

***Ekklēsia* as a Jewish Synagogue Term: A Response to Erich Gruen**

Ralph J. Korner

Taylor Seminary | ralph.korner@taylor-edu.ca

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It is with appreciation that I acknowledge Erich Gruen's thoughtful interaction¹ with my previous article.² Before I engage his comments directly, I wish first to review the basic thrust of my argument. I sought to assess the socio-religious implications of Paul's permanently designating his multi-ethnic communities as *ekklēsiai*, specifically within the context of the claim of Runesson, Binder, and Olsson that the word *ekklēsia* functions as one among many terms that signify Jewish (synagogue) assemblies.³

I suggest that this backdrop of Jewish usages of the word *ekklēsia* helped Paul to solve a key ethno-religious conundrum. If Gentiles could not collectively assume the designation "Israel," but yet, through faith in the Jewish *Christos*, could share in historic Israel's covenantal benefits, then Paul's designation of his multi-ethnic communities as *ekklēsiai* provided them with an inherently Jewish collective identity other than "Israel" by which he could institutionally integrate Gentiles qua Gentiles into theological continuity with

¹ Erich S. Gruen, "Synagogues and Voluntary Associations as Institutional Models," *JJMJS* 3 (2016): 125–129.

² Ralph J. Korner, "*Ekklēsia* as a Jewish Synagogue Term: Some Implications for Paul's Socio-Religious Location," *JJMJS* 2 (2015): 53–78.

³ Anders Runesson notes that "what in English is translated 'synagogue' went under several different names in antiquity, that is, 17 Greek terms, 5 Hebrew terms, and 3 Latin terms, some of which overlap" (Anders Runesson, Donald Binder, and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book* [Leiden: Brill, 2010], 10 n. 21). For a list of all Greek words used for Second Temple synagogues see Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (CBNTS 37; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001), 171–73. For extensive descriptions of each term as used by Jewish communities, see Donald Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 91–151.

Torah observant Jews qua Jews⁴ (i.e., Gentiles become part of the *qahal*, even though they are not part of the [ethnic] ‘*am*).⁵

The term *ekklēsia* served that institutional need particularly well given its long history of usage in Jewish literature. *Ekklēsia* as a supra-local identity for the entire nation of Israel is found in the LXX. *Ekklēsia* as a public/civic assembly for the conducting of civic governance and religious practices is found in Sirach, 1 Maccabees, and Josephus. *Ekklēsia* as an assembly of a Jewish association (*hieros syllogos*) is found in Philo (*Spec.* 1.324-325). One could even read Philo’s *Virt.* 108 as referring to a semi-public Jewish association that was permanently designated as an *ekklēsia*.⁶

Gruen’s perception notwithstanding, it was not my intention to explore which socio-historical *ekklēsia* backdrop (Greek or Jewish) was more important with respect to Paul’s *ekklēsia* identity construction project. Both *ekklēsia* contexts were of equal importance in providing missional relevance for Paul’s communities with Greco-Roman and Jewish outsiders (and insiders). My point with respect to the Greek backdrop was that the *civic ekklēsia* in and of itself could not provide Paul with a sufficient precedent for permanently designating an *association* as an *ekklēsia*. This is because no example exists in the extant inscriptional, papyrological, or literary records of a non-Jewish association

⁴ By “Gentiles qua Gentiles” I mean that Gentiles could become fully constituted followers of the Jewish *Christos* without being required to become Jewish proselytes and/or or take up any one, or all, of the Jewish covenantal identity markers such as circumcision, dietary restrictions, and festival observances.

