

RBL 10/2004



Harland, Philip A.

*Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations:
Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. Pp. xv + 399. Paper.
\$22.00. ISBN 0800635892.

Michael Kaler
Laval University
Toronto, ON, M6K 1H2 Canada

Harland's work is an examination of the literary and archaeological remains of western Asia Minor in the first few centuries of the Christian era. The region and the period were particularly fertile for the Christian movement, as is immediately apparent when one considers the list of works considered to have been produced thereabouts, such as the Pastorals, Ephesians, Colossians, Acts, 1 Peter, possibly the Johannine writings, the Ignatian correspondence, and more. Such a voluminous output not only shows the importance of attaining a proper understanding of the region but also provides us with abundant documentary evidence to use in the development of that understanding.

Harland's study focuses on the related phenomena of associations, synagogues, and congregations; he is concerned with "assessing and comparing the place of [these groups] . . . within the framework of the Greek city, or polis, under Roman rule in Asia Minor. More specifically, [he] focuses on the significance of imperial cults, honours and connections in the external relations and internal life of these groups" (8).

In the past there has been a tendency to consider these three groups ([pagan] associations, [Jewish] synagogues, and [Christian] congregations) as isolated from each other. Associations have been seen as the, so to speak, "indigenous" product of the Hellenistic

polis, from which the early Christian groups were eager to distinguish themselves by their fanatical, aggressively sectarian character. The Jewish groups are considered to have been less vehement in their rejection of contemporary pagan norms, quietly isolationist rather than loudly secessionist, but nonetheless sharply distinguished both from pagan associations and from their Christian relatives and rivals. Harland rejects this view, however, at least in its extreme form: he argues that synagogues and congregations “*were associations* in important respects” and that “ancient observers . . . recognized this parallelism, sometimes describing synagogues and assemblies [used as a synonym for ‘congregations’] in terms of association life in the Greco-Roman world” (3, italics original). This is not to say that there were no differences between Christian, Jewish, and pagan groups; rather, Harland thinks these differences have been overstated, as has been the degree to which Jews and Christians were integrated into their predominantly pagan environment.

Overall, Harland intends to reevaluate and, simultaneously, to nuance our understanding of these related phenomena, with particular emphasis on associations, to which his work gives clear priority both in terms of the amount of space allotted to them and in the way that they provide the template for discussions of synagogues and congregations. But this is to be expected, given that one of his goals is to decrease the perceived distance and tension between these latter sorts of organizations and day-to-day life in the late antique world of Asia Minor. It is precisely Harland’s point that these groups are not purely foreign implantations, at odds with or at the very least alien to their Hellenistic contexts, but rather that they are integrated into them and that this integration is carried out following the model laid down by the popular associations.

Harland avails himself of three sources of evidence. First, as is to be expected, he uses literary remains—texts produced in, or relevant to, Asia Minor in this period. His analyses of these texts are not extreme or tendentious, but he does try to show the hitherto-overlooked evidence in them of the integration of the early Christian communities in their (pagan) environments, an effort that goes against the interpretative grain but that Harland presents convincingly.

His second and major source of evidence is epigraphic, coming from inscriptions, a source that is often underused by scholars of early Christianity. Harland helps remind us of the dangers of such neglect: indeed, the majority of his most revolutionary conclusions are drawn from and supported by the evidence provided by the inscriptions.

Finally, Harland offers some analysis of the archaeological remains having to do with associations of various kinds. One wishes, naturally, that this sort of evidence were more extensive, but he briefly and sensitively deals with what is available. Rarely is

archaeological evidence the main focus of an argument; rather, it generally serves to illustrate, to expand on, or to buttress arguments drawn primarily from the inscriptions.

Through the use of these three sources of evidence, Harland sets out arguments that challenge some of the received opinions in the historical study of this period and in New Testament and early Christian scholarship. As his arguments regarding the latter build on and, to a certain degree, presuppose his reevaluation of the nature of pagan Hellenistic associations, it is with these that I begin (in this regard following Harland's organization of his work).

