

## Sacred Spaces; Synagogues Under Christian Threat in the Roman Empire

The true nature of religious politics in late antiquity is obfuscated by limited textual data, imprecise recordings, the political agendas of historiographers, and centuries of censorship. Despite these obstacles, the modern historian may attempt to interpret the subtext of those surviving records in order to seek out the truth hiding between the lines of available sources. This paper will attempt to characterize the status and role of Jewish synagogues in the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries in respect to: the perception of their sanctity; the threat of violence from Early Christians; and the protection or discrimination of Roman law. The historical ambiguity of many of these sources lead scholars to disagree on how widespread the phenomenon of Christian attacks on synagogues were throughout the Empire. Early sources will be presented along with their scholarly interpretations and corresponding support of either argument, in an attempt to paint a broad picture of the role played by synagogue sites in the religious battles of the time. Regardless of the historicity of the accounts, the substantial presence of references to synagogues in sources of the period as well as the theories of later historians portray the synagogue as a significant domain of religious and political conflict between Jews and Christians under the auspices of Roman rule.

It is worth noting that this paper will not distinguish between distinct geographical regions under Roman rule, or the nuances of political change over the course of the late fourth and early fifth centuries. This is an attempt to broadly characterize the significance of the synagogue as a structure and a cultural phenomenon in the eyes of its congregants as well as the surrounding authorities. As such, a broad area and time frame have been adopted in order to facilitate a generalized conclusion appropriate for the brevity of this work.

The synagogues of antiquity were centers of social congregation for Jewish people.<sup>1</sup> Their communal functions included Torah learning, according to the writings of Philo and Josephus, and group worship through prayer.<sup>2</sup> A second century Tannaic source cites R. Judah praising the glory of the basilica-synagogue in Alexandria at length, describing its colonnades, central platform hosting the minister, *chazan*, for readings from the Torah, and a congregation including the entirety of the social spectrum.<sup>3</sup> This description implies that the very structure of synagogues of the period

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Goodman. "Sacred Space in Diaspora Judaism." *Studies on the Jewish Diaspora in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (1996). p. 2

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *The Tosefta*, Sukkah, 4:6. Neusner, ed. KTAV Publishing House, Inc (1986). Vol. 2 p. 224

could function as a source of communal pride, beyond functioning as a social meeting point for the local congregation. Mentions of the organization of the craftsmen of the congregation by trade prompts some scholars to conclude that, like early basilicas, the synagogue was a center for economic activity within the Jewish community.<sup>4</sup> An additional Tannaic source, attributed to R. Eliezer ben Yaakov, makes mention of the presence of a court which implies that internal judicial proceedings in the Jewish community were held in the vicinity of synagogues.<sup>5</sup> As such, the synagogue emerges as the epicenter of Jewish life in the Roman Empire, fulfilling its congregation's liturgical, scholarly, communal, financial and judicial needs.

It does not necessarily follow from its assorted purposes that the synagogue itself held a status of holiness, independent of the holy activities and items it hosted. The importance of the structure itself is a topic of some debate, as the idea of a permanent sacred space outside of the Temple does not necessarily arise from traditional sources earlier than the first century CE. Archeological evidence implies an extremely limited number of synagogues through the Second Temple period, only expanding in number and scope in late antiquity, so their function and ritual status would have emerged in tandem as new developments in the first several centuries CE.<sup>6</sup> Correspondingly, the synagogue building is not necessarily associated with a particular tradition of holiness or increased significance as an institution itself.

