (Martyn 1968: 18-19), 'excluded from the synagogue' (Martyn 1968: 23), 'to make extra-synagoga' (Ridderbos 1997: 528 n. 150), 'out-of-the-synagōgē' (Cohen 1999: 99), 'to become out-synagogued' (Keener 2012: I, 788), 'synagogueless' (Olsson 2005), 'out of the synagogue' (Carter 2008: 23), 'ousted from the synagogue' (Reinhartz 2008: 58) and 'the desynagoguing process' (Bruner 2012: 586). I have opted for the translation 'Out-of-the-Synagogue' as it appears best to reflect the fact that ἀποσυνάγωγος is a declinable masculine predicate.

This is a key observation that mitigates against the idea that this was an invention of John's: it is not a verb. Why would the evangelist not use a verb to describe this activity? In Mk 13.9 Jesus tells the disciples that they will be beaten in synagogues (εἰς συναγωγὰς δαρήσεσθε). Matthew's Jesus addressees the scribes and Pharisees directly, that they will flog (μαστιγώσετε) those he sends in synagogues (Mt. 23.34). In Lk. 4.29, the crowd drives Jesus out of the town, leads him up a hill and plans to throw him off a cliff. In Acts, Paul plans to bind men and women from the synagogues of Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem (Acts 9.2) and later also admits to having beaten people in synagogues (Acts 22.19). Paul himself writes of receiving beatings (2 Cor. 11.24), though he never refers explicitly to a synagogue. On the other hand, in the ἀποσυνάγωγος passages in John there is no indication of what is involved.²⁸ It is very unlikely that John would invent a label like this rather than describe what is happening.

A key question in this regard is one of labels. What do you call a Jesus-follower? And what does one Jesus-follower call another? The terms of address

27. This could reflect the historical reality that synagogues were few and far between (Lieu 1999: 64). For Olsson (2005: 204), 'the narrator does not always seem to be interested in informing the listener about the setting of the different events'.

28. As Olsson (2005: 215) observes: 'The word as such says nothing about how they had to leave the synagogue, the community and the building'.

that pervade early literature (e.g. ἀδελφός, ἀδελφή, φίλος, μαθητής) are not descriptive of a particular group *from without*, whereas χριστιανός (Acts 11.26; 26.28; cf. 1 Pet. 4.16), ναζωραῖος (Acts 24.5), and γαλιλαῖος (Epictetus, *Diatr.* 4.7.6) were apparently terms for Christians coined by *non*-Christians.²⁹ For ἀποσυνάγωγος, Moulton and Milligan (1930: 70) observe, ‘This is of course just the sort of word that would have to be coined for use in the Jewish community’.³⁰ John Kloppenborg (2011: 5) follows suit: ‘Moulton and Milligan’s conjecture may be correct, especially because the term refers to persons negatively, by indicating the social relationships that they no longer enjoy’. The word ἀποσυνάγωγος assumes the perspective of a synagogue.³¹

The preposition ἀπό before συναγωγή need not necessarily have negative connotations, as a third/fourth century CE epitaph in the Jewish catacombs of Rome demonstrates.

ἐνθάδε κίτε Ἰλαρος | ἄρχων ἀπὸ συναγωγῆς Βολυμνησίων

Here lies Hilarus, *archon* from the synagogue of the Volumnesians.³²

But ἀπο- as a *prefix* clearly has a negative association of distancing or removal.³³ One might contrast it with a positive prefix such as φιλο-, which is attested – in reconstruction – in the same Jewish catacombs in Rome.

29. While ναζωραῖος or γαλιλαῖος could be labels from a Jewish context, χριστιανός builds perhaps unwittingly on the term χριστός (anointed, messiah) and is more likely to have emerged in a non-Jewish context. This could even be reflected in Acts, as Tertullus – speaking on behalf of the High Priest Ananias and some elders (Acts 24.1-9) – refers to ‘the sect of the Nazarenes’, while it is in Syrian Antioch (Acts 11.26) and in King Herod Agrippa’s address to Paul before Festus (Acts 26.28) that the term χριστιανός is used. Penwell (2019) examines the Jewish labelling of Jesus as a ‘Samaritan’ in Jn 8.48.

