

Paul, Synagogues, and Associations: Reframing the Question of Models for Pauline Christ Groups

Richard S. Ascough

School of Religion, Queen's University | rsa@queensu.ca

JJMJS No. 2 (2015): 27–52

In the continuing and growing discourse on how best to understand the social organization of Pauline Christ groups, some approaches continue to advocate for a separation of categories such as “synagogue” and “association” while attempting to place the Pauline groups into one or the other of these. Yet, in order to progress further in the analysis, the question should not be whether Christ groups are “synagogues” or “associations,” as if these two categories are separate and distinct. In fact, the overlap among Judean groups, Christ groups, and associations breaks down such falsely rigid dichotomies.¹

In my 1998 volume surveying analogous models used for understanding Pauline Christ groups, I used a modified version of the quadruple division on ancient groups outlined by Wayne Meeks in his book *The First Urban Christians*:² households, philosophical schools, synagogues, and voluntary associations.³ On the assumption that the household was the foundational

¹ “Associations” in antiquity are groups of men and/or women that are “normally organized around a common ethnic identity, deity or cult, trade or profession, or neighborhood, and are to be distinguished from civic organizations” (J. S. Kloppenborg, *Associations, Voluntary*, in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 2, *Anim-Atheism*, ed. Dale C. Allison and Hans-Joseph Klauck [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009], 1062). In antiquity, there was no broad category or even a term “association” that would encompass the variety of groups that are included in this designation by modern scholars. There was, in fact, a large range of terminology used by the ancients themselves to delineate what moderns call “associations.” The failure to recognize that the etic category of “association” is a modern construct lies at the heart of much of the problematic attempts to locate Judean groups and Christ groups, a issue to which we return in the conclusion of this article.

² Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

³ This four-fold model has antecedents in the work of earlier scholars such as E. A. Judge, Robert Wilken, and L. William Countryman, who explored variously the relationship of

structure for many manifestations of the other three,⁴ I replaced it with “ancient mysteries” as a separate category. My book summarized scholarship up to that time on each of these models, concluding that “no one model is adequate in and of itself for explaining all aspects of Paul’s Christian communities.”⁵ Any one model, I suggested, might better explain a Pauline Christ group *in a particular location* better than the others, but need not be *the* model that best applies to every group to which Paul writes. Since that time, much work has been done on all the models, although particularly that of the associations.⁶ Nevertheless, the sharp distinctive boundary between each has remained firmly in place, as first set out by Meeks and reiterated by my own early work.

According to Meeks’s analysis, “synagogue” is a distinct, separate category from “association,” and to make a comparison with a Christ group one must choose whether the latter is “more like” a synagogue *or* an association. For Meeks it is the former: “Because Christianity was an offshoot of Judaism, the urban Christian groups obviously had the diaspora synagogue as the nearest and most natural model.”⁷ Thus, the synagogue is not “other than” the associations;

Christianity to philosophical schools and collegia (cf. Richard S. Ascough, *What Are They Saying About the Formation of Pauline Churches?* [New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998], 38–40, 83–86). Michael White referenced the “four models” in his doctoral dissertation, supervised by Meeks, and later made published mention of it in “Adolf Harnack and the ‘Expansion’ of Early Christianity: A Reappraisal of Social History,” in *The Second Century* (1985/86), 120 (my thanks to Michael White for pointing me to these references). I start with Meeks, however, since throughout the debate that followed the publication of his book, even until today, he is the most oft-cited source, particularly by those who want to drive a wedge between synagogues and associations (using the same limited dataset of four inscriptions that Meeks cites, alongside the same arguments).

⁴ Although I still see the household as key to the organizational structure of many types of groups, I would not be quite so insistent that it is foundational for all groups.

⁵ Ascough, *What Are They Saying About the Formation of Pauline Churches?*, 95.

⁶ See Richard S. Ascough, “What Are They Now Saying About Christ Groups and Associations?” *Currents in Biblical Research* 13/2 (2015): 207–44. The “voluntary” nomenclature has generally been dropped; cf. Richard S. Ascough, “‘Map-maker, Map-maker, Make me a Map’: Re-describing Greco-Roman ‘Elective Social Formations,’” in *Introducing Religion: Festschrift for Jonathan Z. Smith*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Equinox, 2008), 69 n. 2.

⁷ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 80. Meeks rejected the association model on the basis of a few key differences, all of which have been directly addressed by Richard S. Ascough, “Translocal Relationships Among Voluntary Associations and Early Christianity,” *J ECS* 5 (1997): 223–41; idem, “Voluntary Associations and the Formation of Pauline Churches: Addressing the Objections,” in *Vereine, Synagogen und Gemeinden im kaiserzeitlichen*

it is “better than.” He goes on to say, “The synagogue incorporated features of both the two types of groups we have already looked at, the association and the household.”⁸ Despite adopting the collegial structure and being legally construed as *collegia*, these Judean groups “possessed what is most visibly lacking” when the household and association models are compared with Pauline Christianity, namely, “the sense of belonging to a larger entity: Israel, the People of God, concretely represented by the land of Israel and the Temple in Jerusalem.”⁹ Thus, for Meeks it is this theological construct—a sense of continuity with the traditions of Israel—that governs the choice of “synagogue” as model for Christ groups. It is by no means clear, however, that Paul’s groups had such a construct, even when Paul himself might have done so.¹⁰

My own conclusions tended towards a different direction, with a greater inclination to viewing the early Christ groups as more like associations than synagogues. In framing the discussion this way, however, both Meeks and I pit synagogues against associations, like two divorced parents vying for the attention of their only child. Such a division is not, however, correct. I attempted to address this somewhat in an essay published in 2008, in which I challenged the tripartite taxonomic configuration of “Jews, Christians, and others/pagans” while proposing a complex, and thus more thickly descriptive, approach under the broad rubric of Greco-Roman “elective social formations” that compared all such groups “with respect to” a particular variable (e.g., meal practices;

Kleinasion, ed. Andreas Gutsfeld and Dietrich-Alex Koch (STAC 25; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 149–83; idem, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians* (WUNT II 161; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 47–109; John S. Kloppenborg, “Edwin Hatch, Churches and *Collegia*,” in *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity. Essays in Honour of John C. Hurd*, ed. Bradley H. McLean (JSNTSup 86; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993). Meeks has since then expressed much more openness to using the associations as a model (“Taking Stock and Moving On,” in *After the First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later*, ed. Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell [London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009], 141).

⁸ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 80.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Cf. Ascough, “What Are They Now Saying,” 207–44. John S. Kloppenborg rightly points out, and calls into question, the scholarly assumption regarding Pauline church order that rests on the premise that Paul laid down the structure and polity of the earliest communities and that one can simply “read-off” their social history from Paul’s letters (“Egalitarianism in the Myth and Rhetoric of Pauline Churches,” in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig [Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996], 248).

leadership; nomenclature).¹¹ Nevertheless, the debate about the best analogous model for early Christ groups persists in employing a sharp dichotomy between “synagogues” and “associations,” viewing them as competitors, albeit sometimes subtly, as the organizing model of early Christ groups. Indeed, at times, even after noting similarities among “synagogues” and “associations,” many scholars insist that ultimately the differences disqualify Christ groups from categorization as associations.