Early Rabbinic texts regarding the sanctity of the synagogue are themselves somewhat ambiguous, with one Tannaic source in the *Megilla* tractate stating that the funds from the sale of a synagogue must only be expended in the purchase of another sacred good, equating it with a Torah scroll. This implies, though does not explicitly define, the quasi-holy status associated with the physical land and structure of a synagogue.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, in addition to the ambiguity of these sources and their earliness relative to our chosen period, we have limited Rabbinic texts on

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<sup>4</sup> Ben-Zion Rosenfeld and Joseph Menirav. "The ancient synagogue as an economic center." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 58.4 (1999). Pp. 261-265

<sup>5</sup> *The Tosefta*, Gittin, 3:7 Neusner, ed. KTAV Publishing House, Inc (1986). Vol. 2 p. 471

<sup>6</sup> Howard Clark Kee and Lynn H. Cohick, eds. *Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress*. A&C Black, (1999). Pp. 44-50

<sup>7</sup> Megillah 3:1, in: Joseph Rabinowitz. *Mishnah Megillah: ed. with Introduction, Translation, Commentary and Critical Notes*. Gregg International, (1931). p. 91

synagogues of the Diaspora and cannot conclusively extrapolate an understanding of the nuances of synagogue culture throughout the Roman Empire from texts on the synagogues of Palestine.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these considerations, Steven Fine makes the argument that Rabbis in Palestine intended for synagogues to replace the destroyed Second Temple after 70 CE, and this process of sanctifying permanent spaces eventually took root throughout the Diaspora.<sup>9</sup> He substantiates this claim in the literary conceptualizations in Tannaic, Amoraic and post-Amoraic texts of synagogues and study halls as “small temples”. Additionally, he identifies a series of elements which recall the sanctity of the Temple in rabbinically approved synagogue practices of late antiquity, such as the use of incense, the barring of ritually impure congregants and the inclusion of Torah shrines and seven-branched menorah iconography.<sup>10</sup>

A central characterization of the synagogues of the Roman Empire is illuminated by the comparison suggested by Fine to this traditional place of ritual worship of the Jewish faith, the Temple in Jerusalem. In the aftermath of its destruction, alternative sources of Jewish leadership and places of liturgical practice became a necessity which the synagogue so conveniently supplied. In her analysis of the architecture and design of early synagogues, Joan Branham notes that in the fourth and fifth centuries, the architectural design of synagogue spaces was replete with Temple references.<sup>11</sup> She concludes that while the synagogue of this period was in many ways a “memorialized Temple space”, there is a noticeable series of small distortions of Temple iconography and reinterpretations of its traditions apparent in many of the synagogue’s design elements.<sup>12</sup> This may signify the Temple’s withdrawn sacrality, commemorating its recession into the memory of the Jewish people.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Branham points out that Christian architecture of this time makes use of Temple elements in basilica-churches, for example in its chancel and the separation of the altar from the main structure mirroring the ascending ritual purity required in the inner sections of the Temple.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the synagogue and the church are engaged in indirect

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<sup>8</sup> Lee I. Levine. *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*. Yale University Press, (2005). p. 6

<sup>9</sup> Steven Fine. *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue During the Greco-Roman Period*. Wipf and Stock Publishers (2016). Pp. 159-170

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Pp. 160-161

<sup>11</sup> Joan R. Branham. "Sacred Space Under Erasure in Ancient Synagogues and Early Churches." *The Art Bulletin* 74.3 (1992). Pp. 375-394.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 381

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Pp. 389-390

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Pp. 381-382

competition, each seeking to eke out a sacred liturgical space as the surviving legacy, or rather sanctified replacement, of the Temple of Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup>

Early Church Fathers wrote about the phenomena of Jewish synagogues in relation to the destroyed Temple and the ideal treatment of these spaces of Jewish practice and congregation. For example, the discourses of John Chrysostom reveal an attempt to degrade the synagogue's claim to sanctity through Temple imagery. He appeals to contemporaneous Christians to recognize that the Jews' "ark", a feature of synagogues which symbolizes Tabernacle and Temple paraphernalia, has "no propitiatory, no tables of the law, no holy of holies, no veil, no high priest, no incense, no holocaust, no sacrifice, none of the other things that make the ark of old solemn and august".<sup>16</sup> This call to sever Jewish tradition from Temple tradition indicates that there were those who saw the Jewish synagogue as a space which laid claim to the holiness of the Temple, or at the very least, vestiges of its holy memory. This fourth century text implies a strong sense of Christian discomfort with the theological claim laid by Jews to continuing Biblical traditions. Furthermore, it illuminates the synagogue as a frontier of this debate, a space which is imbued with a sanctity that threatens the status of its counterparts.