⁵ The closest the LXX comes to implying that non-Jews were considered to be a part of the *qahal/ekklēsia* is in 2 Chron 30:25. Therein, Hezekiah’s Passover celebrations in Jerusalem are attended by, among others, “the strangers (οἱ προσήλυτοι) that came from the land of Israel.” While the Greek term (προσήλυτοι) infers that these were proselytes rather than non-Torah observant Gentiles, the underlying Hebrew (עַמֵּי אֲרָם) allows for non-proselyte Gentile participants (e.g., Lev 25:47). It would seem, then, that with respect to the LXX, Paul took a socio-ethnic leap forward, so to speak, when he incorporated into his *ekklēsiai* Gentiles who did not belong to the ‘*am*/Israel, along with Jews who belonged to the people of Israel (i.e., the ethnically defined ‘*am*), thereby maintaining socio-ethnic distinction between Israel and the nations/Gentiles.

⁶ For a complete overview of my argument relative to the use of *ekklēsia* in Jewish sources, see Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklēsia in the Early Jesus Movement* (AJEC 98; Brill: Leiden, 2017), 81–149.

which self-designated collectively as an *ekklēsia*.⁷ There is only one source that holds promise in this regard, and it is a Jewish literary one (*Virt.* 108).

I would forward three overarching assumptions that limit the force of Gruen's critique of my position. Richard Ascough has addressed the first two—reification and bifurcation. Ascough notes, first, that Gruen “essentializes the category ‘synagogue’ and the category ‘association’ as somehow discreet entities that would have been obvious to the ancient persons themselves” and, second, that Gruen places Jewish synagogues in opposition to “pagan” associations as being a more apt Pauline model.⁸

I would add a third observation. Gruen appears to delimit his definition of the English term “synagogue” as having reference either to a Jewish collective/community/congregation or to a building within which they meet, and not to a public/civic entity.⁹ Such a definition does not cohere with the breadth of the semantic domain for the English word “synagogue” that Runesson, Binder, and Olsson have catalogued.

The English word “synagogue” functions as an umbrella term for at least 22 different Greek and Hebrew words that were used by Jews in the Land and/or in the Diaspora to describe a public/civic gathering for administrative, judicial, religious, economic, and/or social activities (e.g., *synagōgē*),¹⁰ along with (1) public or semi-public buildings (e.g., *proseuchē*, *synagōgē*, *bet ha-midrash*, *bet kneset*), (2) a temporary community identity (*synagōgē*) when gathered for public or semi-public purposes, (3) the meeting of a semi-public association (e.g., *sylogos*), or (4) a collective designation for a semi-public association in the Diaspora (*ekklēsia*, *politeuma*).

Aside from these three working assumptions, there are also four specific points that Gruen makes to which I would like to respond. He questions: (1) whether Paul used *ekklēsia* as a group designation for *all* of his communities;

⁷ See my discussion in *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklēsia*, 52–68.

⁸ Richard S. Ascough, “Methodological Reflections on Synagogues and Christ Groups as ‘Associations’: A Response to Erich Gruen,” *JJMJS* 4 (2017): 118–126.

⁹ Gruen, “Synagogues,” 131.

¹⁰ See my discussion in *JJMJS* 2 (61 n. 33) of Lee Levine's contention that a public (rural) synagogue building (in the Land) was used for “the entire gamut of [public] activities...[such] as a courtroom, school, hostel, a place for political meetings, social gatherings, housing charity funds, a setting for manumissions meals sacred or otherwise, and, of course, a number of religious-liturgical functions [such as public Torah reading, rituals, festival observance]” (*The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* [2d ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005], 29).

(2) whether civic *ekklēsiai* in the 1st century CE still were politically relevant and thus formed a sufficient motivating factor in Paul's use of the term *ekklēsia* as a group designation for his Christ-followers; (3) whether the use of *ekklēsia* in some Jewish literary works for a public institution in the Land constitutes sufficient cause for suggesting that diaspora Jewish communities also adopted *ekklēsia* as a congregational synagogue term; and (4) whether Philo's use of *ekklēsia* reflects technical terminology for contemporary Alexandrian synagogue entities.

For his first point, Gruen claims that "complication exists in terminology that Paul himself employs in addressing his epistles," specifically that "Paul does not confine himself to [*ekklēsia*] usage" when addressing all of his communities.¹¹ Gruen highlights Paul's epistles to the Philippians and to the Romans as two cases in point. Two factors mitigate his assertion.

