

# Methodological Reflections on Synagogues and Christ Groups as “Associations”: A Response to Erich Gruen

Richard S. Ascough

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

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Comparison is an important methodological strategy that allows scholars to better understand the nature of the things being juxtaposed by highlighting similarities and differences. When it comes to understanding the social organization and structure of the earliest Christ groups, scholars have looked to a number of other types of ancient social formations such as households, philosophical schools, mystery cults, synagogues, and voluntary associations.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, such groups have been treated as distinct and discreet entities, and in the process many scholars have used the model of “synagogue” polemically to present Paul’s groups as having been insulated from any other of their so-called “pagan” counterparts.<sup>2</sup> This insulation prevents scholars from investigating the full range of contextual data for understanding how members of Paul’s groups both understood themselves and were perceived by non-members. In order to rectify this problem, other scholars are trying to break down the artificial barriers that are constructed when we apply our modern categorizations to ancient group formations. A crucial part of this discussion is

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983) 74-84.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard S. Ascough, “Voluntary Associations and the Formation of Pauline Churches: Addressing the Objections,” in *Vereine, Synagogen und Gemeinden im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien*, ed. Andreas Gutsfeld and Dietrich-Alex Koch (STAC 25; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 149-150; 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) 212-238; and more broadly Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

where synagogues “fit” into the taxonomy — are they distinct from other types of formations, or are they a subset of a larger type?

In a recently published article in this journal, I argued that when considering ancient comparative analogues for the organization and structure of Pauline Christ groups, synagogues should not be treated as separate and distinct from the scholarly category of “association.”<sup>3</sup> Evidence from the Judean synagogue groups and Pauline Christ groups should be placed among the myriad of other types of groups in antiquity as part of a broad conversation that compares and contrasts associative behavior at that time. In responding to my argument, Erich Gruen disagrees and holds the synagogues to be something different than what he terms “pagan voluntary associations,”<sup>4</sup> going so far to suggest that nothing is to be gained from such a comparative process, and that the “search for models” should be “set aside.”<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Gruen has misread and as a result misconstrued what I (along with others) am attempting. Thus, I want to address some overarching methodological problems in Gruen’s approach that cause him to misrepresent the modern framing of the conversation about models for understanding early Christ groups. In doing so, his arguments seem to be reacting to earlier presumptions and arguments that are no longer deployed by those of us working on this material and, more significantly, miss just what is at stake in the comparative project — namely, the discovery of new insights by the analytic juxtaposition of data from a wide variety of group types in antiquity.

I begin with the use of terminology for categorization. In this particular debate the term “association” is not an ancient category but a modern construct, used by scholars to group together social phenomena from antiquity. As Harland succinctly argues,

What we as social historians look for and notice in studying such groups is not necessarily what an ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Syrian, or Judean would notice. For instance, even the typology of associations based on social network connections outlined above in some respects represents the outsider (etic) perspective of a scholar, not necessarily the

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<sup>3</sup> Richard S. Ascough, “Paul, Synagogues, and Associations: Reframing the Question of Models for Pauline Christ Groups,” *JJMJS* 2 (2015): 27-52.

<sup>4</sup> Erich S. Gruen, “Synagogues and Voluntary Associations as Institutional Models: A Response to Richard Ascough and Ralph Korner,” *JJMJS* 3 (2016): 125-131.

<sup>5</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 128.

insider (emic) perspective of the subjects we are studying . . . .  
 Such scholarly constructs assist us in understanding and  
 explaining social phenomena in *our terms*.<sup>6</sup>

Gruen seems to blend the etic and emic perspectives from the very beginning of his article when he attempts to frame the *status quaestionis*: “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*,”<sup>7</sup> citing works from Guterman through to Harland.<sup>8</sup> In deploying the phrases “drew upon” and “were a form of” Gruen essentializes the category “synagogue” and the category “association” as somehow discreet entities that would have been obvious to the ancient persons themselves.

As he develops his response it becomes clear that Gruen then presumes that the arguments being made imagine that there was some “form” or “entity” available to the ancient peoples to which they could point and call an association. Yet this is not at all what is being argued, at least not by most of us working in this area. I think it unlikely that members of a group of Zeus adherents thought of themselves as belonging to a broad category of “associations” that included groups of Isis adherents, Dionysos adherents, Mithraists, and so on (not to mention deliberately excluding Christ adherents and Judean groups). Their identity would be much more narrowly defined as “Zeus *synodos*” or “Zeus *koinon*,” or “the *hetaireia* of Zeus.” Perhaps I will attempt a modern analogy (albeit different from the one deployed in my article concerning genus, which seems not to have proven fruitful with Gruen).<sup>9</sup> A modern designation within government bureaucracy is that of organizations with “tax-exempt status.” It is a useful heuristic for sorting which groups do and which do not pay tax on income earned or property occupied. But members of these groups are not likely to think of themselves first and foremost as belonging to a “tax-exempt organization.” If asked, they might say they belong to “a church,” or “a synagogue,” or “a philanthropic group.” Even more likely, they

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<sup>6</sup> Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York and London: Continuum and T & T Clark, 2009) 36, my emphasis. I make essentially this same point in the first footnote of my article: Ascough, “Paul, Synagogues, and Associations,” 27, n. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 125.