30. Olsson (2005: 219) similarly understands it as based on ‘an inner-Jewish process within the framework of the synagogue’.

31. Ridderbos (1997: 447 n. 221) also sees it as ‘an already existing position’, i.e. not a word the evangelist has created. Thyen (2007: 561) disagrees, claiming that ἀποσυνάγωγος is ‘kein technischer Terminus zur Bezeichnung eines geläufigen Verfahrens, sondern eine ad-hoc-Bildung unserer Evangelisten’, due merely to its absence in any other ancient text (cf. Martyn 1968: 24 n. 50).

32. Text and translation from Noy 1995: 133. See also the images in Paribeni 1919: 64 and CIJ 1.268-269 [#343]. Williams (1994) discusses the organization of Jewish burials in Rome and elsewhere and the role – or lack of a role – played by the synagogue in facilitating burial. For an overview of the archaeological work on the Monteverde catacombs, see Dello Russo 2010.

33. Martyn (1968: 23) comments: ‘The term itself ... does not seem to carry any fearsome denotation, other than the natural concern any Jew might feel at being away from the fellowship of the synagogue. The way in which John uses it however clearly shows ... an awesome connotation.’

ἐνθάδε κε[ῖται Λά]ζαρ ὁσος δίκ[αιος] φιλότεκνος φι[λαδελ]φῶν φιλοσυνά[γωγος] |

Here lies Lazar, pious, just, who loved his children and his brother(s)/sister(s) and the synagogue.³⁴

Just as one can be a φιλοσυνάγωγος, one can become an ἀποσυνάγωγος.

The term also appears with regard to a Jewish synagogue in a later Christian text, Pseudo-Athanasius's *The Miraculous Icon of Beirut* (PG 28.797-812): a Jew who moves into a house previously owned by a Christian discovers an icon of Christ, and when the priests and elders and crowd see it, they decide to make him an Out-of-the-Synagogue.³⁵ This much later Christian text, however, by no means provides independent evidence for the term.

Closer analysis of the term itself could prove helpful for an understanding of any possible historical circumstances and an explanation of why a Christian evangelist would use this particular formulation. There are five aspects of ἀποσυνάγωγος which – while obvious – need to be emphasized and collated.

1. *It is not a verbal formulation.* John could have written 'to be thrown out of the synagogue', 'to be expelled from the synagogue', 'to be ostracized', etc. Greek is a rich enough language for an author to use an appropriate verb for any such immediate environment. The fact that John uses this predicate³⁶ ἀποσυνάγωγος means it was most likely in use in his immediate environment.
2. *It is a predicate.* The word ἀποσυνάγωγος can be declined and therefore understood and employed as an 'adjective' or 'noun'. We cannot know whether there was a feminine form. The ambiguity between 'adjective' and 'noun' is best reflected by the term 'label', as both are descriptive (in this case of a person).
3. *It is not even based on a verb.* It is formed by adding the prefix ἀπο- to the noun συναγωγή and adding the masculine ending -ος. It is not, for example, based on a participial construction. Although ἀποσυνάγω is a verb, ἀποσυνάγωγος is not based on the verb, but on the noun συναγωγή.
4. *It is formed from the noun 'synagogue'.* The term assumes the context of a Jewish meeting-place called a συναγωγή. This is the perspective assumed by those who use it.

34. Text and translation from Noy 1995: 136. See also the images in Paribeni 1919: 66 and CIJ 1.252-253 [#321]. Noy (1995: 137) states that 'φιλοσυνάγωγος seems to be the only possible restoration' and 'may indicate a specific benefaction to a synagogue'.

