

The Synagogue of Satan

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This paper examines one of the most severe and contested phrases in the New Testament: “the Synagogue of Satan,” found in Revelation 2:9 and Revelation 3:9. Rather than treating the phrase as a slogan detached from Scripture, the study situates it within the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, the wider biblical language of covenant identity, accusation, persecution, false holiness, and spiritual opposition, and the long history of Christian interpretation. The paper surveys direct and indirect biblical references, patristic polemic, medieval and Reformation commentary, Protestant apologetics, Catholic and post-Holocaust caution, Messianic Jewish interpretation, and modern academic debate. Its central question is not simply who the phrase named in the first century, but how theologians have understood the possibility of an assembly claiming divine legitimacy while acting adversarially toward God’s people. The result is a layered account of a phrase that functions simultaneously as apocalyptic judgment, ecclesial warning, theological category, and dangerous reception-history text requiring careful contextualization.

Keywords: Synagogue of Satan, Revelation 2:9, Revelation 3:9, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Book of Revelation, apocalyptic theology, covenant identity, false Israel, spiritual opposition, Satan as accuser, Christian apologetics, patristic interpretation, Reformation theology, Matthew Henry, John Gill, John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, Jewish-Christian relations, post-Holocaust theology, Nostra Aetate, Messianic Jewish interpretation, ecclesiology, anti-Judaism, supersessionism, biblical polemic, false religion, persecution, apocalyptic judgment.

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1. Introduction: The Problem of a Severe Biblical Phrase

The phrase “the Synagogue of Satan” is among the most severe designations in the New Testament. It appears only in the Book of Revelation, in the messages to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, yet its interpretive influence has far exceeded its two direct occurrences. The phrase carries several layers at once: it is local, because it addresses concrete communities under pressure; apocalyptic, because it speaks with the symbolic severity of Revelation; theological, because it raises the question of true and false covenant identity; ecclesial, because it concerns assemblies and rival claims to divine legitimacy; and historical, because it has been interpreted, defended, weaponized, softened, restricted, and recontextualized across Christian history.

This paper begins from the premise that the phrase cannot be responsibly understood by isolating it from Scripture, nor can it be adequately explained by reducing it to one modern interpretive rule. The question is broader: what has this phrase meant in the biblical text, what have apologists and theologians said about it, and how has its meaning shifted across historical contexts? The paper therefore treats “the Synagogue of Satan” as a contested theological phrase whose severity must be examined rather than ignored.

1.1. Why the Phrase Matters

The phrase matters because it joins religious identity with satanic opposition in a way that is rhetorically explosive. Revelation does not merely describe enemies outside the religious world. It describes an assembly that claims a sacred identity while being judged as adversarial to God’s faithful people. That is the core scandal of the phrase. It is not simply a denunciation of unbelief, paganism, immorality, or secular empire. It concerns a claim to covenant standing that, according to the text, has become false, inverted, or hostile to divine truth.

This makes the phrase theologically important for several reasons. First, it forces the question of whether covenant identity can be falsely claimed. Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 both speak of those who “say” they are something, but are judged otherwise. The emphasis falls on the difference between verbal claim and spiritual reality. The issue is not merely external membership, public reputation, ritual continuity, or inherited status. The issue is whether an assembly that claims divine legitimacy can, by its actions, become aligned with accusation, persecution, and opposition to God’s work.

Second, the phrase matters because it belongs to the broader biblical pattern in which religious institutions can become enemies of the very truth they claim to guard. The prophets repeatedly rebuke priests, rulers, and people who possess sacred forms while violating justice, mercy, and covenant faithfulness. Jesus condemns religious hypocrisy, not from outside Israel’s Scriptures, but from within their prophetic logic. Paul distinguishes outward religious identity from inward

obedience. Revelation intensifies this pattern in apocalyptic language. The phrase “Synagogue of Satan” stands at the far end of that biblical tradition: a sacred assembly can become spiritually adversarial.

Third, the phrase matters because of its reception history. It has not remained a neutral exegetical puzzle. Across Christian history, it has been used in commentaries, sermons, polemics, apologetic works, ecclesial disputes, anti-Judaizing arguments, anti-Jewish rhetoric, and modern ideological conflict. Some interpreters have treated it as a local first-century designation. Others have generalized it as a type of false religion. Others have read it through the lens of supersessionism, antichrist typology, or ecclesiastical corruption. Still others have warned that the phrase has been misused to assign collective guilt to Jews or Judaism. A serious paper must account for this range rather than pretending that only one interpretive tradition exists.

Finally, the phrase matters because it names a recurring theological possibility: that religious language can be used in the service of accusation rather than truth. Satan in Scripture is not merely a figure of grotesque evil; he is also the adversary, the accuser, the slanderer, the one who opposes God’s people. If an assembly functions through slander, coercion, persecution, hypocrisy, or false holiness, the phrase becomes more than a historical label. It becomes a warning about the satanic corruption of religious form.

1.2. The Difference Between Exegesis, Theology, and Reception History

A central aim of this paper is to keep three tasks distinct: exegesis, theology, and reception history. Confusion among these tasks is one reason the phrase becomes so difficult to discuss.

Exegesis asks what Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 meant in their literary and historical settings. It examines the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, the Greek terms, the local pressures on Christian communities in Asia Minor, the role of slander or accusation, the social vulnerability of early believers, and the apocalyptic style of John’s message. Exegesis asks who is being addressed, what conflict is implied, and why the phrase appears in these two letters and not elsewhere in the same form. This task requires attention to the immediate text before broader theological use is attempted.

Theology asks what the phrase means within the larger structure of Christian doctrine. It considers covenant identity, the distinction between outward claim and inward reality, the nature of Satan as accuser and adversary, the possibility of false assemblies, the relation between Israel and the Church, and the moral marks of true and false religion. Theology does not stop with the local setting, but neither should it abandon it. A theological reading asks how Revelation’s judgment language participates in larger biblical themes: truth versus falsehood,

faithful witness versus persecution, genuine covenant membership versus self-deceptive religious identity, and divine vindication of the faithful.

Reception history asks how the phrase has actually been used. This includes patristic polemic, medieval Christian hostility toward Judaism, Reformation-era commentary, Protestant apologetics, Catholic reinterpretation after the Shoah, Messianic Jewish readings, evangelical cautions, academic historical criticism, and modern conspiracy uses. Reception history does not decide meaning by popularity or by institutional authority. Instead, it shows how a phrase travels through time, how it is intensified or softened, and how later historical conditions shape what interpreters emphasize.

These three tasks must be distinguished because they can yield different kinds of conclusions. A first-century exegetical claim may identify a local persecuting faction. A theological claim may generalize the phrase into a category of counterfeit covenant assembly. A reception-historical claim may explain why modern interpreters restrict the phrase to avoid collective blame. None of these tasks should be confused with the others. A paper that only performs exegesis may understate the theological force of the phrase. A paper that only performs theology may detach the phrase from its local setting. A paper that only performs reception history may reduce doctrine to social aftermath. The goal here is to hold all three together.

This distinction is especially important because the phrase has become a test case for how severe biblical language should be handled. Some modern interpreters approach the phrase by placing strong boundaries around its application. Others regard those boundaries as theological retreat or historical overcorrection. This paper does not begin by resolving that dispute. Instead, it documents the dispute, clarifies its assumptions, and asks what the phrase has meant across the major interpretive traditions.

1.3. Method and Scope of the Paper

The method of this paper is biblical, historical, theological, and typological. It begins with the two direct passages in Revelation, then expands outward to related biblical texts that address false covenant identity, religious hypocrisy, accusation, persecution, and spiritual opposition. From there it surveys major interpretive traditions, including early Christian polemic, medieval and Reformation reception, classical Protestant commentary, modern evangelical apologetics, Catholic and ecumenical caution, Messianic Jewish interpretation, and academic historical-critical analysis. The paper then constructs a theological type: what an assembly would have to be, in biblical terms, to merit the designation “Synagogue of Satan.”

The paper does not treat the phrase as a free-floating insult. Nor does it treat it merely as an embarrassment to be explained away. Instead, it treats the phrase as a severe apocalyptic judgment that requires context, discipline, and theological seriousness. The phrase is severe

because Revelation is severe. The seven messages to the churches contain warnings about persecution, compromise, idolatry, endurance, poverty, lukewarmness, false prophecy, and judgment. “Synagogue of Satan” belongs within that world of prophetic and apocalyptic confrontation.

The scope of the paper is also limited. It does not attempt to write a full history of Judaism and Christianity, nor a complete account of supersessionism, nor a comprehensive treatment of Christian anti-Judaism. Those topics are too large for the present study. They enter the paper only insofar as they illuminate how Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 have been interpreted. Likewise, the paper does not attempt to settle every dispute about the identity of the opponents in Smyrna and Philadelphia. It presents the major readings and evaluates how each reading functions.

The paper’s controlling question is this: what does the phrase “Synagogue of Satan” reveal about the biblical and theological possibility of a religious assembly that claims divine legitimacy while acting as an adversary of God’s faithful people? This question allows the study to examine both the historical referent and the enduring theological category. It also prevents the phrase from being reduced either to a local curiosity or to an uncontrolled polemical weapon.

The intended result is a layered account. At the textual level, the phrase belongs to Revelation’s messages to persecuted churches. At the theological level, it concerns false covenant claim, accusation, and opposition to the faithful. At the historical level, it has been interpreted through conflict between church and synagogue, Christian polemic, apologetic defense, and modern caution. At the typological level, it warns that religious assemblies may become adversarial when they substitute status, power, and accusation for truth, repentance, and obedience to God.

The phrase therefore remains powerful precisely because it cannot be safely domesticated. It names a possibility that Scripture repeatedly confronts: the corruption of sacred identity into spiritual opposition. The burden of interpretation is to understand that possibility without flattening the text, ignoring history, or turning apocalyptic judgment into careless accusation.

2. The Direct Biblical References in Revelation

The phrase “Synagogue of Satan” appears directly only twice in the Bible, both times in the Book of Revelation. The two occurrences are found in the messages to the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia. This concentration is significant. Revelation contains seven messages to seven churches, and each message addresses a concrete spiritual condition: endurance, compromise, false teaching, idolatry, deadness, weakness, faithfulness, or lukewarmness. Only two churches receive the specific phrase “Synagogue of Satan,” and both are among the churches commended rather than condemned. Smyrna is poor, afflicted, and facing imprisonment.

Philadelphia has little strength, yet has kept the word of Christ and not denied His name. In both cases, the phrase appears in a context of pressure against a faithful Christian community.

The direct references therefore must be read first as words of apocalyptic encouragement to persecuted believers. Revelation does not introduce the phrase as an abstract doctrine, a general ethnographic category, or a casual insult. It appears in letters where Christ Himself is portrayed as speaking to churches under trial. The phrase functions as divine disclosure: the community that appears weak, poor, excluded, or slandered is not misjudged by God. Christ knows the truth. He sees the affliction. He names the hidden spiritual character of the opposition. He promises vindication.

This does not remove the severity of the phrase. If anything, it intensifies it. The phrase is not merely human rhetoric. Within the literary world of Revelation, it belongs to the risen Christ's judgment on false religious claim and hostile action. Yet its severity is bounded by its textual setting. The reader must ask why this phrase appears where it appears, what function it serves in each letter, and how the two uses illuminate one another.

2.1. Revelation 2:9 and the Church in Smyrna

The first direct reference appears in the message to Smyrna. Smyrna is one of the two churches in Revelation that receives no rebuke. The message begins with a description of Christ as "the First and the Last," the one "who was dead and came to life." This title is not ornamental. It fits the condition of the church. Smyrna is facing suffering, poverty, slander, imprisonment, testing, and possibly death. The church is being addressed by the Lord who has passed through death and conquered it.

The relevant statement is that Christ knows their tribulation and poverty, though they are rich, and He knows the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Several elements require attention.

First, Christ says, "I know." The faithful in Smyrna may be socially powerless, legally vulnerable, economically poor, or publicly defamed, but they are not invisible. The phrase "I know" establishes divine recognition against worldly misrecognition. Smyrna may be treated as marginal by the city, slandered by opponents, and threatened by authorities, but Christ knows its true condition.

Second, the church is described as poor yet rich. This reversal is characteristic of Revelation's theological vision. Earthly appearances are unreliable. A community may possess little and yet be rich before God. By contrast, a community may claim religious standing and yet be judged false. Smyrna's poverty and the opponents' claim must be read together. Revelation is contrasting visible status with spiritual reality.

Third, the specific offense named is slander. The Greek term often translated as slander can also carry the sense of blasphemy, abusive speech, or defamatory accusation. This is crucial because Satan is the adversary and accuser. The “Synagogue of Satan” is not identified by ethnicity alone, nor by religious label alone, but by adversarial function. The group in question is associated with slander against the faithful. Its speech participates in accusation. It acts in a satanic mode because it opposes and defames the witnesses of Christ.

Fourth, the phrase “who say they are Jews and are not” introduces a distinction between claim and reality. The text does not merely say that the opponents are hostile. It says they make a claim about identity that Christ denies. The heart of the phrase lies in this reversal. They say they possess covenant identity; Christ says they do not possess what they claim in the relevant spiritual sense. The contrast is not between sincere identity and minor error, but between asserted sacred status and divine judgment.

Fifth, the message immediately turns to suffering and imprisonment. This suggests that the slander was not harmless. It may have contributed to social persecution, legal danger, or imperial pressure. The faithful are told not to fear what they are about to suffer. The devil is about to throw some of them into prison so that they may be tested. The same satanic pattern that appears in the phrase “Synagogue of Satan” continues in the next sentence as persecution intensifies. Slander becomes imprisonment; accusation becomes trial; hostility becomes a test of faithfulness unto death.

The message to Smyrna therefore presents the “Synagogue of Satan” as an assembly or faction whose claim to sacred legitimacy is contradicted by its function as accuser and persecutor. In this setting, the phrase is pastoral as well as polemical. It strengthens the suffering church by assuring it that Christ has not mistaken outward weakness for spiritual failure. The poor are rich. The slandered are known. The threatened are called to fidelity. The accusers are exposed.

2.2. Revelation 3:9 and the Church in Philadelphia

The second direct reference appears in the message to Philadelphia. Like Smyrna, Philadelphia receives no rebuke. The message begins with Christ as the holy one, the true one, the one who has the key of David, who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens. This title is again essential to the passage. The church in Philadelphia appears weak, perhaps excluded or marginalized, yet Christ declares that He has set before it an open door that no one can shut.

The reference to the “Synagogue of Satan” appears in a promise. Christ says He will make those of the Synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie, come and bow down before the feet of the faithful, and know that Christ has loved them. The structure is similar to Smyrna, but the emphasis differs.

In Smyrna, the phrase appears in the context of slander and imminent suffering. In Philadelphia, it appears in the context of vindication. The hostile assembly is not merely named; it is promised eventual reversal. Those who deny or oppose the faithful will be made to recognize where Christ's love truly rests. The issue is not only persecution but disputed legitimacy. Philadelphia may be weak, but it is beloved. Its opponents may claim authority, but their claim is judged false.

The phrase "who say they are Jews and are not" is sharpened in Philadelphia by the addition that they "lie." The problem is explicitly false claim. The text presents a contested religious identity in which one party claims covenant standing or divine authorization, while Christ declares the claim untrue in relation to the situation at hand. Again, the central issue is not a generic insult but a specific contradiction between public claim and divine judgment.

The promise that the opponents will bow before the feet of the faithful has deep biblical resonance. In prophetic texts, the nations are sometimes envisioned as coming to recognize the people of God, honoring them, or acknowledging divine favor upon them. Revelation applies that reversal to the church in Philadelphia. The weak Christian community, not its hostile accusers, is identified as the object of Christ's love. The expected hierarchy is inverted.

This is one of the most theologically striking features of Revelation 3:9. The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" is not isolated. It stands inside a promise of public recognition. The opponents' error is not merely that they persecute. It is that they misidentify where God's favor rests. They claim to be the true covenant people and deny the legitimacy of the faithful church, but Christ promises to expose the truth. The faithful who have "little strength" are not abandoned. The open door remains open because Christ Himself has opened it.

Philadelphia is also praised for keeping Christ's word and not denying His name. The church's fidelity is doctrinal, confessional, and persevering. It has not triumphed by power but endured through obedience. This matters because the contrast with the "Synagogue of Satan" is not between two groups competing for social prestige. It is between weak fidelity and false authority. Revelation repeatedly teaches that apparent weakness may conceal true victory, while apparent legitimacy may conceal spiritual opposition.

Thus, Revelation 3:9 adds a second dimension to the phrase. In Smyrna, it exposes accusers who slander a suffering church. In Philadelphia, it promises vindication against those who falsely claim covenant identity and deny Christ's love for His faithful people. Together, the two passages present a unified pattern: false sacred claim, adversarial conduct, and divine reversal.

2.3. Shared Language, Different Local Settings

The two direct references share key language: "Synagogue of Satan," "who say they are Jews," and "are not." This repetition shows that Revelation intends the reader to compare the two

churches. Yet the local settings are not identical. Smyrna emphasizes tribulation, poverty, slander, imprisonment, and faithfulness unto death. Philadelphia emphasizes weakness, obedience, an open door, false claim, and vindication. The phrase therefore has a common theological core but different pastoral functions.

The common core is false covenant claim expressed through opposition to Christ's witnesses. In both passages, the phrase is attached to an assertion of identity that Christ denies. The opponents "say" they are something. Their claim is not accepted at face value. The risen Christ judges identity not merely by declaration but by relation to truth, faithfulness, and the people He loves. This is the direct textual basis for later theological interpretations that treat the phrase as a category of counterfeit covenant identity.

The different pastoral functions are equally important. In Smyrna, the faithful are about to suffer. The phrase helps them interpret persecution. Their opponents may look powerful or legitimate, but spiritually their accusation belongs to the adversary. In Philadelphia, the faithful are promised public vindication. Their opponents may have excluded, denounced, or delegitimized them, but Christ will make them know that He has loved the church. In Smyrna, the phrase strengthens endurance. In Philadelphia, it assures reversal.

This distinction matters for interpretation. If one reads only Smyrna, the phrase may appear primarily as a description of persecuting slanderers. If one reads only Philadelphia, it may appear primarily as a claim about disputed covenant legitimacy. Reading both together shows that the phrase includes both dimensions. The "Synagogue of Satan" is adversarial in action and false in claim. It attacks the faithful and misrepresents its own standing before God.

The shared language also suggests that Revelation is not dealing merely with isolated personal hostility. The word "synagogue," whether understood narrowly as a Jewish assembly or more broadly as an assembly, implies organized religious or communal identity. This is not simply one individual slanderer. It is an assembly, group, or faction with a collective claim. The danger being named is institutional or communal: a body claiming sacred status while functioning as an adversary.

At the same time, the local nature of the letters should not be erased. Revelation addresses actual churches in actual cities. These are not abstract metaphors floating above history. Smyrna and Philadelphia were communities living under pressures that involved local society, imperial expectations, religious conflict, and vulnerability to accusation. Whatever broader theological type later interpreters draw from the phrase, the direct references first belong to these concrete situations.

The result is a layered meaning. The phrase is historically local but theologically portable. It names a particular conflict in the letters, yet it also reveals a pattern that theologians later

recognized in other contexts: an assembly can claim divine legitimacy while acting in the spirit of accusation and persecution.

2.4. Poverty, Slander, Persecution, and Vindication

The direct references are framed by four major themes: poverty, slander, persecution, and vindication. These themes prevent the phrase from being reduced to a mere label. They show how the phrase functions in Revelation's pastoral and apocalyptic logic.

Poverty appears most clearly in Smyrna. The church is poor, yet Christ says it is rich. This reversal establishes Revelation's scale of value. True wealth is not material security, civic honor, institutional power, or social acceptance. True wealth is fidelity to Christ. This matters because communities under accusation often appear weak, discredited, or unsuccessful. Revelation teaches that their outward condition does not define their spiritual reality. The poor church may be the rich church.

Slander is the immediate action associated with the phrase in Smyrna. The "Synagogue of Satan" is connected to defamatory speech against believers. This is not incidental. The satanic is revealed through accusation. False speech against the faithful becomes a spiritual act. It is not merely a social inconvenience; it participates in the work of the adversary. In this sense, the phrase has a functional meaning. An assembly becomes satanic not simply by holding a different label, but by acting as accuser against God's people.

Persecution follows slander. In Smyrna, imprisonment and testing are imminent. The devil will throw some into prison. The sequence suggests that accusation may become coercion. Religious hostility, civic suspicion, and legal vulnerability can converge. Revelation does not treat persecution as an accidental misunderstanding. It sees behind it a spiritual conflict in which the faithful must endure. The command is not to defeat the accusers by worldly power, but to be faithful unto death.

Vindication appears most clearly in Philadelphia. Those who falsely claim divine standing will be made to recognize Christ's love for the faithful. This vindication is not merely private consolation. It is public reversal. The weak church will be shown to belong to Christ. Those who denied its legitimacy will be forced to acknowledge what God has done. This is a central apocalyptic theme: hidden truth will be unveiled, false claims will be exposed, and the faithful will be vindicated.

Together, these themes define the direct biblical meaning of the phrase. The "Synagogue of Satan" appears where faithful communities are poor, slandered, pressured, and awaiting vindication. It names an assembly whose claim to sacred identity is contradicted by its adversarial behavior. It also assures the faithful that Christ sees what others misjudge. He knows the poverty that is actually wealth. He knows the slander that masks false religion. He knows

the weakness that is true endurance. He will expose the false claim and vindicate those who have kept His word.

The two direct references therefore establish the foundation for the rest of the paper. Any later theological construction must begin here: with Smyrna and Philadelphia, with suffering churches, with false claim, with accusation, and with the risen Christ's judgment. The phrase is severe, but it is not random. It belongs to Revelation's larger vision of truth unveiled, falsehood exposed, and the faithful strengthened to endure until divine vindication comes.

3. The Meaning of Synagogue, Satan, and False Claim

The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" is severe because each of its terms carries theological weight. It is not merely a phrase of anger. It joins the language of assembly, adversarial power, religious claim, and divine judgment. To understand the phrase, one must examine its parts:

"synagogue," "Satan," and the claim that certain people "say" they are Jews but are not. These elements are not independent. Together they form a judgment on a communal body whose outward claim is contradicted by its spiritual function.

In Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, the phrase does not identify a merely secular enemy. It identifies an assembly. That assembly makes a claim about sacred identity. Yet the risen Christ judges the claim to be false. The group is not merely mistaken or socially opposed to the Christians; it is described as belonging, functionally or spiritually, to Satan. The full phrase therefore means more than "hostile people." It suggests a religious or communal body whose self-description is inverted by divine assessment.

This section examines the three major components of the phrase. The first is the meaning of synagogue as an assembly. The second is the meaning of Satan as adversary and accuser. The third is the logic of false claim: those who say they are Jews and are not. These three elements produce the theological force of the phrase. A "Synagogue of Satan" is an assembly that claims sacred standing while performing the work of accusation against the faithful.

3.1. Synagogue as Assembly

The word "synagogue" comes from the idea of gathering together. In Jewish and early Christian contexts, it could refer to a local Jewish assembly, a place of gathering, or a gathered community. By the time of the New Testament, synagogue life was central to Jewish worship, instruction, communal identity, and local religious organization. The term therefore carries both practical and symbolic weight. It is not simply a room or building. It is an organized gathering under a recognized religious identity.

This matters because Revelation does not speak merely of individuals. The phrase concerns an assembly. The problem is corporate. The adversarial function is not confined to private hostility; it is associated with a body, community, or organized faction. The phrase therefore raises the possibility of institutionalized religious opposition. A group may gather under sacred forms, speak with communal authority, invoke tradition, and claim covenant legitimacy, yet still be judged by Christ according to its fruits.

