

The Story of Sosthenes (Acts 18:1-17): A Hermeneutic of the Story of Sosthenes within the Context of Semi-Public Synagogue

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1. Introduction

The narrative in Acts 18:1-17 presents a series of intriguing events that culminate in the enigmatic story of a synagogue leader named Sosthenes. Unlike his experience in Athens, Paul's mission in Corinth appears to bear significant fruit. In Corinth, he encounters individuals who are unequivocally identified as Christians: Aquila, his wife Priscilla, Titus Justus, and Crispus, a synagogue ruler. Notably, these names also appear in 1 or 2 Corinthians (Aquila and Priscilla in 1 Corinthians 16:19; Titus, though not certain whether he is Justus, in 2 Corinthians 2:13; Crispus in 1 Corinthians 1:14).

Another figure who abruptly enters the scene and is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:1 is Sosthenes. The reader is informed that Sosthenes is a synagogue ruler (Acts 18:17). However, he unexpectedly becomes the victim of a violent beating by a mob, with no further explanation provided. Additionally, the pro-consul Gallio appears indifferent to the assault, as though he bears no responsibility for the incident. The narrative is ambiguous and cryptic, leaving scholars divided on its interpretation.

Although this story has not received extensive scholarly at-

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tention, it raises several important issues worthy of closer examination. Some key interpretative questions emerge from this passage: Is the narrative historically reliable? Who are the individuals involved in the beating? Why does Gallio dismiss the case brought against Paul by the plaintiffs? Are Crispus and Sosthenes the same person? Is the Sosthenes mentioned in this pericope the same individual referred to in 1 Corinthians 1:1, who is identified as a Christian? Why does Sosthenes, rather than Paul, become the target of the mob's violence?

Commentators have offered varied perspectives on these issues. For instance, while Craig S. Keener views the narrative as depicting a judicial action, F. F. Bruce interprets it as indicative of mob violence.¹⁾ It appears that both scholars extrapolate their arguments significantly from their own inferences. A crucial element to consider in understanding this incident is the centrality of the synagogue setting. Paul engages in debates and attempts to persuade both Jews and Greeks within the synagogue. Crispus, a leader of the synagogue, converts to Christianity. Another figure, Sosthenes, who may be another synagogue ruler or possibly the same individual as Crispus, suddenly appears in the narrative and is beaten by the crowd. Given that the narrative is closely associated with the synagogue setting, it is reasonable to suggest that studies on the synagogue in first-century Corinth can provide valuable insights interpreting the enigmatic story of Sosthenes.

The aim of this paper is to understand the cryptic story of Sosthenes within the context of the first-century diaspora synagogue. To support this hermeneutic endeavor, the study examines the hypotheses concerning the origin of the synagogue

1) Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol.2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 2776-7; Keener, *Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 460-63; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 353.

to appropriately orient the data toward understanding the diaspora synagogue. By defining the synagogue in Corinth as a semi-public institution within a diaspora context, this paper will focus on how the synagogue functioned in the ancient world. Although public and semi-public synagogues shared several general functions, their legal roles differed depending on the circumstances. Additionally, this paper will scrutinize the status of the synagogue ruler within the Jewish society of Greco-Roman cities. Following these preliminary examinations, the paper will address the issues presented in the passage. The conclusion drawn will argue that Sosthenes was a different individual from Crispus, that he was a Christian, and that the assault against him was not an accidental act of violence but an ad hoc judicial action approved by Gallio.

2. The Hypotheses of the Origin of the Synagogue: Public and Semi-Public Association Synagogue

This section draws extensively on Anders Runesson's monograph, *The Origin of the Synagogue*, published in 2001.²⁾ His

2) Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2001). Many scholars assess that in the last three decades we have seen the "advent of what we might call a New Perspective on the Second Temple Synagogue." Jonathan Bernier, "Jesus, Ἀποσιλεύω, and Modes of Religiosity," R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson, eds., *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 127. Such an advent of the deluge of the synagogue-related studies is represented by Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1999); Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 21-173; Runesson, *The Origins*; Runesson, Binder, and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins Until 200 C.E.: A Sourcebook* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

research is crucial for accurately understanding the origin and general functions of the synagogue. Runesson suggests four key terms in defining the synagogue: (1) institutional, (2) liturgical, (3) non-liturgical, and (4) spatial aspects.³⁾ He argues that these four components are integral to defining any synagogal institution, and the absence of any one of them results in a distorted picture of the synagogue.⁴⁾

Historically, scholarly debates regarding the origin of the synagogue have generally split into two main assertions. One view holds that the synagogue's origin is rooted in the cities and towns of Palestine, the Land of Israel. The other perspective contends that the synagogue emerged in the Diaspora, particularly within Greco-Roman contexts, as a form of voluntary association.

One of the prominent scholars advocating for a Palestinian origin of the synagogue is Lee I. Levine, who proposes the city-gate hypothesis.⁵⁾ According to Levine, scholars over the years have

3) Ibid., 34-5. For the studies that have contributed to the institutional aspect include Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Peter Richardson, "Early Synagogues as Collegia in the Diaspora and Palestine," John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson, eds., *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), 90-109. For the studies of the liturgical aspect, see Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993). Also, for the contributions to the study of the non-liturgical aspect, see Harland, *Associations*. Scholars who have discussed the spatial aspect include Stephen K. Catto, *Reconstructing the First Century Synagogue: A Critical Analysis of Current Research* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); Monika Trümper, "The Oldest Original Synagogue Building in the Diaspora: The Delos Synagogue Reconsidered," *Hesperia* 73 (2004), 513-598.

4) Runesson, *The Origins*, 35-6. For the same argument, see Bernier, *Aposynagōgos and the Historical Jesus: Rethinking the Historicity of the Johannine Expulsion Passages* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 56-57; Jordan Ryan, *The Role of the Synagogue in the Aims of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 24.