The recognition of synagogues as spaces subject to religious hatred and thus endangered, extends back through the history of Roman law. Josephus cites a document from the first decade BCE containing Augustus' undated edict on the rights of Jews in Book 16 of his work, *Jewish Antiquities*.<sup>17</sup> In the edict, Augustus decreed that included in the privileges of the Jews of Asia is the protection of the scrolls and money kept in their synagogues, called the *sabbateion*.<sup>18</sup> It is significant to point out that the wording of the edict does not afford this explicit protection to the building itself, not acknowledging the structure as a feature of Jewish belonging that might be threatened.<sup>19</sup> This implies that the structure of the synagogue had yet to be imbued with a broadly accepted level of ritual significance or holy status. This may echo the idea portrayed previously

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 393

<sup>16</sup> John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians* 7:2, in *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. P.W. Harkins, (1979). Pp. 68, 172

<sup>17</sup> Claude Eilers. "The Date of Augustus' Edict on the Jews (Jos. AJ 16.162-165) and the Career of C. Marcius Censorinus." *Phoenix* (2004). Pp. 86-90

<sup>18</sup> Josephus Flavius. *Jewish Antiquities*. Wordsworth Editions, (2006). Pp. 702-705

<sup>19</sup> Martin Goodman. "Sacred Space in Diaspora Judaism." *Studies on the Jewish Diaspora in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (1996). p. 10

that the sanctity of the synagogue was a process that developed gradually after the year 70 CE in the eyes of both the Jews and the surrounding cultures.

Later references to synagogues relevant to our time period appear in various edicts of the Theodosian Code. Theodosius issued six laws regarding Jews, and the edicts of section 16.8 in the year 423 CE contain references to the rights and protection of Jewish synagogues.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, he orders that “Jewish synagogues may not be taken down or burned indiscriminately”, whilst on the other hand he limits the freedom of Jews by forbidding the construction of any new synagogues.<sup>21</sup> Philip Tilden suggests that the motivating theme of Theodosius’ treatment of Jews was the attempt to demarcate the Jewish community as distinct from Roman society.<sup>22</sup> Despite the clear alterity of Jewish communities and their limitations, they are unmistakably afforded Roman legal protection against attacks, with the synagogue structures explicitly referenced in edicts such as 16.8.20 and 16.8.25 as the protected parties. Whether this indicates the existence of perpetual violence against Jews specifically targeting synagogues is a topic for debate, but these laws unquestionably recognize the synagogue as a feature of interest in the threats against the public life of Roman Jewry.

An additional perspective on the perception of synagogues as temple replacements can be associated with this tradition of Roman legislation. Martin Goodman posits that the view of synagogues as small temples lies at the foundation of the Roman treatment of these buildings. In support of his theory, he notes that fourth century texts, such as Constantine’s imperial enactment in 330 CE, refer to “those who administer the synagogues”.<sup>23</sup> This replicates the hierarchy of a pagan sanctuary or the Jerusalem Temple, whereby the structure was under the authority of administering priests. An extension of this possible miscalculation regarding the nature of synagogues by Roman sources is the idea that they could be easily converted to a different religion as a Roman temple may be reappropriated for alternative purposes.<sup>24</sup> Goodman suggests that it is this understanding which prompted Theodosius to assume the likelihood that synagogues would

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<sup>20</sup> Philip Tilden. "Religious Intolerance in the Later Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Theodosian Code." (2006). p. 250

