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THE EXPANSION OF ASSOCIATIONS AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Introduction

Greco-Roman Associations

John S. Kloppenborg relates the story of how Edwin Hatch, relying on the pioneering work of Georg Henrici and Paul Foucart, posited in the 1880 Oxford Bampton Lectures that Paul modeled his churches on Greco-Roman associations. Hatch's thesis was widely rejected and basically forgotten for almost a century until Robert L. Wilken and Abraham J. Malherbe began to revive it.[1] Over the last thirty years, Kloppenborg and his students—Richard S. Ascough and Philip A. Harland, for example—have become leading scholars of Greco-Roman associations in the English-speaking world.[2] A sizable

* My gratitude goes to Craig S. Keener for reading this paper and providing his feedback, most of which I have tried to incorporate.

1. Cf. John S. Kloppenborg, 'Edwin Hatch, Churches and Collegia', in Bradley H. McLean (ed.), *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity* (JSNTSup, 86; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 212-24. Cf. also Richard S. Ascough, *What Are They Saying about the Formation of Pauline Churches?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), pp. 79-93; H.C.G. Matthew, 'Hatch, Edwin (1835–89), Theologian' (September 2004), see online: https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/12589.

2. Their work includes, but is certainly not limited to, a projected five-volume translation and commentary of hundreds of inscriptions and papyri on Greco-Roman associations arranged geographically, of which three have been published. Cf. John S. Kloppenborg and Richard S. Ascough (eds.), *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary: I. Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace*

amount of literature on associations has been generated,[3] and many New Testament scholars who were initially critical now agree that they are crucial for understanding early Christianity.[4]

Providing a definition is not easy, given the wide array of organizational structures and nomenclature found among associations in antiquity.[5] Nevertheless, Sandra Walker-Ramisch helpfully describes voluntary associations as follows:

> A voluntary association might be defined as *an organized association of persons who come together on a voluntary, contractual basis* (rather than kinship, caste, national, or geographic association) *in the pursuit of common interests, both manifest and latent. To the association each*

(BZNW, 181; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011); Philip A. Harland (ed.), *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary: II. North Coast of the Black Sea, Asia Minor* (BZNW, 204; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014); John S. Kloppenborg (ed.), *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary: III. Ptolemaic and Early Roman Egypt* (BZNW, 246; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020).

3. See the annotated bibliography in Richard S. Ascough, Philip A. Harland and John S. Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), pp. 277-359.

4. One of the most conspicuous examples is that of Meeks, who initially rejected associations as a model for the Christian ἐκκλησία but later retracted this view. Cf. Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 75-84; cf. Wayne A. Meeks, 'Taking Stock and Moving On,' in Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell (eds.), *After the First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), pp. 134-46.

5. E.g. ἔρανος/ἐρανισταί, αἵρεσις, ἑταῖροι, ὁμότεχνον, κοινά/κοινόν, κοινωνία, κολλέγιον, μελανηφόροι, ὀργέωνες, φυλή, πλατεῖα, πλῆθος, πολίτευμα, προεδρία, σπεῖρα, σύλλογος, συμβίωσις, συναγωγή, συνέδριον, συνεργασία/ἐργασία, συνέργιον, συνήθεια, συγγένεια, σύνοδος, συντεχνία, συντέλεια, σύστημα, τάξις, τέχνη and θίασος/θιασῶται in Greek; *coetus, collegium, conventus, corporati, corpus, curia, doumos, factio, familia, phratra/phratria/phratores* and *secta* in Latin. Cf. John S. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 33; Ascough, Harland and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, pp. 374-75; Ralph J. Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklēsia in the Early Jesus Movement* (AGJU, 98; Leiden: Brill, 2017), p. 52 n. 129.

> *member contributes, by contractual agreement, a part of his/her time and resources*.[6]

Associations were thus voluntary and private, not state-mandated or demanding exclusive allegiance. They were local and formally organized to meet certain needs of adherents, such as meaningful and profitable social interaction, shared interests, religious devotion, public service and recognition, identity and a proper burial.[7] While several taxonomies have been proposed for the numerous kinds of Greco-Roman associations, Kloppenborg's fivefold categorization around common ethnicity, religious affiliation, vocation, address and family has replaced more traditional efforts at categorization.[8] These are

6. Sandra Walker-Ramisch, 'Graeco-Roman Voluntary Associations and the Damascus Document: A Sociological Analysis', in John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 128-45 (131) (emphasis in original). Cf. also Richard S. Ascough, 'Voluntary Associations and the Formation of Pauline Christian Communities: Overcoming the Objections', in Andreas Gutsfeld and Dietrich-Alex Koch (eds.), *Vereine, Synagogen und Gemeinden im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum, 25; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), p. 151 n. 9; Ascough, *What Are They Saying*, pp. 74-78.

7. Cf. Stephen G. Wilson, 'Voluntary Associations: An Overview', in John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.) *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 7-14; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Jesus and the Twelve* (2 vols.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), I, pp. 648-50.

8. I.e. (1) Diasporic or immigrant associations; (2) Cultic associations; (3) Occupational guilds; (4) Neighborhood associations; and (5) *Collegia domestica*. Cf. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 24-40. Cf. also Kloppenborg (ed.), *Greco-Roman Associations*, pp. 574-84. This is very similar to Harland's five categories of (1) Household, (2) Ethnic, (3) Neighborhood, (4) Occupational and (5) Cult or temple connections. Cf. Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 29-53. This replaced the traditional, threefold taxonomy of (1) Occupational, (2) Cultic and (3) Burial associations. In Marcus Tod's 1931 lectures at the University of London, given at a time when he claimed there was no comprehensive work on ancient associations in English, he made the oft-repeated mistake of likening guilds to modern trade unions and categorized associations according to the names of their (1) Gods, (2) Founders and (3) Location. Cf. Marcus N. Tod, *Ancient Inscriptions: Sidelights on Greek History: Three Lectures on the Light Thrown by Greek In-*

flexible and often overlapping categories. From their legendary origins under King Numa (715–673 BCE),[9] Greco-Roman associations exploded across the Mediterranean from the fifth century BCE to the fourth century CE.[10] Kloppenborg notes that Poland lists 1,200 associations and Waltzing 2,500 *collegia*, while Robert S.J. Garland's study of Piraeus identified over fifty cultic associations in the Athenian port alone between the fifth and the first centuries BCE.[11] Peter Richardson notes that on Delos, the smallest island of the Cyclades, twenty-four different associations have been identified.[12] The size of each association varied considerably, from fifteen to two or three hundred, yet most of them had less than a hundred members.[13]

Associations and the Book of Acts

Among the growing literature on associations and early Christianity, several studies have focused specifically on the book of Acts. Markus Öhler provides a fascinating comparative study of ancient associations and the *Jerusalemer Urgemeinde*.[14] Ascough uses the lens of ancient associations to interpret the accounts of Ananias and Saphira (5.1-11) as well as the Jerusalem Council (15.1-35).[15] Justin K. Hardin argues that the judicial episode in Thessalonica

scriptions on the Life and Thought of the Ancient World (Chicago: Ares, 1974), pp. 71-93.

9. See Plutarch, *Num*. 17.1-3.

10. See Ascough, Harland and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, pp. 252-53.

11. Robert Garland, *The Piraeus from the Fifth to the First Century BC* (London: Duckworth, 2nd edn, 2001), pp. 101-38; cf. John S. Kloppenborg, 'Collegia and Thiasoi: Issues in Function, Taxonomy, and Membership', in John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 16-30 (23); Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, p. 29.

12. Peter Richardson, 'Building "an Association (Synodos) … and a Place of their Own"', in Richard N. Longenecker (ed.), *Community Formation in the Early Church and the Church Today* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), pp. 36-56 (46).

13. Kloppenborg, 'Collegia and *Thiasoi*', pp. 25-26; Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 106-30.

14. Markus Öhler, 'Die Jerusalemer Urgemeinde im Spiegel des antiken Vereinswesens', *NTS* 51 (2005), pp. 393-415.

15. Richard S. Ascough, 'Benefaction Gone Wrong: The "Sin" of Ananias and Sapphira in Context', in Stephen G. Wilson and Michel Desjardins (eds.), *Text and*

(17.6-9) is best understood as relating to imperial policy concerning illegal associations.[16] Finally, Dirk Schinkel posits that the illegal ἐκκλησία in the Ephesian theater (19.23-40) was dissolved by the γραμματεύς of the local silversmith *Verein*, not the civic official.[17] Hence, association research has forged exciting new avenues for Acts studies as well as of the New Testament in general.

The book of Acts, as Keener explains, is an ancient historiography of the expansion of Christianity from its origins in Jerusalem to Rome, the capital of the ancient world.[18] The narrative represents the transition of the new faith from a Jewish 'sect' (αἵρεσις, cf. Acts 24.5, 14; 28.22) to what Martin D. Goodman calls a 'universal, proselytizing mission'.[19] The purpose of this paper is to compare Luke's account of the growth of Christianity in Acts with that of other ancient associations. Part I demonstrates that early Christianity primarily understood itself and was understood by outsiders as an association. Part II surveys the epigraphic and archaeological data on how associations grew. This leads to the third and final part, namely, the expansion of Christianity in Acts as compared with that of other associations. The crucial role of social networks, influential converts, patronage, the marginalized and divine guidance in the growth of ancient associations is also reflected in the expansion of early Christianity as reported in the book of Acts.

Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson (ESCJ, 9; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), pp. 91-110; Richard S. Ascough, 'The Apostolic Decree of Acts and Greco-Roman Associations: Eating in the Shadow of the Roman Empire', in Markus Öhler (ed.) *Aposteldekret und antikes Vereinswesen: Gemeinschaft und ihre Ordnung* (WUNT, 280; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), pp. 297-316.

16. Justin K. Hardin, 'Decrees and Drachmas at Thessalonica: Illegal Assembly in Jason's House (Acts 17.1-10a)', *NTS* 52 (2006), pp. 29-49.

17. Dirk Schinkel, 'Kanzler oder Schriftführer? Apg 19,23-40 und das Amt des γραμματεύς in griechisch-römischen Vereinigungen', in David C. Bienert, Joachim Jeska and Thomas Witulski (eds.), *Paulus und die antike Welt: Beiträge zur zeit- und religionsgeschichtlichen Erforschung des paulinischen Christentums* (FRLANT, 222; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), pp. 136-49.

18. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015), I, pp. 90-115.

19. Martin D. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 7.

I. *Christianity as an Association*

I present four reasons why Greco-Roman associations were the primary organizational model for early Christian churches. First and secondly, both outsiders and insiders understood Christianity as an association. Thirdly, associations were the primary influence on the development of the Jewish synagogue from which Christianity emerged. Finally, the shared terminology between Christians and associations suggests that the former defined themselves in terms of the latter.

Outsiders Understood Christianity as an Association

What is striking about the earliest Roman sources concerning Christianity is the similar terminology used to describe the new sect. The first mention of Christians in extant Latin literature is found in Pliny the Younger's correspondence with Trajan (112 CE). The procurator of Bithynia and Pontus consulted Caesar's council as to how to deal with those who currently or formerly identified as Christians. Pliny repeatedly refers to Christianity as a *superstitio* which, like a disease, has 'infected through contact … a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women'.[20] He groups Christianity together with other new *collegia*, which Trajan had earlier prohibited Pliny from tolerating.[21]

Also writing at the outset of the second century, Tacitus and Suetonius use the term *superstitio* to refer to Christianity. Both accounts concern the same incident of the Great Fire of Rome (64 CE), which Nero blamed on the Christians, lethally persecuting them. Suetonius refers to Christians as 'a class of men given over to a new and mischievous superstition'.[22] Tacitus is even

20. Pliny the Younger, *Ep. Tra.* 10.96 (Radice, LCL).

21. 'But they [i.e. the Christians] had in fact given up this practice since my edict, issued on your instructions, which banned all political societies' (*Ep. Tra.* 10.96 [Radice, LCL]). The edict refers to Trajan's refusal to grant Pliny's request for a 'company of firemen' (*collegium fabrorum*) in 10.33, responding in 10.34 (Radice, LCL), 'You may very well have had the idea that it should be possible to form a company of firemen [*collegium fabrorum*] at Nicomedia on the model of those existing elsewhere, but we must remember that it is societies [*factionibus*] like these which have been responsible for the political disturbances in your province, particularly in its towns. If people assemble for a common purpose, whatever name we give them and for whatever reason, they soon turn into a political club [*hetaeria*].'

22. Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2 (Rolfe, LCL).

more critical, referring to the faith as a 'pernicious superstition' and a 'horrible or shameful … disease'.[23]

Wilken elaborates on the significance of all three of the earliest Latin sources referring to Christianity using the same term. He writes,

> On the lips of an educated Roman or Greek the term *superstitio* had many connotations. Most frequently it designated religious groups or practices foreign to the Romans, e.g., Jews, devotees of Isis, et al. Such religions were thought to be fanatical—Jews refusing to fight on the sabbath—and exotic, irrational, and incompatible with Roman ideals or simply at variance with established religious rites and ceremonies. Superstition was at odds with genuine religion.[24]

The reference to Jews not fighting on the Sabbath is to Plutarch's description of the Delphic priest grouping Judaism together with other ancient religions that have a negative effect on their adherents (cf. Plutarch, *Superst*. 8). Likewise, Cicero clearly distinguished between *superstitio* and *religio*, noting that the latter deserves approval while the former deserves censure (cf. *Nat. d*. 2.72). Hence, from the outset, the Romans classified Christianity together with other foreign, eastern religions. Thus, they were viewed as new associations or *collegia* that were not to be tolerated per imperial decree.[25]

23. Tacitus, *Ann*. 15.44 (Jackson, LCL). Ascough also cites the example of Severus, *Hist. Aug*. 49 (cf. 'Voluntary Associations', p. 151).

24. Robert L. Wilken, 'Collegia, Philosophical Schools, and Theology', in Stephen Benko and John J. O'Rourke (eds.), *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1971), pp. 268-91 (271). Cf. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 15-16, 328-29; Kim D. Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 44-48; E.A. Judge, *The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays* (ed. James R. Harrison; WUNT, 229; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), p. 599; Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, pp. 211-12.

25. For a helpful overview of the history and complicated relationship between Rome and associations, see Wendy Cotter, 'The Collegia and Roman Law: State Restrictions on Voluntary Associations, 64 BCE–200 CE', in John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 74-89; cf. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II*, pp. 161-73; Markus Öhler, 'Römisches Vereinsrecht und christliche Gemeinden', in Michael Labahn and Jürgen Zangenberg (eds.), *Zwischen den Reichen: Neues*

Early Christians Understood Themselves as an Association

The Roman stance towards early Christianity is crucial for understanding the way the church fathers described their faith. Tertullian's *Apology* is one of the most conspicuous examples that Christians understood themselves as an association. He asks, 'Should not this school [*secta*] have been classed among tolerated associations [*factiones*]?'[26] In light of the imperial ban on associations due to their perceived danger to public order, Tertullian devotes this chapter to emphasizing the peaceful and non-threatening nature of the Christian religion.

The description of Christianity as an association continues in *Apol*. 39, even as it opens with, 'I will now show you the proceedings with which the Christian association (*factio*) occupies itself.'[27] Tertullian begins with the Christian assembly (*congregatio*), order (*disciplina*) and leadership (*seniores*), key components of any association.[28] He then moves on to the 'treasury' (*arca*), explaining how it differs from that of other associations. That is, instead of mandatory entrance fees, Christians take up a voluntary offering. Instead of spending the money 'on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses' as the associations do, 'God's school' (*dei sectae*) spends their collection on the poor.[29]

Testament und römische Herrschaft. Vorträge auf der Ersten Konferenz der European Association for Biblical Studies (TANZ, 36; Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2002), pp. 51-71; Ascough, 'Apostolic Decree', pp. 299-306; Keener, *Acts*, I, pp. 450-51. For a survey of primary sources concerning imperial policy towards associations, see Ascough, Harland and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, pp. 252-75.

26. Tertullian, *Apol*. 38.1 (Glover and Rendall, LCL).

27. Tertullian, *Apol*. 39.1 (Glover and Rendall, LCL).

28. Markus Öhler, 'Iobakchen und Christusverehrer: Das Christentum im Rahmen des antiken Vereinswesens', in Rupert Klieber and Martin Stowasser (eds.), *Inkulturation: historische Beispiele und theologische Reflexionen zur Flexibilität und Widerständigkeit des Christlichen* (Theologie: Forschung und Wissenschaft, 10; Vienna: LIT, 2006), pp. 63-86; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 138-40.

29. Tertullian, *Apol*. 39.6 (ANF 3/46; Glover and Rendall, LCL). For finances in associations as they relate to early Christian churches, see the section below on 'Benefaction and Financial Support'; cf. also Eva Ebel, *Die Attraktivität früher*

The third and lengthiest section of *Apol*. 39 is devoted to the Christian 'dinner' (*coena*) called *agape* in 'the three-bench dining room (*triclinium*)'.[30] Udo Schnelle observes, 'Just as social life in Roman-Hellenistic antiquity took place in associations and reached its high point and central focus in communal meals, communal life among Christians was structured around the communal meal.'[31] Tertullian concludes where he started, by asking once again what reason there is to equate Christianity with 'like assemblies of the illicit sort',[32] when indeed it differs completely from them. It is worth noting that even though Justin Martyr does not refer to churches as associations, his description of Christian worship in *1 Apol*. 67 is remarkably similar to Tertullian's.

Origen's *Contra Celsum* is another primary example that early Christianity understood itself and was understood by others as an association. Indeed, the lengthy apology opens with a response to Celsus's accusation that 'the Christians secretly make associations [συνθῆκαι] with one another contrary to

christlicher Gemeinden: Die Gemeinde von Korinth im Spiegel griechisch-römischer Vereine (WUNT, 178; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp. 63-64.

