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# THE ADOPTION AND USE OF THE WORD ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ IN THE EARLY CHRIST-MOVEMENT

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## Abstract

This article engages with two recent monographs and three shorter publications to offer a fresh approach to the origin and some aspects of the use of the word ἐκκλησία in the Christ-movement of the first century CE. It argues that the word was first used as a collective designation by mixed groups of Greek-speaking Judean and non-Judean Christ-followers who were persecuted by Paul. Their intimate table-fellowship (especially of the one loaf and one cup of the Lord's Supper) was regarded as involving or risking idolatry and thus imperilling the ethnic integrity of the Judean people. These Christ-followers adopted the word ἐκκλησία from instances in the Septuagint where it meant not 'assembly' but 'multitude' or 'group', most importantly of all in 1 Sam. 19.20. As Paul founded new communities in the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean that were recognisably similar to Greco-Roman voluntary associations, the word acquired new connotations that reverberated with the role of ἐκκλησία as

civic voting assemblies in the Greek cities. Paul's groups were not anti-Roman, nor did he believe that the Christ-movement would replace ethnic Israel, but rather that the two would co-exist until the End. The Pauline view on this matter finds theological endorsement in a 2015 document from the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Jews.

### **Key Words**

*Ekklēsia*, assembly, Paul, Christ-groups, table-fellowship, charismatic phenomena, circumcision

### **Introduction**

The very name of the journal in which this article appears attests to the fact that, very early in its history in the first century CE, the Christ-movement<sup>1</sup> adopted the word ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) as an ingroup designation. Thereafter it became universally used among Christ-followers/Christians, first in the Greek East and then, as a loan word, in the Latin West. Semantic derivatives of the word, such as ecclesiastical, ecclesiastic, ecclesial and, yes, ecclesiology, as well as examples in other languages, like *chiesa* in Italian and *église* in French, also spread out to identify various niches in the institutions and thought of Christianity. Since the 1990s, the upsurge in scholarly interest in the question of the identity of Christ-followers, both as individuals and as groups, in the first few generations of the movement, not least in their relationship to

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<sup>1</sup> It is anachronistic to use 'Christian' or 'Christianity' in relation to phenomena in the first century CE. The word χριστιανός ('*Christianos*') only appears three times in the New Testament, on each occasion as an outsider designation (Acts 11.26; 26.28; 1 Pet. 4.16). It appears not to have become an insider designation till the early second century CE.

the Judeans,<sup>2</sup> has made it inevitable that this critical word, ἐκκλησία, would come under close scrutiny. One focus of research is how, if at all, the Christ-movement's use of ἐκκλησία intersected with the fact that ἐκκλησία was a term used for the voting assembly of citizens in numerous cities in the Greek east. Another lively research interest has come with recent investigation into the numerous voluntary associations of the Greco-Roman world and how they compare with the Christ-groups.

Recent years have seen the publication of two important monographs that valuably summarise and carry forward this research into the meaning of ἐκκλησία: Young-Ho Park's *Paul's Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*; and Ralph J. Korner's *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklesia in the Early Christian Movement*.<sup>3</sup> Park, having noted that ἐκκλησία did not become prominent among titles for the Christ-movement until the second century CE, states that his study aims

to assess what Paul, the most frequent user of the term ἐκκλησία among the New Testament writers, meant and intended in using it, and endeavors to

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<sup>2</sup> This word, not 'Jews', is used here to reflect the reality of Ἰουδαῖοι ('*Ioudaioi*') in the first century Mediterranean world as an ethnic group, like some fifty other such groups, every one of them named after the homeland from which they sprang, whether they lived there or not; see Philip F. Esler, 'Judean Ethnic Identity in Josephus' *Against Apion*', in Zuleika Rodgers with Margaret Daly-Denton and Anne Fitzpatrick McKinley (eds), *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Sean Freyne* (Leiden: Brill: 2009), pp. 73-91.

<sup>3</sup> Young-Ho Park, *Paul's Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly: Understanding the People of God in Their Politico-Social World*, WUNT 2, 393 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015); Ralph J. Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklesia in the Early Christian Movement*, *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, Volume 98 (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

identify what the word implied to the first Christians, both those who were under his influence and those who were in a discordant relationship with him.<sup>4</sup>

Korner aims to demonstrate that:

Paul's designation of his communities as *ekklēsiai* presents them as associations with a Jewish heritage who inculcate a civic ideology that is three-fold: it is *pro-dēmokratia*, counter-oligarchic, and not counter-imperial.<sup>5</sup>

In the fifteen years before these books were published, three significant shorter works, by Richard Horsley, Paul Trebilco and George van Kooten, stimulated the debate.<sup>6</sup> All five of these publications are characterised by a profound concern to situate the meaning of ἐκκλησία within its relevant ancient contexts: Judean or Greco-Roman or both. These works have prompted the writing of this article as an attempt to engage with major strands in the current discussion and to make a fresh contribution to it.