Judean Synagogues as Associations¹²

The idea that Judean synagogues can be classified as associations is by no means new. Both Josephus and Philo point to Judean groups using the terminology of associations. For example, in a document attributed to Julius Caesar from ca. 47–46 B.C.E., the emperor is quoted as equating the Judean community on Delos with other associations (*thiasoi*). Caesar notes that unlike *other* associations that were banned from meeting, Judean groups were allowed to continue to gather:¹³

For even Gaius Caesar, our praetor and consul, passed a decree preventing societies (*thiasoi*) from gathering together in the city [of Rome], yet he did not prevent these [Judeans] alone from collecting funds or having common meals. Likewise, when I prevent other societies (*thiasoi*), I permit these [Judeans] alone to gather together according to their

¹¹ Ascough, “Map-maker,” 68–84.

¹² Abbreviations for Epigraphic and Papyrological Collections follow those used on the AGRW website, <http://philipharland.com/greco-roman-associations/welcome/how-to-use-the-inscriptions-database/#abbrev>, which is based on G. H. R. Horsley and J. A. L. Lee, *A Preliminary Checklist of Abbreviations of Greek Epigraphic Volumes*, in *Epigraphica* 56 (1994): 129–69; and J. F. Oates, R. S. Bagnall, and W. H. Willis, *Checklist of Editions of Greek Papyri and Ostraca*, 5th ed. (BASP Supplements 9; Oakville, CT: American Society of Papyrologists, 2001).

¹³ In this article I follow those who translate Ἰουδαῖοι as “Judean” rather than “Jew”: “Adopting this geographic, ethnic, and cultural understanding of the term helps to avoid misunderstandings among modern lay readers and some modern scholars who may tend to separate ‘religion’ from its ethnic or cultural matrix” (Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* [New York and London: T&T Clark, 2009], 15). Harland’s entire book “is an argument for approaching Judeans in the diaspora primarily as one among many immigrant and ethnic groups” (15), and convincingly so; see esp. 14–16.

ancestral customs and laws, and to feast. (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.213–16 = AGRW L33; cf. *Ant.* 14.235; 259–60)

In his composition of instructions and background for a Judean embassy traveling to see the emperor Gaius in 39 or 40 C.E., Philo recalls earlier actions of Augustus, who allowed Judean associations (*synodoi*) to gather even when other types of associations were forbidden from doing so:

[Augustus] sent a letter to all the governors of the provinces in Asia, because he heard that the sacred first fruits were being treated with disrespect. He ordered them to permit only the Judeans to come together in gatherings (*synagōgia*). For these synods (*synodoi*) were not based on drunkenness and drunken behavior to cause disturbance. Instead, they were schools of temperance and justice, where people practiced virtue and contributed the annual first fruits every year, sending sacred ambassadors to take them to the temple in Jerusalem. (Philo, *Legat.* 311–13 = AGRW L37; cf. *Legat.* 316)

In both Josephus and Philo, what sets apart the Judean gatherings is not their inherent difference in categorization from “associations,” but that they are of a particular sort of association by virtue of their socially upstanding collective behavior and having a long history of meeting together.¹⁴

There are some scholars who nevertheless resist the categorization of synagogues as associations, such as Shimon Applebaum,¹⁵ Mary Smallwood,¹⁶

¹⁴ Philo seems rather taken with the alcoholic infused excesses of non-Judean associations; see *Ebr.* 20–21 and 23 = AGRW L8; *Contempl.* 40, 64, and 83–89 = AGRW L9; *Flacc.* 4–5 = AGRW L36; *Flacc.* 135–37 = AGRW L10. See further Torrey Seland, “Philo and the Clubs and Associations of Alexandria,” in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), esp. 110–17; Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley, “Synagogue Communities in the Graeco-Roman Cities,” in *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities*, ed. John R. Bartlett (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 79–80.

¹⁵ Shimon Applebaum cites Caesar’s exemption of Judean communities from the law prohibiting associations, concluding that Judean *politeumata* were not *collegia* (“The Organization of the Jewish Communities in the Diaspora,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern [CRINT 1; Assen and Philadelphia: VanGorcum and Fortress, 1974], 502). Their membership was

and Margaret Williams,¹⁷ among others. In such cases the rejection of the connection between synagogues and associations draws heavily on the 1914 work of Jean Juster, who viewed the synagogues as *sui generis* and in no way related to associations.¹⁸ Although there are some similarities, “the resemblances are superficial and the differences fundamental.”¹⁹ In 1951,

determined by ethnic status rather than election, and their regulations were predetermined by Torah rather than created upon the formation of the community. That said, Applebaum does accept that in some cities there existed Judean occupational associations that would have been subject to the *Lex Iulia* (“Organization,” 476, 481–83; cf. Alan F. Segal, “The Jewish Experience: Temple, Synagogue, Home, and Fraternal Groups,” in *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002], 27–28). Thus, for Applebaum it is only insofar as synagogues held the status of *politeuma* that they were different from associations; other Judean groups could be thus classified.

¹⁶ E. Mary Smallwood views synagogues as having a much broader function than the associations, particularly in the political role local Judean associations took on in their cities in order to negotiate with Roman authorities (*The Jews Under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* [SJLA 20; Leiden: Brill, 1976]), 133–38).

¹⁷ Margaret Williams is perhaps one of the clearest opponents of categorizing Judean synagogues as associations, at least in Rome. Her examination of the evidence leads her to conclude that the similarities are superficial and are much outweighed by the differences (“The Structure of the Jewish Community in Rome,” in *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 216; following Jean Juster, *Les Juifs dans l’empire romain: Leur condition juridique, économique et sociale* [2 vols.; Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1914], 418–24). For example, the texts usually cited in support of the connection from Josephus (*Ant.* 14.213–16) cannot be authenticated, and the two references in Seutonius (*Jul.* 42.3 = *AGRW* L32 and *Aug.* 32.1 = *AGRW* L34), in which Judeans are banned from Rome, neither ban all Judeans nor indicate that those who are banned have fallen afoul of laws pertaining to *collegia*. Williams then gives four kinds of evidence that Judeans in Rome had a central council to which all the various *proseuchē* in the city were accountable, but they were collectively conservative and isolationist, more focused on their own “Jewishness” than any appearance of “Romaness” in form.

¹⁸ Juster, *Les Juifs*, 414, 424; see further esp. 413–24.

¹⁹ Erich Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 121; cf. Applebaum “Organization,” 464–65; Smallwood, *Jews Under Roman Rule*, 133; Williams, “Structure of the Jewish Community,” 216. This approach is generally also followed by Lee I. Levine (*The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000], 130–31), who concludes, “For all the engaging comparisons that have been made between the synagogue and

however, Simeon Guterman responded point by point to Juster's argument, demonstrating that the differences are not so great and that synagogues can and should be classified as associations.

