

Synagogues and Voluntary Associations as Institutional Models: A Response to Richard Ascough and Ralph Korner

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The passion for reconstructing the form, type, and purpose of the groups in which early Christians gathered has an obvious and understandable hold on scholars and laypeople alike. Just what was the model for these collectives to which Paul addressed his letters? The pursuit of that quest is a natural one. A desire to comprehend the nature of the fledgling communities retains a firm grip on researchers and students, not to mention churchgoers and synagogue members. And an understanding of Paul's writings requires some grasp of the institutions within which he lived, worked, and preached. Yet investigation into this question has run into obstacles. The evidence is indirect, disputed, and tantalizingly ambiguous.

Where is a model to be found? Two chief contenders have emerged in the scholarly wars: the voluntary association and the synagogue. Richard Ascough, a combatant in these wars for some years, has provided a very helpful and succinct survey of some of the chief recent contributions to this debate. Most significantly, he notes that the either/or dichotomy has itself misled us. Synagogues and voluntary associations (*collegia* or *thiasoi*) need not be mutually exclusive. Ascough is quite right to undermine the simplistic bifurcation. And he is not alone. A growing consensus now reckons that synagogues themselves drew upon the model of the voluntary association or indeed were a form of *collegium* or *thiasos*.¹

¹ Arguments were set out fully long ago by S. L. Guterman, *Religious Toleration and Persecution in Ancient Rome* (London: Aiglon Press, 1951), 130–56. And a plethora of scholars, in one fashion or other, have followed his lead. See, e.g., P. Richardson, “Early Synagogues as Collegia in the Diaspora and Palestine,” in J. S. Kloppenborg and S. G. Wilson, *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), 90–109; A. Fitzpatrick-McKinley, “Synagogue Communities in the Graeco-Roman

But where exactly does that get us? Even if one were to isolate one or the other as a model, it might not take us very far. The associations in Greco-Roman society, known largely from inscriptions, exhibit a great variety of forms, objectives, and interests.² And synagogues of the Second Temple period, of which we know a lot less, had a comparable diversity of aspects, ranging from houses of prayer and places for study to locations for manumission of slaves, and much in between, depending upon local circumstances, needs, and traditions.³ No standard formulas applied, and one size does not fit all. So, as a model, neither associations nor synagogues, nor synagogues as associations, can definitively disclose the nature of Paul's communities.

Ascough wants to reframe the question, a laudable endeavor. But how? In his view, both synagogues and early Christian groups were species of associations, and as such each had some similarities and some differences with other types of associations. Our task then should be to explore both the parallels and the contrasts. Will this, however, get us any closer to understanding the nature of corporate bodies with which Paul communicated in Corinth or Philippi or Galatia or Rome? We know much less about them than we know about pagan *collegia* or even Jewish synagogues. Even to discern similarities or

Cities," in J. R. Bartlett, *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities* (London: Routledge, 2012), 63–70; P. A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 36–42. Skepticism regarding this notion was expressed long ago by J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'empire romaine* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1914), 413–24; similarly, M. H. Williams, "The Structure of the Jewish Community in Rome," in M. Goodman, *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 216–21; E. S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 121–22. For a much more extensive survey of the scholarship, see Richard S. Ascough, "Paul, Synagogues, and Associations: Reframing the Question of Models for Pauline Christ Groups," *JJMJS* No. 2 (2015): 27–52.

² The classic discussion is that of J. P. Waltzing, *Étude historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les Romains depuis les origines jusqu'à la chute de l'empire d'Occident* (Louvain: C. Peeters, 1895–1900), who, however, sees much more homogeneity than the *collegia* actually possessed. See the valuable summary discussions of P. A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 25–53; S. G. Wilson, "Voluntary Associations: An Overview," in Kloppenborg and Wilson, *Voluntary Associations*, 1–15; J. Kloppenborg, "Collegia and Thiasoi: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership," in *ibid.*, 16–30.