### **The Earliest Evidence for the Use of Ἐκκλησία by the Christ-Movement**

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<sup>4</sup> Park, *Paul's Ekklesia*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Korner, *Origin*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Richard A. Horsley, '1 Corinthians: A Case Study of Paul's Assembly as an Alternative Society', in Edward Adams and David G. Horrell (eds), *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 227-237; Paul Trebilco, 'Why Did the Early Christians Call Themselves ἡ ἐκκλησία?', *NTS* 57 (2011), pp. 440-460; George van Kooten, 'Ἐκκλησία τοῦ Θεοῦ: The 'Church of God' and the Civic Assemblies (ἐκκλησία) of the Greek Cities in the Roman Empire: A Reply to Paul Trebilco and Richard A. Horsley', *NTS* 58 (2012), pp. 522-548.

Evidence relating to the earliest use of the word ἐκκλησία by the Christ-movement is found in Paul's letter to the Galatians, to be dated probably to the early to mid fifties of the first century CE, in its long (and immensely valuable) autobiographical passage (Gal. 1.13-2.14). In Gal. 1.13 Paul writes, 'You have heard of my previous conduct, when I lived according to Judean customs (ἐν τῷ Ἰουδαϊσμῷ), that I severely persecuted τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ ('the *ekklēsia* of God') and tried to destroy it' (ἐπόρθουν<sup>7</sup> αὐτήν). The necessary implication is that the '*ekklēsia* of God' was or was acting in some way inimical to Judean ethnic identity. Later in the account (Gal. 1.22) Paul reports that 'I was unknown by sight ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῆς Ἰουδαίας ταῖς ἐν Χριστῷ ('to the *ekklēsiai* of Judea that are in Christ').' Then he adds that 'Only they were hearing that the one who once persecuted us is now preaching the good news of the faith that he was once trying to destroy' (1.23). So Paul can use '*ekklēsia* of God' for the whole movement, or foreground the fact that it was composed of a multiplicity of *ekklēsiai* (in Christ) in a specific region, here Judea, the homeland of the Judean ethnic group. Paul refers to his persecution activities in two other places. In 1 Cor. 15.9 he says ἐδίωξα τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ ('I persecuted the *ekklēsia* of God'), using the same expression as in Gal. 1.13, but in Phil. 3.6 he simply refers to his previously having persecuted τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ('the *ekklēsia*').

Although not always given its due credit, the earliest evidence for the use of ἐκκλησία in relation to Christ-groups is found in 1 Thessalonians, probably Paul's oldest extant letter, which the majority of commentators believe was composed in the

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<sup>7</sup> The verb ἐπόρθουν is a conative imperfect.

period 48-52 CE. This evidence comes in 1 Thess. 2.14, when Paul says to his addressees:

You became imitators, brothers, τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν τοῦ θεοῦ τῶν οὐσῶν ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ('of the *ekklēsiai* of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea'), because you also suffered the same things from your own people (τῶν ἰδίων συμφυλετῶν) as they did from the Judeans (ὑπὸ τῶν Ἰουδαίων).

Although some scholars have disputed the authenticity of this verse, there is no text-critical basis for doing so, and what Paul says here can be easily reconciled with his statements in other places that we have just noted. Here we observe Paul deploying the word ἐκκλησία, in the plural, to depict Christ-groups in Judea who at some point in the past suffered what the Thessalonian Christ-group had suffered. Paul employs the unusual word συμφυλέτης, literally 'a member of the same tribe', which appears only here in the New Testament (and not at all in the Septuagint), to encompass both citizens and non-citizens in Thessalonika, thus creating a group roughly equivalent to the ethnic Judeans of Judea. Christ-groups in both places were persecuted by their own people. Since the impression given in both the Acts of the Apostles and in Galatians is that Paul led the initial persecution of the 'ekklēsia of God' and never shies away from admitting he had done so, this particular persecution of the Christ-groups by Judeans must have been conducted by *other* Judeans *after* he had become a Christ-follower and headed off to Arabia for two or three years (Gal. 1.15-18). It is notable that in all these cases ἐκκλησία is clearly a group designation; it does not refer to meetings of Christ-followers. This is an important distinction, but one not always observed in this discussion, as we will see below.