5) Lee I. Levine, "The Nature and Origin of the Palestinian Synagogue Reconsidered,"

suggested three main options for the origin of the synagogue. The first is to place its origins in the First Temple period, the pre-exilic era. The second view holds that the synagogue arose during the exilic period as an alternative to the Temple, when the traditional place of worship was no longer accessible. The third option argues that the synagogue emerged during the Restoration epoch, primarily for the purpose of Torah reading.⁶⁾

Levine contends that all three perspectives view the synagogue primarily as a religious institution: the first two as a place of worship in place of sacrifices, and the third as a liturgical-scriptural setting focused on Torah reading.”⁷⁾ However, he argues that religious and liturgical functions alone are insufficient to fully explain the synagogue’s origin.⁸⁾ Instead, Levine posits that a range of factors—including communal, judicial, political, and religious functions—must be considered.⁹⁾ He contends that these activities, originally conducted at the city gates during the First Temple period, were transferred to the synagogue when the gates’ function became merely that of an entrance and exit in the Hellenistic era.¹⁰⁾

In contrast, another perspective posits that the synagogue originated as a type of Greco-Roman voluntary association. For instance, John S. Kloppenborg situates the synagogue within the context of Greco-Roman voluntary associations. He argues that

JBL 115 (1996), 425-48; Levine, *Ancient*, 130-34.

6) *Ibid.*, 24-6.

7) *Ibid.*, 26.

8) This does not mean that he obviates religious and liturgical dimensions thoroughly from the factors of the synagogue origin. Rather, he argues that “the formative stages of a new phenomenon are very often not marked by any one moment of dramatic innovation.” His claim is that the synagogue’s origin, as previous scholars have maintained, cannot be determined by only one aspect. See, Levine, *The Ancient*, 29.

9) *Ibid.*, 31.

10) *Ibid.*, 34-5.

such associations, or *collegia*, existed in the Greco-Roman world as cultural institutions, mediating loosely interconnected social infrastructures between citizens and *poleis*.¹¹⁾ Kloppenborg views the synagogue as one of these voluntary associations, playing a role in social networking within Greco-Roman society.

Similarly, Peter Richardson supports the voluntary association model as the origin of the synagogue.¹²⁾ Drawing on Kloppenborg's concept of *collegia*, Richardson asserts that the diaspora setting caused the synagogue to bring about, which took the form of *collegia* rather than "basilicas, ekklesiasteria, triclinia, naoi and the like."¹³⁾ He further explains that the synagogue in Palestine was also imported as a form of voluntary association. Thus, according to Richardson, synagogues in both Palestine and the diaspora functioned as *collegia*.¹⁴⁾

While the scholars mentioned above provide plausible theories regarding the origin of the synagogue, a significant issue in their theoretical frameworks is their failure to distinguish between the different geographical contexts of the synagogues. It is important to recognize the distinct contexts: the Palestinian context, where most of the population was Jewish, and the Greek city context, where the Jewish population did not dominate the social mainstream.¹⁵⁾

Runesson rightly separates these cases and addresses the synagogue's origins in distinct terms: in the Monarchic era, the syna-

11) John S. Kloppenborg, "Collegia and Thiasoi: Issues in Function, Taxonomy, and Membership," in *Voluntary Associations*, 17. Also see Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson, eds., *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).

12) Richardson, "Early Synagogues," 90-109.

13) Ibid., 90.

14) Ibid., 104.

15) Ryan notably claims that "while recent scholarly reconstructions of early synagogues have been occupied with avoiding anachronism, less care has been taken to avoid anatopism and anatyphism." See, Ryan, *The Role*, 36.

gogue originated in the Land of Israel, while in the Hellenistic era, its origins should be understood within a diaspora context.¹⁶⁾ He thus proposes distinguishing synagogues based on their origins—the former being what he calls the “public synagogue,” and the latter the “semi-public association synagogue.”¹⁷⁾ Runesson’s demarcation between these types of synagogues informs the orientation of this paper. Considering that the synagogue setting in Corinth aligns with the diaspora milieu, the next chapter will focus on the first-century semi-public association synagogue.

3. Semi-Public Synagogues in a Diaspora Context

3.1. General Function of the Synagogue in a Diaspora Context

According to Runesson ‘non-official semi-public’ assemblies, or synagogues, can be defined as denominations, sects, and non-administrative assemblies. In other words, while the official,

16) Runesson engages in scholarly discussion as to the synagogue origins. He provides exemplary scholars who maintain the city-gate theory and points out that the scholars, although they all support the theory, differ in providing the date in which the synagogue came into being. He therefore contends that while the city-gate theory can be considered as a strong candidate, it cannot fully solve the problems, especially concerning date. See Runesson, *The Origins*, 87-97. Concerning the voluntary association theory, Runesson criticizes that Richardson does not incorporate the liturgical dimension in his arguments. Also, he maintains that Richardson “does not treat the introduction of the synagogue into the land of Israel at any length.” See Runesson, *The Origins*, 131.

17) Runesson himself remarks that “there is little to be gained in arguing whether the synagogue originated in Judaea or the Diaspora. In fact, the institution evolved in both places more or less simultaneously, under varying circumstances and for very different reasons.” Ibid., 4. Bernier rightly contends that choosing either hypothesis is to depend on a false premise that “there can be only one model that adequately describes the ancient synagogue.” Bernier, *Aposynagōgos*, 59.

municipal, or public synagogues located in the Land of Israel hold formal administrative status and functioned as part of the state apparatus, semi-public association synagogues in the Diaspora context did not enjoy such an official role.¹⁸⁾ As Runesson's model effectively delineates which data are pertinent to the semi-public model, this section focuses on how the semi-public association synagogue functioned in a diaspora context. While it is essential to carefully consider the data within the distinct contexts of public and semi-public synagogues, there are activities that occur in both settings.¹⁹⁾ Therefore, our investigation now turns to identifying the functions shared by public and semi-public synagogues and those that may be unique to one model. We will briefly examine the characteristics of the synagogue in terms of its liturgical and non-liturgical dimensions.