<sup>21</sup> Theodosian Code, Book XVI 16.8.12, 16.8.20, 16.8.21 16.8.25-27

<sup>22</sup> Philip Tilden. "Religious intolerance in the Later Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Theodosian Code." (2006). p. 258

<sup>23</sup> Goodman. "Sacred Space in Diaspora Judaism." (1996). p. 11

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

be seized or consecrated, thereby declaring that Jewish communities be repaid for such actions. The possibility follows that this preoccupation with the capturing of synagogues by Christians wishing to convert them to churches was in fact a product of Roman imagination, and a preemptive legislative phenomenon rather than a reflection of reality. As such, whether there truly existed extensive attempts on the parts of Christians to attack and claim synagogue buildings cannot be concluded from these sources alone.

Several recordings exist of such scenarios of violence towards the physical spaces of synagogues in this time. These stories may belong to the religiopolitical Christian narrative of the time, rather than representing concrete historical evidence. Textual evidence for attacks on synagogues seems to be propagated after the death of Arkadios, rising to popularity in Christian literature of the fifth century.<sup>25</sup> These sources have questionable credibility, as they are agenda-laden with theological teachings and religious narratives of divine miracles, rather than a particular interest in reporting events directly as they occurred. With this consideration in mind, we can enumerate several of these purported events and explore the composite picture they paint of the role of the Jewish synagogue in Judeo-Christian conflicts.

A particularly prominent example of a Christian attack of a synagogue occurred in Callinicum in the year 388 CE, wherein a mob burnt down the building at the provocation of a local bishop.<sup>26</sup> This is a prime example of the attempted enactment of the protection of Roman law as laid out in the Theodosian Code. Theodosius ordered the local bishop to make reparations for the damage, which he subsequently reversed, having become entangled in a dramatic confrontation with the bishop Ambrose and his significant political acumen.<sup>27</sup> In his denial of Theodosius' original request, Ambrose wrote that he wishes to take retroactive responsibility for the burning of the synagogue, which he describes as God's will.<sup>28</sup> It is evident from this text that the Christian rhetoric and ideology of the time treated synagogues as temples of impiety where Christ is denied, thus posing a threat to the adoption of Christian faith.

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<sup>25</sup> Ross Shepard Kraemer. *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews*. Oxford University Press, USA, (2020). p. 190

<sup>26</sup> Tilden. "Religious Intolerance in the Later Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Theodosian Code." (2006). Pp. 254-256

<sup>27</sup> Ruether. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. (1996). P. 193

<sup>28</sup> Ambrose, *Epistolae* XL, 8; PL, XVI 1151 f.

The aftermath of the event in Callinicum may reveal even more about the nature of the relationship between Christian vigilantism and Jewish synagogues. Five years after the burning of the synagogue, Theodosius ordered the Count and Master of branches of the military in the Orient, Addeus, in edict 16.8.9 of the Code, to “restrain with proper severity the excesses of those persons who, in the name of the Christian religion, presume to commit certain unlawful acts and attempt to destroy and to despoil the synagogues.”<sup>29</sup> Tilden finds Theodosius’ use of plural language in this law an indication that this was far from a dramatic reaction to a singular occurrence, rather an acknowledgement of the commonplace nature of Christian attacks on synagogues which only continued after he forgave the attackers in Callinicum.<sup>30</sup>

An additional example of violence against Jews can be found in the fourth century record of Bishop Innocentius of Dertona in Syria, who ordered the destruction of a synagogue and built a church on its ruins.<sup>31</sup> The Jewish residents were baptized and expelled, an incident which some scholars view as reflective of a widespread phenomenon of similar cases of religiously motivated violence.<sup>32</sup> Around this same period, the synagogue in Tipasa in Mauretana was said to be seized by Christians.<sup>33</sup> According to the text of the *Passion of St. Salsa*, a young Christian girl vanquished a dragon, whose sanctuary become a synagogue until that too was destroyed and consecrated as the Church of Salsa in her memory.<sup>34</sup> This tale is undeniably rife with fantastical religious imagery, and therefor may not be indicative of the existence of a synagogue’s ruins under the church.