In the current debate the critical question for understanding the origin of ἐκκλησία as a designation for the Christ-movement is whether

(a) the Christ-groups in Judea that Paul persecuted and those that were persecuted by other Judeans after him had already applied that term to themselves, and if so why; or

(b) Paul applied it to such Christ-groups retrospectively, in light of his later experience in cities of the Greek East, especially through his recognition of the continuing political role of the ἐκκλησία in many of those cities in the first century CE.

Paul Trebilco has recently argued in favour of option (a), while George van Kooten and Ralph Korner prefer option (b).

Trebilco, following other scholars, suggests that when Paul used the expression he was citing an existing way in which the Christ-followers whom Paul persecuted referred to themselves. He further opines that the fact Paul can simply refer to the object of his persecution as the ἐκκλησία (Phil. 3.6) suggests he was ‘recalling a designation used by the group he persecuted’. He adds that when Paul talks about ‘the *ekklēsiai* in Christ that are in Judea’ which he had persecuted (Gal. 1.22-24), he is ‘referring here to a time three years after his Damascus Road experience (Gal. 1.18), and so to a very early period. He follows James Dunn in this regard, who was of the view that ‘Paul’s usage was not original to him or to his



mission.’<sup>8</sup> Lastly, he suggests that Paul’s decision to use ἐκκλησία rather than ‘the saints’ or ‘brothers and sisters’ ‘suggests the origin of the term in pre-Pauline Christianity and that ἐκκλησία was applied to the Jerusalem “assembly” and those in Judea.’<sup>9</sup> Trebilco notes that Luke uses the term in relation to the Jerusalem Christ-movement (Acts 5.11; 8.1, 3; 11.22; 12.1, 5; 15.4, 22), while Acts 9.31 speaks of the ἐκκλησία throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria and considers this further evidence for a pre-Pauline use of the term.<sup>10</sup>

Central to Trebilco’s argument is that the Hellenists, Greek-speaking Christ-following Judeans in Jerusalem (first mentioned in Acts 6.1), introduced the term.<sup>11</sup> Why did the Hellenists establishing Greek-speaking Christ-groups call them ἐκκλησίαι? Trebilco suggests that the usage is based on the expression ἐκκλησία κυρίου that appears in the LXX to designate the assembly of Israel, but was changed to ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ to avoid confusion as to the referent of κυρίου.<sup>12</sup> He sees Stephen’s reference to the ἐκκλησία in the wilderness (from Deut. 4.10 [LXX] etc) in Acts 7.38 as support for the Hellenists’ introduction of the term. He also argues that the Hellenists chose ἐκκλησία because συναγωγή was already in use by Jewish communities as a designation for their groups and their buildings.<sup>13</sup> Trebilco further argues, citing James Dunn to similar effect, that for Paul the word ἐκκλησία probably

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<sup>8</sup> Trebilco, ‘Early Christians’, p. 442, citing James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 600.

<sup>9</sup> Trebilco, ‘Early Christians’, p. 443.

<sup>10</sup> Trebilco, ‘Early Christians’, p. 443.

<sup>11</sup> Trebilco, ‘Early Christians’, p. 443-444.

<sup>12</sup> Trebilco, ‘Early Christians’, pp. 445-446.

<sup>13</sup> Trebilco, ‘Early Christians’, pp. 446-458.

did not have political overtones derived from its importance in Greek cities. Jerusalem, where he considers the idea was first introduced, did not have an ἐκκλησία.<sup>14</sup>

Van Kooten has critiqued these arguments.<sup>15</sup> While not doubting the historicity of the Hellenists of Acts 6.1, he notes that although Luke mentions that the word Χριστιανοί was first employed in Antioch (Acts 11.26), he does not claim the Hellenists introduced ἐκκλησία. He strongly challenges the evidence Trebilco uses from Acts to support his view, including the mention of the ἐκκλησία in the wilderness in Acts 7.38. As to Paul's references to the persecution, he disputes that they should necessarily contain 'the original self-designation used by (the Ἑλληνισταί in) the Jerusalem church which Paul recalls, rather than a term of different origins that was 'retrospectively applied by Paul to the Christian communities which he had persecuted.'<sup>16</sup>

In reaching a view on this matter I find myself largely agreeing with van Kooten's critique (in part adopted by Korner)<sup>17</sup> of Trebilco's well mounted argument (and of the scholars of similar view), yet still believing for other reasons that the use of ἐκκλησία was pre-Pauline.<sup>18</sup> Van Kooten is right to say that the mere fact that Paul used the word of the groups he persecuted does not necessarily mean that it was a self-designation by those groups when he was conducting the persecution. It may

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<sup>14</sup> Trebilco, 'Early Christians', p. 445; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 537.

<sup>15</sup> Van Kooten, 'Church of God', pp. 523-526.