35. For a list of editions of this text, see Butterweck 1995: 133.

36. Martyn (1968: 18) describes it as 'the predicate nominative' and (1968: 20) as an 'adjective'.

5. *It is therefore a purely Greek term.* The prefix and substantive indicate a Greek-speaking milieu.³⁷ It is unlikely to be a translation of an Aramaic or Latin term.³⁸

The label *ἄποσυνάγωγος* was therefore clearly a word which must have been coined and used by a Greek-speaking synagogue community for people with a negative relationship to the group. It reflects the perspective, decision and action of the *In-Group*, the *συναγωγή*, which becomes for John ‘the Jews’ (Jn 9.22), ‘the Pharisees’ (Jn 12.42) and ‘they’ (Jn 16.2). Furthermore, in John it is explicitly associated with negativity: fear, not confessing, being killed. This negativity is reflected in later Christian adoption of the term for exclusion from the *Christian* community.³⁹

Given the synagogue perspective, negative prefix and negative contexts in the gospel, it is highly unlikely that it was a creation of the Christians themselves. Group self-designation is more likely to be positive: the Qumran community in the Community Rule (1QS 3.13) and in the War Scroll (1QM 1.1) designate themselves ‘sons of light’ (בני אור) and – as reconstructed – ‘sons of justice’ (בני צדק).

Kloppenborg (2011: 6) agrees on ‘the likelihood that *ἄποσυνάγωγος* is a technical term in the disciplinary vocabulary of the synagogue’.⁴⁰ It appears that Out-of-the-Synagogue (*ἄποσυνάγωγος*) was a technical designation for some synagogue community somewhere in the Greek-speaking world.⁴¹ It is *not*

37. Olsson 2005: 215: ‘It is a good Greek construction, an adjective derived from a preposition phrase, from *ἀπὸ* (τῆς) *συναγωγῆς*. It can be compared with such words as *ἀποδήμιος* ‘away from one’s country, away from home, abroad’, *ἀποφύλιος* ‘having no tribes, foreign’, *ἄφεταιρος* ‘not member of an *ἐταιρεία*’, *ἀπόπ(π)ολις* ‘far from this city, homeless, banished’, *ἀποβώμιος* ‘far from an altar, godless’, and *ἄποικος* ‘away from home, abroad’.’ Cf. Runesson, Binder and Olsson 2008: 42.

38. Runesson, Binder and Olsson (2008: 42) describe *ἄποσυνάγωγος* as ‘without any clear correspondence in Hebrew or Aramaic’. Cf. Olsson 2005: 215.

39. Kloppenborg (2011: 5-6) points to later Christian uses of the term (in Origen and the Apostolic Constitutions) which reflect ‘a temporary disciplinary exclusion’ from the Christian community.

40. Kloppenborg (2011: 6) observes that the historical evidence mitigates *against* the idea that the Pharisees were in a position to exclude people from the synagogue, as ‘this would have been a role for an archisynagogos’, and then argues (2011: 7) that it would have been nigh on impossible and certainly impractical to exclude someone based on their *beliefs* – and indeed there is no other evidence suggesting this. Evidence from ancient associations (2011: 8-12) suggests that ‘the grounds for exclusion and expulsion were not the holding of deviant beliefs but in exhibiting deviant behaviour’ (2011: 13). Kloppenborg (2011: 13) lists, ‘refusing to pay membership dues, behaving in a disorderly fashion, refusing to acknowledge authorities, clique formation, staying away from meetings’.

41. Richey (2007: 61) sees two options: ‘[I]t may be a technical legal term which actually effected the expulsion of Johannine Christians from the synagogue, or only a descriptive term ... referring to an expulsion that was accomplished separately’.

merely a description of an event (i.e. not a verb, ‘Christians were thrown out of the synagogue’) rather a term used by a synagogue community itself to designate undesirables by describing their status. As Martyn (2007: 187) comments, ‘The word ἀποσυνάγωγος ... is there in the text, and it was not coined in an individual’s private fit of paranoia: the occurrences of this term are communal references to a communal experience’. The question is now: who would want to be an Out-of-the-Synagogue?

4. Re-appropriation

The label χριστιανός became part of Christian self-identity, as indeed this sentence demonstrates.⁴² But John Kloppenborg (2011: 5) claims,

Unlike other pejorative or derisive terms such as πτωχοί (Gl 2.10; Rm 15.26; Jas 2.5), νηπιοί (Q 10.22) and probably Χριστιανός (Ac 11.26) which were eventually inverted and adopted as badges of pride, there is no indication whatsoever that ἀποσυνάγωγος became a self-designation for groups of Jesus-followers.