³ See the magisterial discussion of L. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), especially 125–59. See also D. D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 389–450. A brief summary in Gruen, *Diaspora*, 115–19.

differences among these disparate groups would be a slippery task with few firm foundations. There are enough disparities within each of the categories to leave little of substance on which to seize hold.

Problems arise right from the start. The prevailing view contends that Jewish synagogues should be classified as associations in the general category of Greco-Roman *thiasoi* or *collegia*. That premise certainly holds the field. Such institutions, so it is claimed, were understood by Jews and non-Jews alike as belonging to the wider category of Greco-Roman associations.⁴ And some build on that proposition to infer that many Christ-believers who gathered in synagogues thought of them as Jewish associations on the Greco-Roman prototype.⁵ But what is the basis for this subsuming of the synagogue under the heading of the pagan *collegium*?

The evidence is surprisingly thin. A single passage in Josephus, quite rightly cited by Ascough, is our sole direct testimony.⁶ The historian records a letter from a Roman magistrate to the island of Paros alluding to an earlier decree ostensibly by Gaius Caesar that prohibited *thiasoi* from assembling in the city but exempted the Jews alone from this ban. On the face of it, that might seem to suggest that Jewish gatherings were categorized as *thiasoi*, at least from the perspective of Roman officialdom. But nothing else in our sources uses that designation for the synagogue. The relevant passages in Philo and in Suetonius either do not mention *collegia* or *thiasoi* or do not mention Jews.⁷ And the Josephus passage itself is riddled with difficulty. The very idea that Julius Caesar exempted Jews alone from a general ban on assemblies is extremely difficult to swallow. It could only have encouraged a flood of applications from other groups—or invited widespread resentment and hostility. The Roman magistrate may simply have misinterpreted Caesar's decree for his own purposes (assuming that he had a copy of it with him in Asia) or responded to a special application by the Jews in Paros. It certainly does not show that Roman law classified Jewish communal gatherings as *collegia*—let alone that Jews set themselves under such a rubric. And without that shaky foundation, the whole notion of synagogues in the category of Greco-Roman voluntary associations loses substantive basis.

⁴ See above, n. 1.

⁵ A. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell Intl, 2001); P. Richardson, *Building Jewish in the Roman East* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 111–33; see the valuable summary of recent scholarship by R. Ascough, “What Are They Now Saying About the Formation of Pauline Christianity,” *Currents in Biblical Research*, 13 (2015): 207–44.

⁶ Jos. *Ant.* 14.215–16.

⁷ Philo, *Legat.* 311–13; Suet. *Iul.* 42,3; *Aug.* 32.1.

One might, in fact, go further and question the whole idea of categorization or classification in this subject. Taxonomy may not be the best approach in a realm where fluidity and diversity prevailed, and where interconnections and overlappings constituted the principal features. How much do we gain anyway by labeling the Jewish synagogue a voluntary association? It might tidy up our categories, but it says little about how the Jews conceived their own communal assemblages or governed their own communities, let alone about the purposes of their gatherings. And with so much murkiness, the likelihood of shedding light upon the congregations with which Paul communicated becomes still more distant. Perhaps one should set aside this search for models that runs into blind alleys.

Comparable complication exists in the terminology that Paul himself employs in addressing his epistles to the communities of Christ worshippers in Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. The most common expression, of course, is *ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ*, and Ralph Korner is certainly right to focus attention upon its variegated significance.⁸ The rendering as “church” remains common in modern translations but is obviously anachronistic for this period. As Korner observes, not all New Testament writers employ the term, so that its predominance still lay in the future. One might note also that Paul does not confine himself to that usage. He addresses the Roman congregation, for example, as “all those beloved of God who are called the holy ones.”⁹ The same holds with the Philippians.¹⁰ Paul can also employ the interesting phraseology of the *ekklesia* at the house, as in Romans and Philemon.¹¹ That has served as a basis for the hypothesis that the emergence of early Christianity had its roots in the household. But the language is not technical language. Nor for that matter was *ekklesia* universal usage for civic assembly in the Greek world. The Athenians employed it in the classical era, to be sure. And it appears occasionally, but only occasionally, in the Hellenistic period. References to the actions of the people in the inscriptional evidence overwhelmingly cite the *demos*, not the *ekklesia*.¹² It is far from obvious that Paul’s use of the term was designed to echo a civic institution of the Greek *polis*.