A further source on Christian attacks of synagogues can be found in the Syriac hagiographic work, the *Life of Barsauma*, which follows the story of a miracle working monk with a series of literary elements which recall biblical narratives.<sup>35</sup> The text describes his arrival in the city Rabbat Mo’ab where he miraculously defeated a well-armed band of Jews and brought divine fire down upon a “sabbath house”, which is likened to Solomon’s temple.<sup>36</sup> This specific event on

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<sup>29</sup> Tilden. "Religious Intolerance in the Later Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Theodosian Code." (2006). Pp. 255

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 256

<sup>31</sup> Vita Innocentii, from the records of his deacon Celsus; Acta Sanctorum, April 2, p. 483; Seaver, James Everett. *Persecution of the Jews in the Roman Empire (300-438)*. Lawrence, University of Kansas Publications, (1952). p. 45

<sup>32</sup> Ruether. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. (1996). p. 192

<sup>33</sup> Seaver. *Persecution of the Jews in the Roman Empire (300-438)*. (1952). p. 45

<sup>34</sup> Siméon Vailhé. "Tipasa." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 14. New York: Robert Appleton Company (1912)

<sup>35</sup> Kraemer, Ross Shepard. *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews*. Oxford University Press, USA, (2020). Pp. 191-199

<sup>36</sup> Life of Barsauma 38.2-42.2

his pillaging trip through Palestine is associated by scholars to the year 413 CE.<sup>37</sup> The text concludes that Barsauma travelled on from Palestine throughout the East, burning and destroying Jewish “sabbath houses”, which many scholars have used as questionable evidence that there were innumerable attacks on synagogues by bands of militant monks throughout the broader region.<sup>38</sup>

*The Letter on the Conversion of Jews*, written by Severus of Menorca on the conversion of the Jews of the island of Menorca in 418 CE, describes the “accomplishment” of the burning and destruction of the local synagogue. He describes that the group of Christians first removed the books and silver so as to save them from the fire and allow the arsonists to remain innocent of accusations of looting.<sup>39</sup> This emphasis on the import of the destruction of the synagogue structure itself over the paraphernalia and texts it housed lends itself to the motif of the synagogue as a religiously threatening element in the political landscape of the time. The authenticity of the account is subject to much scholarly skepticism due to its inclusion of miraculous divine signs and its clear religious subjectivity, yet as with the previous sources, its value lies in its indication of the symbolic religious victory associated with destroying a synagogue.<sup>40</sup>

There exist a variety of academic approaches to these limited and varied sources on the nature and role of the synagogue in late antiquity, and their vulnerability to Christian attacks. In his work, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, Lee Levine points out that a new historical perspective on the Jews of late antiquity and their synagogues has emerged over the course of the past century on the basis of new archeological and literary data.<sup>41</sup> Levine claims that there is reason to believe that synagogues populated the entirety of Roman and Byzantine Palestine as well as in central locations throughout the Diaspora. He views the promulgation of synagogues as a signifier that Jewish culture flourished in this period, rather than languishing under stifling Christian and Roman persecution, as was traditionally believed.<sup>42</sup>

An expansion on the prominence of Jewish presence in the Roman Empire, and the ensuing status of the synagogue in this period, can be found in Philip Harland’s book, *Associations*,

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<sup>37</sup> Ruether. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. (1996). p. 192

<sup>38</sup> Kraemer. *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews* (2020). P. 198

<sup>39</sup> Severus of Minorca, Epistula Severi 13:11-15 in *Severus of Minorca: Letter on the Conversion of the Jews*. ed. Bradbury, Scott. Clarendon Press, (1996), P. 95