Yet is not such re-appropriation evident in John’s use? By implicitly criticizing both the parents (Jn 9.22) and the leaders (Jn 12.42) for their fear and by having Jesus promise the disciples that they will be made ἀποσυνάγωγοι (Jn 16.2a), John is setting the standard for true followers of Jesus.⁴³ Indeed, not only does the evangelist himself use the word, but he places it on the lips of Jesus.⁴⁴ This is his act of re-appropriation.

The major sociological study on the re-appropriation of stigmatizing labels is that of Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom and Bodenhausen (2003). They explain that re-appropriation is an aspect of social identity⁴⁵ in which ‘the meanings of names are subject to change and can be negotiated and renegotiated’ (Galinsky et al.

42. The majority view remains that χριστιανός was a term that began outside of the Jesus-movement, e.g.: *NIDNTTE* 4.691: ‘Since it was applied to Christians by outsiders, it probably contained an element of ridicule.’ *EWNT* 3.1146: ‘Wahrscheinlich ist die Benennung den Christen von außen beigelegt wurden’. Mattingly (1958) argues that it emerged as a nickname parallel to the designation *Augustiani* for followers of Nero. *Pace* Bickerman (1949), who – based on an analysis of the verb χρηματίζω in Acts 11.26 – argues that it was Christians themselves who came up with this name.

43. McCready (1990) discusses ‘Johannine Self-Understanding and the Synagogue Episode of John 9’ but does not consider the re-appropriation of the term, referring merely to ‘the dialectic of Christian definition’ (1990: 165).

44. Frey (2018: 43) states that the term is ‘obviously’ later than Jesus, and (2018: 185 n. 103) states: ‘[A]s words of Jesus they can be read as prophecy. However, they are in fact explanations from the post-Easter perspective of the Gospel that were put into the mouth of Jesus.’

45. Galinsky et al. 2003: 223: ‘The nature of stigmatizing labels, and the prospects for successfully deflecting stigma through reappropriation, must be understood in the broader context of social and self-categorization as well as social identity’.

2003: 222). Social stigma⁴⁶ 'is malleable and the meaning of labels is contextually sensitive'.⁴⁷ This means that re-appropriation is one means of reversing the stigma.

Reappropriation, typically in the form of self-labeling, is one strategy that attempts to revalue social identities. (Galinsky et al. 2003: 226)

Other strategies may include *leaving* the stigmatized group if possible, *concealing* any stigmatizing identity markers or *downplaying* the stigma, yet 'even if these strategies succeed in reducing the sting of stigma for some individuals, they are not a viable solution for the group' (Galinsky et al. 2003: 226-27).⁴⁸ An alternative group attempt might be to re-label, such as the rejection of slave-owner vocabulary with the terms 'black', and 'African-American'.⁴⁹ Yet there is a problem with this:

[R]enaming acknowledges that the negativity associated with the word is unlikely to change and raises the possibility that the negative attributes are legitimate and justifiably applied. In addition, the stigma-reducing scope of renaming can be inherently limited because it does not oblige non-group members to follow suit. (Galinsky et al. 2003: 230)

The alternative to re-labelling is re-appropriation. Re-appropriation of stigmatizing labels means neither *ignoring* nor *restricting* comparison to the other group (in this case the synagogue), but rather *changing* the value of the stigma (Galinsky et al. 2003: 228). Re-appropriation means it is no longer *bad* to be an Out-of-the-Synagogue, but rather *essential* (Theobald 2010: 252). To be an Out-of-the-Synagogue is to be a true follower of Jesus. Thus, '[b]y taking a negatively evaluated label, and revaluing it positively, a group can change the value of the label and thus, in at least some important ways, the value of the group' (Galinsky et al. 2003: 228). This means that 'in-group members make it more

46. Galinsky et al. 2003: 224: 'Social stigma links a negatively valued attribute to a social identity or group membership'. Crocker and Major (1989) examine social stigma and self-esteem mechanisms. The principal work on stigma remains that of Goffman (1963).

47. Galinsky et al. 2003: 223; cf. p. 226: '[W]hat is considered stigmatizing is socially constructed ... [and] a social category label takes on negative connotations within a particular context'.