To begin with, "the fact that the Jewish community was always referred to collectively as *universitas* or *corpus*, or by some similar designation suggest to him [Juster] that the Jewish community or synagogue was not commonly regarded as a *collegium*."²⁰ Yet, as Guterman points out, a diversity of names was used to designate associations, so the lack of evidence among Judean groups "for the use of such familiar terms as *collegium* or θιασοι is by no means to be construed as a vital defect."²¹ Other claims made by Juster are addressed in turn.²² Juster's assertion that Judean communities are nationally based falters in the West, where they were not considered to comprise part of the Judean nation under Roman law. We might add that other associations are construed similarly in their Diaspora locations based primarily on a specific geographic or ethnic identity.²³

Smallwood makes a similar argument: "membership was automatic for a Jew by right of birth, without question of admission or enrollment; on the other hand, membership was exclusive to Jews and proselytes, while other *collegia* were corporations with voluntary, open membership."²⁴ Yet, it

comparable Greco-Roman associations (*thiasos*, *koinon*, *collegia*, etc.), many of them cogent to some degree, no analogy can do justice to the unique role of this institution" (*Ancient Synagogue*, 173; see also idem, "The First-Century Synagogue: New Perspectives," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 77 [2001]: 27–28). Yet, as Peter Richardson points out, after having pointed to multiple similarities himself and earlier rejecting *sui generis* arguments, "in the end [Levine] seems to make a *sui generis* argument of synagogues," thus failing to draw the "obvious conclusion" that early Diaspora synagogues borrowed from the model of associations (*Building Jewish in the Roman East* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004], 219).

²⁰ S. L. Guterman, *Religious Toleration and Persecution in Ancient Rome* (London: Aiglon Press, 1951), 131.

²¹ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 131–32 (θιασοι is unaccented in original quote); cf. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations*, 71–78.

²² Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 136–48.

²³ See Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.—A.D. 135)*. A New English Version, rev. and ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), III/1: 107–11 for some detailed comparisons. On associations that are formed on the basis of ethnic identity and/or immigrant status see Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 33–36. See further below.

²⁴ Smallwood, *Jews Under Roman Rule*, 134.

is simply not the case that *all* associations had an open admission policy.²⁵ There are associations whose membership was restricted by one or more factors, such as hereditary succession (e.g., *AGRW* 322; *CIL* III 6150; VIII 683) or social status (e.g., citizen associations [*orgeōnes*] such as *GRA* I 44; 45). Nor, we might add, was ethnicity an *a priori* condition for admission to the Judean synagogue, at least if one allows for the early presence of God-fearers and sympathizers in the synagogues. Thus, Juster's (and following him, Smallwood's) contrast of the exclusive conditions for membership among Judean groups with the openness of associations cannot be maintained.

Nor can one highlight groups of Judeans (particularly in Alexandria and Rome) and their synagogues as a "special case" of ethnic associations. They were not so different than other immigrant groups at the time that formed associations based on common ethnic identity. For example, on the island of Delos we find Egyptians (*AGRW* 221, 230), Tyrians (*AGRW* 223, II–I B.C.E.), Berytians (*AGRW* 224–28, II–I B.C.E.), Syrians (*AGRW* 229, II–I B.C.E.), Italians (*AGRW* 231–32, 237, II–I B.C.E.), Athenians (*AGRW* 238, II–I B.C.E.), and Bithynians (*AGRW* 239, undated). We also have evidence for Pisidians (*AGRW* 273, early II B.C.E.) and Lycians (*AGRW* 174, early II B.C.E.) in Sidon, Syria, and in a later period we find Tyrians in Puteoli (*AGRW* 317, 174 C.E.), *Asiano*i in Macedonia (*IG* X/2.1 309, 480, both II–III C.E.), Thrace (*AGRW* 64, 196–98 C.E.), and the Lower Danube area (*AGRW* 77 [Municipium Montanensium, II C.E.], 78 [Nikopolis ad Istrum, early III C.E.], 71 [Dionysopolis, 222–35 C.E.]), and Alexandrians in Scythia Minor (*AGRW* 82, 160 C.E.), Neapolis, Italy (*AGRW* 312, ca. 100 C.E.), and Rome (*AGRW* 319, 146 C.E.). Understandably, when arriving in a new location, immigrants sought out others who spoke their language, ate the same food, and shared a similar background, and in some cases they formed an association on the basis of such commonalities.

Even in their being granted an exemption from the laws pertaining to *collegia*, it is clear that Judean groups were assumed to be *collegia* by the Romans and thus in need of a special exemption. Yet, despite the supposed general ban on associations, there was tacit acceptance that associations would continue to meet, and, except in cases where they became overtly political, they were simply ignored by the imperial authorities.²⁶ Neither is it

²⁵ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 142–43.

²⁶ Wendy Cotter, "The Collegia and Roman Law: State Restrictions on Voluntary Associations, 64 BCE–200 CE," in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman*

fully clear that Judean groups were actually fully exempt from such laws. Judean groups could be subject to the political heavy-handedness of the rulers when they were deemed to be too disruptive to civic society, just as was the case on occasion with other associations. Whatever might be the details around the potential involvement of Christ adherents, in the view of Suetonius, it is “the Jews” who are the subject of Claudius’s ejection from Rome in the mid-first century C.E., predicated on their political unrest (*Claud.* 25.4; cf. Cassius Dio 60.6.6–7). Political reasons also may have been the case with the expulsion of the Jews earlier under Tiberius, although here the rationale is less clear (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.3.5; Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.85; Suetonius, *Tib.* 36).²⁷

Likewise, it is not the case, as Smallwood argues, that associations were either politically neutral or were embroiled in election shenanigans (about which Cicero so vehemently complains; see *AGRW* L25, L26, L28), since there are cases where associations included civic officials and patrons (e.g., *AGRW* 7; 74; 108; 109), organized civic events such as festivals (e.g., *AGRW* 18; τόπος inscriptions from Magnesia ad Maeander²⁸), and were involved in the work of the *polis* in a positive manner (e.g., *AGRW* 162), even holding places of prominence at civic events.²⁹

Guterman lists a number of association features within synagogues, such as the possession of a treasury for which funds were collected, banquets and common meals, election of officers, and burial of members.³⁰ The so-called lack of “statutes” in Judean groups is belied by Juster’s own admission that they had the law of Moses, among other binding regulations, in particular Judean groups such as that at Apamea, which possessed a νόμος.³¹ Most significantly, “Jewish communities possessed a juridical personality” and as such had, among

World, ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 74–89.

²⁷ See Leonard Victor Rutgers, “Roman Policy Towards the Jews: Expulsions from the City of Rome During the First Century C.E.,” *Classical Antiquity* 13 (1994), 60–65.

²⁸ See Richard S. Ascough, “Carving Out Public Space: τόπος Inscriptions and Early Christ Groups” in *Epigraphik und Neues Testament*, ed. Joseph Verheyden, Markus Öhler, and Thomas Corsten (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), in press.

²⁹ Among other things, this is suggested by the presence of τόπος markers on seats in which associations are given prominence in theaters; see Ascough, “Carving Out Public Space.” For further evidence and argumentation of associations’ positive participation in civic life see Harland, *Associations, Synagogues and Congregations*, 101–12.

³⁰ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 132–33.