<sup>16</sup> Van Kooten, 'Church of God', p. 526.

<sup>17</sup> Korner, *Origin*, pp. 167-170.

<sup>18</sup> Park, *Ekklesia*, also regards the use of the term as pre-Pauline, but as referring primarily to the Jerusalem church (pp. 133-150).

have been, but a more convincing explanation is needed to push the probabilities in its favour, preferably one based on a considered appraisal of the social situation of the early Christ-movement. Furthermore, my unease with the use of Acts as evidence on the point is more fundamental than that of van Kooten, while Korner's general confidence in evidence from Acts leads him into real difficulties.<sup>19</sup> In the early chapters of Acts Luke takes enormous pains to portray essentially harmonious relations between the Aramaic-speaking, largely Galilean Judeans who believed in Christ on the one hand, and the Greek-speaking Judeans from the diaspora who had come to Jerusalem and also accepted Christ on the other. Evidence for this *Tendenz* (to use F. C. Baur's still helpful term)<sup>20</sup> comes, for example, in Luke's handling of the dispute in Acts 6.1-6—which even he could not push entirely under the carpet—and in his extraordinary attempt to solve the inter-ethnic boundary problem (see below) by making Peter, of all people, effect the conversion of the first non-Judean, Cornelius (Acts 10), a conversion which was problematic precisely in leading to commensality between Judean and non-Judean (Acts 10.28; 11.1-3).<sup>21</sup> In this context, I am extremely sceptical of Luke's location of ἐκκλησία as a group designation in Jerusalem in Acts 5.11 and of the idea that the designation originated in Jerusalem, as

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<sup>19</sup> For example, see his resistance to the notion of 'anachronism' in Acts, which I would prefer to call the Lucan *Tendenz*, coupled with other issues, such his confusion of the distinction between 'emic' and 'etic' levels of understanding, as when he suggests ἐκκλησία is an etic designation in Acts: *Origin*, pp. 258-260.

<sup>20</sup> See Mary E. Andrews, 'Tendenz Versus Interpretation: F. C. Baur's Criticisms of Luke', *JBL* 58 (1939), pp. 263-276.

<sup>21</sup> See the argument for this position in Philip F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivation of Lucan Theology*, SNTSMS, 57 (Cambridge: CUP; 1987), pp. 105-109 and *passim*.

these features may well reflect the *Tendenz* just explained.<sup>22</sup> If ἐκκλησία was used initially in Jerusalem, I consider it would not have covered the entirety of the Christ-movement,<sup>23</sup> but only groups of Greek-speaking Judean and non-Judean Christ-followers.

### **The Origin of ἐκκλησία as a Christ-Group Designation**

So let us propose an explanation for the origin of ἐκκλησία as a Christ-group designation. No one doubts Paul's statements that the Christ-groups (whatever they were called, by themselves and outsiders, which is an important distinction) were being persecuted by Judeans, namely by Paul himself, and later, I would argue, by other Judeans (1 Thess. 2.14). The first question is why. They must have done something to incur the wrath of other Judeans. Galatians 1.13-14 provides precious evidence as to what it was. In this passage Paul tells us, in effect, that he persecuted and tried to destroy the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ in defence of Judean customs (Ἰουδαισμός) and the traditions of his fathers (τῶν πατρικῶν μου παραδόσεων). In so doing, he triggers all six of the most widely acknowledged indicia of ethnic identity:<sup>24</sup> (a) the name of the group (Ἰουδαῖοι implied in Ἰουδαισμός, although they also called themselves Israelites); (b) a myth of common ancestry, in the references to the fathers,

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<sup>22</sup> For this reason, I disagree with Park's association of ἐκκλησία with 'the Jerusalem church' (Ekklesia, p. 150).

<sup>23</sup> As Trebilco, p. 44, and James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 539 appear to believe.

<sup>24</sup> See John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith, eds. *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3-14, at 6-7. These indicia should be regarded as diagnostic not essential, and one or more may predominate in any particular case (thus today's Kurds valorise their possession of a homeland).

who must include the patriarchs; (c) a shared history, implied by reference to the fathers; (d) a common culture, embracing such things as customs which for Judeans originated principally in the law given by their great lawgiver, Moses (the law being a ‘wall of iron’, according to the *Letter of Aristeas*, 139, so that Judeans ‘might not mingle at all with any of the other nations’);<sup>25</sup> (e) a link with the ethnic homeland, Ἰουδαία, implied in Ἰουδαισμός; and (f) a sense of communal solidarity, which flows from the previous five. It follows inevitably from this that the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ was acting in some way inimical to Judean ethnic identity and the customs, including the laws and ethical standards, which were integral to it. The members of these Christ-groups were doing something that breached the boundary between Judean and non-Judean, and apparently in a grievous way. What was it? For some thirty-five years I have maintained the argument that the problem was the admission by Judean Christ-followers of non-Judean believers into these groups, which was especially problematic because it involved table-fellowship of an intimate kind, by sharing food and drink, especially the one loaf and the one cup of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 10.16; 11.20).<sup>26</sup>