The assembly-language also sharpens the contrast between the church and its opponents. Revelation itself is written to churches, that is, assemblies of believers. The “Synagogue of Satan” is therefore an assembly opposed to an assembly. The conflict is not simply between isolated Christians and isolated critics. It is between rival communities of claim and witness. One community is poor, weak, slandered, and faithful. The other claims religious standing but is described as false and adversarial. The contest is ecclesial as well as social.

The term synagogue can be read narrowly or broadly. Narrowly, it can refer to a Jewish synagogue or local Jewish communal body in Smyrna and Philadelphia. This is how many interpreters have understood the immediate historical referent. Broadly, because the word means assembly, it can also serve as a theological category: any gathered religious body that claims divine legitimacy while acting in opposition to God’s truth may become a counterfeit assembly. The broader reading does not erase the narrower setting; rather, it draws a type from it.

The danger in interpretation arises when the narrow historical referent is expanded without discipline. If the phrase is treated as a permanent collective label for Jews, Judaism, or all synagogues, then the specific apocalyptic judgment becomes a generalized accusation. But if the phrase is restricted so tightly that it loses its theological force, then Revelation’s warning about false sacred assembly is weakened. The task is to preserve both realities: the phrase appears in specific first-century letters, yet it names a recurring biblical danger, namely a gathered religious body whose identity claim is contradicted by its adversarial conduct.

To call something a synagogue in this context is therefore to identify it as a gathered religious body. To call it a “Synagogue of Satan” is to say that the gathering has been spiritually inverted. The form of assembly remains, but the function has changed. The language of holiness remains, but the action serves accusation. The claim of covenant standing remains, but the fruits deny it. This is why the term is so powerful. It describes the corruption of the assembly itself.

3.2. Satan as Adversary and Accuser

The second key term is Satan. In biblical usage, Satan is the adversary, the accuser, the opponent of God and of God’s people. The satanic is not defined merely by obvious wickedness or pagan irreligion. It is often revealed in opposition, accusation, deception, slander, and the

effort to destroy faithful witness. This meaning is essential for understanding Revelation's phrase.

In Smyrna, the immediate context is slander. Christ says He knows the slander of those who make a false claim of identity. This connects directly to Satan's role as accuser. The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" therefore does not mean that the assembly necessarily worships Satan consciously or names itself as satanic. The point is more subtle and more severe. The assembly functions satanically because it accuses, slanders, and opposes those whom Christ knows and loves. Its spiritual identity is determined by its action.

This functional meaning is crucial. Scripture often judges persons and institutions by the work they do, not merely by the names they claim. A person may claim zeal for God yet oppose God's messenger. A ruler may claim justice yet persecute the righteous. A religious authority may claim holiness yet devour the vulnerable. In the same way, an assembly may claim covenant standing yet act as adversary. Revelation's phrase identifies the hidden spiritual logic behind such behavior.

Satan as accuser also explains why speech is central. Slander is not a minor offense in Revelation's context. Speech can endanger the faithful, distort truth, and deliver believers into systems of punishment. Accusation is a weapon. It can be religious, civic, legal, or social. It can label the faithful as dangerous, deviant, disloyal, impure, or illegitimate. When accusation is used against those who bear faithful witness, it becomes more than disagreement. It becomes participation in the adversary's work.

This does not mean every critic of Christians is satanic in the sense intended by Revelation. The phrase is not a license for careless denunciation. The text identifies a specific pattern: a sacred claim joined to slanderous opposition against faithful witnesses. The satanic quality lies in the combination of false claim and adversarial function. The assembly claims to stand for God while doing the work of the accuser.

In Revelation as a whole, Satan is also associated with deception, imperial pressure, persecution, and counterfeit power. The adversary operates not only through private temptation but through systems, thrones, beasts, false prophets, and corrupt forms of authority. The "Synagogue of Satan" belongs within this symbolic world. It is one manifestation of a larger apocalyptic pattern: the enemies of God's people may appear under religious, political, or cultural forms, but their hidden character is revealed by their relation to faithful witness.

The phrase therefore carries a diagnostic meaning. The question is not merely what an assembly calls itself, but whose work it does. Does it bear witness to truth, repentance, mercy, and faithfulness? Or does it accuse, slander, exclude, persecute, and protect falsehood? In

Revelation's terms, an assembly becomes satanic when it functions as adversary to the people and purposes of God.

3.3. "Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not"

The most contested part of the phrase is the statement that the opponents "say they are Jews and are not." This is the clause that has generated centuries of interpretation, dispute, and misuse. Its meaning depends on how one understands Jewish identity, covenant identity, and the relation between outward claim and divine judgment.

At the simplest textual level, the clause describes a claim that Christ rejects. The opponents say they are Jews. Christ says they are not, in the sense relevant to the judgment being made. The issue is not merely self-identification but divine recognition. Revelation places human claim under the judgment of the risen Christ. A community may assert sacred status, but Christ determines whether that claim corresponds to spiritual reality.

There are several possible ways interpreters have understood this clause. One reading holds that the opponents were ethnically or religiously Jewish but were being denied the name "Jew" in the higher spiritual sense because they opposed Christ and persecuted His people. This reading is close to Paul's distinction between outward and inward covenant identity. On this view, Revelation does not deny their outward Jewishness but denies the validity of their covenant claim before Christ.

Another reading suggests that the opponents may have been falsely claiming Jewish identity for social, religious, or political reasons. In that case, the phrase would refer not to Jews who failed to be spiritually faithful, but to people who claimed Jewish status without truly belonging to the covenant people. This reading attempts to take the phrase "say they are Jews and are not" more literally. It shifts the issue from failed covenant faithfulness to false ethnic or communal claim.

A third reading treats the phrase as part of intra-Jewish conflict in the early Jesus movement. The first followers of Jesus understood themselves within Israel's story. Conflict between Jesus-believing Jews, Gentile believers, and non-Christian Jewish communities could involve competing claims over the meaning of Israel, Messiah, synagogue, law, covenant, and Scripture. In such a setting, "who say they are Jews and are not" may reflect a dispute over who truly belongs to the people of God in light of Christ.

A fourth reading treats the phrase typologically. On this view, the clause identifies the principle of false covenant claim. The specific historical opponents matter, but the deeper category is broader: people or institutions may claim to be God's people while lacking the inward reality of obedience, truth, and fidelity. The phrase then becomes a warning to any religious body, including Christian bodies, that external identity can become false if severed from faithfulness.

The paper does not need to collapse these readings prematurely. Each has appeared in theological and apologetic interpretation. The important point is that the clause turns on the gap between claim and reality. “They say” is the language of assertion. “They are not” is the language of divine contradiction. The risen Christ exposes a falsehood at the center of the group’s identity.

This does not mean that every use of the clause in Christian history has been careful. It has often been used to support sweeping denunciations of Jews or Judaism. Such uses typically move too quickly from a local apocalyptic conflict to collective condemnation. Yet it is also possible to overcorrect by emptying the clause of theological force. Revelation is not embarrassed by the possibility that sacred identity can be falsely claimed. Indeed, that possibility is central to the phrase.

The clause therefore serves as a test of covenant identity. It asks whether belonging to God is a matter of name alone or of truth. It asks whether inherited or institutional identity can be contradicted by action. It asks whether opposition to Christ and His faithful witnesses reveals a deeper rupture between claim and reality. Revelation answers in severe terms: those who claim sacred identity while acting as accusers may be judged not as the assembly of God, but as the assembly of the adversary.

3.4. Covenant Identity as Claim and Judgment

The phrase “Synagogue of Satan” ultimately concerns covenant identity under judgment. It does not merely describe hostility; it evaluates a claim to belong to God. The repeated formula “who say they are Jews and are not” makes identity the central issue. The opponents are not described simply as outsiders. They are described as claimants whose claim is rejected.

Covenant identity in Scripture includes both gift and responsibility. To belong to the people of God is not merely to possess a name, lineage, institution, ritual, or tradition. It is also to be accountable to the God who gives that identity. The prophets repeatedly warn Israel that covenant privilege does not protect unfaithfulness. Jesus continues this prophetic pattern by exposing hypocrisy among religious leaders. Paul develops it by distinguishing outward marks from inward reality. Revelation speaks in apocalyptic form but belongs to the same theological logic.

This means that covenant identity can become a site of judgment. The greater the claim, the greater the accountability. An assembly claiming divine legitimacy is not judged less severely because it is religious. It may be judged more severely because it invokes God’s name while opposing God’s truth. This is why the phrase is so stark. It is not aimed at ordinary ignorance or secular unbelief. It is aimed at the inversion of sacred claim into adversarial function.

The false claim has several dimensions. It is verbal, because the opponents say they are Jews. It is communal, because the claim belongs to an assembly. It is theological, because it concerns standing before God. It is moral, because the claim is contradicted by slander and persecution. It is apocalyptic, because the risen Christ unveils the hidden truth. Revelation is concerned not only with what appears to be true, but with what is revealed to be true.

Covenant identity as judgment also explains why the faithful churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia are so important. They are not powerful communities. One is poor and afflicted; the other has little strength. Yet they are the ones Christ commends. Their identity is not measured by worldly power, social recognition, or institutional dominance. It is measured by endurance, faithfulness, and fidelity to Christ's word. The false assembly claims status; the faithful assembly bears witness.

This reversal is central to Revelation. The Lamb conquers by suffering. The martyrs overcome by testimony. Babylon appears glorious but is doomed. The beast appears powerful but is judged. The poor church is rich. The weak church has an open door. The assembly that claims sacred legitimacy may be exposed as adversarial. Revelation repeatedly overturns visible appearances in light of divine judgment.

The phrase therefore becomes a theological warning to every religious body. No assembly can rest securely on name alone. No institution can substitute tradition for truth, public legitimacy for obedience, or religious authority for faithfulness. The question is not only, "What do they say they are?" but, "What does Christ judge them to be?" This question applies first to the direct opponents in Revelation, but it also echoes across church history.

The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" names the most severe form of false covenant identity: an assembly that claims to represent God while acting as the adversary's instrument against God's people. Its essence is contradiction. It has sacred form but adversarial function. It makes a covenant claim but performs satanic accusation. It asserts identity but is judged otherwise. That contradiction is the theological center of the phrase.

In this sense, the phrase is not merely descriptive but revelatory. It reveals that religious identity can be falsified from within. It reveals that accusation may masquerade as holiness. It reveals that divine judgment penetrates claims, institutions, and appearances. Above all, it reveals that the faithful are not defined by their accusers. Christ knows who is poor yet rich, weak yet faithful, slandered yet beloved. He also knows when an assembly claiming His God has become an assembly of the adversary.

4. Indirect Biblical Parallels and Theological Background

The phrase “Synagogue of Satan” appears directly only in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, but its theological logic is not isolated. It belongs to a wider biblical pattern in which outward religious identity is tested by inward truth, covenant claim is judged by obedience, and sacred authority can become corrupt when it opposes God’s living work. Revelation compresses this pattern into severe apocalyptic language, but the pattern itself runs through the prophets, the Gospels, Paul, and the broader New Testament.

The indirect biblical parallels do not use the exact phrase “Synagogue of Satan.” They illuminate the assumptions beneath it. These passages ask whether descent, ritual, law, office, temple, synagogue, visible piety, or institutional continuity are sufficient when separated from faithfulness to God. Again and again, Scripture answers that sacred identity can be contradicted by unfaithful action. The mere claim to belong to God does not place a person or assembly beyond judgment. Indeed, Scripture often judges religious claimants more severely precisely because they possess sacred knowledge and yet resist truth.

Several passages are especially important: Romans 2, John 8, Matthew 23, Galatians 4, and Philippians 3. Each passage contributes a distinct layer. Romans 2 distinguishes outward and inward covenant identity. John 8 introduces the language of spiritual fatherhood and moral resemblance. Matthew 23 exposes religious hypocrisy and institutional obstruction. Galatians 4 contrasts bondage and promise through the symbolism of two women and two Jerusalems. Philippians 3 redefines true circumcision around worship, Spirit, and confidence in Christ rather than confidence in the flesh.

Taken together, these passages show why Revelation can say that some “say they are Jews and are not.” The statement is not an isolated verbal shock. It arises from a larger biblical distinction between name and reality, claim and obedience, external form and inward truth. The “Synagogue of Satan” language belongs to that larger theological field.

4.1. Romans 2 and Inward Covenant Identity

Romans 2 is one of the most important indirect parallels because it directly addresses the distinction between outward and inward Jewish identity. Paul argues that being a Jew outwardly, and possessing circumcision outwardly in the flesh, is not the deepest form of covenant belonging. True covenant identity must be inward, a matter of the heart, by the Spirit rather than merely by the letter. This does not erase Israel’s historical significance, nor does it reduce Jewish identity to a metaphor. But it does establish a principle: external covenant markers can be contradicted by disobedience.

This principle closely parallels Revelation’s formula: “who say they are Jews and are not.” Both texts distinguish claim from reality. In Romans 2, Paul is not denying that outward Jews exist. He

is distinguishing between outward possession of covenant signs and inward fidelity to the God of the covenant. The issue is not whether a person can claim an identity socially, ethnically, or ritually. The issue is whether that identity is confirmed by obedience, truth, and the praise that comes from God.

Romans 2 also belongs to a larger argument about judgment. Paul insists that God judges impartially. Possession of law does not exempt one from accountability. Hearing the law is not enough; doing the law matters. Circumcision has value when accompanied by obedience, but if the law is broken, the outward sign becomes a witness against the claimant rather than a shield. This is the theological world in which Revelation's severe language becomes intelligible. The greater the sacred claim, the greater the accountability.

The connection to the "Synagogue of Satan" becomes clear when one considers the role of false security. A religious body may rely on identity, status, tradition, or inherited covenantal privilege while failing to manifest the obedience that such privilege requires. In that case, the sacred sign does not protect the assembly from judgment. It intensifies the contradiction. Revelation's phrase names the extreme form of that contradiction: an assembly claiming covenant identity while acting as an adversary against the faithful.

Romans 2 also prevents simplistic interpretation. The distinction between outward and inward identity is not a license for ethnic contempt. Paul himself is Jewish, and his argument is intra-scriptural and covenantal. He argues from within Israel's moral and prophetic tradition. His point is that God's judgment penetrates visible forms. The one who bears the sign must also bear the reality. The one who claims the name must also live in fidelity to the God named.

This has implications beyond the original Jewish-Christian dispute. If outward covenant identity can be judged in Romans 2, then any religious identity can be judged. A Christian church, denomination, ministry, priesthood, school, movement, or theological faction can also claim sacred identity while lacking inward obedience. The indirect parallel therefore expands the force of Revelation beyond one historical referent. It warns all religious assemblies that the name of God cannot be possessed as a charm against judgment.

Romans 2 contributes the first theological foundation for the phrase: true covenant identity is not merely declared, inherited, ritualized, or institutionalized. It is tested by inward truth and obedient life before God.

4.2. John 8 and the Language of Spiritual Fatherhood

John 8 provides another strong indirect parallel because it introduces the language of spiritual fatherhood, resemblance, and moral lineage. In this passage, Jesus disputes with opponents who appeal to Abraham as their father. Jesus does not accept the appeal as sufficient. He argues

that if they were truly Abraham's children in the relevant spiritual sense, they would do the works of Abraham. Instead, their desire to kill Him reveals another spiritual father.

This passage is severe, and it has also had a dangerous reception history. For that reason, it must be read carefully. The issue in the passage is not a crude biological claim about all Jews. Jesus Himself, His disciples, and the earliest Christian movement arise from within Israel. The dispute concerns opponents who claim Abrahamic identity while rejecting and seeking to destroy the one Jesus presents as speaking truth from God. The argument turns on moral resemblance. One's true spiritual father is revealed by one's works.

This is directly relevant to Revelation's "Synagogue of Satan" language. In both John 8 and Revelation 2–3, a sacred claim is tested by relation to Christ and to truth. In John 8, the claim is Abrahamic descent; in Revelation, the claim is Jewish identity. In John 8, Jesus says that the opponents' works reveal a different father; in Revelation, Christ says the opponents' assembly belongs to Satan. Both texts distinguish formal claim from spiritual reality. Both texts connect opposition to truth with satanic alignment.

John 8 also intensifies the role of speech. Jesus contrasts truth and falsehood. He speaks what He has heard from the Father, while His opponents cannot bear His word. The devil is described as having no truth in him and as the father of lies. This overlaps with Revelation's emphasis on slander and false claim. The satanic is not merely violent; it is also false-speaking. It lies about God, about Christ, about the faithful, and about itself.

The connection between lying and murder is also important. In John 8, hostility to truth is not merely intellectual disagreement. It becomes the desire to kill the messenger. In Revelation, slander against the church is connected to imprisonment, trial, and possible death. The same pattern appears: false speech prepares the ground for persecution. Accusation is not neutral. It can become the social and legal mechanism by which the faithful are harmed.

John 8 therefore deepens the meaning of Satan as adversary. The satanic pattern is revealed in falsehood, accusation, rejection of truth, and hostility toward the one sent by God. An assembly does not need to declare itself satanic to function in that pattern. It need only become a corporate instrument of false accusation and opposition to divine truth.

At the same time, John 8 must not be detached from its dramatic context and converted into a universal ethnic curse. Its proper theological use is diagnostic, not racial or collective. It asks whether those who claim sacred ancestry bear the works of that ancestry. It asks whether the claim to Abraham, Moses, church, tradition, apostolic office, orthodoxy, or covenant can survive rejection of truth. In Revelation's terms, it asks whether the assembly's claim corresponds to its spiritual function.

John 8 contributes the second theological foundation for the phrase: true spiritual identity is revealed by resemblance, works, speech, and relation to truth. A false claim to sacred fatherhood or covenant lineage becomes exposed when the claimant acts in the pattern of the adversary.

4.3. Matthew 23 and Religious Hypocrisy

Matthew 23 is one of the New Testament's most sustained condemnations of religious hypocrisy. Jesus addresses scribes and Pharisees with a series of woes, accusing them of shutting the kingdom of heaven in people's faces, imposing burdens they will not bear, seeking honor, neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness, cleaning the outside while remaining corrupt within, and honoring the tombs of prophets while sharing the spirit of those who killed them. The chapter is essential background for any theology of false religious assembly.

Matthew 23 does not use the phrase "Synagogue of Satan," but it describes the kind of religious inversion that makes Revelation's phrase intelligible. Jesus condemns not mere error, but the corruption of sacred office and visible piety. The problem is not lack of religion. It is religion turned inside out. The forms remain: teaching, tithing, praying, interpreting, leading, honoring prophets, guarding tradition. But the inner reality has become pride, obstruction, hypocrisy, self-display, and hostility to God's messengers.

This is especially important because "Synagogue of Satan" is not a term for irreligion. It is a term for corrupted religious claim. Matthew 23 shows that Scripture can judge religious authorities not despite their sacred role but because of their abuse of it. The scribes and Pharisees occupy Moses' seat, yet they are judged for failing to embody the weightier matters of the law. Their external religiosity does not excuse inward corruption. It exposes it.

One of the central themes in Matthew 23 is the gap between outward appearance and inward reality. Jesus uses images of cups cleaned outside but filthy within, whitewashed tombs outwardly beautiful but inwardly full of death, and public righteousness hiding hypocrisy. This imagery parallels Revelation's contrast between what people say they are and what Christ judges them to be. Both texts insist that God sees beneath religious performance.

Matthew 23 also contributes the theme of persecuting the prophets. Jesus accuses His opponents of building tombs for the prophets while belonging to the lineage of those who killed them. This is a profound diagnostic pattern: corrupt religion often honors dead truth-tellers while attacking living ones. It praises prophecy safely located in the past while resisting prophetic truth in the present. This pattern later becomes crucial for constructing the theological type of the "Synagogue of Satan." Such an assembly may preserve sacred memory while persecuting present witness.

The chapter also shows how religious authority can become obstructive. Jesus says the hypocritical leaders neither enter the kingdom nor allow others to enter. This is not merely private moral failure. It is institutional spiritual obstruction. A false religious assembly can block access to truth, shame those seeking God, enforce burdens, and protect its own authority. Such behavior is adversarial because it stands between God and those being called to Him.

The connection to Revelation is not that the opponents in Matthew 23 and Revelation 2–3 are identical in every historical respect. The connection is theological. Both texts show that sacred claim can be judged by its fruits. Both show that religious leaders or assemblies may claim to represent God while opposing God’s work. Both show that hypocrisy is not a minor defect but a profound spiritual danger.

Matthew 23 also widens the application beyond Judaism. Christian history has repeatedly shown that churches, bishops, ministers, theologians, institutions, and reform movements can reproduce the same pattern. Any religious body can clean the outside while concealing corruption within. Any institution can honor past saints while silencing living witnesses. Any assembly can protect its authority by burdening others. Therefore, Matthew 23 makes the “Synagogue of Satan” a warning not only about first-century conflict but about the perennial corruption of religious power.

Matthew 23 contributes the third theological foundation for the phrase: religious form without inward righteousness can become a mechanism of obstruction, hypocrisy, and persecution. When sacred authority protects itself against truth, it begins to function adversarially.

4.4. Galatians 4 and the Two Jerusalems

Galatians 4 provides a different kind of indirect parallel. Paul uses the story of Hagar and Sarah allegorically to contrast slavery and freedom, flesh and promise, the present Jerusalem and the Jerusalem above. The passage is complex and has been interpreted in many ways, but it is important because it shows Paul distinguishing between different modes of covenant identity. Not all claims to descent or law function in the same spiritual way. There is a form of religious inheritance that remains in bondage, and there is a promise-centered identity that belongs to freedom.

This passage has often been connected to debates about supersessionism, law, gospel, Israel, and the Church. It must be handled with care. Paul’s argument is not a simple rejection of Israel’s Scriptures; he is arguing from those Scriptures. Nor is he denying the holiness of the biblical promises. Rather, he is contesting a form of religious identity that, in his view, binds believers to fleshly confidence rather than to the promise fulfilled in Christ.

The relevance to the “Synagogue of Satan” lies in the contrast between outward claim and spiritual condition. In Galatians 4, Paul can speak of a Jerusalem that is in bondage and a

Jerusalem above that is free. The sacred name “Jerusalem” is therefore not used in only one simple way. It can name a visible religious order associated with bondage, and it can name the eschatological mother of the faithful. The same sacred vocabulary is divided by theological reality.

This helps illuminate Revelation 3:9, where those claiming Jewish identity are promised a reversal in which they recognize Christ’s love for the faithful church. Revelation also later contrasts different symbolic cities, especially Babylon and the New Jerusalem. Cities, assemblies, and sacred names are evaluated according to their relation to God, Christ, and faithful witness. Galatians 4 prepares the reader to see that covenant geography and covenant language can be interpreted typologically.

The contrast between flesh and promise is central. For Paul, reliance on flesh means confidence in merely human, outward, or natural markers as the basis of standing before God. Promise means dependence on God’s act, God’s calling, and God’s fulfillment. Applied to Revelation’s phrase, an assembly can claim identity according to outward markers while failing to embody the promise-centered reality of obedience to God. The false claim is not necessarily that outward markers do not exist; it is that they are being treated as ultimate when they are not accompanied by faithfulness.

Galatians 4 also introduces the theme of persecution. Paul says that, as the child born according to the flesh persecuted the child born according to the Spirit, so it is now. This is strikingly close to the pattern in Revelation. The faithful community is pressured or persecuted by those claiming religious standing. The conflict is not merely between religion and irreligion, but between two claims about how God’s promise is rightly identified and embodied.