30. Tertullian, *Apol*. 39.15-16 (Ascough, Harland and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, p. 250). For more on the *triclinium* in early Christian worship, see L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture* (2 vols.; HTS, 42; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1996), I, pp. 107-10, 119-22.

31. Udo Schnelle, *The First One Hundred Years of Christianity: An Introduction to Its History, Literature, and Development* (trans. James W. Thompson; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), pp. 245-46; cf. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 209-44. First Corinthians has received more attention from scholars of Greco-Roman associations than any other New Testament book, especially the meal instructions (11.17-32) (see Richard Last, *The Pauline Church and the Corinthian Ekklēsia: Greco-Roman Associations in Comparative Context* (SNTSMS, 164; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Dace Balode, *Gottesdienst in Korinth* (Greifswalder Theologische Forschungen, 21; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2011), pp. 21-98; Matthias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (TANZ, 13; Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1996); Ebel, *Attraktivität*, pp. 151-213; Stephen J. Chester, *Conversion at Corinth: Perspectives on Conversion in Paul's Theology and the Corinthian Church* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), pp. 245-52.

32. ANF 3/47.

the laws.'[33] Like Tertullian, Origen must also respond to the accusation that Christians are a secret association posing a threat to the *Pax Romana*. His response is that even though forming new associations may be illegal in Rome's eyes, it is necessary according to 'the true law' of God: 'Therefore, it is not wrong to form associations [συνθῆκαι] against the laws for the sake of truth.'[34] Hence, Origen openly admits that Christianity is an association, even of the kind prohibited by imperial policy. The magisterial apology contains multiple passages in which Christianity is referred to using association terminology, whether by Origen himself or in his citations of Celsus.[35]

Finally, Eusebius concludes the opening praise of his tenth book concerning God's triumph over his enemies by the 'heavenly light' that 'shone down upon the churches of Christ throughout the whole world', as well as 'even [to] those outside our society [θίασος]'.[36] Hence, the writings of the early church fathers are compelling evidence that Christianity was primarily understood by both insiders and outsiders as an association.[37]

Synagogues as Associations

The third reason why associations were the primary model of early Christianity is that they were also the predominant social institution responsible for the formation of the Jewish synagogue. Much research has been conducted on synagogues as associations.[38] Richardson surveys the literary, archaeological and epigraphic evidence around the Mediterranean indicating that, in their terminology, structure, functions and architecture, 'synagogues looked and

33. Origen, *Cels*. 1.1 (Henry Chadwick [trans.], *Origen: Contra Celsum* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, rev. edn, 1980], p. 7). Chadwick uses italics to indicate the passages in which Origen is believed to be quoting Celsus.

34. Origen, *Cels*. 1.1 (Chadwick).

35. Cf. Origen, *Cels.* 1.1, 7, 9, 11, 62, 64, 69; 3.12, 13, 23, 29, 30, 81; 4.79, 89, 97; 6.24, 34, 53; 8.15-17, 20, 47.

36. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl*. 10.1.7 (οὐδέ τις ἦν καὶ τοῖς ἔξωθεν τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς θιάσου φθόνος συναπολαύειν; Oulton, LCL).

37. Cf. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 4-19; Ascough, *What Are They Saying*, pp. 95-99.

38. Cf. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, pp. 177-228; Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl*, pp. 175-267.

behaved like voluntary associations.'[39] In his exhaustive study *The Origins of the Synagogue*, Anders Runesson concludes that synagogue and 'synagogue terms were used for two basic types of institution: public city/town/village assemblies and (semi-public) voluntary associations.'[40] The latter were various 'denominations' of Judaism, which emerged in the Hellenistic period and used the former as a kind of forum to put forth their views and gain adherents.[41] It is in this context that Christianity emerged among other Jewish denominations. Runesson notes, 'with Jesus and his earliest followers, we witness the birth of a new voluntary association, gathering around one teacher and his message.'[42]

Besides the denominations of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and the early Jesus movement, associations also had a profound influence on Jewish sects. Moshe Weinfeld's study of Greco-Roman voluntary associations and the Qumran sect shows the remarkable degree of overlap between the two.[43] Runesson agrees, using Matthias Klinghardt's study to conclude that 1QS is

39. Richardson, 'Building an Association', p. 54; cf. Peter Richardson, *Building Jewish in the Roman East* (Supplement to the Journal for the Study of Judaism; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004); Peter Richardson, 'Early Synagogues as Collegia in the Diaspora and Palestine', in John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 90-109; Peter Richardson and Valerie Heuchan, 'Jewish Voluntary Associations in Egypt and the Roles of Women', in John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 226-51.

40. Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (ConBNT, 37; Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2001), p. 395. Korner agrees with Runesson and uses his twofold definition of the synagogue as the basis for his study of ἐκκλησία in Jewish sources (cf. *Origin and Meaning*, p. 85).

41. Cf. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, pp. 398-400; cf. the helpful *Forschungsgeschichte* on synagogue research in Anders Runesson, Donald D. Binder and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book* (AGJU, 72; Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 1-19.

42. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, p. 483.

43. Cf. Moshe Weinfeld, *The Organizational Pattern and the Penal Code of the Qumran Sect: A Comparison with Guilds and Religious Associations of the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (NTOA, 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).

'a statute of a Hellenistic voluntary association'.[44] He ends his study declaring, concerning Judaism and Christianity, that 'the conclusion must be that the Graeco-Roman voluntary association, as an institutional type, rather than the public "synagogue", was the birthplace of two world-religions.'[45] The book of Acts also bears witness to this historical development.[46]

Shared Terminology between Christianity and Associations

Familial and Leadership Terminology. In his earlier work, one of Meeks's principal critiques against viewing Christian churches as associations was 'the almost complete absence of common terminology for the groups themselves or for their leaders'.[47] However, this has since been amply rebutted since the shared terminology between Christianity and associations is now rather compelling.[48] The crucial term ἐκκλησία will be discussed last on account of the contested issue of its use in Greco-Roman associations. The book of Acts bears record that both Christians and Jews commonly referred to one another as 'brother' (ἀδελφός).[49] Likewise, the epigraphic evidence

44. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, p. 371 (cf. pp. 331-37); see also Matthias Klinghardt, 'The Manual of Discipline in the Light of Statutes of Hellenistic Associations', in Michael O. Wise et al. (eds.), *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects* (Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 722; New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1998), pp. 251-67.

45. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, p. 488.

46. Acts 6.8-10; 9.2, 20-21; 13.5, 13-47; 14.1; 17.1-3, 10-11, 17; 18.4-6, 19-20, 26; 19.8; 22.19; 26.11; cf. Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, p. 483 and Markus Öhler, 'Antikes Vereinswesen', in Kurt Erlemann *et al*. (eds.), *Neues Testament und Antike Kultur: Band 2. Familie, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2004), pp. 83-85.

47. Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, p. 79.

48. See Richard S. Ascough, 'Redescribing the Thessalonians' Mission in Light of Graeco-Roman Associations', *NTS* 60 (2014), pp. 61-82 (66); cf. Ascough, *What Are They Saying*, pp. 86-89; Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2009), pp. 64-67, 158-59; Kloppenborg, 'Edwin Hatch', pp. 222-24.

49. Acts 1.14, 16; 2.29, 37; 3.17, 22; 6.3; 7.2, 23, 25, 26, 37; 9.17, 30; 10.23; 11.1, 12, 29; 12.17; 13.15, 26, 38; 14.2; 15.1, 3, 7, 13, 22, 23, 32, 33, 36, 40; 16.2, 40; 17.6, 10, 14; 18.18, 27; 20.32; 21.7, 17, 20; 22.1, 5, 13; 23.1, 5, 6; 28.14, 15, 17, 21; cf. Öhler, 'Jerusalemer Urgemeinde', pp. 399-401.

demonstrates the prominence of familial terminology among members of associations.[50] Also, one of the most prolific self-designations for associations is τὸ κοινόν, which is attested in numerous inscriptions.[51] Öhler explains that Luke's description of the *Urgemeinde* having 'all things common' (εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινά) in Acts 2.44 and 4.32 intentionally calls to mind the Aristotelian *Freundschaftsideal* toward which the Pythagoreans, Epicureans and other Greek philosophical associations strove.[52] Keener also observes that Luke's original audience would have not only thought of associations when they read the initial description of the church's fellowship (κοινωνία), sharing of meals and possessions (2.42-47), but also understood the church as a fulfillment of Hellenistic friendship and community ideals.[53]

Leadership terminology within Christian churches, borrowed from Judaism, was also common among Greco-Roman associations. It is important to understand that there is no standard leadership structure or common nomenclature between the vast array of different associations in antiquity.[54] The central church leadership office in the New Testament is the 'elder' (πρεσβύτερος) or 'overseer' (ἐπίσκοπος).[55] Ascough discusses several examples of associations using ἐπίσκοπος to refer to their leaders, though he notes that the title carries no implicit job description.[56] However, ἐπίσκοπος only occurs once in Acts (20.28; cf. 1.20). Instead, the predominant term for

50. E.g. IBosp 104; 1283-1284; ICiliciaBM 201. Cf. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II*, pp. 32-39, 415-16; cf. Richard S. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), pp. 76-77; Ascough, 'Voluntary Associations', pp. 160-61; Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, pp. 31-33.