First, in Phil 4:15 Paul clearly implies that the Philippians constitute an *ekklēsia* association.¹² Second, the reason that Paul does not address the Roman Christ-followers as an *ekklēsia* is because the Roman community was not founded by Paul. As I highlighted in my previous article,¹³ it may even be, as per Robert Jewett, that the group designation adopted by the Roman community was *hoi hagioi* ("the holy ones"/*klētois hagiois*; Rom 1:7).¹⁴ If the original group designation of the Jerusalem community of Christ-followers also was *hoi hagioi*,¹⁵ this would place the apostolic loyalties of the Romans with the Jerusalem apostles. The only Christ-follower group in Rome that is named an

¹¹ Gruen, "Synagogues," 128.

¹² Paul, in writing to the Philippians, states that "not one *ekklēsia* shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you only" (4:15). This implies that the Philippian Christ-followers also constitute an *ekklēsia*.

¹³ Korner, "*Ekklēsia* as a Jewish Synagogue Term," 62–63, 75.

¹⁴ Jewett writes that "when the term 'saints' is used as a description of specific Christian groups in contrast to all Christians, it refers to Jewish Christians, loyal to or associated with Jerusalem" (*Romans: A Commentary* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 2007], 114). Jewett cites other examples in Romans 15:25, 26, 31; 1 Cor 16:1 (Ibid, 114; see also Horst Balz, "ἅγιοις κτλ.," *EDNT* 1.17).

¹⁵ See the arguments of (1) Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 248; (2) Richard Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Community," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. O. Skarsaune and R. Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 55–95, esp. 57; and (3) especially Paul Trebilco, *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 104–37, esp. 134.

ekklēsia, and thus the only ostensibly Pauline-loyal Christ group in Rome, was the community who met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla. It is to this *ekklēsia* that Paul asks the Romans to extend greetings (Rom 16:3-5; cf. Acts 18:1-4, 26). In the “post-Edict of Claudius” Rome (54 CE) it could be that one of Paul’s rationales for writing his epistle to the Romans (ca. 57 CE) was to forge socio-religious unity (not only Jewish-Gentile unity) between the two differentiated sub-groups of Christ-followers in Rome (the Jerusalem-loyal *hoi hagioi* and the solitary Pauline-loyal *ekklēsia*).¹⁶

For his second point, Gruen makes two observations: he correctly notes that there was not “universal usage [of *ekklēsia*] for civic assembly in the Greek world” and that “references to the actions of the people in the inscriptional evidence overwhelmingly cite the *dēmos*, not the *ekklēsia*.”¹⁷ From these two facts, Gruen deduces that “it is far from obvious” that Paul’s use of *ekklēsia* as a sub-group designation for his Christ-follower communities “was designed to echo a civic institution of the Greek *polis*.”¹⁸

I would suggest that there at least four factors that allow for a different interpretation of the inscriptional data as recounted by Gruen.¹⁹ These four factors reinforce the continued political relevance of civic *ekklēsiai*, particularly within Greek *poleis* of Asia Minor during the Imperial period (27 BCE–284 CE).

First, as I previously noted,²⁰ if one is attentive to avoiding any word-concept confusion, then the absence of the word *ekklēsia* in an enactment decree does not necessarily indicate the absence of an actual *ekklēsia* wherein that decree was formally ratified. Enactment decrees that cite the *dēmos* require that the *dēmos* ratified their decrees within some form of legally binding, formal, political institution. That institution is predominantly the *ekklēsia*.

Second, inscriptional evidence confirms the continued political relevance of civic *ekklēsiai* into at least the 2nd century CE. The Asia Minor *polis* of Termessos is a clear case in point. Onno van Nijf notes that Termessos had a

¹⁶ I make this point in my previous article (Korner, “*Ekklēsia* as a Jewish Synagogue Term,” 75–76). For a more detailed discussion see Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklēsia*, 241–46.