The “two Jerusalems” motif also helps explain why later Christian theology often interpreted Revelation’s phrase in ecclesial or typological terms. If Paul can distinguish between the present Jerusalem and the Jerusalem above, then Christian interpreters could distinguish between visible assemblies and true covenant reality. This does not settle every historical question about Revelation, but it provides a theological grammar for understanding how sacred names can be judged.

Galatians 4 contributes the fourth theological foundation for the phrase: covenant language can be divided between bondage and promise, flesh and Spirit, visible claim and eschatological reality. An assembly may claim sacred descent or geography while opposing the freedom and promise of God.

4.5. Philippians 3 and the True Circumcision

Philippians 3 provides another essential indirect parallel because Paul uses the phrase “the true circumcision” to describe those who worship by the Spirit of God, glory in Christ Jesus, and put

no confidence in the flesh. This passage is especially important because Paul lists his own credentials: circumcision, Israelite descent, tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew identity, Pharisaic zeal, persecution of the church, and righteousness under the law. He does not speak as an outsider ignorant of Jewish covenant markers. He speaks as one who possessed them and yet came to regard confidence in them as loss compared with Christ.

The passage is relevant to Revelation because it sharply distinguishes sacred credentials from saving reality. Paul does not deny that his credentials were real. Rather, he denies that they can be the ground of confidence before God. The true identity of God's people is defined by worship in the Spirit, glorying in Christ, and refusing fleshly confidence. This is closely related to the distinction between those who say they are Jews and those who are judged faithful by Christ.

Philippians 3 also includes a warning against opponents whom Paul describes in severe terms. The language is polemical, and its precise referent has been debated, but the broader theological point is clear: religious cutting, ritual confidence, or external marks can be spiritually misused when they displace Christ. Paul counters such confidence by redefining covenant identity around Christ and the Spirit.

This is not a rejection of embodied religion as such. Paul does not oppose obedience, discipline, community, or worship. He opposes confidence in the flesh as the basis of standing before God. Fleshly confidence can include ancestry, ritual, law-keeping, status, education, zeal, institutional role, or public reputation. It can appear in Jewish or Christian forms. A Christian can place confidence in baptism, ordination, denomination, orthodoxy, theological system, apostolic succession, social mission, or spiritual experience in the same fleshly way. Philippians 3 therefore broadens the warning.

The connection to the "Synagogue of Satan" is particularly strong because Paul includes persecution of the church among his former credentials of zeal. Before his conversion, he believed he was serving God by opposing the followers of Jesus. This is precisely the kind of tragic inversion that Revelation names in apocalyptic form. Religious zeal can become persecution. Sacred confidence can become opposition to Christ. The persecutor may believe himself faithful while functioning as adversary.

Philippians 3 also gives a positive criterion. The true people of God worship by the Spirit, glory in Christ, and put no confidence in the flesh. This provides a constructive counterpoint to the negative phrase "Synagogue of Satan." The issue is not only identifying false assemblies. It is discerning the marks of true covenant life. True assembly is marked by Spirit-worship, Christ-centered glory, humility, and renunciation of self-grounded religious confidence. False assembly is marked by status, accusation, coercion, and confidence in external claim.

Paul's autobiographical argument also introduces humility. He knows from experience that zeal can be misdirected. This matters for interpretation. The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" should not be used with careless self-righteousness. Those who use it must recognize that religious people can misjudge themselves profoundly. Paul himself once opposed the church in the name of God. The warning therefore reaches every interpreter.

Philippians 3 contributes the fifth theological foundation for the phrase: true covenant identity is defined by Spirit-worship, Christ-centered confidence, and renunciation of fleshly status. Religious zeal without Christ can become persecution, and sacred credentials without obedience can become spiritually dangerous.

Together, Romans 2, John 8, Matthew 23, Galatians 4, and Philippians 3 form the indirect biblical background for Revelation's phrase. They show that the New Testament repeatedly distinguishes between outward claim and inward truth, visible status and spiritual reality, religious zeal and obedience to God. The "Synagogue of Satan" is the most severe apocalyptic name for the assembly in which these contradictions reach their most dangerous form: sacred claim joined to accusation, religious identity joined to persecution, and covenant language joined to adversarial function.

5. First-Century Context: Smyrna, Philadelphia, Rome, and the Early Church

The direct references to the "Synagogue of Satan" must be placed within the world of first-century Asia Minor. Revelation is not written into an abstract theological space. It is addressed to seven churches located in real cities under Roman imperial power, surrounded by civic cults, economic obligations, religious associations, local rivalries, and social pressures. Smyrna and Philadelphia were not merely names on a symbolic map. They were communities in which followers of Jesus had to live, trade, worship, speak, suffer, and survive.

The first-century setting matters because the early Christian movement did not yet possess the institutional form it would later acquire. It was small, socially vulnerable, and often misunderstood. It emerged from within Jewish scriptural and messianic expectation, yet increasingly included Gentiles. It confessed Jesus as Messiah and Lord in a world where Jewish communities negotiated their identity under Rome and where civic loyalty was often expressed through participation in public cult. This created overlapping pressures. Jewish communities had to preserve their own distinctiveness. Christian communities had to explain why they worshiped the God of Israel while confessing Jesus. Roman cities expected public conformity to civic and imperial religious life. Local conflict could easily become legal danger.

The phrases in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 likely arise from this complicated overlap. They are not best understood as detached theological abstractions, nor as simple later Christian slogans

projected backward. They belong to the early period when church and synagogue were still disentangling, when Jesus-believers could be seen by some as a Jewish sect, by others as a dangerous deviation, and by Roman authorities as a potentially illicit or destabilizing association. In such a world, accusation mattered. Public denunciation could threaten livelihoods, social standing, and even life. To call an opposing assembly a “Synagogue of Satan” in this setting is to identify not merely doctrinal disagreement, but adversarial action within a fragile social and political environment.

5.1. Jewish and Christian Communities Under Roman Power

Both Jewish and Christian communities in Asia Minor existed under Roman power, but they did not occupy identical positions. Jewish communities had a long-established presence throughout the cities of the eastern Mediterranean. They often possessed communal structures, recognized customs, scriptural traditions, and varying degrees of legal toleration. Their status was not always secure and could vary by locality, ruler, and political circumstance, but Judaism was an ancient and recognizable tradition within the Roman world.

The early Christian movement, by contrast, was new, expanding, and ambiguous in the eyes of outsiders. It inherited Israel’s Scriptures, confessed Israel’s God, and proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. Yet its inclusion of Gentiles, its confession of Jesus as Lord, and its refusal of pagan worship created a distinct identity that did not fit easily within existing categories. Was it a Jewish movement? Was it a new superstition? Was it politically harmless? Was it socially subversive? Different observers could answer differently.

This ambiguity created vulnerability. If Christians were understood as part of Judaism, they might in some contexts be sheltered by the older religion’s recognized status. If they were separated from Judaism in the eyes of local authorities, they could be exposed as an unauthorized religious association refusing civic worship. The distinction mattered. A local synagogue or Jewish communal authority that denied Christian claims might not merely be engaging in theological disagreement. In some circumstances, such denial could affect whether Christians were socially or legally protected.

The letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia appear to presuppose conflict between Christian communities and groups claiming Jewish identity. The precise historical details are debated, but the broad setting is plausible: Jesus-believers, some Jewish and some Gentile, confessed Christ as the fulfillment of Israel’s hope, while other Jewish communities rejected that confession. This rejection could become sharper where Christians used Israel’s Scriptures to claim covenant continuity and messianic fulfillment. The dispute was not merely about private belief. It concerned identity, legitimacy, and the right to claim the God of Israel.

Under Roman power, such disputes were never purely internal. Rome generally cared less about theological precision than about public order, loyalty, and civic stability. If a religious dispute remained internal, it might be ignored. If it produced accusations of sedition, unlawful assembly, impiety, or disloyalty, it could become dangerous. Early Christians were especially vulnerable because their confession of Jesus as Lord could be misunderstood or framed as political defiance. Their refusal to participate in pagan and imperial cult could be interpreted as atheism, impiety, or hostility to the city's welfare.

This context clarifies why Revelation's language is so intense. The "Synagogue of Satan" is not merely a group that disagrees with Christians. In the Smyrna passage, the issue is slander. In the Philadelphia passage, the issue is false claim and eventual vindication. The conflict concerns who truly belongs to God and who is falsely accusing whom before a hostile world. Under Roman power, slander could become more than speech. It could become the bridge between religious dispute and civic punishment.

The early Christian communities in Smyrna and Philadelphia were therefore caught between two worlds. From one side, they faced Roman expectations of loyalty, public cult, and social conformity. From another side, they faced opposition from those who rejected their claim to belong to the people of God through Christ. Revelation interprets this conflict apocalyptically. Behind local pressures stands the adversary. Behind human accusation stands satanic accusation. Behind apparent weakness stands hidden divine favor.

The first-century context does not dissolve the theological meaning of the phrase. It gives that meaning flesh. The "Synagogue of Satan" language emerges where religious identity, communal boundary, imperial pressure, and accusation intersect.

5.2. Civic Loyalty, Imperial Cult, and Social Pressure

The cities addressed in Revelation lived within a world where religion and civic life were deeply intertwined. Public worship was not merely a private spiritual choice. It expressed loyalty to the city, gratitude to benefactors, reverence for traditional gods, and participation in the political order. The imperial cult in particular joined religious ritual to allegiance toward Rome and the emperor. To refuse participation could be seen not only as theological dissent but as civic disloyalty.

Smyrna was especially associated with imperial loyalty. It was proud of its relationship with Rome and was known for its participation in imperial honors. In such a city, Christians could appear socially disruptive. They did not merely worship another deity in addition to the civic gods. They confessed exclusive loyalty to the God revealed in Christ and refused idolatrous worship. Their refusal could be interpreted as arrogance, ingratitude, atheism, or hostility to public order.

Philadelphia also stood within a network of civic and imperial expectations. Although its specific pressures differed from Smyrna's, it too belonged to the same Roman provincial world.

Associations, guilds, festivals, sacrifices, public meals, patronage systems, and civic ceremonies formed the fabric of ordinary life. Participation in these structures could involve religious acts. Nonparticipation could carry economic and social consequences. A Christian who refused idolatrous participation might lose business, status, friendships, family support, or safety.

This helps explain the language of poverty in Smyrna. Christian poverty may have had many causes, but social and economic exclusion are plausible. Those who refused civic religious obligations could be disadvantaged in trade, patronage, guild participation, or public honor. A Christian community could become materially poor because faithfulness made full participation in civic life impossible. Revelation's statement that Smyrna is poor yet rich therefore fits a world in which spiritual fidelity could produce economic vulnerability.

The imperial cult also intensified the significance of the confession that Jesus is Lord. In the Roman world, titles of lordship, saviorhood, benefaction, peace, and divine favor could be associated with imperial power. Revelation directly challenges such claims by presenting Christ as the true ruler, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. The churches are called to endure not because Rome is harmless, but because Christ's authority surpasses Rome's authority.

Within this civic environment, denunciation could be devastating. If Christians were accused of disloyalty, impiety, or refusal to honor the gods, local authorities could intervene. Even where persecution was not constant or empire-wide, local hostility could produce episodic danger. Revelation's letters reflect exactly such local pressure. Smyrna is warned that some will be thrown into prison. Philadelphia is told that its weak but faithful witness will be vindicated. The threat is both spiritual and social.

The "Synagogue of Satan" language must be read against this backdrop. If a local assembly or faction denounced Christians, excluded them, or helped identify them as dangerous outsiders, that act could expose believers to Roman suspicion. The accusation would not be merely theological. It could become civic. It could say, in effect, these people are not legitimately protected, not truly part of an ancient tolerated tradition, not loyal, not safe, not acceptable. Such accusation would serve the adversary because it would deliver the faithful into the machinery of social and political punishment.

This does not require imagining a uniform policy or a single empire-wide persecution at the time of Revelation. The pressure could be local, uneven, and episodic. That makes the letters more plausible, not less. The churches are not described as living in identical circumstances. Each city has its own condition. Smyrna faces tribulation and imprisonment. Philadelphia has

little strength but an open door. The “Synagogue of Satan” appears where the conflict between faithful witness and hostile accusation becomes especially sharp.

Civic loyalty, imperial cult, and social pressure therefore form the political atmosphere behind the phrase. The early Christians were not only debating doctrine. They were navigating a world in which worship, citizenship, economics, public honor, and survival were bound together. To be slandered in that world was dangerous. To be named by Christ as faithful in that world was consolation and strength.

5.3. Accusation, Denunciation, and Legal Vulnerability

Accusation is the key social mechanism connecting the theological phrase to historical danger. Revelation 2:9 explicitly mentions slander. Revelation 3:9 mentions false claim and future vindication. These are not incidental details. They show that the conflict involved speech: naming, accusing, denying, claiming, and misrepresenting. In the Roman world, such speech could have serious consequences.

Early Christians were vulnerable to denunciation because their practices were easily misunderstood. They met in private homes or assemblies. They used familial language such as brother and sister. They celebrated the Lord’s Supper. They refused to worship the gods. They confessed a crucified man as Lord. They expected divine judgment on idolatrous power. To outsiders, such practices could be misrepresented as secrecy, immorality, sedition, atheism, or hatred of society. Even absurd accusations could become dangerous when repeated by hostile voices.

The legal status of Christians in the first century was not always clear. There was no single, simple condition everywhere at all times. Much depended on local governors, local accusations, public unrest, and the perceived threat posed by Christian refusal. If no one accused Christians, they might be ignored. If someone denounced them, their refusal to participate in required acts of loyalty or worship could become evidence against them. This made slander an instrument of persecution.

The connection between Satan and accusation is therefore not merely symbolic. It describes the spiritual meaning of a real social act. The adversary accuses. Human accusers may become instruments of the adversary when their speech endangers the faithful through falsehood or malice. The “Synagogue of Satan” is thus an assembly whose speech functions as accusation before hostile powers. Its satanic character lies in this alignment of false claim, slander, and persecution.

In Smyrna, the progression is especially clear. Christ knows the slander. He then warns that the devil is about to throw some believers into prison. This suggests that the slander and imprisonment are related within the spiritual logic of the passage. The human accusers may

speak, but Revelation sees the devil acting through the process that follows. Prison becomes not only a legal event but a spiritual test. The faithful are called to endure even unto death.

This does not mean every legal accusation against Christians was false in every possible sense, nor that every conflict can be simplified into innocent Christians and demonic outsiders. Historical situations are often complex. But Revelation's concern is with faithful communities suffering because of their witness to Christ. In that setting, slander against them is interpreted as participation in satanic opposition. The point is theological discernment of persecution, not a universal theory of all legal conflict.

Philadelphia adds another dimension. There the emphasis is not imprisonment but vindication. Those who falsely claim sacred status will be made to recognize Christ's love for the faithful. This implies that accusation had produced exclusion or denial of legitimacy. The faithful church may have been treated as outside the true people of God, unworthy of recognition, or cut off from covenant standing. Christ reverses that judgment. The accusers are exposed as liars. The weak church is revealed as beloved.

Accusation therefore operates on two levels: social and theological. Socially, accusation can bring poverty, exclusion, imprisonment, and death. Theologically, accusation denies the identity of the faithful and attempts to define them by hostile judgment. Revelation counters both. Christ knows the truth. Christ names the accusers. Christ strengthens the faithful. Christ promises vindication.

This is why the phrase "Synagogue of Satan" cannot be reduced to ethnic hostility or abstract doctrinal disagreement. Its immediate force is tied to accusation that harms the faithful. The assembly is adversarial because it accuses. It is satanic because it participates in the work of the accuser. It is false because its claim to sacred identity is contradicted by its treatment of those whom Christ calls faithful.

In this sense, Revelation's phrase is both local and enduring. The local form may have involved specific denunciations in Smyrna and Philadelphia. The enduring pattern is broader: whenever a religious assembly uses accusation to expose faithful witnesses to coercion, exclusion, imprisonment, destruction, or spiritual delegitimation, it begins to resemble the adversarial assembly named in Revelation.

5.4. The Separation of Church and Synagogue

The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" also belongs to the painful historical process by which the church and synagogue became increasingly distinct communities. This separation was not instantaneous. The earliest followers of Jesus were Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. They worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, read Israel's

Scriptures, prayed in Jewish forms, and understood Jesus through Israel's promises. The early Christian movement was born within the world of Jewish hope.

As Gentiles entered the movement in large numbers and as the confession of Jesus as Messiah was rejected by many Jewish authorities and communities, the relationship became strained. Questions multiplied. Could Gentiles belong to the people of God without becoming Jews according to the full requirements of the law? Did confession of Jesus fulfill Israel's covenant, transform it, or betray it? Who had authority to interpret the Scriptures? Who represented the true continuity of Israel? These were not minor disagreements. They concerned the identity of God's people.

By the time Revelation was written, the separation was likely underway but not complete in the same way everywhere. In some places, Jesus-believers may still have had close contact with synagogues. In others, they may have been excluded or denounced. The situation likely varied city by city. Smyrna and Philadelphia may represent locations where the conflict became especially intense. The repeated phrase "who say they are Jews and are not" suggests a struggle over legitimate covenant identity.

The separation of church and synagogue must be understood as a historical tragedy as well as a theological development. From the Christian side, the confession of Jesus as Messiah and Lord demanded a reinterpretation of Israel's Scriptures around Christ. From the Jewish side, the claim that a crucified man was Messiah, that Gentiles could enter the people of God through Him, and that worship centered on Him could appear unacceptable or blasphemous. Both communities increasingly defined themselves over against the other.

Revelation speaks from the Christian side of this divide. It does not present a neutral sociological account. It speaks as prophetic-apocalyptic revelation to churches under pressure. It judges those who oppose the faithful as false claimants and adversarial accusers. That is the text's perspective. Historical contextualization does not erase that perspective; it explains the setting in which such severe language emerged.

The separation also explains why the phrase later became so contested. In the first-century setting, the conflict may have been intra-Jewish or Jewish-Christian, involving communities still close enough to dispute covenant identity directly. In later centuries, when Christianity became increasingly Gentile and then politically powerful, the same language could take on a different social function. What began as apocalyptic encouragement to vulnerable churches could later be used by dominant Christian institutions against Jewish minorities. This shift in power is crucial for reception history.

At the original level, the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia appear weak. They are not imperial rulers. They are not dominant institutions. They are poor, slandered, and of little

strength. The phrase “Synagogue of Satan” speaks from the position of a persecuted minority seeking divine vindication. In later Christian history, however, the phrase could be spoken by powerful majorities. That changes its effect, even if the words are the same. A phrase of consolation for the persecuted can become a weapon when used without regard to changed historical conditions.

Nevertheless, the separation of church and synagogue does not require reducing Revelation’s phrase to mere social conflict. The theological issue remains. Revelation claims that some who assert covenant legitimacy may be judged false because they oppose Christ and His faithful witnesses. This is not merely sociology. It is apocalyptic theology. The challenge is to recognize both the historical conflict and the theological claim.

The separation also clarifies why the phrase has enduring ecclesial significance. Christians themselves can become the kind of assembly Revelation condemns if they claim sacred authority while functioning as accusers and persecutors. Once the church becomes institutionally powerful, the warning rebounds upon it. The “Synagogue of Satan” is not only a phrase Christians have applied outward. It is a mirror held up to any religious body that confuses institutional identity with faithfulness to God.

In this sense, the first-century separation of church and synagogue provides the historical soil for the phrase, but not its final limit. The phrase arises from a concrete dispute over covenant identity in the shadow of Roman power. Yet it also exposes a recurring danger in religious history: the assembly that claims God while opposing the people God loves. The early church’s conflict with synagogue authorities in Smyrna and Philadelphia may be the immediate setting. The deeper issue is the corruption of sacred claim into adversarial action.

The first-century context therefore does not weaken the phrase. It disciplines it. It shows that the phrase emerged among vulnerable communities facing accusation, exclusion, and possible imprisonment. It shows that local religious conflict could become dangerous under Rome. It shows that the separation of church and synagogue was already producing intense claims and counterclaims. Above all, it shows why Revelation’s language is both severe and pastoral: Christ names the hidden spiritual character of opposition so that the faithful may endure without surrendering their identity to their accusers.

6. Patristic Interpretation and Early Christian Polemic

Patristic interpretation of the “Synagogue of Satan” must be understood within the formative centuries of Christian identity. The early Church did not interpret Revelation from a position of detached academic distance. It read Scripture while defining itself against pagan empire, heresy, persecution, internal division, and continuing Jewish rejection of Christian messianic claims. The

Fathers inherited the apostolic conviction that Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures, yet they lived in a world where most Jewish communities did not accept that claim. This produced a sustained theological dispute over Scripture, covenant, prophecy, law, temple, Messiah, and the true identity of the people of God.

The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" fit naturally into this world of contested identity. For early Christian writers, the Church was not a new pagan religion but the people gathered around Israel's Messiah. The question was therefore not whether Israel's Scriptures mattered, but who rightly understood them. The early Christian claim was radical: the promises, prophecies, sacrifices, temple patterns, priesthood, kingship, and covenant hopes of Israel reached their fulfillment in Christ. Those who rejected Christ were therefore not merely disagreeing about one doctrine; from the Christian perspective, they were rejecting the center toward which the Scriptures pointed.

This helps explain why patristic interpretation could be severe. The Fathers often saw the conflict between Church and synagogue as a struggle over the meaning of divine revelation itself. In that context, Revelation's phrase was not treated as a marginal oddity. It became part of a larger theological grammar in which the visible synagogue, when opposed to Christ, could be interpreted as having lost the spiritual reality of covenant faithfulness. Yet the patristic use of such language also created a dangerous inheritance. Polemical rhetoric that may have functioned originally as theological boundary-making could become anti-Jewish denunciation, especially as Christianity gained cultural and imperial power.

This section therefore examines patristic interpretation as both theological witness and polemical danger. The Fathers preserved important insights into false religious claim, spiritual opposition, and the Church's self-understanding as the people of the fulfilled covenant. At the same time, some patristic rhetoric hardened into sweeping hostility toward Jews and synagogues as such. Any honest account must describe both realities.

6.1. The Fathers and the Boundary Between Church and Synagogue

The early Fathers interpreted Scripture through the conviction that Christ fulfilled the law and the prophets. This conviction shaped their understanding of the Church's relation to Israel. The Church was not understood as a Gentile invention replacing Scripture, but as the messianic assembly gathered by the God of Israel through Christ. The apostles, martyrs, prophets, patriarchs, and faithful remnant were seen as belonging to one divine economy fulfilled in Jesus. This gave early Christians a strong sense that they were not abandoning Israel's Scriptures but rightly inheriting them.

The boundary between Church and synagogue therefore became a boundary over interpretation. Who understood Moses correctly? Who understood Isaiah, the Psalms, Daniel,

and the prophets? Who recognized the Messiah? Who possessed the true temple, the true sacrifice, the true priesthood, the true circumcision, the true Passover, the true Israel? These questions appear repeatedly in early Christian apologetic literature. The argument was not only historical but typological. Christian interpreters claimed that the events, institutions, and rituals of Israel prefigured Christ and the Church.

In this setting, Revelation's phrase could be read as confirming a distinction between outward Jewish claim and inward covenant reality. The synagogue that rejected Christ could be viewed, by Christian writers, as retaining the outward name while losing the spiritual truth to which that name pointed. This is the same logic seen in Romans 2, Philippians 3, and other New Testament passages. The Fathers developed that logic into a broader theology of fulfillment.