51. See (*inter alia*) IG 2.2.1261-1263, 1275, 1277-1278, 1291-1292, 1297-1298, 1314, 1316-1317, 1323, 1325-1327, 1334, 1343, 1368, 2354, 2960. Cf. Kloppenborg, *Greco-Roman Associations III*, pp. 589-90, 650.

52. Öhler, 'Jerusalemer Urgemeinde', pp. 401-3.

53. Keener, *Acts*, I, pp. 1000-1023.

54. Kloppenborg, *Greco-Roman Associations III*, pp. 600-612.

55. Phil. 1.1; 1 Tim. 3.1-2; 5.1-2, 17, 19; Tit. 1.5, 7; Jas 5.14; 1 Pet. 5.1, 2, 5; 2 Jn 1.1; 3 Jn 1.1.

56. E.g. IDelos 1522; IG 12.1.49-50, 731; 12.3.329; IGL 1989; 1990; 2298; OGIS 2.611; 2.614. Cf. Ascough, 'Voluntary Associations', pp. 164-65; Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations*, pp. 80-81.

church leaders is πρεσβύτερος, which is used thirteen times.[57] Many associations in Ptolemaic and early Roman Egypt also used πρεσβύτερος as a title for their leaders.[58] The office of deacon is not reported in Acts (though see 6:1-4; 19:22), yet the rest of the New Testament bears ample witness to the διάκονος as a standard leadership role in the early church.[59] Ascough cites numerous inscriptions demonstrating that διάκονος was also a common title used for assistants and functionaries in cultic associations.[60]

Associations as Ἐκκλησίαι? One of the primary self-designations of early Christianity was the 'church' (ἐκκλησία), which occurs twenty times in Acts.[61] Meeks's major reason for once rejecting associations as the primary model of early Christianity is the fact that the former never used ἐκκλησία as a self-designation.[62] Kloppenborg and other scholars refuted this claim, positing five inscriptions as examples of associations using ἐκκλησία to refer to themselves and their gatherings.[63] However, the evidence is not as conclusive as they maintain. In his recent monograph on ἐκκλησία in early Christianity, Ralph J. Korner provides a thorough analysis of the epigraphic

57. Acts 11.30; 14.23; 15.2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16.4; 20.17; 21.18; 23.14; 24.1; 25.15. The other occurrences of πρεσβύτερος (4.5, 8, 23; 6.12; 23.14; 24.1; 25.15) refer to the elders of the Jews.

58. See IAlexImp. 92; IFayum 2.122; OGIS 2.729; P.Hamb. 1.34; P.Mich. 5.313; PSI 8.901; P.Stras. 5.341; SB 1.996. Cf. Kloppenborg, *Greco-Roman Associations III*, pp. 28-29, 105-7, 229-32, 267-76, 304-7, 315-16, 331-34, 411-12, 609.

59. Rom. 16.1; 1 Cor. 3.5; 2 Cor. 3.6; 6.4; 11.15, 23; Gal. 2.17; Eph. 3.7; 6.21; Phil. 1.1; Col. 1.7, 23, 25; 4.7; 1 Thess. 3.2; 1 Tim. 3.8-13; 4.6.

60. E.g. CIG 1793b; 1800; 3037; IG 4.774; IG 9.1.486; IMagnMai 109, 217; Μουσεῖον 93, 100; RIG 122; cf. Ascough, 'Voluntary Associations,' pp. 165-66; Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations*, pp. 82-83; cf. Kloppenborg's discussion of ἐπίσκοπος and διάκονος in Kloppenborg, 'Edwin Hatch', pp. 231-34.

61. Acts 2.47; 5.11; 8.1, 3; 9.31; 11.22, 26; 12.1, 5; 13.1; 14.23, 27; 15.3, 4, 22, 41; 16.5; 18.22; 20.17, 28.

62. Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, p. 79.

63. I.e. IGLAM 1381-1382; OGIS 2.488; Samos/OGIS 119; CIG 2271. Cf. Ascough, 'Voluntary Associations', p. 159; Richard S. Ascough, 'Greco-Roman Philosophic, Religious, and Voluntary Associations', in Richard N. Longenecker (ed.), *Community Formation in the Early Church and the Church Today* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), pp. 3-19 (14); Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, pp. 106, 182; Kloppenborg, 'Edwin Hatch', p. 231.

data, concluding, 'there does not appear to be inscriptional attestation of a community of people using *ekklēsia* as a collective designation prior to the first century CE.'[64] He demonstrates that the first three inscriptions (i.e. IGLAM 1381-1382; OGIS 2.488) use the term in its traditional sense of a formal, civic assembly. IDelos 1519 is the only clear example of an association using ἐκκλησία (cf. also *Samos* 119; *Sinuri* 73.8). However, it is used in reference to their meetings and not as a general self-designation.[65]

The closest parallel Korner identifies to the early Christian use of ἐκκλησία is not Greco-Roman associations but Diaspora synagogues. He surveys the usage of the term in the LXX, the Deuterocanonical books of Judith, Sirach and 1 Maccabees, as well as Josephus, Philo and Paul. These books primarily use ἐκκλησία to refer to the civic gatherings of the nation of Israel from the Exodus to the post-exilic period which, unlike the Greek formal assembly, included women and slaves.[66] Intriguingly, he notes that Philo's use of ἐκκλησία—in *Virt*. 108; *Spec*. 1.325; *Deus Imm*. 111—indicates that Alexandrian synagogues used the term both in reference to their non-civic, private, religious gatherings and 'to self-identify collectively as an *ekklēsia hiera*'.[67] Korner spells out the implications for the Christian use of the term:

> If a 1st century CE voluntary association with a *corpus mixtum* of Jews and gentiles, or even one with an exclusively gentile composition, adopted an *ekklēsia* ident ity, its members could have been viewed as being in continuity with a Jewish, and not simply with a Greco-Roman, heritage.[68]

Hence, though Meeks was correct in asserting that ἐκκλησία was not used by Greco-Roman associations, the Christian use of the term reflects its Jewish heritage. In conclusion, there is substantial literary, archeological, and epigraphic evidence to support the claim that early Christianity, in both its Jew-

64. Korner, *Origin and Meaning*, p. 68.

65. Korner, *Origin and Meaning*, pp. 53-68.

66. Korner, *Origin and Meaning*, p. 98.

67. Korner, *Origin and Meaning*, p. 148. Origen's wordplay on ἐκκλησία in *Cels*. 3.29-30 is interesting, comparing 'the assemblies of superstitious, licentious, and unrighteous men' in Athens and elsewhere to the 'far superior ... Churches of God in all places' (Chadwick, *Origen*, p. 147).

68. Korner, *Origin and Meaning*, p. 149.

ish origin and its Greco-Roman milieu, understood itself and was understood by others as an association,

II. *The Expansion of Associations*

This part transitions from Christianity as an association to a study of how associations grew. First, I will use Ascough's article on the architectural and epigraphic evidence that demonstrates the impressive growth of many associations.[69] Secondly, two case studies of association growth will be offered in order to identify potential causes.

Epigraphic and Archeological Evidence

There is abundant evidence indicating the expansion of numerous associations across the Roman empire before, during and after Christianity emerged. For instance, the addition of new names on a fourth-century BCE Athenian inscription demonstrates the growth of seven or eight θίασοι over time.[70] Another intriguing example is Dionysodoros of Alexandria (second century BCE), who was the head (ἀρχερανιστάς) of both the club (ἐρανιστάν) of the Haliasts and Haliads for twenty-three years as well as of the κοινόν of Paniasts for eighteen years.[71] Both associations honor their benefactor with a golden crown for having 'increased' the club.[72] Another inscription dating to 147–49 CE in the Italian port city of Misenum suggests that the *collegium* of the Augustales had a waiting list of around a hundred people desirous of membership.[73]

69. Richard S. Ascough, '"A Place to Stand, A Place to Grow": Architectural and Epigraphic Evidence for Expansion in Greco-Roman Associations', in Zeba A. Crook and Philip A. Harland (eds.), *Identity and Interaction in the Ancient Mediterranean: Jews, Christians and Others* (NTM, 18; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), pp. 76-98.

70. IG 2.2.2345 (Phaleron [Attica]; c. 365–330 BCE); cf. Ascough, *Early Christ Groups*, p. 83; Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations I*, pp. 17-21.

71. IG 12.1.155 (Rhodes [Dodecanese]; second century BCE).

72. Ascough, Harland and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, pp. 156-59; Ascough, *Early Christ Groups*, pp. 83-84.

73. Ascough, '"Place to Stand"', p. 94; Ascough, Harland and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, pp. 226-28.