The first activity that characterizes the synagogue, regardless of whether it is public or semi-public, is the public reading

18) Runesson, *The Origins*, 395-400. The concept, 'semi-public association synagogue,' itself has never been contested. It is evidenced by a recent scholar who takes for granted the terminology. See Matthew J. Grey, "Priest, Judean Community Assemblies, and Synagogue Development in the Second Temple Period," Raimo Hakola, Rick Bonnie, and Ulla Tervahauta, eds., *The Synagogue in Ancient Palestine: Current Issues and Emerging Trends* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage, 2021), 98-131. However, as Raimo Hakola, Rick Bonnie, and Ulla Tervahauta recently remarks, the issue of the origin of the synagogue "still remains unresolved." Raimo Hakola, Rick Bonnie, and Ulla Tervahauta, "The Synagogue in Ancient Palestine: Current Issues and Emerging Trends," in *The Synagogue*, 7. A Korean scholar, I. H. Lee, also mentions that a consensus concerning the origin of synagogue has never made. Unfortunately, his article does not quote Runesson's study. I. H. Lee, "The Origin of the Synagogue," *Bible & Archaeology* 60 (2008), 41-60. At any rate, many concede that Runesson's separation in dealing with the origins of synagogue well integrates the distinctive theories of the synagogue origins into "a coherent narrative." For this, see Bernier, *Aposynagōgos*, 59. Also see Ryan, *The Role*, 31-33.

19) Runesson also points out that "regardless of the nature of the institutions designated by 'synagogue' terms multiple activities were found in them, both non-liturgical and liturgical." Runesson, *The Origins*, 190.

of scripture, particularly the Torah. This liturgical and religious function is applicable to both types of synagogues.²⁰⁾ This observation aligns with New Testament passages, where abundant evidence supports the practice of Torah reading in public synagogues, as seen throughout the Gospels (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 13:54; Mark 1:12; 6:2; Luke 4:15, 16, 20; 6:6; 13:10; John 9:20; 18:20). Although information about the diaspora context is primarily drawn from the Acts of the Apostles, these texts vividly depict Torah reading in the semi-public synagogues (Acts 13:15; 15:21; 18:4; 19:8). Stephen K. Catto supports this idea by asserting that sacred texts were read in synagogues and that Torah reading was “a central component.”²¹⁾ Isaac Levy also notes that the Bimah, a platform established during the Exile, served as a structure for Torah reading in the synagogue.²²⁾

Another function common to both types of synagogues is communal gathering, as suggested by the term ‘synagogue’ itself. The Greek word συναγωγή is a combination of the prefixed preposition συν (with) and the verb ἄγω (to lead), together meaning ‘to gather together.’ Levine notes that people assembled in synagogues for a variety of purposes, including “political meetings and social gatherings, courts, schools, hotels, charity activities, slave manumission, meals, and, of course, religious-liturgical functions.”²³⁾ Similarly, Ryan highlights the role of political ‘meetings,’ arguing that in Palestine, where the Torah was “not only a sacred text, but also functioning normative law.”²⁴⁾ He claims that after reading of the Torah, people were permitted to interpret the text,

20) See, *Ibid.*, 231-233.

21) Catto, *Reconstructing*, 123.

22) This book, however, does not provide separate pictures between public and semi-public synagogue. See Isaac Levy, *The Synagogue: Its History and Function* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co. LTD, 1963), 59-63.

23) Levine, “The Nature and Origin,” 430-1.

24) Ryan, *The Role*, 41.

an activity that Ryan argues should be understood as both religious and carrying religio-political implications.²⁵⁾

Our biblical sources also support the notion that public meetings were held in both public and semi-public synagogues. Jesus routinely attended public meetings in synagogues on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16; 6:6). In the diaspora context, Paul's participation in synagogue gatherings on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14) suggests that such meetings were likely held regularly on that day (Acts 15:21; 18:4). This evidence confirms that communal gatherings were a feature of synagogues both in the Land of Israel and in the diaspora.

One dimension that Palestinian and diasporic synagogues shared, but which functioned differently, is the juridical aspect. Evidence of this function in the Land of Israel is well attested in our biblical sources. For example, Mark 13:9 and Luke 21:12 refer to the courtroom setting where disciples and Christians would be brought for trial. However, while both types of synagogues possessed a juridical function, it is likely that synagogues in the diaspora operated differently, given the potentially restricted political and social status of Jews in those circumstances.²⁶⁾ The next section will focus more on this matter.

3.2. Judicial Function of the Semi-Public Association Synagogue

This section specifically focuses on the legal function of the semi-public association synagogue. Understanding this aspect may help shed light on the enigmatic story of Sosthenes, as the act of beating him in front of Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, appears to be more of a judicial action than the chaotic mob

25) Ibid., 41-43.

26) See Ibid., 29.

violence often depicted in Acts (Acts 13:50; 14:5, 19; 16:19-23; 17:4-8; 19:28; 21:27-32). The question raised here is to what extent the first-century semi-public association synagogue in the diaspora possessed legal authority.

As stated above, the legal function of the public synagogue is well-attested in multiple sources, particularly in the New Testament.²⁷⁾ Acts 9:1-2 provides an intriguing depiction suggesting that the semi-public association synagogue lacked judicial authority, as Paul requested letters from the high priest in Jerusalem to the synagogue in Damascus—a semi-public synagogue. The authoritative role of the public synagogue as a legal court is highly plausible, given that the synagogue was the official institution where the entire town's populace gathered and where the Jewish population, which relied on the Torah as normative law, held the majority. In the diaspora context, however, where Jews did not form the majority of the society, the semi-public association synagogue likely held little to no legal authority.