³¹ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 136–37.

other things, “the right to purchase and maintain land, to sell, and to contract obligations, to receive donations and give donations, and the right to send legations to the emperor.”³² Guterman concludes that based both on the evidence from Josephus and the overall similarity in organization, Judean communities can be regarded as *collegia*.³³

Recent scholarly work on Judean groups and associations has affirmed that the former can to be categorized among the latter, especially in the legal setting,³⁴ but also in their organizational patterns. For example, within his discussion of the similarities among the organizational structures of the Essene community and that of Hellenistic associations, Martin Hengel notes that “the Jewish synagogue communities of the Diaspora had the same legal form” as the associations, and the Jews imitated the associations’ pattern of fostering “patriotic connections and religious interests” among their own ethnos (“nation”) scattered throughout Egypt.³⁵

³² Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 133. He notes that after the reign of Marcus Aurelius synagogues, like associations, also had the right to receive legacies, although this seems only to have been the case for Italy, since Caracalla forbade such a legacy in Antioch (*Religious Toleration*, 133–35). We avoid here the details, however, since this post-dates the time of our immediate interest.

³³ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 150.

³⁴ See Smallwood, *Jews Under Roman Rule*, 133–43; Schürer, *History*, III/1: 115–16; H. J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (updated edition; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 9–11; Cotter, “The Collegia and Roman Law,” 76–78; Carsten Claußen, *Versammlung, Gemeinde, Synagoge: Das hellenistisch-jüdische Umfeld der frühchristlichen Gemeinden* (StUNT 27; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 224–26, 231; Martin Ebner, *Die Stadt als Lebensraum der ersten Christen. Das Urchristentum in seiner Umwelt I. Grundrisse zum Neuen Testament I, I* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 227–28; and especially Mikael Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State, Christians, Jews, and Civic Authorities in 1 Thessalonians, Romans, and Philippians* (CBNT 34; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001), 24–63.

³⁵ Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 243–45, 311. Albert Baumgarten expands upon the comparisons of commensality of Philo and Josephus to compare Judean sects such as the Essenes, Pharisees, and Sadducees to associations and philosophical schools (“Graeco-Roman Voluntary Associations and Ancient Jewish Sects,” in *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Martin Goodman [Oxford: Clarendon, 1998], 93–111). The comparison explains why ancient Judean sectarianism flourished at the time it did, since Judean sects and associations were both in similar circumstances, attracting literate urbanites at a time of extreme social disruption. On the similarities between the community associated with the Qumran documents and the Greco-Roman

Two scholars in particular, however, have laid the groundwork for re-framing the discourse by showing that synagogues themselves have characteristics of associations and as such are part of a larger comparative category of “Greco-Roman associations” more generally: Peter Richardson and Anders Runesson.³⁶ Their systematic treatments may finally put to rest such arguments to the contrary.

associations see Moshe Weinfeld, *The Organizational Pattern and the Penal Code of the Qumran Sect: A Comparison With Guilds and Religious Associations of the Hellenistic Period* (NovT et orbis antiquus 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); Matthias Klinghardt, “The Manual of Discipline in the Light of Statutes of Hellenistic Associations,” in *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects*, ed. John J. Collins, Michael O. Wise, Norman Golb, and Dennis Pardee (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 722; New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1994), 251–70; Richardson, *Building Jewish*, 165–85; Randolph Herrmann, “Die Gemeindergel von Qumran und das antike Vereinswesen,” in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Jörg Frey, Daniel R. Schwartz, and Stephanie Gripenrog (AJEC 71; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 161–203; Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, esp. 182–85; Yonder Moynihan Gillihan, *Civic Ideology, Organization, and Law in the Rule Scrolls: A Comparative Study of the Covenanters’ Sect and Contemporary Voluntary Associations in Political Context* (STDJ 97; Leiden: Brill, 2012).

³⁶ Others who conclude that synagogues were organized as associations include L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, vol. 1. *Building God’s House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Harvard Theological Press 42; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 82–83; John M. G. Barclay, “Money and Meetings: Group Formation among Diaspora Jews and Early Christians,” in *Vereine, Synagogen und Gemeinden im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien*, ed. Andreas Gutsfeld and Dietrich-Alex Koch (STAC 25; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), esp. 114–15, 126; Paul R. Trebilco, “Jews, Christians and the Associations in Ephesos: A Comparative Study of Group Structures,” in *100 Jahre Österreichische forschungen in Ephesos. Akten des symposiums Wien 1995*, ed. Barbara Brandt and Karl R. Krierer (Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften 260; Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999), 333; Tessa Rajak, “The Synagogue within the Graeco-Roman City,” in *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Graeco-Roman Period*, ed. Steven Fine (London: Routledge, 1999), 161–73; Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 36–42. Hugo Mantel enumerates twelve similarities that lead him to conclude that Judean sects in Palestine, including the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem, “were modeled in their organization on the Hellenistic religious and social associations” (“The Nature of the Great Synagogue,” *HTR* 60 [1967]: 75); although the similarities are neither “uniform” nor singularly decisive, “taken together” the similarities suggest the influence of the associations (“Nature,” 91).

Richardson argues that “synagogues functioned—and were perceived—as *collegia* in the Diaspora.”³⁷ Noting the general legislative ban on associations enacted under Julius Caesar and Augustus, Richardson points out that it was only occasionally that *collegia* were restricted and during such times synagogues were exempted.³⁸ Although he does not highlight the point, it is important to reiterate, as noted above, the necessity to explicitly exempt Judean groups; presumably they would otherwise have fallen under the laws applying to *collegia*. That is, in the view of the Roman imperial legislature, synagogues fell into the category of “*collegia*” and thus needed special exemption from the laws applying to such.

Turning to epigraphic, literary, and archaeological data for synagogue buildings in the period prior to the destruction of the temple, Richardson demonstrates a consistency among synagogues’ primary focus on multiple communal functions such as meals, education, and civil law.

Synagogues looked and behaved like voluntary associations. As they developed first in Diaspora, they shared in this architectural complexity (with communal emphasis, benches, meals, worship, courtyards, ancillary spaces, etc.). Within the life of the *polis*, they adopted patterns of behavior similar to associations, such as reserving seats in the theater (Miletus) or finding a donor to give them a house (Priene, Dura, etc.).³⁹

While Richardson recognizes that Judean communities might be differentiated from other associations, he rightly notes that the differences “do not subvert the claim that synagogues were associations, for the variety among associations was wide enough that—architecturally, organizationally, and behaviorally—synagogues fell naturally within those limits.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Richardson, *Building Jewish*, 111.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 204; see further 207–21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

Runesson extends this argument both in range and detail.⁴¹ He argues that synagogues developed in different ways, depending upon their location. In Palestine there were two basic types of institution: “public city/town/village assemblies and (semi-public) voluntary associations.”⁴² The public assemblies are rooted in the Persian period and included Torah liturgies while also serving as the administrative center of the surrounding population. In contrast, the regulations of the voluntary association type were predominantly inwardly focused, with little concern beyond group boundaries. Similar to their public counterparts, these non-official institutions—both “denominations” (such as the Pharisees, the Essenes, and the Sadducees) and “sects” (such as the Samaritans, the *Therapeutae*, and the Qumran community)—were engaged in the reading and interpretation of Torah. Yet they came to the fore at a later time, during the Ptolemaic period, when conditions were such that there was “a loosened attitude of the Jerusalem authorities to the control of the interpretation of the law” along with the process of canonizing scripture and “increasing Hellenistic influence, including the Greek organizational forms of the *thiasoi*, or voluntary associations,” which could be adopted and adapted.⁴³