¹⁷ Gruen, “Synagogues,” 128.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ For a complete overview of my argument relative to the use of *ekklēsia* in Greek and Roman sources, see Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklēsia*, 22–80.

²⁰ Korner, “*Ekklēsia* as a Jewish Synagogue Term,” 74 n. 95.

regular assembly (*ennomos ekklēsia*) which held up to 4,500 citizens.²¹ The democratic *kratos* of the *dēmos* of Termessos is demonstrated in its deliberation of issues that were also included in the traditional agenda of the classical Athenian *ekklēsia kyria*.²²

The literary works of three Second Sophistics (Theon, Plutarch, and Dio Chrysostom²³) constitute a third factor in the case for the continued political relevance of civic *ekklēsiai* in Imperial Greek cities.²⁴ These writers each presume a vibrant “*ekklēsia* discourse” in the Greek East.²⁵ Ruth Webb sees the purpose of

²¹ Van Nijf bases his estimate on the fact that the theatre in which the *dēmos* met in assembly contained seating for c. 4,500 people (“Public Space and the Political Culture of Roman Termessos,” in *Political Culture in the Greek City after the Classical Age* ed. O. van Nijf and R. Alston, with the assistance of C. G. Williamson [Leuven: Peeters, 2011], 234).

²² The *ekklēsia kyria* of classical Athens had an all-embracing program which included: votes of confidence (*epicheirotonia*) with respect to the magistrates (*archontes*); discussion of military preparedness and of issues related to food security; consideration of accusations of high treason (*eisangeliai*); reports of confiscated property; and of determinations made with respect to disputed inheritance claims (Gustave Glotz, *The Greek City and Its Institutions* [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1929/1969], 85). Van Nijf cites some examples of political issues that were decided in the *ekklēsia* of Termessos (“Public Space,” 234): “the appointment of magistrates, financial affairs, civic subdivisions (including the introduction of new *phylai*), construction works (roads and cisterns), food-supply, and the organization of games and festivals.” The *dēmos* of Termessos even enacted foreign policy initiatives such as sending auxiliary troops and embassies to Rome.

²³ Aelius Theon was from Alexandria and probably lived during the mid to late 1st century CE. Plutarch (c. 46–120 CE) was born in Chaeronea (Boeotia) in central Greece. Dio Chrysostom (c. 40–c. 115) is also known as Dion of Prusa or Dio Cocceianus. He was born in Prusa, a town in Bithynia.

²⁴ I follow Onno van Nijf’s definition of “Imperial Greek city” as a city (*polis*) in the Greek East during the first three centuries CE, that is, between the reigns of Augustus and Diocletian (27 BCE–284 CE) (“Politics, Culture and Identities: Towards a Political History of the Imperial Greek City,” keynote address presented Oct. 22 at *Urban Dreams and Realities: An Interdisciplinary Conference on the City in Ancient Cultures* [Oct. 21–22, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB], 1). The governance model of Imperial Greek *poleis* continued to use all three Classical-era political institutions (*boulē*, *dēmos*, *ekklēsia*), yet, as a rule, without the concomitant *dēmokratia* that empowered their Classical ancestors (“Public Space,” 215–242).

²⁵ See Giovanni Salmeri, “Reconstructing the Political Life and Culture of the Greek Cities of the Roman Empire,” in *Political Culture in the Greek City after the Classical Age* (ed. O. van Nijf and R. Alston, with the assistance of C. G. Williamson; Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 197–214.