Despite the limited official legal function of synagogues in the diaspora, where the non-Jewish population was in the majority, the extent of their authority varied across different cities. For example, in the case of Sardis, Josephus provides two documents that allude to the extent of social and legal rights enjoyed by Jews in the city. One is a letter from Lucius Antonius, a *proquaestor* and a *proprietor* in Asia from 49 B.C.E., and the other is a decree addressed to the Jews in Sardis, allowing them to observe their custom.²⁸⁾ Both documents indicate that the Jews in Sardis were permitted, to some degree, to exercise communal, religious, and judicial discretion in accordance with their own customs and laws. Especially, the letter of Lucius Antonius states that “they (Jews in Sardis) have had an association of their own in accordance with their native laws and a place of

27) Matthew 23:43; Mark 13:9; Luke 12:11; 21:12; Acts 9:1-2; 22:19.

28) Josephus, *A.J.* 14.235 and *A.J.* 14.259-61.

their own, in which they decide their affairs and controversies with one another.”²⁹⁾ This statement suggests that the Jews likely possessed jurisdiction at least over their own community.³⁰⁾ However, Carsten Claussen argues that Josephus’s account presents a biased picture that favors a legal status quo for the Jews in the Roman Empire. Claussen’s point is that Josephus may have provided a distorted, overly positive depiction of the Jews’ situation in Sardis. He also asserts that the letter and decree were addressed not to the Jews but to the broader populace of Sardis, implying that the Jews may not have received everything they requested.³¹⁾ Claussen concludes that “although the legal position of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora seems overall strong, it was threatened at quite a few places.”³²⁾

Another example is the case of Alexandria in Egypt. John M. G. Barclay argues that the rights of self-governance and the practice of ancestral laws were granted to the Jewish community in Alexandria by the Ptolemies and later sustained by Augustus.³³⁾ The former right, “the rights of self-governance,” included the establishment of a law court where the Jews of Alexandria could resolve internal controversies and conflicts on their own.³⁴⁾ However, these examples represent only a few cases. Although diaspora Jews were often granted the authority to manage and resolve internal disputes autonomously, the extent of this authority was likely limited and varied across different territories.

29) Josephus, *A.J.* 14.235

30) See, Carsten Clausse, “Meeting, Community, Synagogue—Different Frameworks of Ancient Jewish Congregations in the Diaspora,” Birger Olsson and Magnus Zetterholm, eds., *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins until 200 C.E.* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 156.

31) Ibid.

32) Ibid.

33) John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE - 117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 65-6.

34) Ibid.

3.3. The Status and Role of a Ruler of the Synagogue (ἀρχισυνάγωγος)

Given that in Acts 18:1-17 a ἀρχισυνάγωγος (synagogue ruler) is beaten by what are likely synagogue members, it is logical to explore the social and political status of synagogue leaders within the Jewish diaspora community as a whole. An extant inscription relevant to the issue of the synagogue ruler is the Theodotus inscription.³⁵⁾ The inscription, found in Jerusalem, describes the ἀρχισυνάγωγος as one who “constructed the assembly house for the reading of the law and for the teaching of the commandments and the guest house including the rooms and the water installations for lodging those from abroad.”³⁶⁾ Regarding the inscription, Runesson argues that because the synagogue mentioned here accommodated “those from abroad,” it was directed towards “a separate group of people, namely those living in the diaspora.”³⁷⁾ However, while it is reasonable to agree that the synagogue mentioned in the inscription was an association synagogue, it is also important to consider that the synagogue, which describes the ἀρχισυνάγωγος as a financial supporter of its construction, was still located in the Land of Israel. Therefore, this paper suggests that the situation of the synagogue and the status of its leader within society could differ significantly from that of Corinth.

T. Rajak and D. Noy particularly focus on the roles of the ἀρχισυνάγωγος in the diaspora, proposing several characteristics of the position. Their fundamental point is that the status system within the Jewish community, particularly within the synagogue,

35) For the issue of the date of the inscription, see, John S. Kloppenborg, “The Theodotos Synagogue Inscription and the Problem of First-Century Synagogue Buildings,” James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 236-82.

36) See Kloppenborg’s translation in *Ibid.*, 244.

37) Runesson, *The Origins*, 228.

cannot be separated from the external context of Greco-Roman cities.³⁸⁾ They argue that the role of the ἀρχισυνάγωγος was influenced by “certain external forms of organization from their co-religionists in other societies.”³⁹⁾ This influence extended beyond naming conventions and methods to include distinctive ethos.⁴⁰⁾ Rajak and Noy further assert that the ἀρχισυνάγωγοι in Greco-Roman cities were benefactors in a manner similar to, though not entirely assimilated with, Greek benefactors.⁴¹⁾ The title “ἀρχισυνάγωγοι” is commonly found in donor inscriptions, indicating that synagogue rulers contributed financially to the construction of synagogues.⁴²⁾ The scholars also describe the ἀρχισυνάγωγοι as patronal figures.⁴³⁾

Another useful perspective for understanding the authority of synagogue rulers in the diaspora is provided by Levine. He notes that there is no Talmudic rabbi associated with synagogue leadership in the Roman diaspora.⁴⁴⁾ Additionally, Levine points

38) However, they deal with the data not clearly differentiating the cases of Palestinian and Diasporic context. For example, explaining the terminology of ἀρχισυνάγωγος in diaspora circumstances, they invoke the story of Jairus in Luke 8:41. See, Tessa Rajak and David Noy, “Archisynagogoi: Office, Title, and Social Status in the Greco-Jewish Synagogue,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993), 84. Furthermore, their argument that appearance of ἀρχισυνάγωγος in Mark and Luke cannot be conceived as those of Palestine since the accounts reflect a later context in which the authors wrote the gospels seems to be debatable and vulnerable to critiques. For this, see Rajak and Noy, “Archisynagogoi,” 79.