48. Such methods can be employed by, for example, the overweight (*leaving* the stigmatized group by losing weight), homosexuals (*concealing* one's sexual preferences) or those wishing to succeed in broadcasting (*downplaying* a regional accent in favour of received pronunciation) (my examples). Cf. also the options for 'Responding to Membership in a Disadvantaged Group' in Wright, Taylor and Moghaddam 1990, and for 'Living with Stigma' in Kaufman and Johnson 2004: 812-14.

49. See Smith 1992. To this list could be added the more recent and more inclusive American term 'people of color'.

difficult for out-group members to gain recognition for their own display of superiority' (Galinsky et al. 2003: 231).⁵⁰ At the same time, '[t]he distinctiveness of the group and the label is maintained, but it is simply the negativity that is challenged' (Galinsky et al. 2003: 232). This can go even further: 'Reappropriation may allow the stigmatized to maintain and even augment their sense of distinctiveness' (Galinsky et al. 2003: 237). For this to be possible, a certain degree of both individual and group confidence needs to be in place and a collective decision to be made (Galinsky et al. 2003: 237-38). Regardless of whether such reappropriation has an effect on the other group (in this case the synagogue), it certainly has a beneficial effect for group formation and identity for the stigmatized Out-of-the-Synagoguers.

Modern studies of reappropriation tend to focus on *slurs* which must be both expressive *and* descriptive (e.g. *nigger*, *queer*, *slut*) rather than purely expressive.⁵¹ Todd Anten (2006: Abstract), for example, notes 'the important role that the reappropriation of slurs plays in disarming historically hateful speech and fostering healthy social identity' in his study of the re-appropriation of slurs in trademark law in the United States of America. But a label need not necessarily be a *slur* to be re-appropriated, simply a term used by a group and taken over by another group. Historical examples of such re-appropriated labels include 'Puritan', 'Methodist', 'atheist' and 'Tory'. Indeed, David Frankfurter (2000: 172-74) has argued that there is evidence that ancient Egyptian priests played up to the stereotype of a barbarian *magos*, though in this case as part of a marketing strategy: 'Egyptian priests in alien lands, marketing themselves as gurus and wizards[, were] appropriating these stereotypes for their own status and benefit, assembling an "Egyptianism" and an Egyptian priestly *magos* both from their own background and from the expectations and roles they encountered in their Hellenistic worlds' (Frankfurter 2000: 173). The term *magos* went from being derogatory to fashionable.

The negative label ἀποσυνάγωγος is descriptive (like χριστιανός and ναζωραῖος) and belongs to the *other* group, the synagogue. Furthermore, it is inherently *negative* (whereas χριστιανός and ναζωραῖος are not), and thus there is more need for re-appropriation due to the social stigma attached. If those who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah (Jn 9.22; 12.42) were designated ἀποσυνάγωγοι, then clearly that was the desirable label. To be called an Out-of-the-Synagoguer was to have

50. Similarly, but in sociological academese, Galinsky et al. 2003: 232: '[A]n alternative vision is presented that does not necessarily change the underlying denotative meaning of a concept but transforms the connotative evaluative implications'.

51. See Croom 2014 *contra* Hedger 2012. Galinsky et al. (2003: 231-35) discuss the re-appropriation of the slurs 'nigger' and 'queer' in particular. The linguist John McWhorter (2017: 161-65) has recently argued for an important difference in dialect between 'nigger' and the re-appropriated form 'nigga'.

one's status as a Christian confirmed, just as Jesus had promised (Jn 16.2a). Indeed, the very idea that Jesus had used the term to describe how his disciples would be labelled means that he pulled the rug from under the feet of the synagogue by using their word before they had the chance to do so. Rejection by the synagogue was re-appropriated, retrojected, and given a new meaning: it is good to be a reject.⁵²

Yet the re-appropriation of the label Out-of-the-Synagogue actually stands in contrast to what Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (1998: 4-11) call John's 'relexicalization' and 'antilanguage'. Building on the concept of antilanguage as theorized by Michael Halliday (1978: 164-82), Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998: 9) claim, 'John's Gospel reflects the alternate reality John's group set up in opposition to its opponents ... They are the objects of the power of the law and subjects of their own antilanguage, which resists and undermines the power of the law.'⁵³ As Laura Hunt (2019: 17-21) has most recently pointed out, there are problems with the idea that John represents antilanguage, as the evangelist appears to want to be understood rather than to create distance. She concludes (2019: 21),

John's Gospel does not fit the construct of an antilanguage, nor does it seem possible that an antilanguage could be used to draw those who are over-accommodated to the synagogue and the Roman Empire into an alternative community. Furthermore, the language of the Gospel, although dualistic and often ironic, with layers of meaning that sometimes make it opaque, does not lack signals for interpretation.