⁸ Ralph J. Korner, “*Ekklesia* as a Jewish Synagogue Term: Some Implications for Paul’s Socio-Religious Location,” *JMJS*No. 2 (2015): 53–78.

⁹ Rom 1:7.

¹⁰ Phil 1:1. So also, outside the authentic epistles, Eph 1:1.

¹¹ Phil 2: τῆ κατ’ οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησία; Rom 16:5.

¹² This is readily discernible, for instance, in the collection of testimony in H. H. Schmitt, *Die Staatsverträge des Altertums*, vol. III: *Die Verträge der griechisch-römischen Welt von 338 bis 200 v. Chr.* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1969).

What then did inspire him to resort to that expression? Korner makes the intriguing suggestion that the term would resonate most directly with Jews. In employing it with regard to the budding communities of Christ worshippers with which he was in communication or indeed had founded, Paul would underscore the continuity with Jewish tradition and would help to knit together the Diaspora communities with their Gentile adherents. This is a provocative idea that certainly deserves attention.

But does *ekklesia* really have Jewish resonance? The passages that Korner presents offer only marginal and ambiguous support. This, of course, is not the place to parse each of the citations in detail. But a few remarks might illustrate the difficulties of interpretation. Ben Sirah uses the word *ekklesia* nine times. In five of those instances, however, it applies loosely to a public gathering which could be a civic assembly in a *polis* rather than a Jewish collective.¹³ In one case that implication seems quite clear, as Ben Sirah makes reference to workers and craftsmen who are not sought out in the *boule* of the people, nor do they prevail in the *ekklesia*.¹⁴ There is no obvious connection in any of this to a Jewish community as such. The use of political language occurs again in explicit fashion when Ben Sirah speaks of the “chief men of the people, the leaders of the *ekklesia*.”¹⁵ This may allude to the Jewish congregation, but the verses appear to be metaphorical rather than technical. One other example is revealingly ambiguous. The author does speak of a man of great piety and learning, a devout follower of the Lord’s law, and one whose praises are sung in the *ekklesia*. That might appear to signal a Jewish assemblage. But since the same sentence asserts that his wisdom will be discussed by the nations (*ta ethne*), this puts it in a broader context than just the Jewish one.¹⁶ A closely parallel phraseology occurs in one other passage, which speaks of the *laoi* discussing the sage’s wisdom and the *ekklesia* offering him praise.¹⁷ Of the remaining two passages, one, as Korner himself acknowledges, signifies a heavenly congregation.¹⁸ And only the last alludes to what appears to be a Jewish *ekklesia*, one in which an adulterer and adulteress who violate the law of the Most High are brought to be accused.¹⁹ That hardly suggests that *ekklesia* was standard terminology for an organ of the

¹³ Sirah, 15.5; 21.17; 31.11.

¹⁴ Sirah, 38.33.

¹⁵ Sirah, 33.19.

¹⁶ Sirah, 39.10.

¹⁷ Sirah, 44.15.

¹⁸ Sirah, 24.2.

¹⁹ Sirah, 23.24.

Jewish congregation. Kroner acutely notes that 1 Maccabees uses *ekklesia* in one case to refer to a Jewish assembly before which the Spartans presented condolences to Simon on the death of Jonathan.²⁰ But a few lines later the same author, in speaking of the great assembly that accorded Simon the position of leader, high priest, and commander in chief, gives it the designation of *synagoge*.²¹ So, *ekklesia* evidently does not possess technical force.