Whereas, in line with the anthropologist Fredrik Barth’s classic analysis of ethnic identity,<sup>27</sup> the boundary between Judean and non-Judean was permeable in some respects, in two, commensality and connubium, it was not. There is considerable

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<sup>25</sup> See V. Tcherikover, ‘The Ideology of the Letter of Aristeas’, *HTR* 51 (1958), pp. 59-85.

<sup>26</sup> Esler, *Community and Gospel*, 71-109. The recent realisation that the Ἰουδαῖοι were members of an ethnic group, not adherents of a ‘religion’, with the Christ-movement representing a different, in some cases, trans-ethnic identity, allows me to substantiate this view on a theoretically more sophisticated basis.

<sup>27</sup> Fredrik Barth, ‘Introduction’, in Fredrik Barth (ed), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), pp. 9-38.

evidence from both Judean and Greek and Roman authors for prohibitions on table-fellowship (of the intimate kind just mentioned, not involving meals-in-parallel) and on inter-marriage.<sup>28</sup> Even Luke, ever keen to bridge the gap between Judean and non-Judean, is forced to acknowledge the existence of the proscription on commensality (Acts 10.28): ‘You know that it is forbidden (ἀθέμιτον) for a Judean to associate (κολλᾶσθαι) with or to visit (προσέρχεσθαι) a person from another ethnic group (ἄλλόφυλος).’ The implications of this are clarified a little later in the same narrative (Acts 11.2-3): ‘So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς) criticised him, saying “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”’ Almost certainly the basis for this prohibition in the Mosaic code was the law against idolatry: the specific danger was that a non-Judean would secretly make an offering to his or her god(s) from the cup or the loaf and thus involve all present in idolatry.<sup>29</sup> The ‘slander’ about him of which Paul later complained in Rom. 3.8, namely that he encouraged people to do evil so that good might come of it, must have entailed breach of the Mosaic law. I consider it highly likely that the mechanism that permitted Judean Christ-followers to disregard the danger of breaching the Mosaic law against idolatry and to enter into full fellowship in Christ with non-Judeans was that the latter also manifested the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the factor Peter

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<sup>28</sup> I covered this topic initially in Esler, *Community and Gospel*, pp. 73-86 (although not with the use of ethnic theory) and then, in more detail and responding to flawed critiques by E. P. Sanders and Craig Hill, in Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 93-116.

<sup>29</sup> Esler, *Galatians*, 104-108.

(in Luke's probably fictional account) recognised in relation to Cornelius (Acts 10.47).<sup>30</sup>

As the problem involved an illicit association between Judeans and non-Judeans, the only safe way to resolve it was for the latter to become Judeans through what Katherine Southwood has astutely termed 'ethnic translation'.<sup>31</sup> Philo provides a detailed emic account of ethnic translation from non-Judean to Judean in *De virtutibus*, 102-103.<sup>32</sup> The process involved subjecting oneself to the law of Moses and the vital proof of such adherence, as far as men were concerned, was circumcision. 'Circumcision', in fact, became shorthand for 'becoming a Judean'; this was the solution to the problem posed by intimate table-fellowship between Judean and non-Judean in the Christ-movement. Hence the group of (conservative) Judean Christ-followers insisting on ethnic translation came to be called οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς ('those of the circumcision'; Gal. 2.12; Acts 10.45). These factors explain why during the Jerusalem meeting the 'false brothers' wanted Titus, a Greek, to be circumcised (Gal. 2.3-5). It also explains the pressures on Peter in Antioch to break off mixed table-fellowship from fear of 'those of the circumcision' (Gal. 2.12). But the problem of mixed table-fellowship also provides the reason why, during his time persecuting the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ, Paul preached circumcision, as Gal. 5.11 indicates that he did: 'If I still preach circumcision, why am I being persecuted?' Presumably this was the

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<sup>30</sup> Philip F. Esler, 'Glossolalia and the Admission of Gentiles into the Early Christian Community', in *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds: Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 37-51.

<sup>31</sup> Katherine E. Southwood, 'Will Naomi's Nation Be Ruth's Nation?: Ethnic Translation as a Metaphor for Ruth's Assimilation Within Judah', *Humanities* 3 (2014), pp. 102-131.