Justin Martyr is an important example of early Christian boundary-making. In his dialogue with Trypho, he presents Christianity as the true understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. He argues that circumcision, Sabbath, sacrifices, and ceremonial distinctions pointed beyond themselves to Christ. The point is not that Scripture failed, but that its deepest meaning had arrived. In such a framework, the synagogue's rejection of Christ was interpreted as blindness to the fulfillment of its own Scriptures.

Other early writers made similar arguments. They interpreted the destruction of the temple, the spread of the Gospel among the nations, and the formation of a Gentile-inclusive Church as signs that the covenant promises were being fulfilled in a new mode. The Church became, in their language, the true Israel, the spiritual Israel, or the people of the new covenant. This did not always require direct appeal to the phrase "Synagogue of Satan," but it created the theological environment in which that phrase was understood.

The boundary between Church and synagogue was not merely intellectual. It was also liturgical, communal, and social. Christians increasingly developed their own patterns of worship, calendar, leadership, discipline, and sacramental identity. The question of whether Christians should observe Jewish festivals, attend synagogue, follow dietary rules, keep Sabbath customs, or seek legitimacy through Jewish communal structures became a practical pastoral issue. Polemic against the synagogue often arose where Christian leaders feared that members of their own congregations were being drawn back into Jewish practices or were honoring Jewish ritual authority in ways those leaders regarded as incompatible with Christ.

Thus, early patristic interpretation of the "Synagogue of Satan" belongs to the formation of Christian identity. It helped mark the boundary between the Church as the messianic assembly and the synagogue as the assembly that, from the Christian perspective, had refused the Messiah. The theological claim was not merely that Christians and Jews differed. It was that the

decisive meaning of covenant identity had been revealed in Christ, and that opposition to Christ exposed a false claim to covenant fullness.

Yet this boundary-making contained an enduring danger. Once the Church defined itself as the true heir of Israel, it could be tempted to treat living Jews only as negative witnesses, foils, or enemies. The theological distinction between fulfilled and unfulfilled covenant identity could harden into contempt. The phrase “Synagogue of Satan,” read without restraint, could intensify this movement from doctrinal dispute to social hostility. Patristic interpretation therefore must be read as a formative but dangerous stage in the phrase’s reception.

6.2. John Chrysostom and Anti-Judaizing Rhetoric

John Chrysostom represents one of the most severe examples of early Christian anti-synagogue rhetoric. His homilies against Christians who participated in Jewish festivals and synagogue life are among the most forceful patristic texts in this area. His immediate pastoral concern was not simply the existence of Jewish communities. It was the behavior of Christians in his own setting who, in his view, were honoring Jewish practices, attending synagogues, observing Jewish feasts, or treating Jewish ritual life as spiritually authoritative.

Chrysostom’s rhetoric must be understood in that immediate context. He was trying to prevent Christians from crossing religious boundaries that he believed had been decisively transformed by Christ. For him, Christian participation in synagogue worship or Jewish festivals was not harmless cultural overlap. It was a denial of the sufficiency of Christ and the new covenant. His polemic was therefore aimed at Christian Judaizing as much as at Jews themselves.

Nevertheless, the language he used was extreme. Chrysostom described synagogues in demonic terms and associated them with spiritual danger. In doing so, he drew upon a broader Christian polemical tradition that treated the synagogue opposed to Christ as spiritually fallen. The conceptual connection with the “Synagogue of Satan” is clear even where the exact phrase is not the sole basis of his argument. The synagogue, for Chrysostom, was not merely a rival religious institution. It was a place where Christians could be spiritually corrupted by returning to a form of worship he believed had been surpassed and judged.

His rhetoric shows how Revelation’s phrase could be extended from a local apocalyptic description into a general polemical category. In Revelation, the phrase addresses specific hostile assemblies in Smyrna and Philadelphia. In Chrysostom’s setting, similar language becomes part of a campaign against Christian participation in Jewish life. The original context of persecuted minority churches under pressure is no longer identical. Christianity is becoming more institutionally established. The social direction of the rhetoric begins to shift.

This shift matters. In the first-century setting, Christians in Smyrna and Philadelphia were weak communities threatened by slander and exclusion. In Chrysostom’s setting, the Church had

greater public strength, though local religious competition and pastoral anxiety remained real. When severe apocalyptic language is used from a position of increasing Christian power, its social effect changes. It can move from consolation of the persecuted to denunciation of a religious minority.

Chrysostom's importance for this paper is therefore twofold. On one hand, he illustrates how seriously early Christian theologians took the danger of false worship and divided covenant loyalty. He believed the Church must not return to forms of religious identity that, in his theological judgment, rejected Christ. In that sense, his rhetoric belongs to the early Church's fierce defense of Christian distinctiveness.

On the other hand, Chrysostom also illustrates how theological polemic can exceed disciplined exegesis and become a reservoir for later hostility. Later anti-Jewish rhetoric could draw upon his language as though it were a permanent description of Jews and synagogues as such. This reception cannot be ignored. The severity of his speech became part of the Christian inheritance, and that inheritance shaped later attitudes toward Jewish communities.

Chrysostom therefore stands as a warning about the power of theological rhetoric. A phrase like "Synagogue of Satan" can be used to defend the uniqueness of Christ and the Church's covenant identity. But when generalized, dramatized, and socially weaponized, it can become a tool of contempt. His example shows why reception history is not an optional appendix to exegesis. The way theologians speak can shape centuries of religious imagination.

6.3. Theological Polemic and Pastoral Anxiety

Early Christian polemic against the synagogue was often driven by pastoral anxiety. Church leaders were not only writing abstract theology. They were trying to form Christian communities, maintain doctrinal boundaries, resist pagan pressure, oppose heresy, and prevent believers from returning to practices they believed compromised the Gospel. This pastoral context explains much of the intensity of their language.

The first centuries of Christianity involved unstable boundaries. Some Christians continued to observe aspects of Jewish law. Some honored Jewish festivals. Some regarded synagogue worship as ancient and therefore spiritually prestigious. Some may have seen Jewish traditions as possessing an authority that the still-developing Christian institutions seemed to lack. For bishops and theologians seeking to consolidate Christian identity, this overlap could appear dangerous.

The anxiety was theological because it concerned Christ. If Christ had fulfilled the law, inaugurated the new covenant, opened the promises to the nations, and become the true temple and sacrifice, then returning to the old forms as though they remained religiously

necessary could be interpreted as a denial of fulfillment. The issue was not simply cultural borrowing. It was whether the Church understood itself as complete in Christ.

The anxiety was also communal. A church that could not distinguish itself from synagogue, pagan cult, or heretical assembly could not easily maintain sacramental discipline, doctrinal coherence, or liturgical unity. Early Christian leaders therefore used sharp contrasts: Church and synagogue, Gospel and law, Spirit and letter, truth and shadow, fulfillment and figure, Christ and rejection of Christ. The “Synagogue of Satan” language fit into this broader pattern of contrast.

Theological polemic often works by intensifying boundaries. It says not merely, “This is different,” but “This is spiritually dangerous.” In the patristic world, the synagogue opposed to Christ was often presented not as a neutral alternative but as a rejected or fallen religious form. This was meant to protect Christians from divided allegiance. The problem is that such polemic can easily move from warning believers to vilifying outsiders.

Pastoral anxiety also explains why the Fathers sometimes spoke more severely than later systematic theologians might prefer. They were not writing in a pluralistic academic environment. They were shepherding communities under pressure, where identity was fragile and compromise seemed possible. Their rhetoric often aimed to shock, warn, and separate. They used the language of danger because they believed souls were at stake.

At the same time, pastoral motives do not eliminate responsibility for rhetoric. A polemic may be understandable in context and still become harmful in reception. The Fathers’ concern to defend Christ and the Church was real. So was the later damage caused when anti-synagogue rhetoric became a generalized anti-Jewish tradition. This dual recognition is necessary for balanced historical analysis.

The phrase “Synagogue of Satan” sits exactly at this intersection of theology and anxiety. It names a real biblical category: an assembly that claims divine legitimacy while opposing the faithful. But it also provides language that can be expanded beyond its textual discipline. Early Christian leaders, especially in anti-Judaizing contexts, often read the synagogue as the continuing embodiment of rejection. This reading strengthened Christian boundaries but also contributed to a polemical inheritance that later ages would intensify.

The pastoral lesson is sobering. Religious leaders often use severe language to protect their communities from perceived spiritual danger. Sometimes such language clarifies truth. Sometimes it creates enemies. Sometimes it does both. The patristic use of “Synagogue of Satan” themes must be understood within this tension.

6.4. Early Christian Use of Satan-Language

The early Church used Satan-language to describe opposition to Christ, persecution of believers, false teaching, idolatry, heresy, and spiritual deception. This use was not accidental. The New Testament itself presents Christian life as participation in a cosmic conflict. The Church does not struggle merely against human disagreement but against spiritual powers. Revelation especially portrays earthly events as visible expressions of hidden spiritual war.

In this context, calling an assembly “of Satan” does not necessarily mean that its members consciously worship Satan. Rather, it means that their function aligns with the adversary. They accuse, deceive, persecute, corrupt, or obstruct the work of God. This functional use of Satan-language is central to early Christian interpretation. A person, institution, empire, false teacher, or religious assembly may become satanic by participating in the adversary’s work, even while claiming righteousness.

The Fathers inherited this apocalyptic worldview. They saw pagan idolatry as demonic deception. They saw heresy as satanic distortion of truth. They saw persecution as the devil’s rage against the Church. They saw false asceticism, false prophecy, and schism as spiritual attacks. The “Synagogue of Satan” therefore belonged to a broader vocabulary in which spiritual realities were named behind visible conflicts.

This use of Satan-language gave early Christian polemic its intensity. The dispute between Church and synagogue was not merely a disagreement between two interpretive communities. For many Fathers, it was part of the cosmic drama of acceptance or rejection of Christ. If Christ was the incarnate truth of God, then organized opposition to Him could be interpreted as participation in the adversary’s work. Revelation’s language gave scriptural authority to this way of seeing.

At its best, this Satan-language served discernment. It reminded Christians that evil can appear under religious forms, that accusation can masquerade as zeal, and that persecution may be justified by those who claim holiness. It warned the Church not to judge by appearances. It strengthened the faithful by assuring them that slander and suffering were not signs of abandonment but of participation in Christ’s witness.

At its worst, this Satan-language encouraged demonization. Once a group is described as satanic without careful limits, ordinary moral restraint can weaken. The opponent is no longer merely wrong, mistaken, fearful, hardened, or rivalrous. The opponent becomes the embodiment of evil. In later Christian history, such language helped justify contempt, exclusion, coercion, and violence against Jews and other religious opponents. This was not the only cause of Christian anti-Judaism, but it was part of the vocabulary that made it possible.

The early Christian use of Satan-language therefore presents both a theological insight and a hermeneutical danger. The insight is that religious claim is not self-validating. An assembly may invoke God while serving the adversary's purposes. The danger is that the interpreter may too quickly identify the adversary with a whole people, tradition, or social group rather than with specific actions, functions, and opposition to truth.

For this paper, the important point is that patristic theology did not treat "Satan" as a decorative metaphor. It was a serious spiritual category. To call an assembly "of Satan" was to say that, beneath its visible religious form, it had become aligned with accusation and opposition to Christ. That is why the phrase carried such force in early Christian interpretation. It named a hidden spiritual inversion.

Yet the same force explains why the phrase demands contextualization. Satan-language is powerful because it reaches beyond ordinary criticism. It should therefore be used with theological discipline. Revelation applies it to specific assemblies that slander and oppose faithful churches. The Fathers often expanded this logic into broader anti-synagogue polemic. Later history sometimes expanded it further into anti-Jewish hostility. The line between spiritual discernment and demonizing rhetoric can be crossed quickly.

Patristic interpretation thus leaves a divided legacy. It preserves the seriousness of Revelation's warning that an assembly can claim God while acting as God's adversary. It also shows how severe biblical language can be intensified by pastoral anxiety, boundary formation, and social conflict. The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" was never merely exegetical in the early Church. It became part of the struggle to define the Church, defend Christ, resist divided allegiance, and interpret the synagogue after the coming of the Messiah.

The Fathers therefore cannot be ignored, nor can they be read uncritically. They show how early Christian theology understood the phrase's power. They also show why later interpreters must distinguish between the biblical category of false adversarial assembly and sweeping denunciations that exceed the text. The patristic period is where the phrase begins to move from Revelation's local letters into the broader history of Christian polemic, with all the theological force and historical danger that movement entails.

7. Medieval and Reformation Reception

The medieval and Reformation reception of the "Synagogue of Satan" belongs to a much larger history of Christian interpretation, polemic, institutional power, and conflict over covenant identity. By the Middle Ages, Christianity was no longer a small persecuted movement seeking endurance under pagan empire. In much of Europe, Christianity had become the dominant public religion, intertwined with law, culture, monarchy, education, and social order. This

changed the social meaning of anti-synagogue language. Words that originally addressed vulnerable churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia could now be spoken from positions of ecclesiastical and political authority.

This shift is decisive. In Revelation, the phrase appears as consolation to faithful communities under pressure. In medieval Christendom, similar language could become part of a dominant culture's description of a Jewish minority living under Christian rule. The theological dispute remained real: Christians continued to claim that Christ fulfilled Israel's Scriptures and that the Church represented the people of the new covenant. But the power relationship had changed. The synagogue was no longer primarily a threatening local opponent capable of exposing Christians to Roman punishment. It was often a marginalized community subject to Christian law, Christian preaching, and Christian social imagination.

The Reformation did not remove this inheritance. Reformers challenged Catholic authority, sacramental systems, ecclesiastical abuses, papal power, and inherited theological structures, but many retained severe polemical assumptions about Jews and Judaism. In some cases, the same scriptural language used against Jews was redirected against Rome, the papacy, rival Protestant groups, sectarians, or false churches. "Synagogue of Satan" could thus become a flexible polemical category: sometimes anti-Jewish, sometimes anti-Catholic, sometimes anti-heretical, sometimes anti-institutional, and sometimes broadly typological.

This section examines the medieval and Reformation reception in four movements: medieval Christian polemic against Judaism, Luther's escalation of anti-Jewish rhetoric, Reformation covenant theology and false religion, and the dangers of polemical inheritance. The goal is descriptive and contextual. The question is not how later readers should sanitize the phrase, but how theologians and apologists actually received, expanded, and weaponized it.

7.1. Medieval Christian Polemic Against Judaism

Medieval Christian polemic against Judaism developed within a society where the Church held cultural authority and where Jewish communities occupied a legally tolerated but socially vulnerable position. The theological argument inherited from the Fathers remained central: the Church claimed that the law, prophets, temple, priesthood, sacrifices, festivals, kingship, and covenant promises reached their fulfillment in Christ. The synagogue, by rejecting Christ, was interpreted as clinging to shadow after the arrival of substance, letter after Spirit, figure after fulfillment.

This interpretive structure produced a powerful Christian image of the synagogue as spiritually blind. Medieval art sometimes represented Ecclesia and Synagoga as contrasting female figures: Ecclesia upright, crowned, seeing, and victorious; Synagoga blindfolded, defeated, holding broken symbols of law or covenantal authority. Such imagery did not usually require direct

quotation of Revelation 2:9 or 3:9 to participate in the same theological world. The synagogue was portrayed as religious form without fulfilled sight, scriptural possession without messianic recognition, covenant memory without covenant completion.

Within this framework, “Synagogue of Satan” could be understood as the severe endpoint of a broader medieval judgment: an assembly that possessed Scripture but rejected its Christian fulfillment. The charge was not merely that Jews were religiously different. It was that their difference consisted in refusal of the very Messiah whom Christians believed their own Scriptures announced. This made Jewish persistence theologically troubling to medieval Christians. The continued existence of Jews outside the Church raised questions about prophecy, judgment, witness, blindness, hardening, conversion, and the end times.

Some medieval theologians developed more restrained explanations. They argued that Jews should be preserved as witnesses to the antiquity of Scripture. The survival of Jewish communities could be interpreted as providential evidence that Christians had not invented the Hebrew Scriptures. Jews, in this view, bore witness to the texts that Christians claimed were fulfilled in Christ. This did not imply equality of theological standing, but it did sometimes restrain calls for total elimination or forced disappearance. The synagogue could be judged as spiritually blind while still being assigned a providential role within Christian history.

Yet medieval polemic also became far darker. Jews were accused of obstinacy, malice, ritual corruption, hostility to Christians, and spiritual alliance with evil. Popular preaching and social rumor often intensified theological claims into fear, resentment, and demonization. Charges of blasphemy, desecration, ritual murder, poisoning, and conspiracy entered Christian culture at various points. These accusations did not simply arise from exegesis, but biblical polemical language helped provide an imaginative vocabulary in which Jews could be cast as enemies of Christ and the Church.

This is where the reception of “Synagogue of Satan” becomes historically dangerous. The original Revelation passages concern specific assemblies associated with slander and hostility against faithful churches. In medieval Christendom, the phrase and its conceptual relatives could be absorbed into a general view of Jews as spiritually adversarial. Once that happened, the distinction between local persecuting faction and collective religious people could collapse. The theological charge became social suspicion.

Medieval disputations also shaped the reception. Christian and Jewish scholars debated Scripture, Messiah, law, Talmud, prophecy, and covenant. These debates could be formal, intellectual, and textually sophisticated, but they often took place under unequal conditions. Christian authorities controlled the public environment. Jewish participants could face serious

risks. The synagogue, in these settings, was not merely a theological opponent but a minority tradition compelled to defend itself before a dominant Christian order.

The medieval period therefore expanded the phrase's field of meaning. "Synagogue of Satan" could refer not only to the specific assemblies of Revelation, but to a perceived post-Christian synagogue that continued to reject Christ. The phrase became part of a theology of rejected or superseded religious identity. It marked the synagogue as a negative mirror to the Church: where the Church saw Christ, the synagogue was said to remain blind; where the Church claimed Spirit, the synagogue was said to cling to letter; where the Church claimed fulfillment, the synagogue was said to persist in opposition.

At the same time, medieval Christendom's own use of coercion and accusation complicates the theological picture. If the phrase names an assembly that claims divine legitimacy while acting as accuser or persecutor, then medieval Christian institutions themselves could come under the same typological judgment when they used sacred authority to oppress, slander, or coerce. This reversal is crucial. The phrase may have been used against the synagogue, but its theological structure can also expose any religious body that substitutes power and accusation for truth and mercy.

Medieval reception thus shows the phrase moving from apocalyptic local judgment to civilizational polemic. The more Christianity became socially dominant, the more dangerous the language became when applied collectively. What began as a word of encouragement to the slandered could become a word of suspicion against the marginalized. This does not erase the theological convictions of medieval Christians, but it does show how those convictions were shaped by power.

7.2. Luther and the Escalation of Anti-Jewish Rhetoric

Martin Luther's reception of Jewish-Christian conflict occupies a central and troubling place in Reformation history. Early in his career, Luther hoped that a purified Gospel, freed from what he regarded as Roman corruption, might persuade Jews to accept Christ. He believed that medieval Catholic abuses had obscured the Gospel and that Jews might respond differently if Christ were preached more clearly. This early expectation produced a comparatively more conciliatory approach than his later writings.

When that hope failed, Luther's rhetoric changed dramatically. His later anti-Jewish writings became severe, angry, and destructive. He accused Jews of blasphemy, obstinacy, hostility to Christ, and spiritual corruption. He urged harsh measures against synagogues, Jewish teaching, and Jewish communal life. His language drew upon older Christian anti-Jewish traditions but intensified them with Reformation-era urgency and personal disappointment.

The significance of Luther for the phrase “Synagogue of Satan” is not only whether he used the exact phrase in a given passage. The deeper issue is that he inherited and amplified the same theological logic: the synagogue as an assembly that claims the God of Scripture while rejecting Christ and opposing the Gospel. In Luther’s mature polemic, Jewish refusal of Christ was not treated as mere error. It was portrayed as active blasphemy and spiritual hostility. The boundary between theological dispute and demonizing denunciation became dangerously thin.

Luther’s late rhetoric also shows how apocalyptic categories could be intensified during the Reformation. The Reformation was an age of conflict over true and false church, Gospel and works, Christ and antichrist, Scripture and tradition, papacy and evangelical faith. Luther regularly used severe language against opponents, including the pope, Catholic theologians, radical reformers, peasants, Turks, and Jews. The world was interpreted through conflict between Gospel and its enemies. In such a setting, “Synagogue of Satan” belonged to a larger polemical universe in which religious opposition was often explained as satanic opposition.

Luther’s anti-Jewish rhetoric cannot be separated from his doctrine of Christ. For Luther, Christ was the center of Scripture, justification, promise, and salvation. To reject Christ after hearing the Gospel was therefore spiritually catastrophic. The more central Christ became in Luther’s theology, the more severe his judgment became against those he believed knowingly rejected Him. This Christocentric intensity partly explains the harshness of his speech. It does not make the speech harmless. It explains the theological engine behind it.

Luther also reveals the danger of frustrated missionary expectation. His early hope for Jewish conversion was tied to his belief that the true Gospel would be more compelling than the corrupted Christianity Jews had encountered. When Jews did not convert in the way he expected, disappointment turned into accusation. This pattern is important for reception history. Polemic often intensifies when an opponent fails to play the role assigned by the theologian. The theologian expects recognition, conversion, or submission; when it does not happen, the opponent is interpreted not merely as unconvinced but as hardened, malicious, or satanic.

The later consequences of Luther’s anti-Jewish writings have made his reception especially significant. His words were preserved, quoted, republished, and used in later anti-Jewish contexts far beyond his original theological disputes. This afterlife matters because reception history is not limited to authorial intent. The social effect of theological rhetoric can exceed the moment of composition. Luther’s severe language became part of a larger Christian inheritance that later ages could exploit.

For this paper, Luther illustrates the Reformation escalation of inherited polemic. The Reformation did not simply return to biblical purity in its treatment of the synagogue. It also

transmitted medieval and patristic anti-Jewish assumptions into a new confessional age. The polemical categories of false church, antichrist, law without Gospel, and satanic opposition could be applied against Jews with renewed force. The “Synagogue of Satan” type thus remained active, even when not always named explicitly.

At the same time, Luther’s rhetoric also demonstrates the instability of the category. If “Synagogue of Satan” means an assembly claiming divine legitimacy while opposing Christ, then Luther could direct similar severity toward Rome. If it means religious reliance on law, works, and fleshly confidence, then it could be applied to any opponent of the Gospel as Luther understood it. If it means satanic accusation against the faithful, then both synagogue and papacy could be placed under the same polemical grammar. The phrase’s meaning became transferable across confessional conflict.

This transferability is one reason the phrase is so powerful and dangerous. It can describe a theological type, but it can also become an all-purpose weapon. Once one’s opponent is not merely wrong but “of Satan,” ordinary debate becomes spiritual war. Luther’s case shows how quickly theological conviction can become destructive rhetoric when combined with disappointment, apocalyptic urgency, and inherited hostility.

Luther’s role in this history must therefore be described plainly. He stands as a major Reformation theologian who intensified anti-Jewish polemic while also contributing to a broader Protestant vocabulary of true and false religion. His writings show how the “Synagogue of Satan” logic could be directed against Jews, Rome, and other perceived enemies of the Gospel. His legacy is not a footnote but a central example of how severe biblical language can travel through theology into social consequence.

7.3. Reformation Covenant Theology and False Religion

The Reformation reshaped Christian debates over covenant identity, law, Gospel, church, sacraments, authority, and true worship. While anti-Jewish polemic continued, the concept of a false religious assembly also expanded within intra-Christian conflict. Reformers accused Rome of corrupting the Gospel, obscuring justification, abusing ecclesiastical power, selling indulgences, misusing sacraments, and substituting human tradition for Scripture. Catholic writers, in turn, accused reformers of schism, rebellion, heresy, and destruction of apostolic unity. The language of true and false church became central.