In the Diaspora, synagogues were regarded as associations and generally treated as such under Roman law, but were granted special privileges based on their “antiquity” that exempted them from the legal ban on *collegia*. Thus, “the main difference between the Jewish ‘synagogues’ and other *collegia* was the extended privileges granted the Jews; we are thus dealing with a difference in degree rather than in nature between the ‘synagogue’ and other associations.”⁴⁴ Liturgical developments, including Torah reading, took place variously in place and time in the Diaspora synagogues as Jews from Palestine immigrated westward, although “by the first century torah reading liturgies were firmly established everywhere.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the social pattern and the

⁴¹ Anders Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (CBNT 37; Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 2001). See also his survey of scholarship on the origins of the synagogue in which he demonstrates the breakdown of the consensus view of the exilic origins of the synagogue in favor of seeing the associations as the model, first in Palestine and subsequently in the Diaspora: Anders Runesson, “The Origins of the Synagogue in Past and Present Research—Some Comments on Definitions, Theories, and Sources,” *Studia Theologica—Nordic Journal of Theology* 58 (2003): 60–76.

⁴² Runesson, *Origins*, 395.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 398–99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 468–69.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 470; 480.

temple-like architectural design of Diaspora synagogues resemble the broad organizational form of the *collegia*.⁴⁶

Synagogues as the Intermediary Model for Christ Groups

Notwithstanding the misgivings of some scholars as to whether Judean synagogues were associations, as we have seen, other scholars do accept this categorization. This lays the groundwork for scholars to view Christ groups and synagogues under the same broad umbrella—namely, as associations—since there are a number of group characteristics that are manifest in some associations, synagogues, and Christ groups, such as focus on cult liturgies, common banquets and/or meals, provision of burial for members, rules for admission and exclusion, monetary contributions, written regulations, reliance on patronage, a designated leadership structure, ethical expectations, and translocal connections.⁴⁷ Despite these mutual similarities, or perhaps because of them, there continues to be resistance to claims that Christ groups were modeled on associations. Indeed, when it comes to understanding Christ groups, the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 471. It is important to note that Judean synagogues manifest diverse features, often depending upon locale (as demonstrated by Runesson, *Origins*, and Tessa Rajak, “Synagogue and Community in the Graeco-Roman Diaspora,” in *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities*, ed. John R. Bartlett [London and New York: Routledge, 2002], 22–38). The category “synagogue” itself should not be rarified into a singular model.

⁴⁷ For evidence from Christ groups see Ascough, “What Are They Now Saying,” in which I summarize the substantive work done in this area since 1998. For the synagogues, along with the material summarized above, see the overview of Fitzpatrick-McKinley, “Synagogue Communities,” 63–70. On the whole, Fitzpatrick-McKinley recognizes a number of similarities among synagogues and associations, but in the end concludes that “there were a number of differences between the Graeco-Roman clubs and the synagogues of the Jews” (69). Curiously, she cites only three substantive differences, much fewer than the number of similarities she names. The first difference is the exclusiveness of the synagogues, which, we noted above, is somewhat overstated, as Fitzpatrick-McKinley at least recognizes by drawing attention to the possible presence of God-fearers and converts. Second, drawing on Meeks, she notes that to outsiders the synagogue restrictions on conviviality “may have seemed a little too intense” (69). But this is a matter of degree, not of kind; Josephus and Philo cluster Judean groups with associations even when making this distinction. Third, she notes the Diaspora sense of belonging was not just to their *polis* of residence but also to Israel, the “land and its temple city” (70). Yet, as I have pointed out elsewhere, such feeling cannot have been overly intense, for we have scant evidence of the Diaspora Judean communities rallying to the aid of Jerusalem during the siege of 68–70 C.E. (Ascough, “Translocal Relationships,” 236). It seems there were limits to their commitment!

associations often take a back seat to the synagogues, with the latter playing an intermediary role. For example, in his popular, and thus influential, introductory textbook, Bart Ehrman writes,

We are particularly well informed about ancient *trade organizations and funeral societies*. The church in Thessalonica may have been roughly organized like one of these groups.⁴⁸

At this point, he makes reference to a side box on the opposite page that includes the by-laws of the Association of Diana and Antinoüs from Lanuvium (*CIL* XIV 2112 = *AGRW* 310; 136 C.E.). Within the boxed text itself, Ehrman reiterates the importance of the associations, albeit again referencing a “burial society,” which belies his claim to be among those “well-informed” about ancient associations, since this category is all but defunct.⁴⁹ Yet having made the initial connection of a Christ group with the associations, Ehrman continues,

On the other hand, given its central commitment to a religious purpose, it may have had some close organizational affinities with the Jewish synagogue as well, although the Jewish community was probably much larger than the Christian group. It appears that some of the local converts became leaders in the Christian congregation and that they organized their meetings, distributed the funds

⁴⁸ Bart Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd ed.; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 208, emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ See especially Frank M. Ausbüttel, *Untersuchungen zu den Vereinen im Westen des römischen Reiches* (FAS 11; Kallmünz: Michael Laßleben, 1982), 20, 29; John S. Kloppenborg, “Collegia and *Thiasoi*: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership,” in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 20–23; Éric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity* (Cornell Studies in Classical Philology; Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 38–39. In noting the problems with the special category of “*collegia funeraticia*,” Jonathan Scott Perry rightly comments, “The better approach to the topic is to catalog all instances of a college—of whatever type—acting in a funerary capacity” (*The Roman Collegia: The Modern Evolution of an Ancient Concept* [Mnemosyne, Supplementa, History and Archaeology of Classical Antiquity 277; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006], 32).

they collected, and guided the thinking of the group about religious matters (5:12–13).⁵⁰

Ehrman thus quickly shifts from the associations to the synagogue as the model for Christian community at Thessalonike. The source for the “local converts” who became leaders is a bit ambiguous in his text, but following as it does on the claim about the large Judean community in Thessalonike, Ehrman conveys the idea that leadership in the local Christ group was drawn from the synagogue, even while the rank and file were predominantly “pagan,” and thus the Christ group itself would naturally follow the synagogue model.⁵¹ He does not reference again the associations.

Although the primary focus of his study is the organizational leadership of the early Christians, the title of J. T. Burtchaell’s book conveys clearly his fundamental understanding of the lines of influence: *From Synagogue to Church*. Practices found in the Christian churches of both the earliest period and later developments can be linked, through continuity with Judean antecedents, to the Judean synagogue “from which Christians emerged.”⁵² The synagogues, however, had little to do with associations beyond surface resemblances in the naming offices and the electing and honoring of incumbents to these positions. In the synagogues, officers held positions for much longer time periods and focused their attention “on the entire welfare of the people” rather than short term aims of the group.⁵³ A translocal view created a sense of continuity with Jews elsewhere,⁵⁴ while a backward, historic view connected them with the traditions and leaders of Israel, especially Moses. Above all, Jews found the ultimate authority in their God, rather than their elected officials. Thus, despite similarities in titles, the synagogues had little else in common with associations. And, although he does not state it explicitly, this removes any possible influence of the associations on the development of the early Christ groups. For Burtchaell,

⁵⁰ Ehrman, *Brief Introduction*, 208.