39) Ibid., 87.

40) Ibid., 84.

41) Ibid., 87.

42) Ibid., 83.

43) However, their conclusion is that the honorary title “ἀρχισυνάγωγος” signifies a donor or respectful person rather than religious role. The conclusion that they make is that “if there were any such strong figures in the Jewish communities of the Roman Empire, then they were not the archisynagogoi but others, perhaps prophets or charismatics, hidden from our view.” Ibid., 89.

44) Levine, *The Ancient*, 303.

out that only a few diaspora religious leaders are mentioned in inscriptions.⁴⁵⁾ Therefore, if the ἀρχισυνάγωγος in the diaspora was considered a respected and honored figure, and if other religious authorities were not involved in the institution, it can be comprehensively assumed that the ἀρχισυνάγωγος likely held a higher status in the diasporic milieu within the Jewish community than in the Palestinian context.⁴⁶⁾

4. The Enigma of the Story of Sosthenes: A Hermeneutic within the Semi-Public Synagogue Study

The preliminary research discussed above offers several insights into our passage. First, typologically the synagogue under consideration in this paper should be categorized as a semi-public association synagogue rooted in diaspora context. Secondly, although the judicial function of semi-public synagogues varied between cities, it is undeniable that the autonomous legal authority of this synagogue type was restricted compared to that in the Land of Israel. Third, the ἀρχισυνάγωγος (the synagogue ruler) maintained a high social status within Jewish communities in diaspora setting. Within these preliminary points, this section is dedicated to interpreting and clarifying Acts 18:1-17 by engaging with the issues raised by scholarship.

First, the study of synagogues aids in interpreting the grammatical ambiguity in Acts 18:8: “Κρίσπος δὲ ὁ ἀρχισυνάγωγος ἐπίστευσεν τῷ κυρίῳ σὺν ὅλῳ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ, καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν

45) Ibid.

46) However, we do not have sufficient data for reconstructing any leadership of diaspora situation. It is presumable that the status of ἀρχισυνάγωγος varied in cities. Levine comments that “any religious leadership in the Roman Diaspora was probably locally nurtured.” Ibid.

Κορινθίων ἀκούοντες ἐπίστευον καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο (Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized).⁴⁷⁾ While the subject of the clause “πολλοὶ τῶν Κορινθίων ἀκούοντες” is clearly “many Corinthians” (literally, “many of the Corinthians”), the object of “ἀκούοντες” is equivocal. What did the Corinthians hear that led them to become Christians? Was it Paul’s preaching, mentioned in the preceding verses 4-5, or the news that Crispus himself had become a Christian (18:8)?

David G. Peterson suggests that “ἀκούοντες” signifies a typical response to the preaching of the gospel.⁴⁸⁾ Bruce similarly asserts that the Corinthians in this scene heard “the good news.”⁴⁹⁾ However, a closer grammatical analysis supports the opposite interpretation. Acts 18:8 consists of one sentence. Crispus became a believer, and the verb used to describe this event is in the aorist tense (“ἐπίστευσεν”), which suggests Crispus’ conversion at that moment, rather than indicating that he was simply continuing a previously held faith.⁵⁰⁾ In the same sentence, the Corinthians became believers, and here the verb is in the imperfect tense (“ἐπίστευον”), which can be inceptive and may be translated as “they began to believe.”⁵¹⁾ The use of two different tenses of the same verb (πιστεύω) in one sentence suggests that Crispus became a Christian, and those who heard this news began to become Christians.

Additionally, the study of synagogues supports this

47) Acts 18:8. English translation is from NRSV.

48) David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 512

49) Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 350

50) See C. K. Barrett, *Acts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 868.

51) Ibid., 869. For this grammatical usage, see Bradley H. McLean, *Hellenistic and Biblical Greek: A Graduated Reader* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), xxxii.

interpretation. It is plausible that the “πολλοὶ τῶν Κορινθίων” in 18:8 included both Jews and Greeks, and that they were likely members of the synagogue congregation mentioned in 18:4. If the synagogue ruler (ἄρχισυνάγωγος), as discussed earlier, held an esteemed position within the synagogue, it is likely that his conversion had a significant impact on and influenced the synagogue attendees. Keener supports this idea by arguing that the synagogue ruler’s conversion “led to more conversions.”⁵²⁾ Therefore, it can be inferred that what the Corinthians, the synagogue congregation, heard was the news that their leader had become a believer in Christ.

Another issue pertaining to the passage is whether Sosthenes was formerly called Crispus. This question is crucial for understanding why Sosthenes was beaten, especially since Crispus is obviously identified as a Christian. Augustine Myrou wrote an article dedicated solely to the matter of nomenclature. He argues that it is a common theme in both the Old Testament and New Testament for a person’s name to change after conversion or being called by God.⁵³⁾ In addition, Myrou suggests that since the name Crispus means “unsteady,” it was not fitting as a Christian name.⁵⁴⁾ Hence, Myrou believes that Paul changed Crispus’s name (which means unsteady) to Sosthenes (which means steady) when he baptized the synagogue ruler.⁵⁵⁾

Richard G. Fellows disavows this view, arguing that it is based on Myrou’s mistranslation.⁵⁶⁾ According to Fellows, the Latin name “Crispus” signifies “curly,” which may indicate a

52) Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical*, 2748. For the same view, see, Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 535.

53) Augustine Myrou, “Sosthenes: The Former Crispus?” *GOTR* 44 (1999), 208.

54) *Ibid.*, 209.