Theon's *progymnasmata* as being a preparatory "manual" for a citizen's engagement in rhetorical repartee within real world *ekklēsiai*.²⁶ Anna Crescinda Miller defines the "*ekklēsia* discourse" of Plutarch and Dio as including

topoi familiar from classical literature, such as idealization of an empowered citizen body and the speech of the assembly...were applied not only to historical assemblies of the past, or theoretical assemblies of the imagination, but also to the assemblies that were meeting in Greek cities of the first century.²⁷

This vibrant "*ekklēsia* discourse" is contemporaneous with a fourth factor — an exponential rise in euergetism/benefaction concurrently with what Onno van Nijf calls a burgeoning "political culture" among Imperial Greek cities.²⁸ Van Nijf identifies three non-institutional aspects of this vibrant political culture, the first two of which represent a "politics of munificence"²⁹ (i.e., euergetism)³⁰: festivals, monuments of leadership,³¹ and emotive communities.³²

²⁶ Ruth Webb, "The *Progymnasmata* as Practice," in *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity* ed. Yun Lee Too (Boston: Brill, 2001), 289–316, esp. 289–92.

²⁷ Anna Crescinda Miller, "*Ekklesia*: 1 Corinthians in the Context of Ancient Democratic Discourse" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2008), 4–5.

²⁸ Van Nijf, "Political Culture in the Greek City after the Classical Age: Introduction and Preview," in *Political Culture in the Greek City after the Classical Age* ed. O. van Nijf and R. Alston, with the assistance of C. G. Williamson (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 1–26.

²⁹ Arjan Zuiderhoek, *The Politics of Munificence in the Roman Empire: Citizens, Elites and Benefactors in Asia Minor* (GCRW; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁰ Van Nijf argues that the public use of honorific language implicitly pressures the honorand to live up to the public impression created of him or her. In this way, the *dēmos*, through individuals and/or collectives such as professional associations, plays an active role in the process of political identity construction even without having been formally granted any official political office or even role. The practice of monumentalism exponentially increased in the Greek East during the Imperial period (*The Civic World of Professional Associations in the Roman East* [DMAHA XVII; Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1997], 73–130; "Public Space," 217–23).

³¹ For van Nijf's discussion of festivals and monuments of leadership in political culture see: *Civic World*, 131–148 (festivals); *Civic World*, 73–130 (honorific inscriptions); and "Public Space," 217–23 (monumental politics).

³² Van Nijf observes that "when a writer of the Second Sophistic wanted to get to the *essence* of a community he would naturally focus on the *emotional climate* in which social and political transactions took place" ("Politics, Culture and Identities," 11 [author's emphasis]).

The “politics of munificence” represent an informal expression of *kratos* for the *dēmos* that was not directly tied to the formal political structures of Classical-style *dēmokratia* (e.g., the enactment of decrees by the *dēmos* within civic *ekklēsiai*). The “political culture” in Asia Minor grew in response to the increasing control of formal political structures (e.g., the *boulē*) by the oligarchic elites. The *dēmos* distributed power and prestige to the oligarchs in exchange for the distribution of material and social “wealth” from the oligarchs.

This enfranchisement of the informal political influence of the *dēmos* with the oligarchic elites would implicitly have gained even greater reinforcement through the disproportionate number of references to the *dēmos* within enactment decrees over formal political institutions such as the *ekklēsia*. But this same fact, conversely, need not *necessarily* indicate a lack of relevance for *ekklēsiai* within civic politics and, thus, for the rhetorical purposes of Paul’s *ekklēsia* identity construction project for his associations of Christ-followers.

For his third point, Gruen questions whether, in Ben Sira, 1 Maccabees, and Josephus, the use of *ekklēsia* for a public institution, or at the very least for public (civic) gatherings (even if only occasional ones), constitutes sufficient cause for suggesting “that *ekklēsia* was standard terminology for an organ of the Jewish congregation.”³³ It appears that Gruen here creates an unnecessary dichotomy between a “public gathering which could be a civic assembly in a *polis*” and a Jewish collective/community/congregation.³⁴ As I have reiterated, Runesson, Binder, and Olsson claim that both institutions represent a Jewish synagogue entity. Thus, simply the existence of *civic ekklēsiai* in the Land would have reinforced an implicit “link with the heritage of Israel”³⁵ for any diasporic association/community/congregation that adopted *ekklēsia* as their sub-group identity.