The membership lists of associations (or *alba*) not only attest to their growth but yield insight into the factors behind it. Ascough notes the rise in membership of a professional association in Ostia evidenced by comparing their *alba*, inscribed between 152 and 213 CE.[74] The increase from 125 to 258 names, many of which are fathers and sons, indicates the crucial role of familial relationships in the expansion of associations. He writes, 'the *paterfamilias* was a key component in the recruitment of new members. Father-son or *dominus-libertus* (*liberti*) connections are the primary means that the group grew.'[75] He also discusses two examples of Mithraist *alba* in Virunum (Nordicum) from the second and third centuries CE that likewise attest to the role 'kin and social networks' played in the secret association's rapid growth.[76]

Next, Ascough considers the impressive expansion of the Dionysian associations, relying on the work of Peter Pilhofer. The German scholar refers to this cult as 'ein andres Volk ohne Tempel', a reference to Judaism.[77] That is, he notes the parallel between Judaism, Christianity and the cult in that the last evolved from a temple-based religion to an international movement of small-groups meeting in homes to worship their σωτήρ, Dionysus. In Thessalonica, three second-century CE inscriptions (IG 9.2.1; 185; 309) attest the existence of numerous Dionysian θίασοι in the city.[78] In Pergamon, excavations of a meeting place of the βυκόλοι ('cowherds') reveal that the building was continually renovated and expanded from 27 BCE to the fourth century CE; this

74. I.e. the *Collegium lenunculariorum tabulariorum auxiliariorum* (*CIL* 14.250-251); cf. Ascough, Harland and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, pp. 201-2.

75. Ascough, *Early Christian Groups*, p. 92.

76. Ascough, '"Place to Stand"', p. 95; for the rise and fall of Mithraism, see David Walsh, *The Cult of Mithras in Late Antiquity: Development, Decline and Demise ca. A.D. 270–430* (Late Antique Archaeology Supplementary Series, 2; Leiden: Brill, 2018).

77. See Peter Pilhofer, 'Ein andres Volk ohne Tempel: Die θίασοι der Dionysos-Verehrer', in Peter Pilhofer, *Die frühen Christen und ihre Welt: Greifswalder Aufsätze 1996–2001. Mit Beiträgen von Jens Börstinghaus und Eva Ebel* (WUNT, 145; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), pp. 123-38.

78. Pilhofer, *Die frühen Christen*, pp. 128-30; Ascough, *Early Christ Groups*, pp. 85-87.

demonstrates the association's steady growth.[79] The last stop in Asia Minor is the capital city of Ephesus. Ascough discusses two examples, an association of fishmongers dedicated to Isis, as well as what appears to be a private Dionysian cult. The epigraphic and archaeological evidence suggests that both groups experienced numerical growth and financial prosperity during the second century CE.[80]

The final stop on Ascough's tour of the expansion of associations is Dura-Europos, relying on L. Michael White's excellent two-volume study.[81] The Roman garrison on the Syrian frontier was destroyed in 256 CE. The site is invaluable as it contains 'the earliest and most completely known pre-Constantinian church building'.[82] The excavation reports explain that the oldest extant Christian worship facility was originally a private house built around 232–33 CE and renovated as a *Domus Ecclesiae* around 241.[83] It is not clear whether the Christians originally worshipped in the house before renovating it. However, White documents several examples from archaeological excavations of ancient churches in Rome, Carthage, Antioch and Hippo of the transition in the Ante-Nicene era from a house church first, then to a renovated church facility still serving as a domicile, and finally to a church building.[84]

Dura-Europas provides archeological evidence of the way in which ancient associations expanded, including Christianity. There is a synagogue and a Mithraeum on the same street as the Christian building. Much more prominent are the three temples of Adonis, Zeus Theos and of the 'Gaddê' (a Palmyrene temple dedicated to their 'gods' [Gaddê]). All these houses of worship were built and rebuilt, renovated and expanded, throughout the city's history beginning in the third century BCE.[85] White observes,

> A survey of the local religious landscape at Dura-Europos over time indicates that this process of gradual appropriation and adaptation was

79. Pilhofer, *Die frühen Christen*, pp. 130-37; Ascough, *Early Christ Groups*, pp. 85-86.

80. I.e. IEph 20, 1503; cf. Ascough, *Early Christ Groups*, pp. 87-90; Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II*, pp. 249-60.

81. White, *Social Origins*, I and II.

82. White, *Social Origins*, I, p. 7.

83. White, *Social Origins*, II, pp. 123-35.

84. White, *Social Origins*, I, pp. 102-39.

85. White, *Social Origins*, I, pp. 40-45.

> commonly followed … In case after case, year after year, these small religious associations adapted private domestic structures for public religious or collegial use.[86]

The financial means for such expensive building projects for these local associations, including Christian churches, came primarily through donations from benefactors. He interprets the graffiti found in the Christian assembly hall and baptistry at Dura-Europas as coming 'from patrons and/or artisans who participated in the renovation and decoration of the building for Christian usage'.[87] He notes the evidence from several other excavations of second-to-fourth-century church buildings in Rome, Istria, Arabia, etc. that demonstrate the same pattern of gradual and continual renovation.[88] He concludes, 'access to property through patronage and donation was perhaps the *sina qua non* for the architectural development from house church to *domus ecclesiae*.'[89] Hence, the financial support of patrons and wealthy members of cultic associations, including Christianity, was crucial to the growth of their facilities and thus the size of their group.

Case Study 1: The Agrippinilla Inscription

The epigraphic data not only affirm the impressive expansion of many associations during the rise of Christianity, but also provide illuminating insights into the causes behind it. Four inscriptions in particular serve as case studies of association growth. The first is the Agrippinilla inscription (IGUR 1.160) in the Roman Campagna (Torre Nova), dated 160–70 CE.[90] The marble base contains a list of 402 names of only those Dionysian μύσται who helped finance the statue, hence the total size of the association must have been larger. The statue honors the high priestess and wife of Marcus Gavius Squilla Gallicanus, founder of the household association around 150 CE, a senator and proconsul of Asia Minor, whose ancestry hails from Lesbos (Mytilene).

In the 'first critical edition of the Agrippinilla inscription', Bradley H. McLean discusses the familial structure of the association: 'the principal

86. White, *Social Origins*, I, pp. 43-44.

87. White, *Social Origins*, II, p. 134 n. 12.

88. White, *Social Origins*, I, pp. 111-23; White, *Social Origins*, II, pp. 209-28.

89. White, *Social Origins*, I, p. 146.

90. Ascough, Harland, and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, pp. 215-16.

functionaries are all members of the senatorial family.'[91] This was common as 'private *collegia* and *thiasoi* were customarily dependent upon aristocratic individuals or families who established and financed them.'[92] He observes that 'eighty percent (323 of 402 names) of the cognomina listed in the inscription are of Greek origin.'[93] This suggests that the association was predominantly made up of foreigners, those who 'had only recently immigrated from Lesbos as the slaves and freedmen of the Gallicanus household'.[94] Yet the names and size of the group indicate that many members came from outside the household of the *paterfamilias*. Ascough observes that this exemplifies one of the reasons why certain associations grew, namely, 'the desire of those outside the family … to be affiliated with a person of great influence and power'.[95]

The honorific titles listed next to the names display the unique value of this artifact, as McLean observes: 'the Agrippinilla inscription encompasses more titles than any other extant Dionysiac inscription.'[96] He identifies twenty-two of them, most of which are related to the Bacchic procession.[97] What is striking about the list is the role of women and slaves in the *collegium*, both groups making up about one quarter of the whole.[98] This is substantial since they were generally worse off financially than others, which means there were probably many other female and slave initiates not engraved. However, even among those listed, McLean discusses the prominent

91. Bradley H. McLean, 'The Agrippinilla Inscription: Religious Associations and Early Church Formation', in Bradley H. McLean (ed.), *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity* (JSNTSup, 86; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 239-70 (247-48) (the Greek text and critical footnotes are found on pp. 240-45).

92. McLean, 'Agrippinilla Inscription', p. 249.

93. McLean, 'Agrippinilla Inscription', p. 249.

94. McLean, 'Agrippinilla Inscription', p. 254 (cf. the extensive discussion on pp. 247-57).

95. Ascough, *Early Christ Groups*, p. 92.

96. McLean, 'Agrippinilla Inscription', p. 258.

97. E.g. basket-bearers (κισταφόροι); god-bearers (θεόφοροι); fire-bearers (πυρφόροι); holy cowherds (βούκολοι ἵεροι); phallus-bearers (φαλλοφόροι); torch-bearers (δαδοῦχοι); winnowing-basket bearers (λικναφόροι), etc. (cf. McLean, 'Agrippinilla Inscription', p. 262).