The label ἀποσυνάγωγος is not antilanguage but rather pure re-appropriation.⁵⁴ The term is clearly understandable and is used in an implicitly positive way by the evangelist as a re-valuation, not as a secret code word. Its meaning was not up for dispute or interpretation, rather only its desirability. That it was never widely adopted suggests not only that it failed because of its clearly negative meaning – despite John's best attempt to re-value it – and that it was indeed a local phenomenon. Furthermore, if the community comprised Out-of-the-Synagogues and others who had never been given this label, then it was evidently unusable as a designation for everyone everywhere who believed in Jesus.⁵⁵ There are

52. Cf. Augustine, *Comm in John* 44.10: *Iam non erat malum fieri extra synagogam. Illi expellebant, sed Christus excipiebat.* (PL 35.1717) 'It was no longer a bad thing to be put out of the synagogue. They cast out, but Christ received' (NPNF¹ 7.248).

53. Cf. Halliday 1978: 178-79, who explains that antilanguage is used 'defensively to maintain a particular social reality or offensively for resistance and protest'.

54. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that a discussion of the term is absent in Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998.

55. Cf. Tajfel 1982: 15, who notes this problem in empirical studies of modern inter-group conflict: 'What happens if all members of a group are not equally and indiscriminately affected by the conflict?'

many successful re-appropriations of slurs that can be studied. It appears that *ἄποσυνάγωγος* was an attempt that ultimately failed.

5. Conclusion

The stilted rendering of *ἄποσυνάγωγος* as Out-of-the-Synagogue in English actually helps to reflect the unusual formulations in John: *ἄποσυνάγωγοι γίνεσθαι* and *ἄποσυναγώγους ποιεῖν*. This throws some new light on the debate about possible historical expulsion from synagogues. If the phenomenon were merely creative propaganda on the part of the evangelist in his attempts to keep Christians away from the synagogue, why would he come up with this strange label? He could have described the event(s) with verbs or chosen a more positive term for those who confess Jesus. The word surely reflects the vocabulary of a Greek-speaking synagogue community. Yet whether people were declared *ἄποσυνάγωγοι* in 30 or 70 or 90 CE, it seems to have been a rather local event, as any more widespread use of the term would have left more traces in literature or archaeological evidence. Thus, I agree with those who posit two levels to the *ἄποσυνάγωγος* passages in John.⁵⁶ The term *ἄποσυνάγωγος* itself betrays this. But I also agree with those who see in the passages anti-synagogue propaganda,⁵⁷ for by re-appropriating this label, placing it on the lips of Jesus and shaming those who are afraid to confess that he is the Christ, the evangelist seeks to construct group identity around the term and form a community of Out-of-the-Synagogues.⁵⁸

For a brief period in a small corner of the ancient world, people were being ostracized from their local community and marked as ‘Out-of-the-Synagogues’. But they soon learned not to be ashamed of this, but rather adopted it as a badge to be worn with pride. The negative consequences of this social stigma are overcome when they discover that Jesus himself told them that they would be Out-of-the-Synagogues.

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56. As even many of the critics of Martyn appear to concede, e.g., Bernier 2013: 133: ‘When John describes the experiences of conflict with and within Judean synagogues, Christians in Smyrna and Philadelphia might well have heard resonances of their experiences of conflict’.
57. Reinhartz (2007: 194; 2008: 76; 2018: 122) also admits that the theory of anti-synagogue propaganda is not incompatible with the expulsion theory itself.
58. Brown 1966: I, 380: ‘[T]he Gospel appeals to them to allow themselves to be excommunicated’.

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