<sup>8</sup> S. L. Guterman, *Religious Toleration and Persecution in Ancient Rome* (London: Aiglon Press, 1951); Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*.

<sup>9</sup> Ascough, “Paul, Synagogues, and Associations,” 47.

would titrate it down further, claiming to belong to “First Baptist Church,” or “Beth Israel Synagogue,” or the “Kingston Rotary Club.”

For purposes of comparison from the *etic* point of view, the broad category of “tax-exempt organization” allows for similarities and differences to be made *among* all the groups that fit into this particular taxon as distinct from another taxon; in my example, perhaps the taxon of “for-profit corporation.” To push the analogy, in the past the trend has been towards keeping synagogues apart from “associations,” not unlike separating tax-exempt groups from for-profit corporations as two very different entities. What I (and others) am arguing is that this approach has not proven helpful, and falls prey to the tendency to use synagogues to isolate “Christianity” from the corrupting influence of its “pagan” environment, as Jonathan Z. Smith so clearly demonstrated a quarter century ago.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, John Kloppenborg, Philip Harland, Richard Last, myself, and others have made it clear that the designation “association” is a modern construct — a taxonomic category that we use to collect and talk about social and organizational dynamics of a constellation of groups in antiquity that modern researchers have decided to compare and contrast. We are not using an *emic* category, which should be clear even from the very fact that what we group together as (non-Jewish and non-Christian) forms of association in antiquity go well beyond the two linguistic labels that (probably for convenience) Gruen deploys: the Latin *collegium* and the Greek *thiasos*. For example, the comprehensive index to *GRA II* includes at least thirty-five different Greek and Latin designations for what scholars are investigating under the rubric of the (modern) label “association” (not including groups with theophoric names or groups named for founders), and this primarily only covers Greece and Asia Minor.<sup>11</sup> There is no singular Latin or Greek term that can be used with regard to what is an ancient association. The English term “association” (and in German “*Verein*”) is the scholarly category that cannot simply be equated with *collegium* and/or *thiasos* alone.

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Drudgery Divine*; see 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) 68-84; Ascough, “Paul, Synagogues, and Associations,” 46-47.

<sup>11</sup> See Philip A. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary. Vol. II. North Coast of the Black Sea, Asia Minor* (BZNV 204; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014) 467-476.

By assuming otherwise, Gruen (unintentionally) sets up a straw argument around classification through a slippery linguistic shift in his argument. He states (correctly) that there are scholars who infer that “many Christ-believers who gathered in synagogues thought of them as Jewish associations on the Greco-Roman prototype” but then immediately asks “what is the basis for this subsuming of the synagogue under the heading of the pagan *collegium*?”<sup>12</sup> Suddenly the modern scholar’s rather broad category of “association” has become the pejoratively described “pagan” *collegium*, which not only limits the category to one particular designation (*collegium*) but invokes a term that Gruen must know can only be answered in one way. Who indeed would put something “Jewish” under the category “pagan”? In fact, no one he cites as having done this would actually frame it this way. Both Runesson and Richardson (who are explicitly implicated) certainly nowhere (so far as I know) claim Jewish synagogues are a subset of “pagan” associations — and while clearly this is not what Gruen means, it is what he says. In doing so, he sets up an argument with which the majority of his readers (myself included) must agree (“synagogues are not pagan associations”), but it is built on a false premise that suggests this is what scholars are arguing.

We see this inattention to linguistic detail also at work in his discussion of the legal standing of Jewish groups as associations. I am willing to concede that the citation from Josephus invoking an ostensible decree of Julius Caesar that places Judean groups among *thiasoi* (*Ant.* 14.215-126) itself “does not show that Roman law classified Jewish communal gatherings as *collegia*.”<sup>13</sup> Yet even here Gruen is playing fast and loose with the terminology. The Josephus text itself uses the word “*thiasoi*” so there is no question that it does not say anything about Judean groups as “*collegia*.” These are different terms (deployed mostly, but not always, in different languages). In fact, that alone would be one of the interesting points of comparison to apply to groups. But Gruen here simply blends them into one single categorization (they are two terms *for the same thing* in his view), as he has done throughout the first part of his article, even while he has been arguing for nuance and differentiation when it comes to groups that use the designation “synagogue.” He then makes the claim that the text from Philo (*Legat.* 311-313) does not mention *collegia* or *thiasoi*, which indeed, it does not. It uses a different term, namely *synodos*, for the same broad

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<sup>12</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 127.