98. McLean, 'Agrippinilla Inscription', pp. 251-52, 262.

roles they played. Women bear numerous titles, including two of the four highest offices (e.g. priestess and δαδοῦχος), not to mention the statue's namesake, Pompeiia Agrippinilla herself.[99]

Likewise, slaves occupy fifteen of the twenty-two titles, including some of the leadership roles.[100] Hence, the inscription is evidence of an oft-observed principle concerning the attraction of some associations and a cause of their growth, namely, the high sense of kinship and equality initiates enjoyed.[101] McLean observes, 'membership in the association served to relativize social distinctions in an otherwise socially stratified society.'[102] The Agrippinilla inscription is only one of numerous examples of associations, both Greco-Roman and Jewish (i.e. Synagogues), that listed women and slaves as members and honored them as both benefactors and leaders in the group.[103]

Case Study 2: The Cult of Serapis

The cult of Serapis on the island of Delos is often exhibited as a case study for the growth of associations. The 220 BCE inscription recounts the story of the cult's founding told by Apollonius II, grandson of the founder, on a

99. McLean, 'Agrippinilla Inscription', pp. 262-63.

100. E.g. ἱεροφάνται (leaders of male and female bacchants [ἀρχιβάσσαροι/αι]); ἀρχινεανίσκοι (youth leaders) (cf. McLean, 'Agrippinilla Inscription', p. 256).

101. John S. Kloppenborg, 'Egalitarianism in the Myth and Rhetoric of Pauline Churches', in Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig (eds.), *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1996), pp. 247-63 (252-60); Thomas Schmeller, *Hierarchie und Egalität: Eine sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung paulinischer Gemeinden und griechisch-römischer Vereine* (SBS, 162; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1995).

102. McLean, 'Agrippinilla Inscription', p. 269.

103. For women, cf. IApamBith 35; IJO 2.36, 43, 168; ISmyrna 653–654; MAMA 6.263; SEG 28.953; TAM 3.4, 62; 5.972 (see Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II*, pp. 50-54, 95-100, 106-14, 150-56, 223-29, 308-11, 385-90); Kloppenborg, *Greco-Roman Associations III*, p. 681. For slaves, cf. BGU 4.1137; IBosp 69, 1021, 1123; IByzantion 31; IEph 20; *IG* 2.2.1365-1366; ILeukopetra 16; SB 22.15460; SEG 46.800; TAM 5.1539 (see Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations I*, pp. 262-78, 335-39, 400-402); Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II*, pp. 24-32, 178-93, 249-60; Kloppenborg, *Greco-Roman Associations III*, pp. 65-70, 668.

temple column (IG 11.4; 1299).[104] As Hans-Josef Klauck explains, Apollonius I migrated from Memphis around 280 BCE, 'having brought his own god with him', and began venerating the statue of Serapis in rented rooms.[105] Leadership was passed to his son Demetrius, then to his son Apollonius, and the foreign cult grew steadily.

One night, Serapis instructed Apollonius II in a dream that 'he should no longer be in rented rooms as before' and wanted a temple to dwell in.[106] The priest was also given a sign of a mysterious 'note' by which he would know the predestined location 'where you will build for me a sacred enclosure and a famous temple'.[107] The dream was fulfilled and the temple constructed accordingly. But then opposition came as 'certain individuals conspired against' Apollonius, threatening him with monetary and even corporal punishment.[108] Once again in a dream, Serapis told the weeping priest not to be afraid and said that he would defend him. The column concludes by praising Serapis for his 'miracle on that day' of delivering Apollonius 'by divine power'.[109] By the time Delos came under Roman control (c. 166 BCE), the cult of Serapis had become so prominent on the island that it occupied three temples on the Terrace of the Foreign Gods.[110]

Another similar example is found in Thessalonica in the temple of the Egyptian gods (IG 10.2.1).[111] Although the inscription is dated to the first and second centuries CE, Ascough explains that the original version was com-

104. Ascough, Harland, and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, p. 224.

105. Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (trans. Brian McNeil; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 63-64. The English translation of IG 11.4, 1299 quoted here is from B. Hudson McLean, 'The Place of Cult in Voluntary Associations and Christian Churches on Delos', in John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 186-225 (206-8).

106. McLean, 'Place of Cult', p. 206.

107. McLean, 'Place of Cult', p. 207.

108. McLean, 'Place of Cult', p. 206.

109. McLean, 'Place of Cult', p. 208.

110. White explains the irony that resulted from this growth as the patrons of the official cult (Sarapeion C) on Delos eventually attempted to shut down the various private associations of Serapis using Sarapeion A (cf. *Social Origins I*, pp. 32-40).

111. Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations I*, pp. 357-62.

posed in the second and third centuries BCE.[112] As in Delos, Serapis appears to a man named Xenainetos in a dream and also gives him a sign involving a secret note or letter, commanding him to give it to his political rival Eurynomos. Upon waking, Xenainetos finds the miraculous letter and gives it to Eurynomos, who is then converted from his skepticism and founds the cult in the household (οἶκος) of a woman named Sosinikē. Ascough explains that the inscription narrates the humble origins of the cult, which, by that time, had become one of the largest temples of Isis-Serapis in the Greco-Roman world.[113]

The phenomenon of associations being founded by divine oracle was not limited to the cult of Serapis. One of the more intriguing examples is the Dionysian household association in Philadelphia (TAM 5.1539, c. 100 BCE).[114] The inscription explains that Zeus the Σωτήρ appeared to Dionysios to give him instructions for 'common salvation' (κοινῆι σωτηρίαι). He commands Dionysios to establish a place of worship in his οἶκος 'giving access … to men … and women, free people and household slaves'.[115] Moreover, Zeus reveals a lengthy set of ethical injunctions adherents are to practice, which mainly center around sexual purity.[116] These are just a few of the many examples of the role of divine oracles in the establishment and leadership of ancient associations.[117] Harland concludes, 'the clear message of such stories, including our own from Philadelphia, seems to be that the gods

112. Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations I*, p. 360.

113. Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations I*, p. 361.

114. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II*, pp. 178-93; cf. Ascough, Harland, and Kloppenborg, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World*, pp. 82-84; Klauck, *Religious Context*, pp. 64-68; White, *Social Origins I*, p. 45.

115. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II*, p. 181.

116. Harland warns against 'a moralizing or Christianizing reading of the rules' (*Greco-Roman Associations II*, p. 189), explaining that they relate primarily to ritual purity and defilement (cf. pp. 189-92). For other examples of associations with various regulations pertaining both to their gatherings as well as the ethical behavior of adherents, cf. IG 2.2.1368-1369; SEG 31.122; Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations I*, pp. 229-57; cf. Weinfeld, *Organizational Pattern*, pp. 46-57.

117. E.g. IG 2.2.1283, 1326, 1365-1366; IG 12.3.329; ImagnMai 215; P.Lips. 2.131; SEG 42.157; Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations I*, pp. 125-32, 179-84, 198-203, 262-78; Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II*, pp. 344-50; Kloppenborg, *Greco-Roman Associations III*, pp. 257-58, 632, 660.

themselves were personally invested in the activities of the group and that the instructions given should therefore be followed closely and taken seriously.'[118] Therefore, many cultic associations preserved narratives promulgating divine guidance over the emergence and expansion of their congregation.

III. *Expansion of the Christ Associations in Acts*

The study of the growth of ancient associations in Part II has led to the identification of several common factors that can be used to study the expansion of early Christianity as recorded in the book of Acts. There are five in particular:

> 1. The role of one's social network in recruiting new members, especially family and household relationships.
> 2. The participation of powerful figures, who exercise great influence and contribute substantially to the association.
> 3. The monetary gifts patrons and especially wealthy members contribute to finance the association (e.g. facilities).
> 4. The opportunities for marginalized groups such as women and slaves in some associations to have access to relationships and leadership opportunities otherwise not available to them.
> 5. The role of divine guidance, or at least the perception thereof, in the origin and growth of the association.

Part three explores the role each of these factors plays in the growth of Christianity as recorded in the book of Acts.

1. *Οἶκος and Social Networks*

Many studies have been conducted on the central importance of the οἶκος in Acts, as it relates both to the physical structure and to the Greco-Roman household.[119] The principal meeting places of the first Christians in Jerusalem were in the temple as well as 'from house to house' (cf. Acts 2.46; 5.42). As the movement expanded, the private home served as the primary

118. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations II*, p. 188.

119. Bradley Blue, 'Acts and the House Church', in David W.J. Gill and Conrad H. Gempf (eds.), *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting* (BAFCS, 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 119-222; Keener, *Acts*, I, pp. 1030-31; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 211; Bowes, *Private Worship*, pp. 191-96.

meeting place for Christianity's early beginnings, just as was the case with associations.[120] Even in Ephesus, where Paul rented 'the hall of Tyrannus' (19.9), he continued meeting with the people 'from house to house' (20.20).[121] Of course, οἶκος is also used to refer to the household, i.e. one's spouse, children and other dependents living in the house, as well as slaves.[122] Κατὰ τοὺς οἴκους thus not only signifies different domiciles but also refers to the various social networks brought into the Christian fold.

Many scholars have noted the importance of the four household conversions of Cornelius (Acts 10.2, 24, 33; 11.14), Lydia (16.14-15), the Philippian jailer (16.31-34) and Crispus (18.8) in Acts, which represent the progress of Christian expansion.[123] Ascough uses the lens of associations to reinterpret the Thessalonian mission (1 Thess. 1.2-10) as a natural spread of the gospel. This took place locally through the Thessalonians' social networks as well as abroad in their personal and business travels, as they 'went everywhere gossiping the gospel', to use Michael Green's phrase.[124] Eckhard J. Schnabel also identifies the οἰκία (or *familia*) and one's social network as well as the ease of travel to be crucial factors of Christian expansion in the second and third centuries CE.[125]

120. Acts 8.3; 10.22-23; 11.3, 12; 12.12; 16.15, 32, 40; 17.5; 18.7; 20.7-8; 21.8; cf. Schnelle, *First One Hundred Years*, pp. 243-45. White's survey of literary sources concerning early Christian assembly is extraordinary (cf. *Social Origins II*, pp. 33-120).

121. Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 2827-35.

122. *DNTB*, p. 366; Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 24-25.

123. David Lertis Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts: Pattern and Interpretation* (JSNTSup, 123; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996); Keener, *Acts*, III, p. 2399.

124. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 173; Ascough, 'Redescribing'. Although Luke focuses on the Peter-Paul parallel as part of his apologetic for the latter, he frequently mentions the role of ordinary laypeople in the expansion of Christianity, whose impact cannot be overstated. Cf. Acts 6.8–7.60; 8.4, 5-40; 9.10-18; 11.19-21; 18.2-3, 24-28. Cf. Keener, *Acts*, II, pp. 1485-87, 1832-44.

125. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, II, pp. 1555-61.

2. *Patrons and Prominent Converts*

Related to households is the importance of powerful figures to lend credibility and recruit members for the new association. The mention of influential people in the young churches in Jerusalem (priests and Pharisees in Acts 6.7; 15.5) and Antioch (Manaen, 13.1) presumes their contribution to the new faith's reputation.[126] The Ethiopian eunuch, as a royal court official (8.27), was another convert of prominent status whom tradition holds to have had great impact in his homeland.[127] Although he was not the first Gentile convert, Cornelius represents the beginning of the Gentile mission in Acts. The retired centurion's influence not only led to the conversion of his οἶκος but also converted 'his relatives and close friends' (10.24).[128] Examples abound throughout the account of Paul, from the conversion of Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus, at the outset of his mission (13.7, 12),[129] to Publius, 'the chief man of the island' of Malta (28.7-10) at its conclusion.[130] Other noteworthy examples are Dionysius, a member of the Athenian Areopagus (17.34)[131] as well as at least one ἀρχισυνάγωγος or perhaps two in Corinth (cf. Acts 18.8, 17; 1 Cor. 1.1, 14).[132] Luke's frequent mention of prominent people in Paul's Gentile mission is suggestive of the substantial impact they had on the establishment, credibility and spread of the new faith.

3. *Benefaction and Financial Support*

The conversion of such prominent figures benefitted not only the propagation of early Christianity but also its budget. Christian expansion was financed by wealthy converts who became benefactors in the new movement as was seen in other associations. Indeed, the existence of Luke–Acts itself is most likely the product of Luke's patron, Theophilus (cf. Lk. 1.1-4; Acts 1.1).[133]

126. Keener, *Acts*, II, pp. 1291-93, 1988-91.

127. Keener, *Acts*, II, pp. 1550-79, 1595.

128. τοὺς συγγενεῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ τοὺς ἀναγκαίους φίλους (cf. Keener, *Acts*, II, pp. 1742-55).

129. Keener, *Acts*, II, pp. 2014-16.

130. τῷ πρώτῳ τῆς νήσου ὀνόματι Ποπλίῳ (see Keener, *Acts*, IV, pp. 3681-93).

131. Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 2678.

132. Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 2748-50, 2778-79.

133. Keener, *Acts*, I, pp. 653-68; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 52; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), p. 63.

Keener's study of the Asiarchs, who were Paul's 'friends' (19.31), suggests that they were most likely the apostle's benefactors in Ephesus, supporting the new teacher and perhaps financing the rented hall he taught in (19.9).[134]

Nevertheless, Christian benefaction differed markedly from its Greco-Roman counterpart. As Ascough points out, the hapax legomenon εὐεργέτης ('benefactor') occurs in Lk. 22.25, where the Evangelist adapts Jesus' teaching on servant leadership (Mk 10.41-45) to delineate the Christian antithesis to Hellenistic patronage. Instead of giving to receive honor, the third Gospel emphasizes more than any other the 'service-oriented frame of mind', as Frederick W. Danker puts it, that Christians are to adopt in their generosity.[135] Ascough concludes, 'Luke is attempting to transform the culturally defined pattern of patron-client relationships and benefaction in his community.'[136] This motif continues in Acts, where Luke's portrayal of the early church functions as the realization of Jesus' ethic. Keener writes, 'the sharing of goods in Acts thus may fulfill on a literal level what Jesus demanded in an ideal and hyperbolic manner.'[137]

After the second description of ideal generosity and friendship in the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 4.32-35), Luke provides two models of Christian benefaction. The first is the positive example of Barnabas, who, like others, was content to lay the proceeds from the sale of his property 'at the apostles' feet' (v. 37).[138] The second (5.1-11) is infamously negative. Ascough writes,

> Set within the larger context of both Luke–Acts and the world of voluntary associations, the story of Ananias and Saphira is a cautionary tale about wanting honours for benefaction, and a warning for those who act according to human conventions rather than divine conventions.[139]

134. τινὲς δὲ καὶ τῶν Ἀσιαρχῶν, ὄντες αὐτῷ φίλοι (see Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 2908-18). The staggering value of the burned magic books in 19.19 suggests the considerable wealth of several converts in Ephesus (cf. Witherington, *Acts*, p. 582).

135. Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1982), p. 324; cf. Lk. 3.11; 6.24-25; 12.13-21, 33-34, 43-48; 14.7-24, 33; 16.1-13, 19-31; 18.18-30; 19.8-9.

136. Ascough, 'Benefaction Gone Wrong', p. 105.

137. Keener, *Acts*, I, p. 1022.

138. Keener, *Acts*, II, p. 1178.

139. Ascough, 'Benefaction Gone Wrong', p. 105.

It is worth noting that the church buried Ananias and Saphira (5.6, 10), a crucial service provided by associations.[140]

Another major way in which Christian benefaction differed from its Greco-Roman counterpart was in its concern for the poor. Instead of spending the funds primarily on acquiring and renovating church property, Acts emphasizes the primary focus on the needy.[141] As Keener notes, the early Christian collection for the poor was most likely another result of their Jewish heritage.[142] Kloppenborg's study of Paul's *epidosis* (organized contribution) among the Gentile Christian associations for the poor saints in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 20.4; 21.26; 24.17) is fascinating.[143] Not only was it rare for associations to collect funds for the needy locally, but there is 'no evidence of any *epidosis* organized for the benefit of residents of a city or members of an association other than that of the donors themselves'.[144] Even more unparalleled is the appeal for Greek Christians to organize a collection for their remote, Jewish brethren, members of a different ethnic group. Paul's vision behind this revolutionary act, as articulated in 2 Cor. 8–9, is that it would be a tangible expression of the 'equality' (2 Cor. 8.13-14) and thus the transnational identity and unity of the church of Jesus Christ.[145]

4. *Women and Slaves*

The importance of women in Luke–Acts has been the subject of much study.[146] Among the Gospels, Luke's emphasis on the role of women, in-

140. Keener, *Acts*, II, pp.1194-95; Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 265-77; Ebel, *Attraktivität*, pp. 44-46; Pilhofer, *Die frühen Christen*, pp. 207-8.

141. Acts 2.44-45; 3.2; 4.34-35; 6.1-6; 11.28-30.

142. Keener, *Acts*, II, p. 1178. He notes the striking example of CD 14.13-16, the Essene collection for 'the fatherless … the poor and the needy, the aged sick and the man who is stricken (with disease), the captive taken by a foreign people, the virgin with no near kin, and the ma[id for] whom no one cares' (Géza Vermès [ed.], *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* [London: Penguin, rev. edn, 2011], p. 145).

143. Acts 20.4; cf. Rom. 15.31; 1 Cor. 16.1-4; 2 Cor. 8–9.

144. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 260-61.

145. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 245-64.

146. Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Keener, *Acts*, I, pp. 597-638; Witherington, *Acts*, pp. 334-39.

cluding female benefactors (cf. 8.2-3), is preeminent.[147] The motif continues in Acts as Peter raises a woman from the dead in the Jewish port city of Joppa; she was a 'disciple named Tabitha … full of good works and acts of charity' (9.36). Keener concludes from 9.39 that she was a 'benefactress of widows', who financially assisted them.[148] Thus, she exemplifies Christian benefaction as one who uses one's own wealth to support the poor without expectation of public honor.[149]

In Thessalonica and Berea, Luke mentions many of 'the leading women' and 'women of high standing' among the new converts to the faith (17.4, 12).[150] The influence these female disciples would have exerted for Christianity is exemplified by the power 'the devout women of high standing' in Pisidian Antioch exercised against it, forcing Paul and Barnabas out of the region (13.50).[151] The mention of Damaris among the Athenian converts (17.34) suggests she was a female philosopher or at least 'a member of the elite'.[152] That two of these texts mention women first before men emphasizes the former's prestige.[153]

Yet the most prominent example of an influential benefactress in Acts is undoubtedly Lydia. The 'seller of purple goods' (16.14) must have been a woman of means since she had her own οἶκος as well as a house large enough to serve as the first Philippian worship space (cf. vv. 14-15, 40).[154] Her willingness to serve as a benefactress is suggested by the hospitality she insisted on offering Paul and his team and Paul's epistle to the Philippians has been posited as further evidence of her patronage (cf. 2.25-30; 4.2, 14-17).[155] There are other women noted in Acts for their spiritual influence even though

147. Lk. 1.26-56; 2.19, 36-38, 51; 4.25-26, 38-39; 7.11-13, 36-50; 8.19-21, 40-56; 10.38-42; 13.11-16; 15.8-10; 16.18; 18.2-8; 21.1-4; 23.27-31, 49, 55-56; 24.1-11.