For our purposes, perhaps the most interesting aspect of Harland's reevaluation of the associations is his look at their relationship to pagan religion. In earlier works the tendency has been to stress their social function—the general attitude was “yes, of course many of them *claimed* to have a religious orientation, but the focus was *really* on the social aspects, the feasting and comradeship and such.” Harland notes that the sharp distinction between the religious and the social is in fact a modern, Western development, anachronistic in the context of antiquity, “where ‘religion’ was very much embedded within various dimensions of the daily life of individuals, whose identities were inextricably bound up within social groupings” and where it had to do “with appropriately honoring gods and goddesses . . . in ways which ensured the safety and protection of human communities. . . . Moreover, the form that such cultic honours . . . could take do not necessarily coincide with modern or Western preconceptions of what being religious should mean” (61). In his discussion of associations, Harland takes pains to show how the sacred, the social, and the functional were entwined.

The rise of associations is often considered as a symptom of the decline of the polis, with associations often understood as a subversive phenomenon contributing to that decline. Harland challenges both of these assumptions. The mere loss of some degree of autonomy for the individual polis was not equivalent to an overall decline (see, e.g., the work of M. Hansen on this topic, esp. “The ‘Autonomous City-State’: Ancient Fact or Modern Fiction,” in *Studies in the Ancient Greek Polis* [Stuttgart: Steiner, 1995]), particularly with such generally “hands-off” rulers as the Romans, and Harland provides considerable evidence that associations provided a means by which the people could be enfranchised, by organizing them into influence groups that could have an effect on rulers and help to shape and nourish the social life of the community. Associations should thus be seen as preservers of the polis rather than agents of its decline. And while associations were frequently organized on the basis of links of homeland, race, or profession, this did not necessarily produce an exclusionary attitude but rather could function as a basis for a greater participation in civic life. “Belonging within an association and belonging within the polis were by no means mutually exclusive” (106).

With regard to the Jewish and Christian groups, I have already mentioned Harland's view that they were more integrated into the day-to-day fabric of pagan society and more influenced by the association model in their structure and goals than has previously been assumed. There was a range of accommodation to their contemporary environment, rather than the uniform extremist response that is commonly assumed to have been operative. While we have ample testimony of (quite understandable) Jewish hostility to Rome and its rulers, particularly following the destruction of the temple, Harland points out many contrary indications of Jewish organizational willingness to assimilate, honor the emperors and enter into contact with the powers that be, and compete "for benefactions from influential figures within the civic and provincial context" (228). Likewise, there were efforts within Christian groups to lessen the tension between themselves and their social surroundings, although there were also, of course, attempts to heighten that tension, as shown in the book of Revelation, to an analysis of which Harland devotes the latter portion of his final chapter. But the very vehemence of Revelation's rejection of all participation in contemporary pagan practices and society indicates that some Christians did participate in them. Integrating Revelation's critique with Paul's own testimony regarding the eating of idol-food and his involvement in the associations linked to his occupation, Harland argues that "it is quite possible to suggest that some of the opponents [attacked in Revelation] ... were continuing in their occupational affiliations and sustaining membership in other local guilds" (261).

Harland's purpose, then, is not simply to replace the old paradigm by its opposite; rather, his goal is to show that the old paradigm represents only one in a range of options for our understanding of the sociological self-awareness of the early Christian groups. And he achieves this goal with precision and clarity.

It is the mark of a good book that one finds oneself straining to identify some flaws, so as to write a review rather than a panegyric. But in this case there are few. This is not to suggest that Harland has exhausted his subject or that specialists will not find aspects of his evidence or his use of it to be problematic. But his primary goal in this book, at least as I see it, is to open things up, to create a context for a more open and wide-ranging discussion of associations, synagogues, and congregations, and this he has achieved with gusto. In these discussions, which I feel confident are sure to come, I would like to see more in-depth analysis of the Christian side of things and more analysis of Jewish evidence and opinions, which I found underappreciated in this book.

Turning to nonacademic aspects of the work, it is a pleasure to note that the book is attractively laid out and that the writing throughout is clear and readable. I must admit that my personal preference is for notes to be printed at the bottom of the page rather than at the end of the book, as is the case here and as seems to have become the dominant

scholarly practice. If one does choose to print endnotes, one should definitely have the pages in the text to which the notes refer printed at the top of the page. But this is just a quibble.

Overall, this book is highly recommended to anyone interested in this important and hitherto underdeveloped subject.