55) *Ibid.*

56) Richard G. Fellows, “Renaming in Paul’s Churches: The Case of Crispus-Sosthenes Revisited,” *TynBul* 56 (2005), 124-5.

physical peculiarity, making the significance of his name unlikely to be the rationale for any name modification.⁵⁷⁾ Despite his critique of Myrou, Fellows still maintains that Crispus and Sosthenes are the same person. He argues that the conversion of two different synagogue rulers is highly implausible.⁵⁸⁾ He also points out that in any New Testament writing, a second individual holding the same title does not appear without comment.⁵⁹⁾ Only one case that he invokes for the clue to solve this problem is Bar-Jesus and Elymas in Acts 13:6-8.⁶⁰⁾ He contends that Elymas in 13:8 is likely the same μάγος as the aforementioned Bar-Jesus in 13:6. For him, this case suggests that Luke's naming practice supports the idea that Crispus and Sosthenes are the same individual.⁶¹⁾

Fellows' first inference must be repudiated as untenable because it is based on the argument from nothing. Why couldn't two synagogue leaders convert to Christianity? It should be noted that it is not simply implausible. Likewise, his second corroboration is flawed. For instance, Bar-Jesus (Βαρϊησοῦς), already introduced as a Jew (13:6), is a Semitic name, transliterated into Greek, meaning 'son of Jesus.' Elymas in 13:8 should indeed be identified as Bar-Jesus, but he appears to have had a Greek name, which may have led Luke to clarify its meaning (13:8).⁶²⁾ Besides, Fellows overlooks Luke's consistent naming style. Whenever a name change occurs that could confuse readers, Luke attempts to mitigate the potential confusion by mentioning both names. Examples abound: "Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus (Acts 1:23);" "John, also called Mark (Acts

57) Ibid.

58) Ibid., 116.

59) Ibid., 121.

60) Ibid., 123-4.

61) Ibid., 122.

62) For the same view, see, Peterson, *The Acts*, 380, Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 249; Haenchen, *The Acts*, 398.

12:12, 25; 15:37);” “Judas called Barsabba (Acts 15:22);” “Saul, who was also called Paul (Acts 13:9);” “Simeon who was called Niger (Acts 13:1);” “Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (Acts 4:36);” “Simon, who is also called Peter (Acts 10:5; 11:13).”

Furthermore, Fellows agrees with the assertion that Sosthenes in Acts 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 1:1 is the same individual.⁶³⁾ This claim is plausible, given that Luke intentionally introduces names found in 1 and 2 Corinthians within this passage.⁶⁴⁾ However, if the verses in Acts 18:17 and 1 Corinthians 1:1 refer to the same Sosthenes, why does Paul mention Crispus in 1 Corinthians as if he is still among the Corinthian congregations?⁶⁵⁾

Moreover, it is equally plausible that there was more than one synagogue in first-century Corinth. The only evidence confirming the existence of a synagogue in Corinth is an inscription discovered there, which consists of one line “[Συνα]γωγή τῶν Εβρ[αίων] (Synagogue of Hebrews).”⁶⁶⁾ However, it remains a distinct possibility that two or more synagogues existed in Corinth. Another observation is that Acts 18:11, which mentions that a year and six months had passed, suggests that Sosthenes could have been the successor to Crispus. On the other hand, Keener argues that it is likely that more than one synagogue ruler was involved in a single synagogue, given Luke’s use of the plural form “ἀρχισυνάγωγος” in Acts 13:15.⁶⁷⁾ These together collectively support the conclusion that Crispus and

63) Fellows, “Renaming,” 115.

64) See, Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 308.

65) 1 Cor 1:14 says “οὐδένα ὑμῶν ἐβάπτισα εἰ μὴ Κρίστον (I baptized none of you except Crispus).”

66) Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 162.

67) Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical*, 1748.

Sosthenes are different individuals. Fellows' misinterpretation leads to his hasty conclusion that Sosthenes was a Christian.

If Crispus and Sosthenes were not the identical person and it is not yet certain whether Sosthenes was a Christian, how should we understand the cryptic scene in which Sosthenes is beaten by a group of people? It might be perplexing to read that the conversion of one respected synagogue ruler (Crispus) leads to the subsequent conversion of other synagogue members, while another respected synagogue ruler (Sosthenes) is beaten by a group of people. Viewing this through the lens of the synagogue's legal function may help resolve this issue.

We should consider who were involved in the beating of Sosthenes (18:17). Some manuscripts insert “οἱ Ἕλληνες” after “πάντες,” whereas other texts leave “πάντες” undefined.⁶⁸⁾ C. K. Barrett argues that adding “οἱ Ἕλληνες” is a correct interpretation since Jews were “often unpopular; they were for the moment out of favour and it would be safe to attack one of them.”⁶⁹⁾ Hans Conzelmann, without furthered inference or evidence, asserts that “πάντες” were definitely not Jews.⁷⁰⁾ However, these scholars overlook the narrative context, as no Greeks are mentioned in the pericope (Acts 18:12-17). Furthermore, the proconsul Gallio remarks that this matter pertains to “words and names and your [Jewish] law.”⁷¹⁾ It is reasonable to infer that if the Jews who accused Paul were driven away from the court, they may have returned for an additional action. Fellows similarly argues that understanding “πάντες” as

68) See, Barrett, *Acts*, 875.

69) Ibid. This is the interpretation that the most commentators hold. For this, also see Keener, *Acts*, 463.

70) Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg and A. Thomas Kraabel, ed. Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 154. Also see Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 353.

71) Acts 18:15.

referring to the Jews mentioned earlier in 18:12 allows for a smoother reading of the pericope.⁷²⁾ Thus, it is more likely that the referent of πάντες in Acts 18:17 is the Jews.