⁵¹ The same rhetorical move is present almost verbatim in Ehrman’s more comprehensive introductory textbook; see Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (4th ed.; New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 316–17.

⁵² J. T. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 272.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 265–66.

⁵⁴ The argument that associations had no translocal connections in the manner of Judean and Christian groups is addressed in detail in Ascough, “Translocal Relationships,” 223–41.

“the synagogue became the church, not by dint of a new social format, but in view of new convictions within its members.”⁵⁵ It seems that for Burtchaell, Christian groups thus inherit all that is embedded in the history and organization of the Jews with little or no (corrupting?) influence from outsiders, and carry these traditions forward in ways the Jews themselves do not.

In Claußen’s comprehensive review of the structure and organization of the ancient synagogues, he considers briefly the influence of associations, although he relies on the work of Meeks and thus ends up discounting their influence on early Christ groups, and arguing that synagogues influenced the structure of early Christian house churches, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora: “Vor allem Privathaushalt, Verein, Synagoge und philosophische Schule bildeten die vielfach herangezogenen Vorbilder der frühchristlichen Gemeindestruktur, wobei zumindest bei Meeks eine gewisse Neigung auszumachen ist, der Diasporasynagoge die führende vorbildrolle zuzubilligen.”⁵⁶ Yet, as Runesson points out, Claußen’s assumption that the majority of synagogue gatherings were household based is questionable, since there were a variety of institutional forms associated with terms such as *synagogē* and *proseuchē* at that time.⁵⁷

In some cases, scholars maintain a distinction within the affirmation of synagogues as associations, bracketing out synagogues as, at best, a special kind of association, and ultimately driving a wedge between the two by emphasizing that Christ groups were synagogues *rather than* associations. For example, Mark Nanos cites Smallwood and others in affirming that the synagogues had the legal standing of “association” in the ancient world, albeit, with special privileges based on their “ancestral customs.”⁵⁸ Two pages later, he quotes La Piana cautiously but affirmingly to the effect that synagogues were in many respects similar to associations, but in other ways were superior: “In a word, the Jewish associations, taken all together, actually possessed all the essential elements of organization and government pertaining to a city, and not merely

⁵⁵ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 352.

⁵⁶ Claußen, *Versammlung*, 47, drawing on Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*.

⁵⁷ Anders Runesson, Review of Carsten Claußen, *Versammlung, Gemeinde, Synagoge* (2002), *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 34 (2003): 314.

⁵⁸ Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 43–44.

showed the semblance of such institutions, as was the case with the *collegia*.”⁵⁹ Yet La Piana’s work in this particular area needs to be used with caution, since La Piana seems unable to make up his mind whether synagogues can be classified alongside associations. For example, he notes that the Diaspora synagogues adopted the “Greek nomenclature of the associations,”⁶⁰ yet claims that they were not *collegia*,⁶¹ only to contradict this later with the statement that a number of synagogues “were really Jewish *collegia domestica*,”⁶² that is, a particular type of association.

For Nanos, it is the affiliation of the Christian communities with synagogues—as synagogues—rather than associations that protects them from imperial interferences in the mid-part of the first century. Citing Suetonius’s reference to Julius Caesar dissolving all guilds except those with ancient foundations (*Jul.* 42.3 = *AGRW* L32), Nanos argues that it is only through their being “subordinate” to the “governing authorities” of the synagogue that the Christ adherents at Rome to whom Paul writes would have been protected: “Paul *and* the Christian Jews and gentiles of Rome both understood their community(s) as part of the Jewish community(s) when Paul wrote Romans, with Christian gentiles identified as ‘righteous gentiles’ who were now worshipping in the midst of Israel in fulfillment of the eschatological ingathering of the nations (15:5–12).”⁶³ Had the Christ adherents been designated as a “private club” they would have had insufficient grounds to practice their religion freely within the city.⁶⁴

Nanos presumes that Christ groups would need to apply to the Roman authorities for “the right to congregate for fellowship and worship,

⁵⁹ Georg La Piana, “Foreign Groups in Rome during the First Century of the Empire,” *HTR* 20 (1927): 349–50; Nanos, *Mystery of Romans*, 47.

⁶⁰ La Piana, “Foreign Groups,” 360.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 349 and n. 17.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 355 n. 23.

⁶³ Nanos, *Mystery of Romans*, 75.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 74–75. He is reacting to suggestions that Christ groups sought protection from the authorities by designating themselves as “funerary associations,” a category of which he is rightly skeptical, as it has been called into question as a *taxon*, as noted above (see footnote 49). Most recent work on Christ groups as associations no longer relies on this defunct argument. In his 2002 book, Nanos makes a similar argument for the Galatian Christ groups affiliating with local Judean communities in order to gain safeguards from the Roman legal protections offered to Judean groups (*The Irony of Galatians: Paul’s Letter in First-Century Context* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002], 257–67, esp. 264).

even in their own homes or tenement rooms,” and we have no evidence for such taking place.⁶⁵ This, he argues, is because their designation as synagogues provided sufficient protection. This claim, however, does not account for the evidence that, despite the general ban on associations, there was tacit acceptance that associations would continue to meet, and, except in cases where they became overtly political, they were simply ignored by the imperial authorities.⁶⁶ That is, many non-Christ groups in first century Rome show no evidence of applying for imperial approval and yet continued to meet in private, despite not having protected themselves by subordinating themselves to the synagogue authorities. Furthermore, although Judean groups did seem to have some privileges, Judeans in particular cities were not immune from periods of opposition from local authorities.⁶⁷ Thus, even an alliance with a synagogue would provide Christ groups with no guarantee of freedom from interference.

Other scholars have made the same assumption, even while not so explicitly attempting to distance Christ groups from direct affiliation with associations through the buffer of the synagogues. Thus, for Guterman, it is Christianity’s identification with Judaism, whose associations had the status “*religio licita*,” that protects it from persecution by Roman authorities; once separation occurred, Christians were prosecuted under Roman law.⁶⁸ Even Runesson follows an explicit claim—“In the Diaspora the Jewish communities were most likely organized and understood by the surrounding community as *collegia*”—by noting, “In the same way, the early Christ-believers were organized as voluntary associations, first within, and later outside the umbrella of Jewish voluntary associations.”⁶⁹ But it is the summary of Gehring that perhaps best encapsulates what is at stake when scholars make such claims, whether consciously or sub-consciously:

⁶⁵ Nanos, *Mystery of Romans*, 74.

⁶⁶ Cotter, “The Collegia and Roman Law,” 74–89.

⁶⁷ Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State*, 63.

⁶⁸ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 157–18. Guterman (like others) is, however, incorrect in asserting the category of “*religio licita*” as a legally defined category that protected Judeans (or any others) by granting them official status. There is no ancient support for the existence of such a category (see Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, Congregations*, 222), which originated with Tertullian (*Apologeticum* 21.1); see further Philip F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (SNTSMS 57; Cambridge University Press, 1987), 211–15; Tessa Rajak, “Was There a Roman Charter for the Jews?” *JRS* 74 (1984): 107–23.