<sup>32</sup> See the discussion in Philip F. Esler, *God's Court and Courtiers in the Book of the Watchers: Re-interpreting Heaven in 1 Enoch 1-36* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), pp. 16-19.

programme of the Judeans who continued persecuting the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ in Judea after Paul (1 Thess. 2.14).

It follows from all of the above that Judean Christ-followers who refused to eat with non-Judeans would not have been in breach of the law of Moses and would not have attracted the animosity of other Judeans. Merely believing the Messiah had come did not entail breach of the boundary between Judean and non-Judean to which the Mosaic law so critically contributed. This means that Paul and Judeans after him would not have persecuted such Christ-followers. Suspicion has long attended the report in Acts 8.1 that on the day of Stephen's death 'a great persecution arose against the ἐκκλησία in Jerusalem and they were all scattered except the apostles.' One does not persecute a movement and leave its leaders in peace; more likely this persecution entailed not those of the circumcision party, but the Hellenists, or just their leaders, and it explains how they became scattered throughout Judea.<sup>33</sup> This result accords with the analysis above: it was only Greek-speaking Judean members of the Christ-movement who permitted the admission of non-Judeans who were persecuted and left Jerusalem, not the Aramaic-speaking Judean Christ-followers who opposed that practice. This view presupposes that mixed table-fellowship began in Jerusalem very early in the history of the Christ-movement, as I have long argued.<sup>34</sup>

These considerations bring us to the second question, of nomenclature. It is highly likely that the Judeans persecuting these Christ-followers of Judea had some name for them and also that they had a self-designation. The basic reason for this is referential efficiency in a situation of intergroup conflict and outgroup stereotypification. Groups employ names—for use by insiders and outsiders—not

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<sup>33</sup> Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), p. 297.

<sup>34</sup> Esler, *Community and Gospel*, pp. 158-161.



descriptive periphrases. The phenomenon of referential efficiency occurs in the New Testament, for example in Paul's references to 'the circumcision' (περιτομή) and the 'uncircumcision' (ἀκροβυστία) when he means 'circumcised Judeans' (Rom. 3.30; 4.9, Gal. 2.8) and 'uncircumcised non-Judeans' (Rom. 3.30; 4.9; Gal. 2.7). Another New Testament example is Χριστιανός (Acts 11.26; 26.28; 1 Pet. 4.16). This was originally a derogatory word applied to the new movement by outsiders, and carried the connotation 'Christ-lackey.' Eventually, but probably not until the early second century CE, Christ-followers applied it to themselves.<sup>35</sup> In World War II, by way of contrast, the Australian troops besieged in Tobruk in 1941 by Rommel's *Afrika Korps* adopted almost immediately the name 'rats' applied to them in a radio broadcast by the British traitor William Joyce ('Lord Haw Haw') because of the underground positions in which they were sheltering.

Unfortunately, we do not know how the Judeans persecuting these Christ-followers referred to them. They certainly did not call them the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ. Since the offence in question was ethnic betrayal (not heresy!), probably on the basis of breach of the Mosaic law against idolatry, perhaps they deployed a word signifying 'law breakers' (in Greek παράνομοι), essentially the accusation against Paul (Rom 3.8), or 'traitors' (προδότες) or 'idolaters' (εἰδωλάτραι). If their negative term, whatever it was, had been adopted by their victims, it would probably have been treasured and survived, like Χριστιανοί and 'the Rats of Tobruk.' But it has not survived, so they probably did not apply it to themselves.

So then we are looking for a term that these persecuted Christ-followers employed as a self-designation. Since it was their own designation, it must have been

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<sup>35</sup> John H. Elliott, *I Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 789-794.

positive in character. It would have been acquired in the midst of suffering and become hallowed in use for that reason. It was probably a Greek word, given the likely diaspora origin of the core group of Judeans in their number.<sup>36</sup> But it was unlikely to have been συναγωγή because that was already in use as a designation by Judean groups (and was also used for the building in which such a group met),<sup>37</sup> so it would not have served the need of distinctiveness. It was also from among the Judeans of the συναγωγαί that people like Paul came to persecute them.

This brings us to the nub of the discussion. If the self-designation was something different from ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ, or ἐκκλησία ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, or just ἐκκλησία, why has it not survived? More particularly, if it had been some other word, and treasured in their memory, why would Paul have replaced it with ἐκκλησία and its various permutations? In my view, there is no satisfactory answer to these questions. Paul adopted a group designation already in use by the Greek-speaking Christ-groups composed of Judeans and non-Judeans who engaged in mixed table-fellowship, groups he had previously tried to destroy.