How, then, can we define the collective action of beating Sosthenes? Bruce interprets it as an anti-Jewish mob action. He suggests that the crowd of bystanders, after witnessing the pro-consul's dismissal of the case, seized one of the Jewish leaders, Sosthenes, and beat him up. According to Bruce, Gallio, imbued with anti-Jewish sentiment, did not intervene in this matter.⁷³⁾ Moyer V. Hubbard, however, contests this anti-Semitic interpretation. He views the incident as a mob action within the Greco-Roman social context.⁷⁴⁾ Hubbard argues that the "πάντες" in Acts 18:17 were Jews. He suggests that the beating of Sosthenes parallels urban unrest, a common social phenomenon in the Greco-Roman world, often triggered by economic factors such as poverty or a shortage of employment opportunities.⁷⁵⁾ As such, he contends that the story of Sosthenes represents inner-ethnic sedition rather than a xenophobic social issue.

More specifically, Hubbard's historical reconstruction is as follows: Gallio dismissed the legal case against Paul and ordered the plaintiffs to be ejected. The individuals who received this order attempted to forcefully remove the plaintiffs and their

72) Fellows, "Renaming," 113. For this view, also see Seung-Ho Lee, "Paulus und Sosthenes: Eine Untersuchung ueber Apg 18, 17," *Theology and Ministry* 35 (2011), 148.

73) Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 353-4.

74) By introducing emic (insider) and etic (outsider) approach borrowed from anthropologist methodology, he posits that our perspective focused upon this matter ignores the point of "emic" which views an incident through the lens of insider. His claim is that one should consider the story of Sosthenes within the cultural and social setting of the Greco-Roman world. Moyer V. Hubbard, "Urban Uprisings in the Roman World: The Social Setting of the Mobbing of Sosthenes," *NTS* 51 (2005), 416-28.

75) *Ibid.*, 417-23.

leader, Sosthenes. The Jews became embroiled in this violence, which escalated into a physical altercation. Sosthenes, inadvertently, was beaten the most, while Gallio failed to take notice.⁷⁶⁾ Although Hubbard correctly identifies the narrative as an inner-Jewish conflict, he overlooks the fact that the story still unfolds within a trial setting rather than as an accidental mob action.

We may draw upon the study of Ernest Metzger, a jurist who addresses Roman civil trials in his article. His work provides valuable insight for understanding our passage. Metzger briefly introduces the process of a Roman civil trial:

A plaintiff seeking a civil lawsuit against another would appear before a magistrate, bringing along with him the person he wished to sue. The plaintiff would then request permission to bring a particular kind of action; the defendant, for his part, might request the inclusion of a particular defense. This proceeding, though brief, might require the parties to recount their stories: how one's opponent had failed to pay, stolen a thing, agreed not to pursue a debt etc.⁷⁷⁾

Given this procedure of civic trial in the Roman world, our passage offers reliable historical data, as it closely aligns with the civic trial process depicted by Metzger. The crowd brings Paul to a magistrate and recounts the story (Acts 18:12-13). We can infer why the Jews, the plaintiffs, brought the case to Gallio: the synagogue in Corinth lacked legal autonomy, necessitating the presentation of the case to the proconsul. Gallio's reaction in Acts 18:14-15 ostensibly appears to be a rejection of the lawsuit. However, it can be argued that his response was

76) Ibid., 426.

76) Ernest Metzger, "Remedy of Prohibition against Roman Judges in Civil Trial," Paul Brand and Joshua Getzler, eds., *Judges and Judging in the History of the Common Law and Civil Law: From Antiquity to Modern Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 178.

rather to grant them legal authority to resolve their internal conflict, similar to the cases in Egypt and Sardis (as discussed earlier), even if this authority was temporary and provisional.⁷⁸⁾ Fellows rightly states that the beating Sosthenes was undertaken in accord with Gallio's tacit approval as a "quasi-judicial punishment."⁷⁹⁾ He correctly posits that "it is hard to believe that an unanticipated, illegal beating would take place immediately after the hearing and in front of the judgement seat in apparent defiance of Roman authority."⁸⁰⁾ This narrative, therefore, shows a judicial interplay within Jewish community, pivoted on the synagogue setting and connected to Corinthian society.

The final issue to address here is why Sosthenes was beaten. Some suggest that he was the leader of the Jewish plaintiffs who brought Paul's case to Gallio, and his mismanagement of the case led to the violence.⁸¹⁾ However, the assumption that one synagogue leader's conversion led to others becoming believers, while another synagogue leader was beaten by the synagogue attendees, seems implausible. Sosthenes being beaten is only understandable if his social position within the Jews in the synagogue had changed. If he had still retained a high social status within the Jewish community, such as that of a benefactor or financial supporter, this narrative would appear preposterous. Thus, even though we may not agree that Sosthenes was formerly known as Crispus, he is, in this scene, evidently a Christian based on the synagogue study, which explains the social status of synagogue rulers within the diaspora. It is conceivable that

77) For this, see Keener, *Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 461-62.

78) Fellows, "Renaming," 114. Richard I. Pervo, however, claims that the scene does not show a typical trial procedure. His inference unfortunately neglects the semi-public synagogue context, which the present study is pursuing. Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 454.

79) Ibid.

80) Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 353; Barret, *Acts*, 875; Haenchen, *The Acts*, 357; Peterson, *The Acts*, 518.

when the group could not find Paul, they assaulted Paul's follower, Sosthenes.

5. Conclusion

The study of the synagogue offers valuable insight that help to clarify the enigmatic and abstruse story of Sosthenes. By examining the Corinthian synagogue within the framework of a semi-public synagogal institution, we can better understand its limitations in legal autonomy. This lack of full legal authority is evidenced by the fact that the Jewish community in Corinth brought their case against Paul before the Roman proconsul Gallio, rather than resolving it within the synagogue.