<sup>40</sup> Scott Bradbury, ed. *Severus of Minorca: Letter on the Conversion of the Jews*. Clarendon Press, (1996), p. 9-15

<sup>41</sup> Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*. Yale University Press, (2005). Pp. 6, 10-14

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 6



*Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*.<sup>43</sup> He suggests that there exists a positive correlation between the strong presence of a certain group over a period of time and their relative acceptance in their broader society. Correspondingly, the continued presence of synagogues in Roman landscapes over the course of centuries afforded Jews a way of “finding a place within civic society akin to the ways of other groups in that setting”.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, they became an accepted and assimilated facet of the cultural diversity of the Empire, rather than protruding as an unwanted and threatening alien force.

In contrast to this idyllic view, an argument can be made that the implication of imperial legislation protecting synagogues points towards a lack of peaceable acceptance of their presence. In her book, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, Rosemary Radford Ruether interprets the existence of what she considers to be anti-Judaic laws and messages in the teachings of the Early Church as supporting evidence for the reality that there were active cases of violence towards Jewish communities in the Roman Empire. She further finds the explicit protection of Jews by imperial law a likely reactionary measure to an apparent series of violent events.<sup>45</sup> She summarizes the content of these laws as protection against “vandalism, synagogue burning or confiscation, interference with Jewish celebration of the Sabbath or other religious observances, and even pogroms”.<sup>46</sup> She views this as a persistent pattern of the period, whereby Christian monks provoked their constituents to “pillage... seize or burn Jewish religious buildings” while secular Roman leaders rebuked their violence and required compensation. Subsequently, bishops would retroactively condone the violent act and refuse the demanded reparations, inciting a conflict between Roman and Christian authority.<sup>47</sup> Whether or not this model was truly a repeated pattern throughout the Empire in late antiquity or simply extrapolated from the story of Callinicum in 388 CE, her formulation emphasizes the synagogue as the medium upon which the chief violence was inflicted, and the axis upon which the ensuing drama circulated.

Whilst the historicity of accounts of the synagogue as grounds for habitual violence towards Jews may be questioned, the very existence of these accounts is significant. Whether or

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<sup>43</sup> Philip Harland. "Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society." (2003). Pp. 148-150, 179

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 179

<sup>45</sup> Ruether. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. (1996). Pp. 191-195

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 192

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

not multiple buildings were burned or captured, the preoccupation of both the Christian and Roman authorities with the possibility sets the synagogue as an important symbol in the consciousness of the religious conflicts of the time. The motivation and source of this violence, whether actual or theoretical and anecdotal, may lie in the characterization of the synagogue as described above.

It is apparent from the subtext of the sources of the period – be they Jewish, Christian, or Roman – that the status of the synagogue is intertwined with the memory of the Temple, imbuing it with the character of either ritual sacrality, biblical holiness, or political import as a vestige of a center of Jewish faith and nationhood. It is possible that this sanctified status is the element that maintained the synagogue in the active awareness of Christian theologians and Roman authorities, and even the supposed mobs of Christian attackers. Without this sacred significance, the synagogue would be a building like any other hosting organizational activities for one of the myriad local communities populating the Empire.<sup>48</sup> As such, it would remain a convenient setting for attackers wishing to target congregated groups of Jews, but this does not explain the literary or historical preoccupation with destroying or converting the building itself. Rather, when seen as a facsimile of the Temple, the synagogue becomes an implied threat to Christian legitimacy and superiority as the chosen people with Divine providence. It is converted into a unique structure representing a perception of the untarnished holiness of the Jewish faith and their unabashed continued presence unhindered by the destruction of the very heart of their religious practice. This status and all the religious significance with which it is imbued may clarify the placement of the synagogue in the foreground of Judeo-Christian tensions throughout late antiquity.

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<sup>48</sup> For an expansion on the status of independent organizations in the empire, see Harland's work, "Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society" (2003).

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