In this setting, the “Synagogue of Satan” could function typologically beyond its original Jewish-Christian frame. A religious body might be called false not because it lacked religious form, but because it possessed religious form while opposing the truth of Christ. This is structurally similar to Revelation’s phrase. The issue is not irreligion but corrupted religion. The enemy is not

merely pagan empire but an assembly claiming divine authority while, in the accuser's view, resisting God's word.

Reformation covenant theology added further complexity. Different Protestant traditions developed accounts of the covenant of works, covenant of grace, continuity and discontinuity between Old and New Testaments, baptism, election, visible and invisible church, and the relation between Israel and the Church. These debates affected how interpreters understood phrases such as "true Israel," "circumcision of the heart," "Jerusalem above," and "Synagogue of Satan." The question of who truly belongs to God remained central.

Some Reformation traditions emphasized the visible and invisible Church. The visible Church contains mixed members, institutions, offices, and sacraments. The invisible Church consists of the elect truly known to God. This distinction parallels the biblical distinction between outward claim and inward reality. A church may have outward marks and yet contain corruption. Conversely, the true people of God may be hidden, weak, persecuted, or scattered. Revelation's letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia fit easily into this framework. The faithful may appear poor or weak, while false claimants may appear legitimate.

The Reformers also emphasized the marks of the true Church: the pure preaching of the Word, right administration of the sacraments, and discipline. Where these marks were corrupted or suppressed, a church could be judged false. This made it possible to apply "Synagogue of Satan" language not only to Jews but to Christian institutions viewed as apostate. The phrase became part of a broader Protestant attack on false ecclesial legitimacy. Rome could be portrayed as a church in name but an adversary in function. Radical groups could be portrayed the same way. Confessional opponents could be identified as assemblies of deception.

This broader application shows the theological portability of the phrase. Revelation's language about those who "say" they are something but are not became a template for evaluating religious institutions. A body might say it is the Church, say it possesses apostolic succession, say it guards the sacraments, say it teaches Scripture, say it preserves tradition, say it represents Christ. The Reformation question was whether Christ Himself recognized that claim. If the institution opposed the Gospel, persecuted believers, obscured justification, or trafficked in false worship, reformers could judge it a counterfeit assembly.

At the same time, this portability intensified polemical danger. If every confessional opponent becomes a "Synagogue of Satan," the phrase loses precision. It becomes a rhetorical weapon rather than a disciplined theological judgment. Reformation polemic often used extreme terms because the stakes were understood as eternal. But high stakes do not automatically produce careful speech. The same logic that allowed reformers to expose corruption also allowed them to demonize disagreement.

Covenant theology also influenced attitudes toward Jews. Many Protestants continued to view the Church as the true Israel or the fulfillment of Israel's promises. Some expected future Jewish conversion. Some interpreted Jewish unbelief as temporary hardening. Some maintained severe anti-Jewish assumptions inherited from earlier centuries. The Reformation did not produce one uniform view. It produced competing forms of continuity, replacement, fulfillment, restoration, and eschatological expectation. The "Synagogue of Satan" phrase could be interpreted differently depending on these larger covenant frameworks.

A strict supersessionist framework tended to read the synagogue as a rejected form after Christ, a religious body persisting in refusal of fulfillment. A more eschatological framework might interpret Jewish unbelief as severe but not final, awaiting future conversion or restoration. A more typological framework might generalize the phrase to any false religious assembly, including corrupt Christian institutions. A more historical reading might confine the phrase to Smyrna and Philadelphia. All these possibilities existed within or after the Reformation world.

The Reformation therefore broadened the phrase's use. It preserved anti-Jewish inherited readings, but it also redirected the logic of false assembly toward intra-Christian disputes. The phrase became a way to ask: What makes an assembly truly of God? Is it name, continuity, ritual, law, episcopal office, sacrament, doctrine, Scripture, Spirit, faith, election, or obedience? When an institution claims divine legitimacy but opposes the Gospel, is it still the Church, or has it become an adversarial counterfeit?

These questions show why the phrase retained theological force. It was not merely a slur preserved from ancient conflict. It expressed a central Reformation concern: the visible religious institution can lie about itself. The assembly can say it is holy while acting against holiness. It can say it represents God while obstructing God's word. It can say it is the guardian of covenant while persecuting the faithful. That is the theological structure of the "Synagogue of Satan" type.

7.4. The Dangers of Polemical Inheritance

The medieval and Reformation reception of the "Synagogue of Satan" reveals a central danger: severe biblical language can be inherited without its original constraints. Revelation speaks to particular churches under particular pressures. Later interpreters inherit the phrase, but they do not inherit the same social location, the same local conflict, or the same balance of power. When the phrase moves from persecuted minority communities to dominant religious institutions, its effect changes.

This danger is not unique to this phrase. All polemical Scripture can be misused when detached from context. Prophetic judgment, apocalyptic denunciation, Gospel rebuke, Pauline severity, and Johannine dualism can all become tools of self-justifying hostility. But the phrase

“Synagogue of Satan” is especially volatile because it joins a recognizable religious term with satanic identification. It can move quickly from theological discernment to demonization.

The first danger is collective expansion. A phrase applied in Revelation to specific opponents in Smyrna and Philadelphia can be expanded to all Jews, all Judaism, all synagogues, or all non-Christian Jewish identity. This expansion is not merely exegetical; it is social. It transforms a local apocalyptic judgment into a collective religious accusation. Medieval and Reformation reception often moved in this direction, whether explicitly or implicitly. The result was a theological atmosphere in which Jews could be imagined as adversarial by nature rather than as participants in a real and contested religious history.

The second danger is power blindness. A persecuted community and a dominant institution do not speak the same words with the same effect. When Smyrna hears that Christ knows the slander of the “Synagogue of Satan,” the phrase consoles the afflicted. When a powerful Christian society calls a vulnerable Jewish minority satanic, the phrase can help justify exclusion, contempt, and coercion. Reception history must therefore consider not only what words mean but what words do.

The third danger is rhetorical transfer. Once a phrase becomes a weapon, it can be aimed at many targets. Jews, Catholics, Protestants, radicals, heretics, mystics, reformers, bishops, monarchs, and dissenters can all be accused of belonging to Satan’s assembly. The phrase’s typological power becomes its rhetorical danger. It can name real corruption, but it can also sanctify factional hatred. Every group can imagine itself as Philadelphia and its opponent as the synagogue of the adversary.

The fourth danger is loss of self-application. Biblical judgment language is safest when interpreters allow it to judge themselves. The “Synagogue of Satan” should not be only an outward label. It should raise the question of whether one’s own assembly claims God while acting as accuser, slanderer, persecutor, or defender of falsehood. Medieval and Reformation polemics often failed at this point. They applied severe language outward while leaving their own institutions insufficiently examined. Yet the theological structure of the phrase demands self-examination. Any church can become adversarial if it protects power against truth.

The fifth danger is the confusion of doctrinal seriousness with moral permission. A theologian may believe that rejection of Christ is spiritually grave. A church may believe that false teaching endangers souls. A reformer may believe that an institution has corrupted the Gospel. Such convictions may be sincere and serious. But seriousness does not grant permission for slander, cruelty, false accusation, or collective condemnation. Indeed, the phrase itself condemns accusatory falsehood. To use “Synagogue of Satan” in a satanic manner is to fall under its own judgment.

The medieval and Reformation periods demonstrate how difficult this balance can be. Theologians believed they were defending truth. They interpreted Scripture through Christ. They sought to distinguish true from false worship. They warned against spiritual danger. Yet the same rhetoric often contributed to contempt, social exclusion, and inherited hostility. The problem was not only bad exegesis. It was the combination of theology, fear, institutional power, and polemical imagination.

This does not mean the phrase should be emptied of meaning. To avoid misuse by neutralizing the text would be another kind of failure. Revelation does name a real possibility: an assembly can claim divine legitimacy while functioning as the adversary's instrument. Religious institutions can lie. Sacred forms can become corrupt. Accusation can masquerade as holiness. Persecution can be justified by covenant language. The phrase retains its theological force because the danger it names is real.

The task, then, is disciplined reception. Medieval and Reformation readings must be studied honestly as part of the history of interpretation. They show how Christians understood the phrase in relation to Judaism, the Church, Rome, covenant, law, Gospel, and false religion. They also show how quickly biblical severity can become inherited hostility. Contextualization does not mean correction from above; it means placing interpreters in their historical, theological, and social settings so their claims can be understood in full.

The dangers of polemical inheritance are therefore part of the paper's central argument. The "Synagogue of Satan" is not only a phrase about first-century opponents. It is also a test of interpreters. Those who use the phrase reveal their own theology of covenant, accusation, power, and truth. The phrase asks not only who the adversarial assembly is, but how one knows, who is speaking, from what position, with what evidence, and toward what end.

Medieval and Reformation reception teaches that the phrase can illuminate false religion, but it can also darken the religious imagination when severed from humility. It can expose counterfeit holiness, but it can also create counterfeit righteousness in the one who wields it. It can warn the faithful, but it can also endanger the vulnerable. This dual capacity is why the phrase remains one of the most severe and contested in Christian interpretation.

8. Protestant Apologists and Classical Commentators

Protestant interpretation of the "Synagogue of Satan" developed along two related tracks. The first was exegetical and historical: commentators asked what the phrase meant in Revelation's messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia. The second was theological and polemical: apologists asked what kind of religious assembly could claim covenant legitimacy while opposing Christ and persecuting His people. These two tracks often overlapped. Classical Protestant

commentators usually read the phrase as referring first to hostile Jewish opponents of the early churches, but many also generalized it into a warning against counterfeit religion, false churches, hypocritical assemblies, and religious bodies that claim God while serving the adversary's purposes.

This Protestant tradition inherited much from the Fathers and the Reformers, especially the distinction between outward claim and inward reality. It also intensified the concern with Scripture, Gospel, true church, false church, and the marks of authentic faith. A group could possess religious vocabulary, sacred history, public authority, ceremonies, and institutional continuity, yet still be judged false if it opposed Christ and His word. This made the "Synagogue of Satan" a powerful phrase for Protestant theology, not only in relation to Jewish-Christian conflict but also in relation to Rome, nominal Christianity, legalism, persecution, and spiritual hypocrisy.

The classical Protestant commentarial tradition is not uniform. Matthew Henry, John Gill, Ellicott, and later evangelical interpreters emphasize different aspects of the phrase. Some focus on false covenant claim. Some stress the satanic character of slander and persecution. Some read the phrase typologically as a warning against all false religious assemblies. Some restrict the language to the specific historical opponents in Asia Minor. Together, these readings show how the phrase functioned in Protestant apologetics: as exegesis of Revelation, as a doctrine of true and false religion, and as a weapon in debates over ecclesial legitimacy.

8.1. Matthew Henry and the Counterfeit Covenant Assembly

Matthew Henry's interpretation is one of the most influential in the English Protestant tradition. His reading of the "Synagogue of Satan" reflects the devotional, ecclesial, and moral style of his commentary. He does not treat the phrase as a mere historical curiosity. He reads it as a serious warning about religious pretension. For Henry, the key issue is that some people claim to be the peculiar covenant people of God while opposing the truth of the Gospel. Their claim is therefore contradicted by their spiritual condition and conduct.

Henry's reading is important because it identifies the core of the phrase as counterfeit covenant identity. The opponents "say" they are Jews. They claim sacred standing. They appeal to a name associated with God's covenant people. Yet, according to the text, their actions reveal a different reality. In Henry's logic, the name of God's people cannot be separated from faithfulness to God's revelation in Christ. To reject the Gospel while claiming covenant privilege is to become a false assembly.

This interpretation fits the larger Protestant concern with nominal religion. Henry's world was shaped by the distinction between outward profession and inward grace. A person could be baptized, attend worship, hear sermons, confess orthodox doctrine, and belong to a visible

church while lacking true regeneration. In the same way, an assembly could claim a sacred identity while lacking the spiritual reality of obedience to God. Henry therefore reads Revelation's phrase as a warning not only about one ancient group but about all religious hypocrisy.

His commentary also emphasizes the opposition between the Church of Christ and the assembly of the adversary. If Christ has His Church, then Satan also gathers an opposing assembly. This does not require open satanic worship. It means that false religion can become organized, communal, and institutional. Satan's work is not limited to individual temptation; it can take social and religious form. An assembly may become satanic in function when it resists the Gospel, slanders the faithful, and claims holiness falsely.

Henry's reading therefore contributes to the theological type developed in this paper. A "Synagogue of Satan" is not merely a group outside Christianity. It is any gathered religious body that claims divine standing while opposing divine truth. Its danger lies precisely in its sacred appearance. It does not present itself as wickedness. It presents itself as fidelity. It does not openly announce itself as adversarial. It accuses the faithful in the name of righteousness.

At the same time, Henry's interpretation belongs to the older Protestant tradition that often assumed a sharp contrast between the Church and the synagogue. His language reflects a world in which Christian fulfillment theology was taken for granted. He does not approach the text with later post-Holocaust caution or modern Jewish-Christian dialogue in view. His concern is primarily doctrinal and moral: a false religious claim is exposed by opposition to Christ.

This makes Henry useful for understanding Protestant apologetics. His interpretation is not merely anti-Jewish polemic. It is a general theory of false religious profession. The phrase becomes a mirror for all who claim God without the inward reality of grace. A Christian church may also fall under analogous judgment if it possesses outward profession while opposing Christ's truth. Henry's reading therefore preserves the severity of Revelation while expanding its warning beyond the immediate first-century setting.

For this paper, Henry represents a classical Protestant move: the "Synagogue of Satan" is first read historically, but then generalized morally and ecclesially. The phrase names a counterfeit covenant assembly, one that possesses the language of sacred identity but lacks the truth of covenant fidelity.

8.2. John Gill and the Antichrist Typology

John Gill's interpretation is more severe and more explicitly polemical. As a Baptist theologian and commentator, Gill reads Revelation through a strong doctrinal and prophetic framework. His treatment of the "Synagogue of Satan" reflects older Protestant instincts about antichrist, false religion, and the opposition between true Gospel faith and religious corruption. Where

Henry often moralizes and devotionalizes the phrase, Gill intensifies its apocalyptic and typological force.

Gill's reading tends to see the opponents not only as local adversaries but as representatives of a broader pattern of anti-Christian hostility. The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" becomes connected to the idea of religious bodies that imitate holiness while serving the adversary. Gill's language can be harsh, reflecting the polemical style of his age and tradition. He is concerned with the reality of false assemblies, false teachers, and counterfeit claims to divine authority.

One important feature of Gill's interpretation is the connection between the "Synagogue of Satan" and antichrist typology. In Protestant interpretation, antichrist was often not simply a future individual but a religious system opposed to Christ while claiming sacred authority. This made Revelation's phrase especially useful. A religious body could appear pious, ancient, organized, and authoritative while in fact opposing the Gospel. That is the essence of antichrist in much Protestant polemic: not open atheism, but religious counterfeit.

Gill's interpretation also reflects a strong doctrine of spiritual conflict. The Church is not merely one institution among others. It is the assembly of Christ in conflict with false religion, worldly power, and satanic deception. The "Synagogue of Satan" is therefore not a mild term for religious difference. It identifies a body that actively opposes the true Church. The adversary works through organized religion when that religion rejects Christ, persecutes believers, or corrupts the Gospel.

This reading has obvious theological power. It refuses to domesticate Revelation. It recognizes that Scripture often names evil not only in pagan forms but in religious forms. It sees that the most dangerous opposition to Christ may come from those who claim divine authority. It also connects Revelation's local phrase to larger biblical themes: false prophets, wolves in sheep's clothing, antichrist, Babylon, and the beastly corruption of power.

Yet Gill's reading also illustrates the danger of escalation. Once the phrase is drawn into antichrist typology, it can become extremely broad. It can be applied to Jews, Catholics, heretics, nominal churches, persecuting states, or any opponent of one's doctrinal system. This does not mean all such applications are equal, but it shows how the phrase can become mobile within polemical theology. Its severity can be transferred from the text's immediate situation to a wide range of later conflicts.

Gill's Protestant world was also shaped by the identification of true religion with doctrinal fidelity and evangelical truth. An assembly that rejected the Gospel as Gill understood it could be categorized not merely as mistaken but as adversarial. The strength of this approach is that it takes truth seriously. The weakness is that it can reduce complex historical communities to their polemical function in one theological system.

For this paper, Gill is important because he represents the more apocalyptic Protestant use of the phrase. The “Synagogue of Satan” is not only a local persecuting assembly. It is a type of antichrist religion: a body that claims the name of God while opposing Christ, persecuting His people, and serving the adversary’s work. Gill’s reading helps explain why the phrase became so potent in Protestant apologetics. It provided a scriptural name for religious counterfeit at the institutional level.

At the same time, Gill’s interpretation must be contextualized. His severity belongs to a confessional age in which theological disagreement was often framed as cosmic conflict. He preserves an important biblical category, but his style shows how easily the category can become expansive and polemical. The value of his interpretation lies in its recognition of counterfeit sacred authority. Its danger lies in how broadly and harshly such recognition can be deployed.

8.3. Ellicott and the Historical Persecution Frame

Ellicott’s commentary represents a somewhat more historically focused approach. While still operating within a Christian interpretive framework, Ellicott pays close attention to the local circumstances of Smyrna and the early Church’s experience of persecution. In this reading, the “Synagogue of Satan” is connected to concrete hostility against Christians, especially slander, denunciation, and participation in persecution. The phrase is severe because the opposition is severe.

This historical frame is important because it prevents the phrase from floating free as a general theological insult. In Revelation 2:9, Christ says He knows the slander directed at the church in Smyrna. The phrase “Synagogue of Satan” appears in that specific context. Ellicott and similar commentators therefore read the phrase through the experience of Christian communities who were defamed, exposed, and endangered by hostile local opponents. The satanic character of the assembly lies in its role as accuser.

Ellicott also connects the passage to later traditions about the martyrdom of Polycarp in Smyrna. In that martyrdom account, Jews are described as participating in the hostility against Polycarp, including the gathering of fuel for his execution. Whether one reads that account as direct confirmation of the situation in Revelation or as a later example of similar conflict, it illustrates how Christian memory associated Smyrna with severe Jewish-Christian hostility. The “Synagogue of Satan” phrase was therefore read not only through the text of Revelation but through martyrdom tradition.

The historical persecution frame highlights several key features. First, Christians in Smyrna were vulnerable. They were not the dominant religious body. They faced poverty, slander, imprisonment, and death. Second, the opposition was not merely doctrinal. It could have social

and legal consequences. Third, the phrase functions pastorally: Christ assures the afflicted church that He knows the truth about its accusers. Fourth, the spiritual identity of the opposition is revealed by its conduct toward the faithful.

This reading is less abstract than some Protestant typological interpretations. It does not begin by asking which later institution corresponds to the “Synagogue of Satan.” It begins with Smyrna. Who was slandering the church? What pressures did Christians face? How could local hostility become imprisonment or martyrdom? How does Revelation interpret that danger? These questions keep the phrase anchored in its immediate literary and historical setting.

At the same time, Ellicott’s reading does not eliminate theology. The historical opponents are still judged spiritually. Slander against the faithful is not merely social friction. It is associated with Satan, the accuser. The assembly that participates in such slander becomes, in Revelation’s terms, the adversary’s assembly. Historical contextualization therefore does not soften the phrase into neutrality. It clarifies why the phrase is severe.

This approach also helps explain why Smyrna and Philadelphia are the two churches that receive the phrase. Both are faithful under pressure. Both face opponents whose claims are contradicted by their actions. Both are promised Christ’s recognition. The phrase belongs not to churches being rebuked for compromise, but to churches being strengthened against external hostility. This pastoral function is central.

Ellicott’s historical frame also helps prevent overgeneralization. If the phrase is tied to specific slanderous and persecuting conduct, then it should not be applied indiscriminately. The issue is not merely that a group is Jewish, non-Christian, or religiously different. The issue is that a particular assembly opposes the faithful through accusation and persecution while claiming sacred legitimacy. The conduct is essential to the designation.

For this paper, Ellicott represents a Protestant reading that balances historical referent and theological judgment. He does not deny the severity of the phrase, but he places it in the context of persecution. This is important because it shows that the “Synagogue of Satan” is not first a theory of abstract religious otherness. It is a name given to adversarial action against Christ’s witnesses. The assembly is judged by its fruit: slander, hostility, and participation in persecution.

8.4. Later Evangelical Commentary and Local Application

Later evangelical commentary has often moved toward a more restricted application of the phrase. Many contemporary evangelical interpreters still identify the immediate opponents in Smyrna and Philadelphia as Jewish communities or factions hostile to Christians. However, they commonly emphasize that the phrase applies to those specific opponents in those specific

cities, not to Jews as a people, Judaism as a whole, or modern Jewish communities. This restriction reflects both exegetical caution and awareness of reception history.

This modern evangelical move does not necessarily deny the older theological category of false religious assembly. Rather, it distinguishes between original referent, theological principle, and improper collective application. The original referent may be a hostile local assembly in first-century Asia Minor. The theological principle may be that any assembly claiming divine legitimacy while slandering and persecuting the faithful becomes adversarial. The improper application would be to turn the phrase into a blanket condemnation of an ethnic or religious people across time.

This distinction marks a major development in Protestant apologetics. Classical commentators often assumed a Christian society and wrote within inherited anti-Jewish frameworks. Modern evangelical apologists write after the Holocaust, after major developments in Jewish-Christian dialogue, and in a context where antisemitic conspiracy theories frequently misuse Revelation's language. As a result, many now explicitly warn against modern conspiratorial uses of the phrase. They attempt to preserve the text's meaning while refusing racialized or collective demonization.

Some later evangelical readings emphasize the meaning of Satan as accuser. On this view, the phrase identifies an assembly that becomes "of Satan" insofar as it slanders or denounces believers. This reading is especially useful because it focuses on function rather than essence. The question becomes: what is the assembly doing? If it is accusing the faithful falsely, exposing them to harm, and denying Christ's work, then it is acting in the adversary's pattern. This avoids the claim that a whole people or tradition is ontologically satanic.

Other evangelical readings emphasize the local historical pressures of Smyrna and Philadelphia. They note that Christians may have been vulnerable to Roman punishment if denounced as outside the protection or recognition associated with Judaism. In this interpretation, synagogue opposition could have serious practical consequences. The phrase names those who, by excluding or accusing Christians, placed them in danger. Again, the satanic function is tied to accusation and persecution.

Still other evangelical interpreters read the phrase more broadly as a warning against false religion. They may apply it to nominal churches, cults, persecuting religious institutions, legalistic systems, or apostate assemblies. This continues the classical Protestant instinct. However, contemporary interpreters are more likely to add boundaries: the phrase should be applied by analogy only where the same pattern exists, not as a careless label for disagreement.

This later evangelical caution has sometimes been criticized from different directions. Some argue that modern interpreters overcorrect and soften the text because of contemporary

sensitivities. Others argue that even limited identification of first-century Jewish opponents risks perpetuating harmful patterns. Still others argue that the phrase is best understood as intra-Jewish polemic from a Jewish apocalyptic writer and should not be read through later Christian anti-Jewish frameworks. These debates show that the phrase remains contested.

For the purposes of this paper, later evangelical commentary is important because it shows a self-conscious attempt to separate exegesis from misuse. Apologists often want to affirm that Revelation's words are true and inspired while also denying that they authorize hatred of Jews. Their approach is therefore contextual: Christ addressed specific opponents who slandered His churches; the phrase may also warn against any false assembly; but it should not be converted into an ethnic, racial, or conspiratorial category.