<sup>13</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 127.

etic category “association.”<sup>14</sup> This is also the case for a different passage from Josephus, in which a Roman official responds to a request from Judean ambassadors from Sardis regarding their “*synodos*” (*Ant.* 14.235).<sup>15</sup> While not definitive evidence for a legal standing of Judeans as being placed among associations, it certainly demonstrates that it is far from as cut-and-dried as Gruen’s eliding of two linguistic terms and exclusion of any others might suggest. Indeed, many titles used by Judean groups overlap with terms used by what scholars collectively reference as associations, as Harland has clearly demonstrated.<sup>16</sup>

In part, the lack of ancient evidence for grouping synagogues among the broader scholarly category of “associations” is predicated on the exclusion of pertinent evidence. As Richard Last notes, “the modern practice of differentiating occupation-based groups from ethnic-based groups devoted to the Judean deity by designating them with different names — craft guilds for the former, synagogues for the latter — seems rather particular.”<sup>17</sup> Non-Judean groups are never treated in this way, and even ancient writers treated Judean-deity craft guilds as synagogues.<sup>18</sup> The net effect of this modern separation of different types of Judean groups is to give the ancient synagogue a much more insular character than was the case in antiquity. Last details thirty Judean-deity occupational associations, eight of which pre-date the first century BCE and three of which are from the first century BCE through the first century CE. Even while this evidence does not demonstrate how Judean groups were treated under the law, once such groups are counted as “synagogues” the “shaky foundation” of considering synagogues among the broader (modern) category of “associations” that so concerns Gruen<sup>19</sup> seems to have been shored up considerably.

Whether intentional or not, Gruen seems still to be mired in older configurations of the entire argument, as seen in his use of “pagan” noted above, but more so in his perpetuation of the use of “voluntary” with associations. This adjective in itself has proved not to have the utility it once was thought to have

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<sup>14</sup> See Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 38-39.

<sup>15</sup> See Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 37-38.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 40-42.

<sup>17</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 332.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Last, “The Other Synagogues,” *JSJ* 47 (2016): 334, citing *b. Meg.* 26a.

<sup>19</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 127.

had as a descriptor, and has for the most part been dropped in the discussions.<sup>20</sup> Certainly nowhere would modern scholars of the comparative use of associations reference them as “pagan voluntary associations” as does Gruen.<sup>21</sup> But perhaps more important as an illustration of Gruen’s reticence to engage in the contemporary debate is his uncritical deployment of evidence embedded in Acts for understanding where “Saul of Tarsus, who moved from his Diaspora home to . . . Jerusalem” came upon the model for the Christ groups he would go on to establish. Gruen suggests that Saul found his exemplar in the synagogues there. I have no doubt that there were first-century synagogues in Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup> But Gruen here relies on a second-hand theologically constructed narrative that, even if one does not accept to be dated to the second century CE,<sup>23</sup> is at the very least a problematic historical source. And in so accepting it, Gruen imagines that Saul of Tarsus is so insulated from his surrounding culture that in his upbringing and in his travels he has not *also* encountered other examples of associative behavior that would influence the way he imagines a group might be organized. Behind this is perhaps Gruen’s presumption that diaspora synagogues were isolated from their surrounding culture,<sup>24</sup> a presumption that simply does not hold in the face of evidence for the dynamic interaction of Judeans in civic institutions and networks.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, for Gruen the members of the groups that Paul establishes, many of whom are not Judean,

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<sup>20</sup> See John S. Kloppenborg, “Associations, Voluntary,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, ed. Hans-Josef Klauck, Bernard McGinn, Choon-Leong Seow, Hermann Spieckermann, Barry Dov Walfish and Eric Ziolkowski (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009) 1062-1063.

<sup>21</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 131.

<sup>22</sup> Anders Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001) 228-235; John S. Kloppenborg, “Dating Theodotos (CIJ II 1404),” *JJS* 51 (2000): 243-280; cf. Last, “Other Synagogues,” 348-351. The data from Acts to which Gruen points (“Synagogues,” 131) is not uncomplicated. For example, Acts 6:9 might indicate the existence of a foreigners’ association that included non-Judean immigrants from various homelands who are devoted to the Judean deity, like foreigners’ associations on Rhodes (I am indebted to Richard Last for this observation; cf. also Last, “Other Synagogues,” 348-349).