Gallio's response to the case is particularly telling. Rather than outright rejecting the case, Gallio appears to have tacitly permitted the Jewish community to make an internal decision in accordance with their own laws and customs. This provisional and implicit consent likely emboldened the Jewish crowd to take matters into their own hands. When they failed to apprehend Paul, they turned their frustration toward Sosthenes.

The act of beating Sosthenes is difficult to comprehend without considering a significant change in his social status within the synagogue. The evidence strongly suggests that Sosthenes had converted to Christianity at some point, and this conversion likely altered his standing within the 'Jewish' community. The context of a semi-public synagogue in the diaspora, where the Jewish community had limited legal autonomy and where social roles could shift dramatically based on religious affiliations, makes this conclusion more convincing.

<Key Words>

Synagogue Studies, Anders Runesson, Corinthian Synagogue,
Sosthenes, Semi-Public Association

<주요어>

회당 연구, 안데르스 루네슨, 고린도 회당, 소스데네, 반-공적 연합회당

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<Abstract>

**The Story of Sosthenes (Acts 18:1-17):
A Hermeneutic of the Story of Sosthenes
within the Context of Semi-Public Synagogue**

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The pericope in Acts 18:1-17 narrates an intriguing story that culminates in an enigmatic scene of group violence against Sosthenes, a figure who had not been previously mentioned. As Paul's evangelistic efforts bore fruit in the city of Corinth, the Jews opposed him and brought the matter before Gallio, the proconsul. Gallio appears to have declined to adjudicate the case, leading to an unexpected assault on Sosthenes, a synagogue ruler. This puzzling narrative has not reached a consensus within scholarly interpretation. Given that the story is centered around a synagogal context, it is essential to interpret the passage in light of synagogue studies.

To address this interpretative challenge, the present article first explores different theories regarding the origins of synagogues. Relying primarily on Anders Runesson's research, the study identifies two types of synagogues: public and semi-public association synagogues. By focusing on the semi-public association synagogue setting, the article examines three aspects common to all types of synagogues: Torah reading, communal meetings, and legal roles. It is argued that while the first two aspects did not differ significantly across synagogue types, the juridical function was likely limited within diasporic Jewish settings. Additionally, the article notes that synagogue

rulers in the ancient world were often benefactors and respected figures.

Building on these preliminary studies, the present paper addresses the hermeneutical issues related to the passage. First, it argues that Crispus (a synagogue ruler mentioned in Acts 18:8) and Sosthenes (another synagogue ruler mentioned in Acts 18:17) were distinct individuals. Second, the fact that the Jews brought their case to Gallio indicates that the legal autonomy of the Corinthian synagogue was restricted. While Gallio's response may superficially seem like a dismissal of their case, it actually granted the Jews tacit and temporary legal authority to resolve the matter according to their own laws and customs. When the Jews involved in the incident failed to locate Paul, they turned their aggression toward Sosthenes, who was a follower of Paul. Consequently, Sosthenes, having converted to Christianity, experienced a shift in status from a respected benefactor to a Christian, a status that provoked hostility from the Jewish community.

<초록>

소스테네 이야기 (사도행전 18:1-17)

- 소스테네 이야기에 대한 반-공적 회당의 상황에서의 해석적 연구 -

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사도행전 18:1-18의 본문은 소스테네에 대한 집단 폭력이라는 수수께끼 같은 장면으로 끝나는 흥미로운 이야기를 서술하고 있다. 바울의 전도 활동이 고린도에서 결실을 맺자 유대인들은 그에 반해 이 사건을 갈리오 총독에게 가지고 간다. 갈리오는 이 사건을 판결하는 것을 거절하는 것으로 보이며, 결과적으로 유대인들은 회당의 지도자인 소스테네를 폭행하게 된다. 이 이야기의 난해성은 학자들 간의 일반적 합의를 도출하지 못하도록 만들었다. 이 이야기가 회당을 중심으로 전개된다는 점에서, 본문은 회당 연구의 관점에서 해석 되어져야 한다고 저자는 주장한다.

이 해석적 문제를 다루기 위해서, 본 연구는 먼저 회당의 기원에 관한 다양한 이론들을 서술한다. 안데스 루네슨의 연구를 바탕으로, 본 연구는 공적 회당과 반-공적 회당이라는 두 가지 유형의 회당이 존재했음을 밝힌다. 반-공적 회당의 설정에 초점을 맞춘 후 본 논문은 모든 회당이 공통적으로 가지는 세 가지 측면인 토라 읽기, 공동체의 모임, 법적 역할에 대해 다룬다. 두 가지 전자는 회당의 유형에 따른 큰 차이가 존재하지 않지만, 법적 기능은 디아스포라 유대인 환경에서 제한적이었을 가능성이 있다고 본 논문은 주장한다. 또한, 고대 세계에서 회당의 지도자들은 후원자이자 존경받는 인물이었음도 밝힌다.

이러한 사전 연구를 바탕으로, 본 연구는 본문과 관련된 해석학적 문제점

들을 다룬다. 첫째로, 그리스보 (행 18:8)와 소스테네 (행 18:17)는 별개의 인물이라는 점을 주장한다. 둘째로, 유대인들이 사건을 갈리오에게 가져갔다는 사실은 고린도 회당이 유대 공동체 안에서 법적 자치권이 제한적이었음을 시사한다. 갈리오의 반응은 표면적으로는 사건을 기각한 것으로 보이지만, 실제로는 유대인들에게 그들 자신의 법과 관습에 따라 문제를 해결할 수 있는 묵시적이고 일시적인 사법권한을 부여한 것으로 볼 수 있다. 사건에 연루된 유대인들이 바울을 찾는데 실패하자, 그들은 바울의 추종자인 소스테네를 폭행하였다. 따라서 본 연구는 소스테네는 기독교로 개종한 후 후원자에서 유대인 공동체의 적대감을 사는 기독교인으로 지위가 변한 것으로 볼 수 있다고 결론을 맺는다.