This differs from some older Protestant commentary not necessarily in the basic identification of false claim, but in the explicitness of the limits. Matthew Henry and John Gill often wrote as though the theological contrast were obvious and did not need modern safeguards. Contemporary evangelicals often state the safeguards directly. That difference is itself part of the phrase's reception history. Modern caution is not simply external correction; it is a historically conditioned mode of interpretation shaped by the known consequences of earlier polemics.

Later evangelical readings therefore preserve three elements. First, they retain the authority of the biblical phrase. Revelation's language is not erased. Second, they retain the historical reality of opposition to early Christians. The churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia faced real slander and hostility. Third, they restrict application so that the phrase does not become a tool of collective demonization. The result is a moderated Protestant apologetic: severe text, specific context, transferable principle, limited application.

This approach may not satisfy every theological reader. Some will regard it as too cautious. Others will regard it as still too severe. But as a reception-historical fact, it is significant. It shows how Protestant apologetics has adapted its handling of the phrase in light of modern history, while still seeking to preserve the apocalyptic warning. The "Synagogue of Satan" remains, in this reading, a real biblical category. But it is a category defined by false claim, accusation, and persecution, not by ethnicity, ancestry, or ordinary religious difference.

Classical and modern Protestant interpretations therefore form a spectrum. Henry emphasizes counterfeit covenant profession. Gill intensifies the antichrist and false religion typology. Ellicott anchors the phrase in historical persecution. Later evangelicals often restrict the application while preserving the theological principle. Together, they show the Protestant tradition wrestling with the same central problem: an assembly may claim to belong to God while acting

against God's truth and people. Revelation names that contradiction with one of Scripture's most severe phrases.

9. Modern Academic, Catholic, and Ecumenical Contextualization

Modern interpretation of the "Synagogue of Satan" differs from much patristic, medieval, and Reformation reception because it operates after several major shifts: historical-critical biblical scholarship, the recovery of Jewish context for the New Testament, modern study of Second Temple Judaism, awareness of the Jewishness of Jesus and the apostles, post-Holocaust Christian self-examination, and formal Jewish-Christian dialogue. These shifts did not create a single consensus, but they changed the terms of discussion. The phrase is now commonly treated not only as a problem of exegesis, but also as a problem of reception history.

This modern contextualization does not simply say that earlier theologians were wrong and later interpreters are right. That would oversimplify the history. The older commentators often preserved real theological concerns: false covenant claim, religious hypocrisy, persecution of the faithful, satanic accusation, and opposition to Christ. Modern scholars and church bodies generally do not deny that Revelation contains severe judgment language. Rather, they ask how that language functioned in its first-century setting and how later Christian use of it changed when Christianity became socially dominant.

The modern period therefore adds a new layer to the interpretation of the phrase. It asks not only, "What did Revelation mean?" but also, "What has this phrase done in Christian history?" It recognizes that an apocalyptic phrase addressed to persecuted churches can become dangerous when repeated without context by powerful religious majorities. It also recognizes that the New Testament emerged from a Jewish world, not from a later Gentile Christian civilization already separated from Judaism. The result is a more cautious and historically layered discussion.

This section examines four dimensions of modern contextualization: historical-critical readings of Revelation, post-Holocaust caution and Jewish-Christian dialogue, the Catholic teaching represented by *Nostra Aetate*, and the interpretation of modern caution itself as part of reception history rather than final exegesis.

9.1. Historical-Critical Readings of Revelation

Historical-critical scholarship generally begins by locating Revelation within the late first-century world of Asia Minor, Roman imperial power, local civic religion, Jewish communities, early Christian assemblies, and apocalyptic literary convention. Instead of beginning with later doctrinal systems, it asks how the phrase "Synagogue of Satan" would have functioned in the

messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia. This method usually emphasizes local conflict, social vulnerability, and disputed identity.

In this framework, the phrase is often interpreted as part of the conflict between early Jesus-believing communities and local Jewish assemblies or factions that rejected their claims. The churches addressed in Revelation were small, fragile, and under pressure. They were not socially dominant. In Smyrna, the immediate context is slander and impending imprisonment. In Philadelphia, the context is weakness, endurance, and promised vindication. Historical-critical readings therefore usually treat the phrase as a word spoken to suffering Christians rather than as a general theological label for Judaism.

This approach pays special attention to the phrase “who say they are Jews and are not.” Scholars have proposed several explanations. Some argue that the opponents were ethnically or religiously Jewish but, from Revelation’s Christian perspective, failed to be true Jews because they rejected Christ and opposed His people. Others argue that the opponents may have falsely claimed Jewish identity in some local sense. Others read the passage as intra-Jewish polemic, since the earliest Jesus movement was itself deeply Jewish and disputes over Messiah, covenant, and Scripture occurred within Jewish categories before becoming a fully separate Christian-Jewish divide. Still others emphasize the social and political function of the claim: who had the right to represent the people of God, and who could claim continuity with Israel’s Scriptures?

Historical-critical scholarship also emphasizes that Revelation is apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic language is symbolic, severe, dualistic, and unveiling. It does not speak in the measured tone of modern academic prose. Revelation names spiritual realities behind visible institutions and events. Rome becomes Babylon. Imperial power becomes beastly. False prophecy becomes demonic deception. Persecution becomes satanic assault. In that literary world, “Synagogue of Satan” is not an isolated insult but part of Revelation’s broader unveiling of hidden spiritual allegiances.

At the same time, historical-critical interpretation often resists turning Revelation’s local polemic into universal ethnic theology. The phrase appears only in two specific letters. It is not used as a general description of all Jews in Revelation, nor does Revelation itself provide a systematic doctrine of Judaism. The book is concerned with faithful witness, idolatrous empire, compromise, persecution, endurance, judgment, and the victory of the Lamb. The “Synagogue of Satan” passages belong to that pattern, but they do not by themselves authorize unlimited application.

Another feature of modern scholarship is renewed attention to the Jewishness of Revelation itself. Revelation is saturated with the Hebrew Scriptures. Its imagery, symbols, judgment

scenes, temple language, prophetic echoes, and messianic expectations are deeply Jewish in form. The author does not write as someone detached from Israel's scriptural world. He writes as a Christian prophet whose imagination is formed by Israel's God, Israel's prophets, Israel's worship, and Israel's apocalyptic hope. This complicates any simple reading in which Revelation is imagined as anti-Jewish in a later civilizational sense. The book is more accurately understood as a Christian Jewish or Jewish-scriptural apocalypse centered on Jesus.

Historical-critical readings also place emphasis on denunciation and legal vulnerability. If local Jewish groups rejected the Christian claim to belong within the tolerated orbit of Judaism, Christians might become more exposed to Roman suspicion. If Christians were publicly accused of being disloyal, impious, or socially dangerous, they could face imprisonment or death. In that context, slander was not merely insult. It could become a mechanism of persecution. The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" may therefore name those whose accusations placed the faithful in danger.

This does not remove the theological severity of the phrase. Historical-critical interpretation can sometimes appear to domesticate apocalyptic language by explaining its social setting. But explanation is not necessarily reduction. To say that the phrase arose from local conflict does not mean it was merely local anger. Within Revelation's own theology, local conflict reveals cosmic conflict. The historical situation is the stage on which spiritual opposition becomes visible.

Modern academic readings therefore tend to produce a layered interpretation: the immediate referent is local and first-century; the language is apocalyptic and theological; the conflict concerns identity, slander, and persecution; and later generalized applications must be treated with caution. This reading may differ from older theological polemic, but it does not eliminate the central biblical issue. An assembly that claims sacred legitimacy while acting as accuser against the faithful is exposed by Christ as adversarial.

9.2. Post-Holocaust Caution and Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Post-Holocaust Christian interpretation of the "Synagogue of Satan" is shaped by the recognition that Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric contributed to a long cultural history in which Jews were marginalized, demonized, and sometimes persecuted in Christian societies. The Holocaust was carried out by a modern racial and political ideology, not by traditional Christian theology alone, but it forced Christian churches to examine the ways earlier theological language had helped prepare cultural patterns of contempt. Texts such as Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 therefore came under renewed scrutiny.

This scrutiny did not arise because modern interpreters suddenly discovered that Revelation was severe. The severity had always been obvious. The new question was how such severity had

been received and repeated. A phrase spoken within an apocalyptic message to persecuted first-century churches had often been abstracted from its context and applied broadly to Jews and synagogues across history. Post-Holocaust interpretation asked whether Christian theology had sufficiently distinguished between local biblical polemic, doctrinal disagreement, and collective demonization.

Jewish-Christian dialogue also changed the interpretive atmosphere. Christians increasingly engaged Jewish scholars, rabbis, historians, and theologians not merely as objects of mission or polemic, but as interlocutors. This dialogue highlighted how certain Christian readings sounded to Jewish communities and how the history of interpretation had affected Jewish life. It also encouraged Christians to recover the Jewish matrix of the New Testament: Jesus as a Jew, Mary and the apostles as Jews, Paul as a Jewish apostle to the Gentiles, and the early Church as emerging from within Israel's Scriptures.

In this setting, many interpreters began to distinguish more carefully between anti-Jewish polemic within ancient intra-religious conflict and later antisemitic uses of Scripture. Ancient Jewish, Christian, and pagan polemics could all be severe. The ancient world often used sharp boundary language. But when such language is transmitted through centuries of unequal power, its meaning and effect change. Post-Holocaust caution therefore asks modern readers to attend not only to original meaning but also to accumulated impact.

This caution has led many theologians and apologists to state explicit limits when discussing the phrase. They may say that the "Synagogue of Satan" refers to specific opponents in Smyrna and Philadelphia. They may say that it names those who slandered and persecuted Christians. They may say that it describes an assembly acting in the satanic role of accuser. They may also say that it must not be applied to Jews as a people, to Judaism as such, or to modern Jewish communities. These limits are not always presented as purely exegetical conclusions. Often they are also moral and historical safeguards.

Some readers object that such safeguards risk weakening the text. They argue that Revelation itself speaks in severe theological categories and that modern sensitivity should not erase Christ's judgment on false covenant claim. This objection deserves to be understood rather than dismissed. The text does not present itself as neutral sociology. It makes a divine judgment. It says that some who claim sacred identity are not what they claim and that their assembly belongs to Satan. Any interpretation that explains away that severity has failed to take Revelation seriously.

However, post-Holocaust caution does not necessarily require explaining away the severity. It can instead ask where the severity is directed. Is it directed at specific slanderers and persecutors? At any assembly that falsely claims divine standing while acting as accuser? At a

theological pattern of counterfeit covenant identity? Or at an entire people across time? Modern caution usually rejects the last move while allowing debate over the others. This distinction is central to contemporary handling of the phrase.

Jewish-Christian dialogue has also encouraged Christians to distinguish between criticism of particular actions, theological disagreement with Judaism, and demonization of Jewish identity. A Christian theologian may believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that refusal of Christ has grave theological consequences. That is a doctrinal claim. But it is different from saying that Jews as a people are satanic or that every synagogue is a demonic assembly. Much modern interpretation attempts to preserve the doctrinal claim without repeating the collective demonization.

The post-Holocaust context therefore does not erase the historical and theological interpretations that came before it. It contextualizes them. It asks how patristic, medieval, Reformation, and classical Protestant readings operated within their own worlds, and how their language was later inherited. It also asks modern Christians to recognize that their use of biblical polemic is never socially weightless. Words accumulate histories. Severe phrases carry the memory of their uses.

For this paper, post-Holocaust caution should be understood as an interpretive development within reception history. It is not merely political correctness imposed on Scripture. Nor is it identical with final exegesis. It is a historically serious response to the fact that Christian interpretation has consequences. It urges interpreters to read Revelation fully, but also to avoid turning a local apocalyptic judgment into a careless collective accusation.

9.3. Nostra Aetate and the Rejection of Collective Blame

The Catholic declaration *Nostra Aetate* represents one of the most important modern ecclesial statements affecting Christian interpretation of Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations. Although it does not focus specifically on the phrase “Synagogue of Satan,” its teaching shapes how Catholic interpreters approach all New Testament passages that have been used against Jews collectively. Its importance lies in its rejection of collective blame, its affirmation of the Jewish roots of Christianity, and its refusal to portray Jews as rejected or accursed by God as though such a claim followed from Scripture.

Nostra Aetate emerged from the Second Vatican Council and marked a major change in official Catholic presentation of Judaism. It emphasized the spiritual bond between Christians and Jews, the patriarchs, the prophets, and the Jewish origins of the Church. It rejected the idea that all Jews of Jesus’ time, or Jews today, can be held collectively responsible for the death of Christ. It also opposed hatred, persecution, and displays of antisemitism directed against Jews.

This statement matters for the interpretation of Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 because it establishes a Catholic hermeneutical boundary. A Catholic interpreter may still acknowledge the severity of

Revelation's language. A Catholic interpreter may still discuss first-century conflict, rejection of Christ, covenant dispute, and opposition to the early Church. But such interpretation must not become collective accusation against Jews as a people. The phrase must be read in a way consistent with the Church's rejection of the claim that Jews are rejected or cursed as a people.

Nostra Aetate did not simply arise from exegesis of Revelation. It arose from broader theological, historical, and moral reflection. That is why it should be classified in this paper under modern ecclesial contextualization rather than as a narrow commentary on one verse. It represents a church-level response to the history of Christian anti-Judaism and to the need for a renewed account of the Church's relationship to the Jewish people. Its relevance is hermeneutical: it affects how Catholic theology permits severe New Testament polemic to be applied.

The declaration also shifts emphasis from replacement understood as contempt to fulfillment understood within a continuing mystery. Catholic theology after Vatican II increasingly speaks of the Jewish people in terms of enduring significance within God's providence. This does not erase Christian claims about Christ as Messiah and universal Savior. But it does discourage crude readings in which Judaism is treated simply as satanic, discarded, or spiritually meaningless after Christ. This has direct implications for how one reads the phrase "who say they are Jews and are not."

Within a Nostra Aetate framework, Revelation's phrase would likely be read as referring to specific opponents of the churches, not to the Jewish people as such. The theological judgment is real, but its application is limited. The passage may name slanderers and persecutors in Smyrna and Philadelphia. It may warn against false religious claim. It may reveal the danger of accusation against the faithful. But it cannot be used to declare Jews collectively cursed, rejected, or demonic.

This Catholic approach differs from much premodern Christian polemic. Earlier writers often spoke of the synagogue as blind, rejected, hardened, or spiritually fallen in sweeping terms. Nostra Aetate introduces a formal doctrinal and pastoral restraint on such speech. The restraint is not merely a matter of tone. It reflects a theological decision about how Scripture should be read in light of the whole mystery of Israel, Christ, and the Church.

This does not mean every Catholic theologian interprets Revelation in the same way. Some emphasize continuity with older fulfillment theology. Some emphasize Jewish-Christian dialogue. Some stress the irrevocability of God's gifts and calling. Some focus on the local historical setting of Revelation. But the official postconciliar direction is clear: New Testament polemic must not be used to justify hatred, collective blame, or claims that Jews as a people are accursed.

For this paper's purposes, *Nostra Aetate* is important because it shows how an ecclesial body can reinterpret its own reception history. The Catholic Church did not remove Revelation from the canon or deny its severe language. Instead, it placed constraints on how such language should be taught and applied. It distinguished Scripture's theological claims from later anti-Jewish extrapolations. This is a major example of modern contextualization.

It is also important to note that such contextualization is not the same as denying all earlier theology. Catholic doctrine still confesses Christ as the fulfillment of God's saving plan. It still reads the Old Testament in relation to Christ. It still maintains the Church's identity as the people gathered through the new covenant. The change lies in how the relationship to the Jewish people is described and how blame is assigned. The synagogue is no longer treated in official Catholic teaching as a simple demonic opposite of the Church.

Nostra Aetate therefore represents a major interpretive boundary in modern theology. It does not settle every exegetical question about Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, but it does shape the permissible range of Catholic application. It requires that "Synagogue of Satan" be read in context and not used as a collective condemnation of Jews. In the reception history of the phrase, this is one of the most important modern developments.

9.4. Modern Contextualization as Reception History, Not Final Exegesis

The modern tendency to restrict, qualify, or contextualize the phrase "Synagogue of Satan" should itself be understood historically. It is part of reception history, not simply the final word that cancels all earlier interpretation. This distinction is crucial. If modern caution is presented as though it automatically resolves the meaning of the text, it can appear to be an external correction imposed on Scripture. If it is presented as part of the text's reception history, it can be understood more accurately as a historically conditioned interpretive response to prior misuse.

Modern interpreters often operate with concerns that earlier interpreters did not share in the same way. They are aware of antisemitism as a racial, political, and religious phenomenon. They know the role Christian polemic played in shaping attitudes toward Jews in Europe. They read after the Holocaust. They work in academic contexts where Second Temple Judaism, rabbinic Judaism, and early Christianity are studied with historical precision. They often engage Jewish scholars directly. These factors shape their presentation of Revelation's phrase.

Earlier interpreters operated differently. Patristic writers were forming Christian identity against synagogue and paganism. Medieval theologians worked within Christendom and inherited a theology of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga*. Reformers fought over Gospel, law, church, and antichrist. Classical Protestant commentators worked within confessional worlds where the superiority of Christianity to Judaism was assumed. Their interpretations cannot be understood apart from

those contexts. They were not merely reading the text; they were reading the text inside living conflicts.

Modern contextualization, then, should not be described as a simple correction of all prior theology. It is better described as a shift in interpretive posture. It asks readers to separate several questions that older interpreters often fused: What did Revelation say to Smyrna and Philadelphia? What theological principle follows from that? What is the relationship between Church and Israel? How have Christians used the phrase against Jews? What applications are legitimate now? What applications are dangerous? These questions are related, but they are not identical.

This distinction allows the paper to avoid two errors. The first error is uncritical repetition of older polemic. This would take patristic, medieval, or Reformation language and apply it without regard to changed historical circumstances, Jewish-Christian dialogue, or the consequences of collective demonization. The second error is modern flattening. This would treat the phrase as merely embarrassing rhetoric that must be neutralized. A serious account must avoid both. Revelation's phrase is severe and theological. Its reception is dangerous and historically burdened.

Modern contextualization also clarifies the difference between application and identification. The text identifies a particular assembly or set of opponents in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia. Theological application may identify similar patterns elsewhere: false claim to divine authority, accusation, persecution, and opposition to the faithful. But collective identification of entire peoples or traditions is a further move. Modern interpreters often reject that further move not because Revelation lacks force, but because the move exceeds the text's disciplined application.

This is where the phrase remains useful as a theological type. A "Synagogue of Satan" can be understood as an assembly that claims sacred legitimacy while acting in the satanic role of accuser against God's faithful people. That type can apply beyond the first century, but only where the pattern is actually present. It cannot be applied merely because a group is Jewish, non-Christian, religiously different, or theologically opposed. The key elements are false sacred claim, adversarial function, slander, persecution, and opposition to Christ's faithful witnesses.

Modern contextualization also returns the phrase to Christian self-examination. If the phrase is a theological type, then churches can fall under its warning. A Christian institution that claims Christ while slandering truth-tellers, persecuting the faithful, protecting corrupt authority, or substituting institutional survival for obedience may resemble the adversarial assembly. This self-application is one of the most important safeguards against misuse. It prevents the phrase from becoming only an outward accusation.

To call modern caution “reception history” does not diminish it. Reception history is not secondary or unimportant. It is the record of how Scripture has lived in the Church and the world. The afterlife of a phrase can reveal dangers hidden in its misuse. It can show how power changes interpretation. It can expose the difference between persecuted speech and persecuting speech. It can remind theologians that severe words require severe discipline.

At the same time, reception history does not replace exegesis or theology. The fact that a phrase has been misused does not mean the phrase has no legitimate meaning. Revelation still says what it says. Smyrna is still slandered. Philadelphia is still vindicated. False claim is still exposed. Satan is still the accuser. Christ still judges assemblies by truth rather than name. Modern interpreters must not erase this because of discomfort. They must interpret it carefully because of both its truth and its danger.

The modern academic, Catholic, and ecumenical period therefore adds a necessary layer to the paper’s argument. It shows how the phrase is read after the history of its effects. It explains why many contemporary interpreters restrict the phrase to local first-century opponents or to a general spiritual category rather than applying it collectively. It places *Nostra Aetate* and Jewish-Christian dialogue within the reception history of the text. It also allows older theological readings to be described rather than simply dismissed.

The result is a more disciplined interpretive posture. The “Synagogue of Satan” remains a severe biblical phrase. It names false covenant claim and adversarial assembly. But modern contextualization insists that the phrase be handled with awareness of history, power, and misuse. It should be read neither as a dead artifact nor as an uncontrolled weapon. It should be read as apocalyptic judgment addressed to specific churches, as a theological warning about counterfeit sacred identity, and as a reception-history burden that interpreters must carry honestly.

10. Messianic Jewish and Contemporary Apologetic Readings

Messianic Jewish and contemporary apologetic readings of the “Synagogue of Satan” occupy a distinctive place in the phrase’s reception history. They emerge after the long separation of church and synagogue, after centuries of Christian polemic, and after modern Jewish-Christian dialogue, yet they also attempt to recover the first-century Jewish setting of the New Testament. These readings are especially important because they complicate the simple opposition between “Christian” and “Jewish” interpretation. The earliest Jesus movement was Jewish at its root, and modern Messianic Jewish interpreters often emphasize that Revelation’s conflict may have been an intra-Jewish or Jewish-context dispute before it became part of later Christian anti-Jewish polemic.

This approach changes the tone of interpretation. Instead of treating “Synagogue of Satan” as a Christian slogan against Judaism, Messianic Jewish readings often ask what it meant for Jewish believers in Jesus to be excluded, denounced, or delegitimized by other Jewish communal authorities. The issue becomes not race, ethnicity, or blanket condemnation, but accusation within a contested covenant family. Who had the right to claim the God of Israel? Who rightly interpreted the Messiah? Who represented the faithful remnant? Who was acting as accuser against whom?

Contemporary apologetic readings also attempt to respond to modern misuse. Many apologists recognize that the phrase has been taken up by conspiratorial, racial, and ideological movements detached from Revelation’s first-century setting. In response, they often distinguish between the text’s original referent, its theological principle, and illegitimate modern applications. This does not erase the phrase’s severity. It attempts to discipline that severity by tying it to false claim, slander, persecution, and opposition to Christ’s faithful witnesses.

10.1. The Synagogue of the Accuser

One of the most important contemporary readings emphasizes the meaning of Satan as accuser. In this interpretation, the phrase “Synagogue of Satan” can be understood as “assembly of the accuser” or “synagogue of the adversary.” This does not mean the assembly consciously worshiped Satan, nor that every synagogue is demonic. It means that the group in question functioned according to the adversary’s role: accusation, slander, denunciation, and opposition to the faithful.

This reading fits the Smyrna passage especially well. Revelation 2:9 explicitly mentions slander. Christ says He knows the tribulation and poverty of the church, and He knows the slander of those who make a false claim of identity. The connection between slander and Satan is the heart of the interpretation. The group becomes “of Satan” because it accuses the faithful in a way that serves the adversary’s work. The designation is functional before it is metaphysical. It identifies what the assembly does.

This reading also clarifies why the phrase is not simply a synonym for unbelief. Revelation does not say “those who do not believe are the Synagogue of Satan.” It identifies an assembly whose conduct is adversarial. The defining feature is not mere religious difference. It is slanderous opposition to those whom Christ knows and commends. The phrase therefore has a moral and spiritual criterion: accusation against the faithful.