⁶⁹ Runesson, Review of Claußen, 314.

It is also possible that Hellenistic associations had an *indirect* influence on the early Christian house churches by way of the Jewish synagogue. If the Diaspora synagogue was organized like an association, this would provide an explanation for the fact that elements of the association can be seen in the organization of the house church. One must distinguish between the theological self-understanding of the early Christian house churches, on the one hand, and the sociological and legal form of organization or outward appearance, on the other. It could be that the house churches were organized like a house synagogue (that is, like an association or household) and yet *understood themselves theologically not as an association but as an ecclesia* or the family/house of God, which in turn would suggest a theological connection between the house church and the house synagogue.⁷⁰

While many scholars, myself included, have been arguing that structurally the Christ groups have the organizational form that would categorize them as “associations,” as did the synagogues, for some scholars there clearly remains an important distinction insofar as they are concerned that the “theology” of the associations (if one can speak of such) should not be seen to be tainting the self-understanding of Christ groups. For some scholars, Christ groups are protected from such “pagan” influences through the synagogues.

John Kloppenborg has aptly illustrated the issue of theological or ideological concerns interfering with scholarly pursuit of the connections between associations and the early Christian groups in his analysis of the reaction of scholars to the work of Edwin Hatch (and others) at the end of the 19th century.⁷¹ In the various negative responses that Hatch received to his suggestion that Paul’s communities resembled associations and were thus structurally influenced by them, it is clear that much of the polemic is driven by theological considerations rather than an engagement with the data, and expressed as a fundamental opposition to the suggestion that “paganism” had any influence on early Christianity. Moreover, Jonathan Z. Smith’s *Drudgery Divine* provides a detailed analysis as to how Judaism was used (mostly by

⁷⁰ Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 21, my emphasis.

⁷¹ Kloppenborg, “Edwin Hatch,” 226–28.

Protestants) to isolate early Christ groups from their “pagan” surroundings (which, for the Protestants, represented Catholicism).⁷² It seems to me that framing the question of antecedents for Pauline Christ groups in a manner that pits “synagogues” against “associations” falls prey to the same methodological mistake, even if for different reasons. The question itself must be rethought.

Reframing the Question of Associations as a Model

There is a game that my children enjoyed playing, called *Apples to Apples*, that involves categorization and definition. In the game, the “dealer” turns up a card on which there is a word, and each player must submit, facedown, a card with another word on it that they think the dealer will choose as the best match to the up-turned card. Hence the name of the game; if the face card reads “apple” then a player’s best bet is to submit a card that best encapsulates “apple-ness”—e.g., “round” or “sweet,” or, even better, “Granny Smith.” It strikes me that we are playing a version of this game in the debate about models for early Christ groups, but we are playing it wrong—or at least, are misreading the cards. The “apple” card on the table is “Christ group,” and when one player throws down the “synagogue” card as a matching “apple,” others say, “That’s not an apple, it’s a banana.” In response, they throw down their own match for “apple,” which reads “association,” to which the other side retorts, “That’s not an apple, that’s a grapefruit.” We are left, then, with quite a fruit basket, but little way forward in the debate.

What a summary of scholarship shows, however, is that we are not, in fact, dealing with different fruit at all. Our taxonomy is incorrect, which skews our conclusions. If I may be permitted to persist with the fruit-game analogy, I think the face card on the table is “associations,” a decidedly scholarly (etic) category. When one player puts down the “synagogue” card, they are indicating a *particular type* of association—perhaps a “Golden Delicious.” When another player puts down the “Christ group” card, they too have a match, but again, it is a *particular type* of association, a “Granny Smith.” In biological terms, they are different species but of the same genus; different type of apples, but both still of the *malus* genus.

Returning to Gehring, he asks “whether the synthesis between Judaism and Hellenism can be demonstrated in concentrated form here in the synagogue—in other words, patterned after the organization of a voluntary

⁷² See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), esp. 83.

association yet Jewish in self-understanding.”⁷³ On the one hand, it makes sense that the self-understanding of a group of Judeans would be “Jewish.” Yet Gehring’s statement underlines the fundamental methodological problem in the way the question is often framed in the debate between synagogues and associations—a “Jewish self-understanding” in comparison to what? An “association’s self-understanding”? Framed this way, the question is ridiculous, as no ancient group would think like this (nor would they be able to).⁷⁴ The *taxon* “association” as it is used in the scholarly literature is a modern construct—again, an “etic” category; the ancients themselves had numerous words for such groups (the “emic” perspective), which are not entirely synonymous (e.g., *thiasos*; *eranos*; *koinon*; *collegium*). Nor would it even make sense to the majority of ancients to frame the contrast of Judean self-understanding with that of “Gentile self-understanding”; this is a thoroughly Judean framework in and of itself (and when used by modern scholars, often buys into a Pauline theological framework). As religious studies scholars we need to frame the difference appropriately, such as contrasting Judean self-understanding with other possible emic ethnic self-understandings such as that of the “*Asianoï*,” and then for comparative purposes cite examples of associations of *Asianoï*, which have both ancient traditions and ethnic character traits, and also in some cases include non-*Asianoï* in their group (see, for example, *AGRW* 64 = *GRA* I 87, Perinthos, 196–97 C.E.; *IG* X/2.1 309, Thessalonike, II–III C.E.).

Kloppenborg has observed that, “our data about associations is sufficiently fragmentary and scattered that it is difficult to tessellate these data into a coherent picture that would permit systematic comparison to the practices

⁷³ Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 21 n. 117.

⁷⁴ Occasionally Judean groups referred to themselves as “associations”; for example, *σύνδοξ* in *IJO* II Nysa 26 (see comments in Philip A. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary*, vol. 2, *North Coast of the Black Sea, Asia Minor* [BZMW 181; Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2014], 355), and Josephus *Ant.* 14.235 or *θίασος* in Josephus, *Ant.* 14.213–16 (quoted above), and perhaps *IJO* I Ach. 41 (see comments there). There is more evidence for groups that held no special ethnic Judean quality employing the term *συναγωγή* for their group (e.g., *AGRW* 63; 95; *IPerinthos* 59) or *ἀρχισυναγωγός* for their leader (e.g., *AGRW* 39; 45; 49; 63; see Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 311–12); cf. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 40–41.

of Christ groups.”⁷⁵ This is correct, to a degree, but seems to assume that we have enough unfragmentary and unscattered data to permit a coherent picture of the Christ groups themselves. In fact, we do not. Although much of the evidence for the early Christ groups is collected into a single volume—the canonical New Testament—which can give the *appearance* of coherence, these texts were written by multiple authors spread over at least the second half of the first century (probably later), and geographically spread around the eastern circum-Mediterranean. It is no more a coherent picture than that acquired by association data. One can extend this to the data for ancient synagogues, which again is fragmentary and scattered.

It is the scattered and fragmentary nature of *all* of this data that makes the comparative process difficult. More to the point, any attempt to tessellate the association data into a coherent picture of “association” would of necessity ignore the various different types of associations.⁷⁶ To return to our horticultural metaphor, the genus is “association,” which has various species based on such factors as kinship, neighborhood, ethnicity, occupation, or cultic practice.⁷⁷ Breaking the taxonomy down further, we could suggest there are Dionysos associations, Zeus associations, Hero associations—all of them species designations of the larger genus.