Josephus utilizes *ekklesia* 48 times. There is certainly no need to go through each of those. Korner helpfully observes that only nine of those examples apply to a public assembly. Even if all of those nine reflect terminology of the Second Temple period, they do not allow the conclusion that it was common usage, let alone a *terminus technicus* in Jerusalem or the Diaspora for an assembly of Jews.

Korner brings two selections from Philo to bear on the question. In one, the philosopher notes that a good number of undesirable persons find their way into *ekklesiai*, thus prompting measures to ban them. The reference does imply Jewish assemblies since the context is that of Mosaic laws and regulation.²² But it is notable that the *ekklesia* from which these worthless characters, mostly eunuchs, homosexuals, and prostitutes, were excluded is described as the “holy congregation” (*hieros syllogos*). Labels for the institution appear to be synonymous, as Korner rightly observes. But that suggests that the phraseology is fluid, not that *ekklesia* serves as a customary term for a Jewish assembly. The other passage is a gloss on Deut 23:7–8, which enjoins the Hebrews not to despise the Egyptians, since they were sojourners in their land, and to admit them into their community in the third generation. Philo’s wording in the *de Virtutibus* is that if Egyptians wish to transfer to the *politeia* of the Jews, they should not only be allowed to do so but should, in the third generation, be invited into the *ekklesia*.²³ Although *politeia* has the connotation of a civic community, *ekklesia* in the context of conversion appears to signify a religious congregation. There is more complexity than clarity here. And the term *ekklesia* is just lifted by Philo from the Septuagint translation. It need not reflect the standard terminology for Jewish assembly in the age of Philo.

In short, the hypothesis that Paul, by choosing the term *ekklesia*, sought to establish a connection with Jewish synagogue communities is attractive and appealing. But the available evidence is simply insufficient to sustain it. The term

²⁰ 1 Macc 14.19.

²¹ 1 Macc 14.28.

²² Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.324–25.

²³ Philo, *Virt.* 108.

itself has multiple meanings, other phrases are used for similar purposes even by Paul, and the instances in which Jewish writers employ the word to denote a Jewish assembly are extremely sparse. The claim that Paul fastened upon *ekklesia* in order to establish a link with the heritage of Israel remains well short of compelling.

The testimony that we do possess on Jewish congregations in the Second Temple period refers almost exclusively to Diaspora synagogues. What about synagogues in Judea, indeed in Jerusalem itself? We know that there were some. They receive mention three times in Acts,²⁴ most notably in a passage that identifies the synagogues of the freedmen (*libertini*), of the Cyreneans and the Alexandrians, and of the Cilicians and Asians.²⁵ Whether this disputed reference signifies one, two, three, or five synagogues need not be decided here. In any case, it may be no coincidence that the only explicit literary reference to synagogues in Jerusalem speaks of them as institutions of Diaspora Jews in the city. (The allusion to “freedmen” almost certainly signals enslaved Jewish captives brought to Rome, later manumitted, and now resettled in Jerusalem.) This seems quite congruent with the famous Theodotus inscription. That document records the building of the synagogue by Theodotus, son of Vettenus, a Roman name, thus indicating an Italian origin. And since the structure that he built explicitly included facilities to accommodate those from abroad, this synagogue too may well have been designed primarily for the needs of Diaspora Jews who had returned to the homeland.²⁶

Just as synagogues in the Diaspora served as vehicles to provide a sense of community and to supply continuity with tradition for Jews abroad, so the synagogues in Jerusalem served a comparable function for Jews from abroad who had resettled in the homeland but retained a communal connection to their Diaspora roots. For Saul of Tarsus, who moved from his Diaspora home to a different form of Diaspora in Jerusalem, this type of institution might have been quite familiar, even if it did not pattern itself upon pagan voluntary associations. As a model, it might well have sufficed.

²⁴ Acts 6:9; 24:12; 26:11.

²⁵ Acts 6:9.

²⁶ *CIJ* 2.1404 = *SEG* 8.170: τοῖς χρήζουσιν ἀπὸ τῆς ξένης. See the discussions in Binder, *Temple Courts*, 104–109; and Runesson, *Origins*, 226–31.