The “accuser” reading also helps explain the relationship between human conflict and spiritual warfare. In Revelation, visible events are interpreted as manifestations of unseen spiritual realities. Human slander can become satanic accusation. Local denunciation can participate in cosmic opposition to the Lamb. A small church’s suffering becomes part of the larger conflict

between faithful witness and the adversary. The phrase therefore unveils the spiritual meaning of an earthly action.

This interpretation is especially useful for avoiding careless collective application. If the phrase means “assembly of the accuser,” then the question is not, “What ethnic or religious label does the group bear?” The question is, “Who is accusing the faithful falsely?” An assembly becomes satanic in function when it bears false witness, exposes believers to persecution, and claims sacred legitimacy while acting as adversary. That criterion can apply to any religious body, including Christian institutions.

The accuser reading also preserves the severity of the phrase. It does not soften Revelation into mere social commentary. Accusation is a satanic function. Slander against the faithful is spiritually grave. The point is not to neutralize the phrase, but to locate its force precisely. The text condemns an assembly whose words and actions align with Satan’s role as adversary.

This reading therefore contributes a disciplined theological definition. A “Synagogue of Satan” is not a biological people, nor a permanent label for Judaism, nor a casual insult against opponents. It is an assembly that acts as the accuser against those who belong to Christ. Its satanic character lies in the convergence of false claim, religious authority, slander, and persecution.

10.2. Jewish Believers in Jesus and Intra-Jewish Conflict

Messianic Jewish interpretation often emphasizes that the earliest Jesus movement was not an external Gentile attack on Judaism. Jesus was Jewish. The apostles were Jewish. The first believers in Jesus interpreted Him through Israel’s Scriptures, promises, temple imagery, festivals, prophets, and covenant hope. The New Testament’s earliest disputes over Jesus were therefore disputes within a Jewish world before they became disputes between two fully separated religions.

This matters for Revelation. The phrase “who say they are Jews and are not” can be heard differently if one remembers that the speaker, authorial world, and scriptural imagination are deeply Jewish. The issue may not be simple Christian denunciation of Jews from the outside. It may be a claim made from within a Jewish messianic framework: those who reject the Messiah and accuse His followers are not embodying true Jewish covenant faithfulness, whatever their outward communal claim.

Intra-Jewish conflict in antiquity could be severe. Different Jewish groups disputed temple legitimacy, priesthood, purity, law, calendar, resurrection, messianic expectation, Roman accommodation, and scriptural interpretation. The Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, show how sharp Jewish sectarian polemic could be. Groups could accuse other Jews of corruption, blindness, lawlessness, or betrayal of the covenant. Revelation’s phrase may belong to this

world of intense internal boundary-making, now centered on the confession of Jesus as Messiah.

Messianic Jewish readings often highlight the pain of exclusion. Jewish believers in Jesus may have been treated as traitors, heretics, or illegitimate members of the covenant community. If they were expelled from synagogue life or denounced to authorities, their religious and social identity would be deeply affected. The issue was not merely theological disagreement. It was communal belonging. To be told that one no longer belonged to Israel's faithful people because of belief in Jesus would have been devastating. Revelation answers that exclusion with Christ's own judgment: He knows who is faithful.

This reading is especially important for Philadelphia. Revelation 3:9 promises that the hostile claimants will come and recognize that Christ has loved the faithful church. The issue is vindication. Those who denied the church's legitimacy will be forced to acknowledge divine favor. This resembles a dispute over who truly stands within the love and promise of God. The weak community is vindicated against stronger claimants.

Intra-Jewish readings also prevent the phrase from being read anachronistically through later Christian dominance. In the first century, Jesus-believers were not medieval bishops, Reformation polemicists, or modern ideological actors. They were small communities struggling to define their identity in relation to synagogue, Scripture, Messiah, Gentile inclusion, and Roman power. The phrase should first be heard in that fragile setting.

At the same time, Messianic Jewish interpretation does not remove the theological claim. It may sharpen it. If the dispute is intra-Jewish, then the charge is not a Gentile dismissal of Jewish identity but a messianic claim about the true fulfillment of Jewish identity in Christ. The phrase "who say they are Jews and are not" becomes a statement about covenant authenticity in relation to Messiah. It says that opposition to Jesus and His witnesses contradicts the deepest meaning of Jewish covenant faithfulness as understood by the New Testament.

This reading remains contested, but it is valuable because it refuses two simplifications. It refuses the anti-Jewish simplification that treats the phrase as a permanent Christian curse against Jews. It also refuses the secularizing simplification that treats the phrase as nothing more than social rivalry. For Messianic Jewish readers, the phrase is both historically Jewish and theologically messianic. It arises from a dispute over Israel's Messiah, Israel's Scriptures, and Israel's true assembly.

10.3. Conservative Evangelical Limits on Application

Many conservative evangelical apologists interpret Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 as referring to specific opponents of the early churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia. They usually affirm that these opponents were associated with Jewish communal claims, but they often add strong limits on

application. The phrase, in this view, does not authorize condemnation of all Jews, Judaism as such, or modern Jewish communities. It refers to those particular groups who slandered, opposed, or endangered faithful Christians in the first-century setting.

This approach reflects a desire to preserve both biblical authority and interpretive restraint. Conservative evangelicals generally do not want to explain away the text. They affirm that Christ spoke severely and truthfully. They affirm that the opponents made a false claim and acted in opposition to the faithful. But they also recognize that the phrase has been misused. Therefore they restrict its application to the pattern present in the text: false sacred claim joined to accusation and persecution.

This produces a three-level interpretation. First, the historical referent is local: hostile assemblies or factions in Smyrna and Philadelphia. Second, the theological principle is broader: any religious body that claims God while doing the work of the accuser may become a counterfeit assembly. Third, modern application must be limited: the phrase cannot be applied merely on the basis of Jewish identity, non-Christian religion, political disagreement, or ethnic ancestry.

This kind of evangelical reading often emphasizes that Revelation's churches were under pressure. Smyrna was suffering poverty and slander. Philadelphia had little strength. These churches were not attacking a vulnerable minority from a position of social dominance. They were being encouraged by Christ while enduring hostility. Modern interpreters must therefore be cautious when repeating the phrase from very different social positions. The text's first function is consolation and vindication for the faithful, not permission for broad denunciation.

Conservative evangelical interpreters also commonly distinguish between theological disagreement and hatred. A Christian may believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that rejecting Him is spiritually serious. That conviction is central to Christian faith. But that does not mean Christians are licensed to slander, despise, or demonize Jewish people. The text judges slander; it does not authorize slander. The text condemns false accusation; it does not permit false accusation in return.

This limit is important because the phrase is sometimes attractive to people who want a biblical weapon rather than a biblical interpretation. Evangelical apologists often respond by saying that the phrase must remain tied to Christ's evaluation of specific conduct. It is not a code word for modern conspiracies. It is not an ethnic category. It is not a racial doctrine. It is not a general label for everyone outside Christian faith. It is a judgment on adversarial assembly.

At the same time, conservative evangelical readings may still preserve a strong theology of fulfillment. They may argue that true covenant identity is found in relation to Christ, that outward religious identity cannot save, and that opposition to the Gospel reveals spiritual

blindness or rebellion. These claims remain theologically severe. The difference lies in application. The severity is directed toward the false claim and adversarial conduct named in the text, not toward collective demonization.

This approach is therefore both traditional and modern. It is traditional because it affirms the truth of Revelation's words, the centrality of Christ, and the possibility of false religious claim. It is modern because it explicitly rejects antisemitic or conspiratorial extensions. It attempts to read the text as inspired Scripture while recognizing the burden of reception history.

For this paper, conservative evangelical limits on application are important because they show how apologists currently handle the phrase in public discourse. They often function defensively, explaining what the phrase does not mean before explaining what it does mean. That defensive posture is itself revealing. It shows that the phrase now carries a public history that interpreters cannot ignore.

10.4. The Phrase in Modern Conspiracy and Polemical Misuse

Modern conspiracy and polemical misuse of the phrase "Synagogue of Satan" represents one of the most serious reception-history problems surrounding Revelation 2:9 and 3:9. Detached from its biblical setting, the phrase has been used to support racialized, antisemitic, ideological, and conspiratorial claims. In such uses, the phrase is no longer interpreted as a specific apocalyptic judgment on slanderous opponents of persecuted churches. It becomes a slogan used to demonize Jews, Judaism, elites, political enemies, religious rivals, or imagined secret powers.

This misuse typically involves several distortions. The first is decontextualization. Revelation's messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia are ignored. The poverty, slander, imprisonment, weakness, open door, and promised vindication disappear. The phrase is removed from the pastoral setting of suffering churches and turned into a general accusation.

The second distortion is collectivization. A phrase addressed to specific opponents becomes a label for an entire people or religion. This move exceeds the text. Revelation does not say that all Jews in all times and places are the "Synagogue of Satan." It identifies those who make a false claim and act adversarially in the local situations addressed. Modern conspiratorial readings often erase this distinction.

The third distortion is racialization. Biblical covenant language is converted into racial theory. This is especially alien to Revelation's theological world. The text is concerned with faithfulness, witness, truth, accusation, and relation to Christ, not modern racial categories. When interpreters turn "Synagogue of Satan" into a racial accusation, they replace apocalyptic theology with ideology.

The fourth distortion is conspiracy projection. The phrase is used to imply hidden control, secret evil, or collective manipulation by Jews or other targeted groups. This transforms Revelation's concrete language of slander and persecution into an unfalsifiable theory of hidden enemies. Such use is spiritually dangerous because it imitates the very accusatory pattern the text condemns. It becomes a form of slander under the cover of biblical language.

The fifth distortion is loss of self-examination. The phrase is aimed outward only. The interpreter never asks whether his own assembly, movement, church, or ideology might function as accuser. This is a major theological failure. If the phrase names an assembly that claims God while serving accusation, then any group using the phrase slanderously risks becoming what it denounces.

Modern polemical misuse also occurs in intra-Christian conflict. Churches, denominations, theologians, ministries, and rival factions may accuse one another of being satanic assemblies. Sometimes such accusations arise from serious doctrinal concern. But often they function rhetorically, as a way to end argument by demonizing the opponent. The phrase becomes a weapon of factional identity rather than a disciplined theological judgment.

This does not mean the phrase has no legitimate contemporary use. A theological type can be applied beyond its original setting when the same pattern is present. An assembly that falsely claims divine authority while slandering the faithful, persecuting witnesses, protecting corruption, denying truth, and acting as adversary may rightly be examined under Revelation's category. But legitimate application requires evidence, humility, specificity, and self-judgment. It cannot be based on ethnicity, inherited identity, ordinary disagreement, or conspiracy imagination.

The misuse of the phrase is also a warning about Scripture itself. Severe biblical language must be interpreted by the whole counsel of Scripture. Revelation's prophetic judgment must be held together with commands against false witness, hatred, partiality, pride, and vengeance. The Bible does not permit interpreters to use truth as a mask for accusation. A phrase about satanic slander cannot be rightly used in a slanderous way.

Modern misuse further explains why contemporary apologists often begin with disclaimers. They are not necessarily trying to weaken the text. They are trying to prevent the phrase from being absorbed into ideological systems that contradict the text's own moral logic. The phrase must be rescued from both erasure and abuse. It should not be erased because Revelation speaks it. It should not be abused because Revelation speaks it against false accusation and persecution.

The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" therefore remains a test of interpretation. Does the reader honor the text's context? Does the reader distinguish local referent from theological type? Does

the reader avoid collective demonization? Does the reader recognize Satan as accuser and refuse to imitate him? Does the reader allow the phrase to judge his own assembly as well as others? These questions are essential.

Messianic Jewish and contemporary apologetic readings help recover these disciplines. They remind readers that the New Testament is rooted in Jewish Scripture and first-century Jewish conflict. They emphasize accusation as the key satanic function. They preserve the possibility of false covenant claim. They restrict illegitimate collective applications. And they expose modern conspiratorial misuse as a deformation of the text.

In this way, section ten brings the paper into the present. The phrase is no longer only a matter of patristic polemic, medieval theology, Reformation commentary, or classical Protestant exegesis. It is now a live term in public discourse, apologetics, online ideology, and Jewish-Christian relations. Its meaning must therefore be handled with both theological seriousness and interpretive discipline. Revelation's warning remains severe: an assembly can claim sacred legitimacy while acting as accuser. But the interpreter must not become the accuser in the act of interpretation.

11. Constructing the Theological Type: What Would a "Synagogue of Satan" Be?

Having examined the biblical text, indirect scriptural parallels, first-century context, patristic interpretation, medieval and Reformation reception, Protestant commentary, modern academic contextualization, Messianic Jewish readings, and contemporary apologetic cautions, the paper can now construct the theological type implied by the phrase "Synagogue of Satan." This does not mean inventing a new doctrine independent of Revelation. It means asking what pattern must be present for the phrase to have theological meaning beyond Smyrna and Philadelphia.

A theological type is not the same as a loose metaphor. It is a recurring pattern drawn from Scripture and recognized across different historical settings. Adam is a type. Babylon is a type. Egypt is a type. Jerusalem is a type. Antichrist is a type. The beast is a type. Likewise, the "Synagogue of Satan" can be treated as a type if its defining features are carefully derived from the text: assembly, sacred claim, false identity, accusation, persecution, and opposition to the faithful.

This section therefore asks: what would an assembly have to be in order to correspond, by analogy, to Revelation's severe category? The answer cannot be based on ethnic identity, inherited tradition, religious label, or ordinary doctrinal disagreement. The answer must be based on function and fruit. The "Synagogue of Satan" is an assembly that claims divine legitimacy while acting in the pattern of the adversary. It is religious in appearance but accusatory in spirit. It invokes holiness while opposing truth. It claims covenant standing while

persecuting the faithful. It protects itself by false witness. It substitutes institutional survival for obedience to God.

The theological type must also be self-applying. If it is used only against others, it becomes dangerous. Revelation's phrase is most faithfully handled when it is allowed to judge every assembly, including Christian ones. A church, denomination, religious order, theological guild, school, movement, ministry, or reforming faction may become adversarial if it claims God while serving accusation and falsehood. The phrase is not safe because no severe biblical phrase is safe. It must be handled as judgment before it is handled as accusation.

11.1. False Claim to Divine Legitimacy

The first defining feature of the theological type is false claim to divine legitimacy. Revelation does not merely describe people who oppose the church. It describes people who say they are something and are not. The emphasis falls on the claim. They assert sacred identity. They invoke covenant standing. They present themselves as legitimate heirs, guardians, or representatives of God's people. The risen Christ rejects the claim.

This is essential. A "Synagogue of Satan" is not simply an irreligious mob, pagan crowd, secular government, or open enemy of faith. It is an assembly making a sacred claim. It gathers under religious identity. It speaks as though it has divine authorization. It claims continuity with God, Scripture, covenant, tradition, law, temple, church, apostolicity, election, holiness, or spiritual authority. Its danger lies precisely in the fact that it does not appear merely profane. It appears sacred.

False claim to divine legitimacy may take many forms. It may appeal to ancestry, office, sacrament, ordination, succession, revelation, doctrine, ritual, scholarship, institutional age, moral purity, political chosenness, or prophetic mission. It may say, explicitly or implicitly, "We are the faithful ones," "We are the authorized interpreters," "We are the true people of God," "We alone preserve the tradition," "We alone defend the covenant," or "To oppose us is to oppose God." Such claims are not automatically false. Scripture recognizes real authority, real covenant, real office, real doctrine, and real holiness. The problem arises when the claim becomes detached from obedience.

The biblical pattern is clear: sacred identity increases accountability. Israel is judged because Israel knows God. Priests are judged because they serve near the holy things. Prophets are judged because they speak in the name of the Lord. Churches are judged because they bear Christ's name. Teachers are judged because they instruct others. A claim to divine legitimacy is never a shield against judgment. It is an exposure to judgment.

The theological type of the "Synagogue of Satan" begins when an assembly uses sacred claim as insulation against truth. Instead of allowing God's word to judge it, the assembly uses God's

name to protect itself. Instead of repenting when confronted, it appeals to its status. Instead of testing its fruits, it points to its history. Instead of hearing witnesses, it accuses them. The false claim becomes a fortress.

This is why Revelation's language is so severe. The assembly says it is something, but Christ says it is not. The ultimate issue is not what the assembly claims about itself, but what Christ knows. Smyrna appears poor, but Christ says it is rich. Philadelphia appears weak, but Christ sets before it an open door. The hostile assembly appears legitimate, but Christ exposes its falsehood. Divine judgment reverses visible claims.

A false claim to divine legitimacy often involves control over naming. The assembly defines who belongs and who does not. It declares who is faithful and who is dangerous. It decides who may speak, teach, worship, interpret, or be recognized. When such authority is truthful and obedient, it can serve order. When corrupted, it becomes an instrument of exclusion and accusation. The assembly begins to act as though its judgment is identical with God's judgment. That is the beginning of satanic inversion.

This feature applies across religious history. A synagogue, church, council, denomination, monastery, academy, ministry, movement, or ideological religious order can claim divine legitimacy falsely. The name differs; the pattern remains. The sacred claim becomes false when it is contradicted by opposition to truth, persecution of the faithful, and refusal of repentance.

The first mark of the "Synagogue of Satan," therefore, is not Jewishness, Christianity, antiquity, conservatism, liberalism, hierarchy, or charismatic fervor. The first mark is a sacred claim that Christ Himself would deny because the assembly's function contradicts the God it claims to represent.

11.2. Accusation as Spiritual Function

The second defining feature is accusation as spiritual function. Satan is the adversary and accuser. In Revelation 2:9, the relevant action is slander. This is not incidental. The assembly becomes "of Satan" because it participates in the adversary's work. It accuses the faithful falsely, weaponizes speech, and uses religious authority to define witnesses of Christ as dangerous, illegitimate, impure, rebellious, or outside the people of God.

Accusation must be distinguished from discernment. Scripture commands discernment. It warns against false prophets, false teachers, wolves, hypocrisy, idolatry, and deception. A faithful assembly must sometimes rebuke, correct, discipline, and name error. Not every charge is satanic. Not every conflict is slander. Not every act of boundary-setting is persecution. The difference lies in truth, motive, fruit, and relation to God's faithful witnesses.

Satanic accusation is not truthful correction. It is adversarial speech. It is speech that destroys rather than restores, lies rather than reveals, scapegoats rather than judges righteously, and protects false authority rather than serving God. It may use the language of holiness, law, order, orthodoxy, safety, patriotism, unity, or purity. Yet its function is to silence, isolate, shame, endanger, or expel those whose witness threatens the assembly's false claim.

The "Synagogue of Satan" type therefore cannot be identified merely by what it teaches on paper. It must be identified by how it speaks and what its speech does. Does it bear true witness, or false witness? Does it correct in order to restore, or accuse in order to destroy? Does it allow the weak to speak truth, or does it crush them under institutional labels? Does it examine evidence, or does it manufacture guilt? Does it seek repentance, or does it seek elimination?

Satanic accusation often begins with misnaming. The faithful are called enemies. Truth-tellers are called traitors. Reformers are called destroyers. Victims are called threats. Prophets are called blasphemers. The poor are called cursed. The weak are called expendable. Those who keep Christ's word are called outside the covenant. This misnaming is powerful because it attempts to replace Christ's judgment with the assembly's judgment.

In Smyrna, slander appears before imprisonment. This sequence is important. False speech prepares coercion. Accusation can become social exclusion, economic harm, legal exposure, imprisonment, violence, or martyrdom. Before a faithful witness is punished, that witness is often renamed. The accuser creates the category under which the punishment becomes acceptable. This is why slander is spiritually grave. It is not merely talk. It can be the first stage of persecution.

The theological type also includes self-justifying accusation. The false assembly often believes its accusations are righteous. It imagines itself defending God, tradition, community, law, purity, or security. This makes the deception deeper. The assembly may not experience itself as satanic. It may experience itself as zealous. Yet zeal without truth becomes persecution. Paul's former persecution of the church shows this danger. Religious zeal can become the accuser's instrument when it opposes Christ's work.

Accusation as spiritual function is also contagious. An assembly organized around accusation forms people into accusers. Members learn to suspect, report, denounce, shame, and fear. The community becomes spiritually cold. Mercy is treated as weakness. Questions are treated as rebellion. Truth is treated as threat. The atmosphere becomes adversarial. Even worship can become accusatory if it reinforces collective self-righteousness against condemned outsiders.

The "Synagogue of Satan" type is therefore identified by a distinctive spiritual atmosphere: suspicion rather than charity, denunciation rather than repentance, control rather than truth,

fear rather than freedom, and false witness rather than honest judgment. Such an assembly may retain prayers, hymns, rituals, sermons, vestments, confessions, scholarship, or sacred language. Yet its living function is accusation.

The second mark of the “Synagogue of Satan” is therefore the adversarial use of speech. It is an assembly that bears false witness against God’s faithful people while claiming to speak for God.

11.3. Persecution of the Faithful

The third defining feature is persecution of the faithful. In Revelation, accusation is not merely verbal. Smyrna faces tribulation, poverty, slander, imprisonment, testing, and possible death. Philadelphia has little strength and awaits vindication against false claimants. The “Synagogue of Satan” appears in contexts where faithful communities are pressured by hostile religious opposition. Therefore, any theological type derived from the phrase must include persecution or coercive opposition.

Persecution may take many forms. It can be physical violence, imprisonment, exile, execution, forced exclusion, economic deprivation, legal harassment, social shaming, defamation, institutional discipline, spiritual abuse, or the destruction of livelihood and reputation. The form changes by context, but the pattern remains: the assembly uses its power to harm those who remain faithful to God’s truth.

This does not mean every experience of criticism is persecution. Faithful interpretation requires sobriety. A person who is challenged, corrected, debated, or disciplined for genuine wrongdoing is not automatically persecuted. The theological type applies where the faithful are harmed because they bear witness to truth, keep Christ’s word, refuse idolatry, expose corruption, or resist false claims of divine authority. Persecution is not mere discomfort. It is adversarial pressure against faithfulness.

The persecution of the faithful often occurs under the appearance of religious duty. The false assembly does not usually say, “We are persecuting the faithful.” It says, “We are preserving order,” “We are defending doctrine,” “We are protecting the institution,” “We are maintaining unity,” “We are guarding the people,” or “We are punishing rebellion.” Such claims may sometimes be valid. But when they are used to punish truth and protect falsehood, they become part of the satanic pattern.

Revelation’s two churches help define the faithful. Smyrna is faithful in suffering. Philadelphia is faithful in weakness. Neither church is praised for worldly dominance. Neither wins by force. Smyrna is called to be faithful unto death. Philadelphia keeps Christ’s word and does not deny His name. The faithful are those who endure, witness, obey, and remain true to Christ under pressure. They may be poor, weak, small, slandered, or excluded. Their legitimacy comes from Christ’s knowledge of them, not from public recognition.

The false assembly persecutes because the faithful expose it. True witness reveals false claim. The presence of a poor but rich church exposes the poverty of worldly religious power. The presence of a weak but obedient church exposes the weakness of false authority. The presence of a truth-teller exposes institutional falsehood. Therefore, the false assembly must silence the witness or lose its claim. Persecution is often the defense mechanism of counterfeit holiness.

This feature also explains why the phrase should not be used carelessly against ordinary theological opponents. A group may be wrong without persecuting the faithful. A community may reject Christian claims without functioning as an accuser or persecutor in the Revelation sense. The theological type requires active opposition that harms or endangers faithful witness. Without that element, the analogy becomes weak or abusive.