148. Keener, *Acts*, II, p. 1718.

149. Reimer, *Women in the Acts*, pp. 31-69.

150. cf. Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 2542-44, 2562-63.

151. Keener, *Acts*, II, pp. 2103-105.

152. Keener, *Acts*, III, p. 2680.

153. Reimer, *Women in the Acts*, pp. 243-48.

154. Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 2393-2420.

155. Richard S. Ascough, *Lydia: Paul's Cosmopolitan Hostess* (Paul's Social Network: Brothers and Sisters in Faith; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), pp. 52-57; Reimer, *Women in the Acts*, pp. 71-149.

nothing is said of their material wealth. Two of the most significant examples are Priscilla, the church planter and teaching minister (cf. 18.2, 18, 26; Rom. 16.3; 2 Tim. 4.19), and Philip's daughters, i.e. the four prophetesses (21.9).[156]

While women feature prominently in Luke–Acts, slaves are rare. Since Christianity was later criticized as a foolish *superstitio* for the lowly and uneducated,[157] Luke's emphasis on converts of high social status (and lack of attention towards slave converts) may stem from his apologetic motivation to correct this broad misperception and present the faith as viable for the educated elite (e.g. Theophilus).[158] The reference at the outset of Peter's Pentecost sermon to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit 'on my male servants and female servants' (2.18) is best understood figuratively as a general reference to the servants of the Lord (cf. 4.29; 16.17). However, it certainly conveys the New Testament principle that women and those of lower status are full-fledged members of Christ's body.[159]

There are two slave girls (παιδίσκη) mentioned in Acts. The first is Rhoda at Mary's house church (12.12-15). Keener notes that Luke's positive portrayal of this Christian slave implies that she was a trusted member of the early church.[160] The other is the woman with the Python spirit in Philippi (16.16), who stands in stark contrast to affluent Lydia.[161] Luke does not record what happened to the young woman after she was delivered, but it is plausible that she became another member of the new Philippian Christ association.[162]

Finally, Cornelius sends two of his οἰκέται (household slaves) to fetch Peter, who presumably were converted along with his οἶκος (10.7, 19-23).

156. Reimer, *Women in the Acts*, pp. 195-226; Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 153-54; Witherington, *Acts*, pp. 566-67.

157. Origen, *Cels*. 3.44-58; Pliny the Younger, *Ep*. *Tra*. 10.96; Tacitus, *Ann*. 15.44; Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2.

158. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, pp. 187-89; Green, *Evangelism*, pp. 172-78; Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1997), pp. 29-47.

159. Keener, *Acts*, I, pp. 882-86.

160. Keener, *Acts*, II, pp. 1904-48; Reimer, *Women in the Acts*, pp. 240-43.

161. See Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 2422-56.

162. Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 2466-67; Reimer, *Women in the Acts*, pp. 151-94.

Hence, Christianity, like many other associations, counted women and slaves among its adherents. Yet as Eva Ebel explains, the structure and policy of Christian churches towards women and the marginalized was more attractive than other associations.[163] The ἐκκλησία likewise afforded elite women opportunities to use their wealth and influence to contribute towards the expansion of the uniquely trans-local, Christian movement.[164]

5. *Divine Guidance*

One of the primary themes in Acts is that Christian expansion is the result of God's guidance not only of the apostles but of members in general, through prophecy, visions, dreams and other means.[165] There are striking parallels between the Lord's guidance of Paul in Acts and the founding of cultic associations, particularly that of Serapis. In Corinth, the Lord appears to Paul in a night vision, saying, 'do not be afraid,' for he would protect him and prosper the new church (18.9-10). The dream is fulfilled by God's deliverance from Jewish legal opposition under Gallio (vv. 12-16). Similarly, Serapis appeared to Apollonius in a night vision, telling him not to be afraid because the deity would fight on his behalf in court and prosper the cult (IG 11.4). Moreover, the narrative of Paul's journey as a prisoner to Rome includes two night-visions in which God promises to protect the apostle and aid him in trial (cf. 23.11; 27.23-24).

The Thessalonian inscription also parallels the Lord's guidance of Paul. As Serapis commanded Xenainetos in a dream to found the household association in Thessalonica (IG 10.2.1), so the Spirit forbids Paul from remaining in Asia and gives him the Macedonian vision (16.6-10). Paul and his team interpret this dream to be the Lord's instructions for the second missionary

163. Ebel, *Attraktivität*, pp. 218-19; McLean disagrees (cf. 'Agrippinilla Inscription', pp. 257, 265, 270).

164. 'Als Ergebnis dieser Skizze läßt sich festhalten: Im Wettbewerb mit paganen Vereinen in ihrem Umfeld können christliche Gemeinden vor allem auf ihren Verzicht auf formale Zulassungsbedingungen und auf die größere Intensität ihres Zusammenlebens, die den Christinnen und Christen auch materielle Vorteile einbringt, verweisen' (Ebel, *Attraktivität*, p. 218); Pilhofer, *Die frühen Christen*, pp. 209-11; Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 2408-22.

165. Acts 1.4-8; 2.1-4, 17; 7.31, 55-56; 9.3-18; 10.3-22; 11.4-17, 27-28; 12.7-11; 13.2; 16.6-10; 18.9-10; 21.9-14; 22.6-21; 23.11; 26.12-18; 27.23-24; cf. Keener, *Acts*, I, pp. 886-916; Witherington, *Acts*, p. 142.

journey, leading to the establishment of Christ associations in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Corinth (cf. 16.11–18.18). Indeed, Paul's conversion and calling as well as the beginning of his Gentile mission are all portrayed in Acts as oracles.[166] More research also needs to be done on the role of miracles and miracle reports in the propagation and expansion of both early Christianity and other cultic associations.[167] Suffice it to say that Luke's account of Paul's ministry, like that of Peter, is characterized by visions and dreams, prophecies and miracles. These are designed to convey the Lord's guidance over the emergence and expansion of the new Christian faith.[168]

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to provide a comparative study of early Christian expansion as recorded in the book of Acts with that of other ancient, Greco-Roman associations. Part I presented four reasons why associations were the primary socio-organizational model for early Christianity. Outsiders (e.g. Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius) understood Christianity as one of the many new cultic associations spreading around the empire, and the church fathers (e.g. Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius) also described Christianity as an association. Thirdly, numerous scholars have demonstrated that Greco-Roman associations were the primary influence on the development of Jewish synagogues, out of which Christianity emerged. Finally, the New Testament, including the book of Acts, uses common association terminology in reference to the early church.

166. Acts 9.15; 13.2-3; 22.21; 26.15-19.

167. Acts 2.43; 3.1-10; 4.30, 33; 5.12-16; 6.8; 8.13, 18-19; 9.12, 17-18, 32-41; 13.9-11; 14.8-10; 16.16-19; 19.11-12; 20.7-11; 22.13; 28.3-9; cf. Origen, *Cels*. 1.1-2, 6, 25-26, 28, 30, 38, 45-46, 57, 60, 67-68, 71; 2.8-9; 6.40; 7.8; 8.37. See Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), I, pp. 35-82; Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 118-19, 327-30, 570-71; Howard Clark Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World: A Study in Sociohistorical Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 128-31, 202-6, 211-18, 267-71; A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), pp. 83-98.

168. Acts 4.31; 5.17-20; 10.1-33; 11.4-11; 12.6-11. For the Lukan Peter-Paul parallelism, see Keener, *Acts*, I, pp. 561-74.

Part II surveyed the epigraphic and archaeological evidence for the growth of Greco-Roman associations as well as case studies that provide insight into its causes. Five factors were identified as being of particular importance: (1) family and social networks, (2) influential converts, (3) financial support, (4) opportunities for the marginalized and (5) divine guidance. Part III interpreted the account of early Christian expansion in the book of Acts through the lens of these five factors. Scholars continue to debate why Christianity emerged among so many other cultic associations to become the religion of Rome.[169] This study confirms some assumptions about the uniqueness of early Christianity and the causes of its rapid growth while challenging others. It is hoped that a greater knowledge of Christianity's past leads to enhanced understanding of its role today.

169. Ebel, *Attraktivität*, pp. 214-21; Pilhofer, *Die frühen Christen*, pp. 194-211. However, Kloppenborg expediently criticizes the 'Pilhofer-Ebel model' (cf. *Christ's Associations*, pp. 236-37).