<sup>23</sup> Richard Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), summarized in Last, “Other Synagogues,” 339-340.

<sup>25</sup> See Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 200-210.

would not bring their own ideas about social formations into the mix as they determined with Paul — and more often than not, without him — how best to “be” a Christ group. Gruen simply assumes Paul to be authoritative and normative in directing how a group be configured, and does not consider that Paul engaged with local people to collectively determine how best to structure their group (as I think is more likely)<sup>26</sup>.

I do agree with Gruen when he notes that isolating “synagogue” or “association” as *the* model for early Christ groups does not get the scholarly project very far. In fact, I have made that point myself, arguing for a much more nuanced and complex descriptive project.<sup>27</sup> And Gruen correctly notes my aversion to an either/or dichotomy that simplistically equates synagogues and associations or completely separates them.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, Gruen perpetuates the bifurcation, even if unintentionally, when he is attempting to be more inclusive. For example, he claims

The associations in Greco-Roman society . . . exhibit a great variety of forms, objectives, and interests. And synagogues of the Second Temple period . . . had a comparable diversity of aspects . . . .<sup>29</sup>

In this very statement, Gruen is essentializing “association” and “synagogue” even when rightly noting the variety of form. His phrase “had a comparable diversity of aspects” betrays his own presumption that these are two different “things” that can be compared and contrasted. But this is to return us to the work of the early 1980s, particularly encapsulated in the (still) oft-cited framing of Wayne Meeks, who set up a four-part taxonomy of models for Paul’s “churches”: households, philosophical schools, “voluntary” associations, and synagogues.<sup>30</sup> To be fair to Gruen, this is where the field was for quite some time, and this is even how I framed my own review of the state of affairs in the late 1990s.<sup>31</sup> Admittedly, there are some scholars for whom this Christo-centric

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<sup>26</sup> See Richard S. Ascough, “What are They *Now* Saying About Christ Groups and Associations?” *CBR* 13 (2015) 210-211.

<sup>27</sup> Richard S. Ascough, *What Are They Saying About the Formation of Pauline Churches?* (New York and Mahway: Paulist Press, 1998): 95-99; idem, 2008; idem, 2015b, 235-236.

<sup>28</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 125.

<sup>29</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 126.

<sup>30</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 74-84; Ascough, “Paul, Synagogues, and Associations,” 27-29.

<sup>31</sup> And as I admitted in my article (Ascough, “Paul, Synagogues, and Associations,” 27-28); see Ascough, *What Are They Saying About*.



project is still at times at the heart of the comparative process. But at least in my article, and more broadly in the work that my colleagues and I are doing, this is *not* what is at stake. We are not interested in whether Pauline Christ groups are or are not “synagogues” or “associations,” since in and of itself that information does not get us very far. We are more intrigued by the much more compelling research that asks what one can learn about each type of group when they are put into conversation with one another.

Again, Gruen acknowledges this (“Ascough wants to reframe the question”)<sup>32</sup> but then immediately returns to the Christo-centric focus by asking whether even this reframing gets us any closer to understanding the groups to which Paul writes. The short answer is that it has more chance of doing so than if we simply ignore the comparanda that associations writ large provide. But more importantly, as Kloppenborg has noted, invoking Lévi Strauss, the data concerning associative behavior that accrues from inscriptions and papyri are “good to think with” and can be mutually illuminating when put into conversation with data from synagogues and Christ groups. The comparative process is a heuristic tool for asking new questions, testing newly formulated hypotheses, and finding additional analogous data that may help fill in lacunae in our understanding.<sup>33</sup> For example, we know that many groups, including some Christ groups and some synagogue groups, had shared meals, yet we lack a level of detail that would allow us to know what might have taken place at such meals. By looking at meal practices of other types of groups — Zeus groups, Dionysos groups, Isis groups, and so on — we can begin to note typical and atypical behaviors and regulations that allow us to develop a more comprehensive picture of what is or is not possible in a particular synagogue meal or a Christ group meal.

The issue is not really whether synagogues or Pauline Christ groups were or were not associations. The real issue is whether we learn anything useful by comparing data from a variety of different ancient groups.<sup>34</sup> All indications seem to suggest that much has and will be learned from doing so.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Gruen, “Synagogues,” 126.

<sup>33</sup> John S. Kloppenborg, “Membership Practices in Pauline Christ Groups,” *Early Christianity* 4 (2013) 187-189.

<sup>34</sup> I am indebted to John Kloppenborg for this way of framing the issue.

<sup>35</sup> As I detail in Ascough, “What are They Now Saying,” 207-244.