Persecution also reveals the assembly's true god. An assembly that sacrifices truth to preserve power does not ultimately serve God. It serves itself. If it must destroy the faithful in order to protect its identity, then its identity is false. If it must silence truth in order to preserve holiness, then its holiness is counterfeit. If it must accuse the innocent in order to defend divine authority, then its authority is adversarial.

This is why the "Synagogue of Satan" type must include victims. The phrase is not a detached label for doctrinal error. It appears where the faithful are slandered and endangered. To construct the type without attention to those harmed would distort the text. The false assembly is known by what it does to the faithful poor, the faithful weak, the faithful excluded, and the faithful witnesses who refuse to deny Christ's name.

The third mark of the "Synagogue of Satan" is therefore coercive opposition to faithful witness. It persecutes those whom Christ knows, loves, strengthens, and promises to vindicate.

11.4. External Holiness Without Inward Obedience

The fourth defining feature is external holiness without inward obedience. This theme connects Revelation to Romans 2, John 8, Matthew 23, Galatians 4, and Philippians 3. The false assembly does not lack religious form. It may possess impressive religious form. It may have ritual, history, doctrine, discipline, hierarchy, sacred texts, learned teachers, visible order, and public seriousness. Yet the external form is contradicted by inward disobedience.

External holiness becomes dangerous when it is mistaken for holiness itself. Scripture does not despise external forms. God gives signs, rituals, offices, assemblies, sacraments, commandments, and visible practices. The problem is not embodiment. The problem is externality severed from obedience. When outward form becomes a substitute for truth, mercy, justice, repentance, and faithfulness, it becomes a mask.

Matthew 23 is decisive here. Jesus condemns religious leaders who clean the outside while inwardly remaining corrupt. The image is not irreligion, but inverted religion. The outside is bright; the inside is death. The tomb is whitewashed; the contents are unclean. This is the atmosphere in which the “Synagogue of Satan” type becomes possible. The assembly’s external holiness makes its adversarial function more deceptive.

External holiness without inward obedience often produces moral blindness. The assembly believes its forms prove its legitimacy. It cannot imagine that God might judge it because it possesses the right name, lineage, doctrine, liturgy, or office. It confuses recognition by humans with recognition by Christ. It says, “We are rich,” while Christ sees poverty. It says, “We are the true assembly,” while Christ sees accusation. It says, “We are guardians of holiness,” while Christ sees persecution of the faithful.

This feature also reveals why the phrase has Christian self-application. A church may possess correct doctrine and still act falsely. It may have valid sacraments and still protect abuse. It may preach Scripture and still silence truth. It may maintain apostolic language and still oppose the Spirit. It may defend orthodoxy while lacking love. It may build monuments to prophets while rejecting living witnesses. It may preserve holy forms while functioning as an adversary.

External holiness without inward obedience is especially dangerous because it can sanctify evil. When an ordinary institution lies, people may recognize corruption. When a sacred institution lies, the lie is wrapped in divine language. When ordinary power persecutes, the violence may appear political. When religious power persecutes, the persecution may be called discipline, purification, obedience, or defense of God. This is how counterfeit holiness becomes more dangerous than open wickedness.

The inward obedience required by Scripture includes truth, repentance, humility, justice, mercy, fidelity, love, and submission to God’s word. These are not sentimental additions to doctrine. They are covenantal realities. An assembly that lacks them cannot validate itself by external claim. Revelation’s phrase assumes that Christ judges more deeply than public religious appearance. He knows the works. He knows the suffering. He knows the lies. He knows the true and the false.

External holiness without inward obedience also produces selective memory. The false assembly honors past saints but rejects present correction. It praises dead prophets because dead prophets no longer threaten its power. It recites sacred history while refusing the living demand of God. It uses tradition not as witness to truth but as a shield against repentance. In doing so, it repeats the pattern condemned by Jesus: honoring the tombs while sharing the spirit of the persecutors.

The “Synagogue of Satan” type therefore includes a tragic contradiction. The assembly may contain real fragments of truth, real Scripture, real tradition, real moral language, and real spiritual inheritance. Its falsehood does not necessarily mean that everything it touches is empty. Rather, its condemnation lies in the misuse of holy things. It turns sacred forms into instruments of accusation. It uses the name of God against the people of God.

The fourth mark of the “Synagogue of Satan” is therefore the separation of sacred appearance from obedient reality. It possesses or claims external holiness while inwardly serving falsehood, accusation, and opposition to God.

11.5. Institutional Self-Protection Against Truth

The fifth defining feature is institutional self-protection against truth. This is where the theological type reaches its mature form. A false assembly may begin with sacred claim, proceed through accusation, and act through persecution, but it becomes fully hardened when it protects itself against the truth that could call it to repentance. At that point, the institution’s survival becomes its functional god.

Institutional self-protection is not the same as legitimate preservation. Every community must maintain order, continuity, doctrine, and discipline. A church should preserve the faith. A synagogue should preserve its worship. A school should preserve learning. A ministry should preserve its mission. Preservation becomes corrupt when the institution protects its image, leaders, wealth, power, or reputation at the expense of truth. The problem is not continuity. The problem is idolatrous self-preservation.

A “Synagogue of Satan” type assembly cannot repent because repentance would expose the falsehood of its claim. Therefore it must attack the messenger. It cannot answer the truth, so it discredits the witness. It cannot bear examination, so it forbids questions. It cannot confess guilt, so it relocates guilt onto victims, reformers, prophets, whistleblowers, or faithful dissenters. Accusation becomes the instrument of institutional survival.

This pattern appears repeatedly in religious history. Institutions often claim that exposure of wrongdoing will harm the faithful, scandalize the weak, empower enemies, or damage the mission. Sometimes these concerns are not imaginary. Truth can be disruptive. Exposure can cause scandal. Enemies can exploit weakness. Yet Scripture does not permit falsehood as a strategy of holiness. An institution that suppresses truth to protect God’s reputation reveals that it does not trust God with truth.

Institutional self-protection also creates a false unity. The assembly demands silence for the sake of peace. It treats honest correction as division. It confuses loyalty to God with loyalty to leadership. It calls truth-tellers proud, bitter, dangerous, or disobedient. It invokes unity while

practicing concealment. This is not biblical unity. It is the unity of fear. True unity is in truth. False unity is in coordinated denial.

When the institution becomes self-protective, it often develops procedures that mimic righteousness while preventing justice. It may investigate itself in order to clear itself. It may create rituals of accountability that never reach the powerful. It may discipline the weak quickly and the strong slowly, if at all. It may use theological language to delay, exhaust, or confuse those seeking truth. The external form of justice remains, but the inward function is defense of the institution.

This feature connects the “Synagogue of Satan” type with Babylon in Revelation. Babylon is glorious, wealthy, religiously charged, politically connected, and doomed. Its splendor hides violence. Its commerce hides exploitation. Its self-presentation hides judgment. The false assembly likewise may appear stable and holy while internally organized around self-preservation. It says, “We sit secure,” while divine judgment is already measuring it.

Institutional self-protection against truth also explains why the faithful are often poor or weak. Those with power inside a false assembly benefit from silence. Those who speak truth often lose protection, status, livelihood, or belonging. Smyrna is poor. Philadelphia has little strength. Revelation repeatedly sides with faithful weakness against corrupt power. The false assembly may possess resources, reputation, numbers, and influence. But Christ’s judgment does not follow institutional weight.

The theological type is complete when the assembly’s sacred claim becomes a closed system. It claims God. It defines truth. It accuses dissent. It punishes witnesses. It protects itself. It refuses repentance. At that point, its religious identity has become adversarial. It is no longer merely an assembly with errors. It has become an assembly organized against the truth that could save it.

This is why the phrase “Synagogue of Satan” remains a warning to every religious body. The decisive question is not whether an institution can recite correct doctrine, invoke sacred history, or claim divine authority. The question is what it does when confronted by truth. Does it repent, or does it accuse? Does it humble itself, or does it protect itself? Does it listen to the faithful weak, or does it crush them? Does it submit to God, or does it use God’s name to defend itself?

The fifth mark of the “Synagogue of Satan” is therefore institutional self-protection against truth. It is an assembly that would rather preserve its sacred claim than obey the God it claims. It becomes adversarial because truth has become its enemy.

Taken together, these five marks define the theological type. A “Synagogue of Satan” is an assembly that falsely claims divine legitimacy, functions through accusation, persecutes the faithful, displays external holiness without inward obedience, and protects itself against truth. This type may appear in many historical forms. It may arise in a synagogue, church,

denomination, sect, ministry, religious court, theological school, political religion, or reform movement. The label is never safe and never casual. It belongs only where the pattern is grave, specific, and evident.

The final purpose of constructing the type is not to provide a weapon but to sharpen discernment. Revelation's phrase is severe because the corruption it names is severe. Sacred assemblies can become adversarial. Religious language can become accusation. Covenant claim can become false. Institutional holiness can become a mask. The faithful can be slandered by those who claim God. Christ's promise to Smyrna and Philadelphia is that He knows the truth. He knows the poor who are rich. He knows the weak who have kept His word. He knows the accusers. He knows the false claim. He will vindicate His own.

12. Conclusion: Apocalyptic Warning, Theological Category, and Interpretive Burden

The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" remains severe because it cannot be reduced to one safe category. It is not merely a local historical insult, not merely a timeless theological abstraction, not merely a reception-history problem, and not merely a phrase to be neutralized by modern caution. It is all of these at once: a phrase spoken in Revelation to persecuted churches, a judgment on false sacred claim, a warning about accusation and persecution, a category later theologians expanded in multiple directions, and a phrase whose history of use requires careful contextualization.

The direct biblical references in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 establish the foundation. Smyrna is poor, slandered, and facing imprisonment. Philadelphia is weak, obedient, and awaiting vindication. In both cases, Christ addresses communities whose outward condition does not reveal their true standing. The poor are rich. The weak possess an open door. The slandered are known by Christ. The hostile assembly that claims sacred identity is judged otherwise. This is the first and controlling meaning of the phrase: Christ unveils the hidden truth beneath outward religious claim.

The indirect biblical background deepens the meaning. Romans 2 distinguishes outward and inward covenant identity. John 8 connects spiritual fatherhood with works, truth, and opposition to Christ. Matthew 23 exposes religious hypocrisy that appears holy outwardly while inwardly resisting justice and truth. Galatians 4 contrasts bondage and promise. Philippians 3 rejects confidence in the flesh and defines true covenant worship by the Spirit and Christ. Revelation's phrase belongs within this wider scriptural pattern: sacred claim can be contradicted by adversarial conduct.

The historical reception then shows how powerful and dangerous the phrase became. The Fathers used related logic to draw boundaries between Church and synagogue. Chrysostom

intensified anti-Judaizing rhetoric into severe anti-synagogue language. Medieval Christendom absorbed the phrase into a theology of Ecclesia and Synagoga, often under conditions of unequal power. Luther and other Reformation voices carried forward and redirected severe polemic. Protestant commentators such as Matthew Henry, John Gill, and Ellicott preserved important theological insights while also reflecting the assumptions of their eras. Modern academic, Catholic, ecumenical, Messianic Jewish, and evangelical readings have attempted to contextualize the phrase in light of first-century history and its later misuse.

The result is not a simple conclusion but a disciplined one. The “Synagogue of Satan” is a real biblical phrase with real theological force. It names an assembly that claims divine legitimacy while functioning as the adversary. Yet because the phrase has been used to demonize Jews collectively, it must be handled with awareness of its reception history. Contextualization does not erase the phrase. It prevents the interpreter from turning Revelation’s judgment on false accusation into a new act of false accusation.

12.1. What the Phrase Says in Revelation

In Revelation, the phrase says first that Christ knows the truth about His churches and their opponents. Human judgment is not final. Public reputation is not final. Institutional claim is not final. The visible balance of power is not final. Smyrna may appear poor, but Christ calls it rich. Philadelphia may have little strength, but Christ gives it an open door. Their opponents may claim sacred legitimacy, but Christ exposes the claim as false.

The phrase also says that religious identity can be judged by Christ. Those who “say” they are something are not automatically what they say. The repeated formula places human claim under divine examination. This is one of Revelation’s major theological instincts. Reality is not what empire says it is. Reality is not what wealth says it is. Reality is not what persecutors say it is. Reality is what God reveals through Christ. The book is an apocalypse, an unveiling. The “Synagogue of Satan” phrase unveils a false sacred claim.

In Smyrna, the phrase is tied to slander. This is essential. The satanic function is accusation. The assembly is not judged merely because it is religiously different from the church. It is judged because it slanders the faithful and participates in the adversary’s work. Slander in this context is not harmless speech. It can expose believers to exclusion, poverty, imprisonment, and death. Revelation sees such accusation as spiritually charged. Behind human slander stands the accuser.

In Philadelphia, the phrase is tied to vindication. The hostile claimants will be made to recognize that Christ has loved the faithful church. This is a reversal of legitimacy. Those who denied the church’s standing will be confronted with Christ’s own judgment. The weak community will be

shown to be beloved. The false claimants will be shown to have misjudged God's people. The central issue is not merely social conflict but divine recognition.

The phrase therefore says four things in Revelation. First, sacred claim can be false. Second, slander against the faithful is satanic in function. Third, weak churches may be the true objects of Christ's favor. Fourth, Christ will vindicate those who keep His word. These four elements must remain at the center of interpretation.

The phrase does not say everything later interpreters have made it say. It does not present a full doctrine of Judaism. It does not give permission for racial, ethnic, or collective demonization. It does not authorize careless application to any disliked religious opponent. Nor does it become meaningless because later interpreters misused it. Its meaning is severe but specific: an assembly that claims divine identity while accusing and opposing the faithful is exposed by Christ as belonging to the adversary's pattern.

In this sense, Revelation's phrase is both narrower and broader than many readings have assumed. It is narrower because it arises from specific letters to specific churches. It is broader because it names a recurring spiritual pattern. The text does not give interpreters a license for uncontrolled accusation. It gives them a category for discerning the corruption of sacred assembly into adversarial function.

12.2. What Apologists and Theologians Have Made of It

Apologists and theologians have made the phrase carry many burdens. For early Christian writers, it contributed to the boundary between Church and synagogue. The Church claimed that Christ fulfilled Israel's Scriptures; the synagogue that rejected Christ was therefore interpreted as possessing outward continuity without inward fulfillment. This reading was not merely social hostility. It was rooted in the Christian conviction that Jesus is the decisive revelation of Israel's God. Yet the rhetoric that developed from this conviction often became severe, and sometimes sweeping.

The patristic period shows the phrase's movement from local apocalyptic judgment to theological boundary-marker. The Fathers were concerned with truth, worship, Scripture, and the danger of divided allegiance. They also wrote in a polemical world where sharp contrasts were common. Their use of anti-synagogue language must be contextualized within pastoral anxiety, Christian identity formation, and conflict over Scripture. But it must also be recognized as the beginning of a rhetorical inheritance that later became dangerous.

The medieval period intensified the problem because Christianity had become socially powerful. The synagogue was no longer simply a rival local assembly capable of endangering weak Christian communities. In much of Europe, Jewish communities were minorities under Christian authority. Anti-synagogue language now functioned within a different balance of power. It could

reinforce social suspicion, legal restriction, and contempt. Medieval imagery of Ecclesia and Synagoga expressed theological claims about fulfillment, but also helped fix the synagogue in the Christian imagination as defeated, blind, and spiritually inferior.

The Reformation preserved and redirected the phrase's logic. Luther's late anti-Jewish writings illustrate the destructive escalation of inherited polemic. At the same time, Protestant theology also turned the "false assembly" category against Rome, false churches, antichrist systems, legalism, and corrupt ecclesiastical power. The phrase became portable. It no longer belonged only to Jewish-Christian dispute. It became a name for any religious institution that claimed God while opposing the Gospel as the interpreter understood it.

Classical Protestant commentators show this variety. Matthew Henry reads the phrase as a warning against counterfeit covenant profession. John Gill intensifies it through antichrist typology. Ellicott anchors it more firmly in historical persecution and slander against early Christians. Later evangelicals often combine these concerns: they affirm the phrase's biblical truth, identify the immediate opponents as local persecutors, and warn against applying it to Jews collectively or to modern conspiratorial claims.

Modern academic and ecumenical interpreters have added another layer. They have emphasized first-century context, intra-Jewish conflict, the Jewish character of Revelation, Roman imperial pressure, and the social function of denunciation. Catholic interpretation after *Nostra Aetate* rejects collective blame and refuses to present Jews as rejected or accursed as though that followed from Scripture. Messianic Jewish interpreters often recover the phrase as a painful intra-Jewish or Jewish-context conflict over Messiah, covenant, and accusation.

Thus, apologists and theologians have made the phrase into at least five things: a local historical designation, a covenantal judgment, an anti-Judaizing warning, a Protestant category of false religion, and a modern reception-history problem. These meanings are not identical, but they are historically connected. The phrase has remained powerful because it sits at the intersection of Scripture, identity, accusation, power, and theological legitimacy.

The descriptive task is therefore not to pretend that there has been one interpretation. There has not. The task is to show how each interpretive layer arose, what theological work it performed, and what dangers it carried. The phrase has been used to defend Christ, define the Church, attack Judaism, critique Rome, expose false religion, warn against slander, and resist conspiratorial misuse. Its history is complex because its theological structure is potent.

12.3. Why Contextualization Is Necessary

Contextualization is necessary because the phrase is too severe to be used without discipline. It joins assembly-language with satanic identification. It speaks of false claim to sacred identity. It has been used in settings of persecution, apologetics, polemic, social domination, theological

dispute, and modern ideological misuse. A phrase with this history cannot be responsibly handled as though it were self-explanatory.

First, contextualization is necessary to preserve the biblical setting. Revelation speaks to Smyrna and Philadelphia. These were faithful churches under pressure. The phrase appears in messages of consolation, warning, endurance, and vindication. Removing the phrase from that setting distorts it. The first recipients were not powerful majorities looking for a weapon against a minority. They were poor, weak, slandered, and vulnerable believers being assured that Christ knew the truth.

Second, contextualization is necessary to distinguish exegesis from theological application. Exegesis asks what the phrase meant in Revelation's local and literary setting. Theology asks what continuing category may be drawn from it. Application asks where that category may be discerned later. These tasks overlap, but they are not the same. Confusing them leads to overreach. A local historical referent does not automatically produce a universal label. A theological type does not automatically identify a modern group. Application requires evidence and humility.

Third, contextualization is necessary because of changed power relations. The same phrase does not have the same social effect in every setting. When spoken to a persecuted church, it can console the faithful. When spoken by a dominant institution against a vulnerable minority, it can become oppressive. This does not mean truth is determined by power, but it does mean that use is morally significant. Scripture must not be used as a tool of false accusation, especially when the text itself condemns accusation.

Fourth, contextualization is necessary because the phrase has been misused. It has been drawn into anti-Jewish polemic, racial ideology, and conspiracy thinking. Such misuse is not a minor footnote. It is part of the phrase's public history. Interpreters must know that history so they do not unknowingly repeat its errors. To contextualize the phrase is not to deny Revelation. It is to refuse to weaponize Revelation against its own moral logic.

Fifth, contextualization is necessary because the phrase judges the interpreter. Anyone who uses "Synagogue of Satan" must ask whether he is speaking truth or performing accusation. Is he discerning a real adversarial assembly, or is he slandering an opponent? Is he identifying a pattern of false sacred claim and persecution, or is he baptizing resentment? Is he applying the text with fear of God, or using it to intensify hostility? The phrase cannot be interpreted rightly by an accusatory spirit.

Contextualization also allows older interpreters to be described fairly. Patristic, medieval, and Reformation theologians should not be flattened into modern caricatures. They wrote from within real doctrinal conflicts and often with serious theological motives. They believed Christ

fulfilled the Scriptures. They believed false worship endangered souls. They believed religious identity could become adversarial. These convictions must be understood. But their rhetoric must also be placed within the history of its effects. Contextualization allows both recognition and critique without pretending that the interpreter stands outside history.

The most important reason for contextualization is that the phrase names a real danger: the sacred assembly that becomes adversarial. If the phrase is used carelessly, that danger is obscured. If it is neutralized completely, that danger is also obscured. Contextualization keeps the phrase sharp but disciplined. It preserves the possibility of theological judgment while preventing uncontrolled demonization.

12.4. The Continuing Theological Force of the Phrase

The continuing theological force of the phrase lies in its warning that religious assemblies can become false from within. The danger is not merely outside the house of worship. It can arise in the assembly itself. It can wear the garments of holiness. It can quote Scripture. It can invoke covenant, law, tradition, church, office, doctrine, mission, purity, reform, or divine authority. It can say, "We are the faithful." Yet Christ may judge otherwise.

This is why the phrase remains important. It refuses the assumption that sacred form guarantees sacred reality. It refuses the idea that institutional continuity proves obedience. It refuses the claim that religious authority is self-validating. It refuses to let accusers define the faithful. The risen Christ knows the churches. He knows the poor who are rich. He knows the weak who keep His word. He knows the slanderers. He knows the false claimants. He knows the assembly that has become adversarial.

The theological type constructed in this paper identifies five marks: false claim to divine legitimacy, accusation as spiritual function, persecution of the faithful, external holiness without inward obedience, and institutional self-protection against truth. These marks preserve the phrase's force without making it a careless label. They also make the phrase self-applying. Any assembly may be examined under them. A synagogue, church, denomination, ministry, theological movement, religious court, or reform faction can become adversarial if it claims God while resisting truth and persecuting the faithful.

The phrase also continues to warn against the corruption of speech. Satan is the accuser. Therefore the assembly of Satan is an assembly organized by accusation. This is especially relevant in every age because religious communities often justify harmful speech as zeal. They may call slander discernment, cruelty discipline, fear prudence, and self-protection unity. Revelation exposes this inversion. Speech that falsely accuses the faithful does not become holy because it is spoken in a religious setting.

The phrase further warns against the corruption of power. The faithful churches in Revelation are not powerful in worldly terms. Smyrna is poor. Philadelphia has little strength. Yet Christ commends them. The hostile assembly may possess social recognition or religious confidence, but Christ exposes it. This reversal challenges every religious institution that equates size, wealth, office, prestige, or longevity with divine approval. Revelation measures by faithfulness, not by institutional weight.

The phrase also preserves hope. It is severe toward the accusers because it is consoling to the accused. Christ knows. Christ judges. Christ vindicates. The faithful do not need to surrender their identity to those who slander them. They do not need to accept the false names imposed by adversarial assemblies. They do not need to believe that poverty means abandonment or weakness means defeat. Christ's word to Smyrna and Philadelphia is that hidden fidelity will be revealed.

Finally, the phrase carries an interpretive burden. It must be used rarely, carefully, and with fear of God. It should not be applied to entire peoples, ethnicities, or religious traditions as such. It should not be used as a slogan for conspiracy, resentment, or factional warfare. It should not be used to avoid argument, evidence, or self-examination. It should be reserved for the grave pattern Revelation itself reveals: sacred claim joined to false accusation and persecution of the faithful.

The final conclusion is therefore twofold. The phrase "Synagogue of Satan" must not be emptied of theological meaning. Revelation speaks it because the corruption it names is real. An assembly can claim God while serving the adversary. But the phrase must also not be detached from context and wielded as accusation. To misuse the phrase is to risk becoming what the phrase condemns.

The paper ends where Revelation begins: with Christ knowing His churches. Human assemblies claim, accuse, exclude, and judge. Christ sees. He sees the truth beneath poverty, weakness, slander, and institutional confidence. He sees when sacred identity is real and when it is false. He sees when an assembly has become the accuser's instrument. He sees the faithful who endure. The continuing force of the phrase lies in that divine unveiling. The final question is not what any assembly says it is. The final question is what Christ knows it to be.

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