Yet this conclusion still leaves open the question of why these Christ-groups, probably originating in the 30s of the first century CE, adopted ἐκκλησία as a group designation. Before considering this question, it will be helpful to critique a specific and recent argument against the pre-Pauline use of the word. Korner (expressly) and

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<sup>36</sup> This is why no Aramaic self-designation has survived.

<sup>37</sup> A good example of συναγωγή as a group designation is the ‘synagogue of the Freedmen’ (and others) in Acts 6.9, while an example of the word referring to a building is found in Luke 4.16. Both meanings of the word are found in the Theodotus inscription from Jerusalem, on which see John S. Kloppenborg, ‘Dating Theodotus’, *JJS* 51 (2000), pp. 243-280 (arguing for a pre-70 CE date). On this subject, see Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period*. SBL Dissertation Series, 169. Atlanta, GA: SBL, 1999, 92-111; Korner, *Origin*, 2-3.

van Kooten (by implication) maintain that it was Paul who introduced the word ἐκκλησία, and that he did so from his understanding of the role of the ἐκκλησία in the social and political arrangements in the Greek city-states.<sup>38</sup> At this point I will offer an argument aimed at excluding this possibility. I will then propose the Septuagint as the source of the expression, though for different reasons than the detailed and careful ones advanced by Trebilco. Aspects of the case for eliminating the possibility that Paul adopted ἐκκλησία also bear on the likelihood that it was the pre-Pauline Christ-groups who did so.

The last two decades have seen a dramatic increase in research into Greco-Roman voluntary associations, a subject that was inaugurated as long ago as the turn of the twentieth century by Jean Pierre Waltzing and Franz Poland. This research has been spearheaded by the Canadian scholars Richard Ascough, Philip Harland and John Kloppenborg.<sup>39</sup> Voluntary associations can be classified into a number of types, of which probably the two most well attested are cultic associations and occupational

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<sup>38</sup> Korner, *Origin*, pp. 156-173.

<sup>39</sup> John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson (eds), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996); Richard S. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and I Thessalonians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); *idem*, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2009); J. S. Kloppenborg and R. S. Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary. Vol. I: Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011); P. A. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary. Vol. II: North Coast of the Black Sea* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); R. S. Ascough, *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).

guilds.<sup>40</sup> It was soon noted that the word ἐκκλησία occurred in some ancient inscriptions, and some scholars argued that the name was applied to voluntary associations.<sup>41</sup> If that view had been correct, such a practice would have provided a model for the adoption of ἐκκλησία as a group-designation by the Christ-movement. Yet the number of inscriptions relied upon in this regard was always worryingly small, five or six at the most, a problem insufficiently acknowledged by those arguing for ἐκκλησία being a group designation. Further examination of these inscriptions, moreover, has led to the conclusion that the word is not applied to voluntary associations, a conclusion now reached even by those who originally claimed it did.<sup>42</sup> Both Park and (in far more detail) Korner argue, convincingly, that there is not a single instance of ἐκκλησία being used as the name of a Greek voluntary association.<sup>43</sup> Thus, a voluntary association in Delos describing itself as a σύνοδος uses ἐκκλησία as way of referring to its meeting.<sup>44</sup> So too does a voluntary association in a village called Kastollos near Philadelphia in Roman Asia.<sup>45</sup> The same is the case with a voluntary association in Samos.<sup>46</sup> In two inscriptions from Aspendos the word

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<sup>40</sup> See J. S. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2019) p. 24-25

<sup>41</sup> For evidence of this view by Kloppenborg, Ascough and Harland, see Korner, *Origin*, 53-54, fn. 132.

<sup>42</sup> Korner, *Origin*, pp. 53-54, fn. 132.

<sup>43</sup> Park, *Paul's Ekklesia*, pp. 56-59; Korner, *Origin*, pp. 52-76.

<sup>44</sup> CIG 2271.

<sup>45</sup> W. Dittenberger (ed.), *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae* (Leipzig: Hildesheim, 1903-5/1960), no. 488.

<sup>46</sup> D. F. McCabe *et al.*, *Samos Inscriptions: Text and List* (Princeton: Institute for Advanced Study, 1986), no. 119.

refers to a civic association of a polis, not to a voluntary association.<sup>47</sup> In an inscription brought into the discussion by Korner, a συγγένεια (kinship-group) in Sinuri (in Asia Minor) uses ἐκκλησία to designate its semi-public meeting.<sup>48</sup>

This conclusion has a major (and negative) impact on the claim that Paul adopted ἐκκλησία from the voting assembly in the Greek cities of the East. Of all the hundreds, if not thousands, of voluntary associations from these cities of which we have epigraphic knowledge over approximately five centuries, not a single one them ever used ἐκκλησία as a *group designation*. And yet we are asked to believe that Paul did. Accordingly, since it is not credible that Paul took this step when—as far as we know in spite of the abundant evidence—people far more involved in the civic life of these cities never did—we can eliminate this possibility.