There is not a tripartite division of “synagogue, Christ group, and other”—there is only “associations,” with all their various manifestations and permutations.⁷⁸ As John Barclay notes with a slightly different emphasis, “To ask, therefore, in what respects the Diaspora synagogues or early churches were like ‘associations’ is akin to asking whether churches today are like clubs: there

⁷⁵ John S. Kloppenborg, “Associations and Their Meals,” unpublished paper presented at the Greco-Roman Meals Seminar, Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (Chicago, IL, Nov. 19, 2012), 48.

⁷⁶ If there is any justification for using “Greco-Roman associations” in a way that is inclusive of all groupings, including Judeans and Christians, it is that it serves as a quick reference that locates the general topic of scholarly discourse (“association”) within the temporal and locative frame designated “Greco-Roman” by scholarly discourse.

⁷⁷ John S. Kloppenborg, “Associations in the Ancient World,” in *The Historical Jesus In Context*, ed. Amy Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, and John Dominic Crossan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 323–25; Ascough, Harland, and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, 2.

⁷⁸ Thus, the recently published critical edition volumes and sourcebook on associations assume that Judean groups are to be categorized as associations, not contrasted with them: *GRA I* 73, 82; *GRA II* 95, 106, 113, 139, 150; cf. *AGRW* 46, 59, 86, 89, 105, 127, 145, 149, 196, 270, 307, 329, and perhaps 283 and 286.

are too many different kinds of church, and too many different kinds of club to make this vague and over-generalized comparison of much heuristic value.”⁷⁹ Once we recognize that “synagogue” and “Christ group” are simply two different species of “association,” we can leave behind arguments about whether or not Christ groups *are* or *are not* “synagogues” and focus on the more complex, and thus more interesting, comparative investigation across all the “apples” in the basket to see how their similarities, and their differences, help us understand each species in its own right.⁸⁰

From the ancients’ perspective, a group of foreigners meeting in the house down the road—those people who arrived a generation ago from Judea and speak Greek in a funny way—are certainly perceived as “different.” But in many respects, they are also similar. Despite their accent, they speak Greek. They shop at some of the same stalls and, like “us” (from the perspective of the neighbor), meet regularly as a form of social experimentation. And thus, how one frames the comparative question will determine the relationship. Do they meet regularly in a house in the name of a particular deity? Yes. Do they pour out libations to their deity and follow this with a drunken discourse over philosophy? Well, not really—but take out the libation and the drunkenness and they do pursue philosophical-like conversations. Thus, they are at the same time both similar and different.

Yet, when one imposes the scholarly *taxa* such as “synagogue” and “other”/“pagan” group, one privileges the differences of the synagogues and

⁷⁹ Barclay, “Money and Meetings,” 114–15. Although she does not expand on her comment, Tessa Rajak is quite correct when she observes concerning the similarities between Judean groups, including synagogues, and associations that “it is unwarranted to think in terms of a unitary Graeco-Roman model, as scholars have sometimes been over-inclined to do” (“Synagogue and Community,” 37). There was, as she notes, a “broad framework of a spectrum of types of Graeco-Roman associations” within which the various Judean groups could adapt and experiment. As I noted, it would thus be unwise to assume that in using the etic “association” as a comparator we are employing a term that signifies one particular “thing.”

⁸⁰ Although my argument has focused on how the category “synagogue” is used as a buffer between Christ groups and their wider so-called “pagan” surroundings, the breakdown of the rigid distinctions between the three categories also works the other way, mitigating arguments put forth that would isolate early Christ groups *from* the synagogues (as does Philip F. Esler, on the basis of architectural distinctions, with Judeans meeting in dedicated buildings termed “*proseuchai*” and Christ groups meeting in domestic spaces or rented commercial venues (see *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003], 77–107, esp. 106).

demeans the differences among the “others” by making them secondary. In the framing of the comparison we are thus already deciding which is the preferred group; as Smith notes, our language, our choice of categories, creates the world we want to study while reflecting the world that we inhabit.⁸¹ No wonder, then, that when we read Philo’s comparison of synagogues and associations we readily agree with his assessment and see it as self-evidently “historical.” To wit, Philo suggests that in contrast to the sobriety and philosophical nature of particular Judean groups (*Therapeutai*; synagogues), the associations are raucous drunken feasts, a contrast to which many scholars have given the nod of approval. I hope that my argument has given pause to such assent. Instead, we should see synagogues as a different manifestation of “association,” bearing both similarities to and differences from other manifestations of associations. Likewise, Christ groups bear both similarities to and differences from other manifestations of associations, including—but not limited to—synagogues.

Nevertheless, my overarching aim is not an attempt to slot “synagogues” (or Christ groups, for that matter) into the particular category “association,” as if doing so will provide some sort of leverage for better understanding. Rather, my aim is to call into question the categories, and the categorization, themselves. We must drop the dichotomous either/or categorization and re-frame the discussion around the comparative exploration of similarities and differences across all types of Greco-Roman associations, including synagogues and Christ groups, in order to move forward in our understanding of the complex interactions reflected in all of our texts, sacred or otherwise.⁸²

⁸¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

⁸² Like all metaphors, pushed too far, the fruit metaphor does begin to break down. As Mark Nanos pointed out to me (via email), while one cannot simply take a “Granny Smith” and call it a “Red Delicious,” there is evidence that a Judean group could be identified as both a “synagogue” and an “*ekklesia*.” That said, I think a focus on the terminology for group meetings is part of the problem. So while we most commonly associate “synagogue” with Judean meetings, there are non-Judean groups that use that term as well. For example, in Perinthos, Thrace, there is a synagogue of barbers dedicated to Zeus, which is clearly not Judean (*GRA* I 86 = *AGRW* 63, I–II C.E.). Similarly, the use of ἀρχισυναγωγός as a leadership term appears in non-Judean groups (see footnote 72 above; cf. Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 79–80, incl. n. 38). Thus, a focus on nomenclature can only get us so far, which is why I want to push beyond it to formulate comparisons that would be construed something like, “comparing the synagogue of Judeans in Perinthos with the synagogue of barbers with respect to their dedicatory

practices.” The use of “synagogue” is not the most interesting aspect, nor does it make them “the same.” It simply invites the deeper comparison of two “associations.” This is something I have advocated more strongly elsewhere; see Ascough, “Map-maker,” 68–84. We should drop either/or bifurcations and essentializing and focus on deeper analysis of “X compared to Y with respect to Z” and on practices (or so-called “theologies”) reflected in the texts. For example, many groups had meals, so we can identify the similarities in practice (reclining; small numbers; drinking) in order to highlight the differences, not so we can argue that one type of group is better than another (as does Philo) but simply to show the range of practices. In so doing, it may well be that one particular Judean group differs from another Judean group, especially in a different location, yet both claim the designator “synagogue.”

My thanks to many who read and commented on versions of this paper, including Mark Nanos, Anders Runesson, Richard Last, Erich Gruen, Philip Esler, L. Michael White, Cheryl O’Shea, and the anonymous peer-reviewers for *JJMJS*.