Aside from *ekklēsiai* in the Land, Gruen questions what we can know “about synagogues in Judea, indeed in Jerusalem itself.”³⁶ With respect to Jerusalem, he claims that there is no extant example of a semi-public Jewish association/congregation that was comprised solely of Judean Jews (rather than of diasporic Jews).³⁷ Gruen neglects to note, though, that the assembly places of

³³ Gruen, “Synagogue,” 129–30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

some Jews in Judea are called *synagōgai* (or their linguistic equivalent) (*Hypoth.* 7.11–14³⁸; IQM 3.3–4³⁹).

A fourth point of Gruen’s critique relates to the use of *ekklēsia* in Philo. He rightly comments that if, in *Spec.* 1.324–325, the terms *ekklēsia* and *hieros syllogos* are used synonymously to describe a “Sabbath assembly,” then “the phraseology is fluid.”⁴⁰ The translation of *hieros syllogos* as “holy congregation,” however, allows for one more conclusion: Philo’s *hieros syllogos* is not simply a communal gathering (“Sabbath assembly”) but a communal designation. If that is the case, then *Spec.* 1.324–25 may imply that a Jewish association/congregation known as *hieros syllogos* sponsored meetings (*en tais ekklesiāis*) which were publicly accessible to local Jews. This scenario accounts for two paradoxical facts: there are participants in the meetings (*ekklēsiai*) who are in an unworthy state (e.g., atheists, polytheists), yet participation in the synagogue association is only available to the worthy.⁴¹

Regarding Philo’s gloss on Deut 23:7–8 (*Virt.* 108), Gruen expresses puzzlement at the juxtaposition of *politeia* (“the connotation of a civic community”) with *ekklēsia* (“a religious congregation”).⁴² If I understand his point correctly, then my previous suggestion that these need not reflect

³⁸ Philo uses *synagōgē* for the assembly place of the Essenes in *Hypoth.* 7.11–14. Philo claims that the Essenes were found in many cities and villages in Judea (*Hypoth.* 11.1). Binder classifies the Essenes as “what we might imprecisely label ‘sectarian synagogues’” (Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 24). Runesson contends that the Pharisees also could be considered as a Judean (synagogue) association (*Origins of the Synagogue*, 486; “Behind the Gospel of Matthew: Radical Pharisees in Post-War Galilee?” *CurTM* 37:6 [December 2010]: 460–471).

³⁹ The Hebrew phrase *bet mo’ed* (meeting house) is used in the War Scroll (IQM 3.3–4) of the sectarian community’s (Essenes?) assembly place. Runesson, Binder, and Olsson claim that it “translates well into Greek as *synagōgē*...It is probable that *bet mo’ed* represents the earliest known Hebrew term for synagogue” (Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *ASSB*, no. 38).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴¹ See further in Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklēsia*, 136–141. This situation seems similar to the practice of the Christ-follower association in Corinth. Paul speaks of people who were not believers in Jesus, but who entered and took part in meetings held by the Corinthian Christ-followers (cf. 1 Cor 14:16, 20–25). For an exploration of the identity of these participants in the Christ-followers’ *ekklēsiai*, see Anders Runesson, “Jewish and Christian Interaction from the First to the Fifth Centuries,” in *The Early Christian World* ed. Philip Esler; 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 244–264, esp. 253–54.

⁴² Gruen, “Synagogue,” 130.

contradictory realities is worth repeating. The *ekklēsia* in *Virt.* 108 appears to be an official collective, whether a meeting or a non-civic group, that represents the *politeia* of Alexandrian Jews for the purpose of providing ethno-religious instruction for Egyptian converts.⁴³

Although there are other points of conversation that could unfold relative to Gruen’s critique, I trust that this response has added more substance to my suggestion that Paul’s designation of his *Christos*-following communities as *ekklēsiai* provided them with a group identity that helped to level the socio-ethnic and religious “playing field,” so to speak, such that Gentiles qua Gentiles could live in community, and in theological continuity, with Torah-observant Jews qua Jews.

⁴³ Korner, “*Ekklēsia* as a Jewish Synagogue Term,” 66–68.