This brings us back to the early Christ-groups in Judea. Since the above reason for eliminating Paul as the one who first deployed the word ἐκκλησία as a group designation also applies to them in relation to their experience of Greek cities, we have to turn to the only other likely source, the Septuagint, with which the Greek-speaking Judeans in the offending Christ-groups would have been familiar. It is necessary to recall that we need to distinguish between ἐκκλησία as referring to a large assembly of people—who were called upon to take note of, consider, or even vote upon an issue—and ἐκκλησία in the sense of a group designation.

The word ἐκκλησία occurs 123 times in the Septuagint. On the vast majority of occasions it refers to an act of gathering together, a meeting of the people.<sup>49</sup> In this

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<sup>47</sup> P. Le Bas and W. H. Waddington, *Inscriptiones graecae et latinae recueillies en Asia Mineur*. Two volumes (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1870), nos. 1381 and 1382.

<sup>48</sup> Korner, *Origin*, 65-67.

<sup>49</sup> See the discussion of these instances by Trebilco, 'Early Christians', p. 447.

sense it translates  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  73 times. (By way of contrast,  $\text{συναγωγή}$  translates  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  35 times and  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  130 times, with  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  never used to translate  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$ .)<sup>50</sup> Trebilco offers a specific source for the early Christ-movement's use of  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  in the expression  $\text{ἐκκλησία κυρίου}$ , which is found a handful times in the Septuagint (e.g. Deut. 23.1, 2, 3; 1 Chron. 28.8; Mic. 2.5), of the Lord's assembly. He further suggests, as noted above, that they changed  $\text{ἐκκλησία κυρίου}$  to  $\text{ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ}$  so as to avoid confusion 'with regard to the referent of  $\text{κύριος}$ .'<sup>51</sup>

While I agree with Trebilco on the Septuagint being the source of the usage, there are, I submit, two problems with his particular view. First, he is arguing that  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$ , a word meaning a meeting or assembly of the people, came to designate a group; if this was problematic (indeed insuperably so) in the context of the  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  of Greek city-states, it is likely also to have been a problem for Judean and non-Judean Christ-followers adopting a name for their group(s). Indeed, the more that careful and creative scholars like Park argue, with considerable plausibility, for a far greater similarity between the  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  of Israelites as depicted in Israelite writings and the  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  of Greek cities than is usually allowed,<sup>52</sup> the greater this problem becomes. Secondly, as noted above, Paul is quite flexible in his use of  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  and on one occasion deploys it without additional words (Phil. 3.6).<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, it is

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 447, for these statistics.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 444.

<sup>52</sup> Park, *Paul's Ekklesia*, pp. 62-97.

<sup>53</sup> Park, *Paul's Ekklesia*, on the other hand, argues that Paul predominantly used the term to refer to the single  $\text{ἐκκλησία}$  in each city (pp. 103-124).

pushing the evidence too far to focus on his use of ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ and then derive this from the instances of ἐκκλησία κυρίου in the Septuagint.<sup>54</sup>

My own approach to the problem focuses on the need to find ἐκκλησία being used in the Septuagint as a group designation. There are occasions when ἐκκλησία refers not to a meeting but just to a multitude of people. One example is 2 Chron. 30.13: ‘And many people (λαὸς πολὺς) were gathered in Jerusalem to keep the feast of the unleavened bread in the second month, a very great ἐκκλησία.’ The instance of ἐκκλησία in 2 Chron. 30.17 seems to carry the same implication, even though everyone is standing in rows. Another very clear example occurs in Neh. 8.17: ‘And all the ἐκκλησία who had returned from captivity made booths, and dwelt in the booths.’ Here the word is quite divorced from the sense of ‘meeting’ or ‘assembly’. So too is its use in 1 Macc. 3.13: ‘Judas had gathered a multitude, an ἐκκλησία of the faithful (πιστῶν), to go out with him to war’, where the addition of πιστῶν makes this a particularly interesting case in the context of a Christ-movement that valorised ‘faith’ (πίστις) in Christ and whose members Paul would later refer to as πιστός (2 Cor. 6.15). The final example is the most interesting. 1 Samuel 19.20 relates how Saul sent messengers to apprehend David and ‘they saw the ἐκκλησία of the prophets (the Hebrew text adds ‘prophesying’) and Samuel stood as appointed over them.’ The Spirit of God then came upon the messengers and they began to prophesy. Finally Saul went himself and he took off his clothes and prophesied before them naked, so that they said, ‘Is Saul also among the prophets?’ (19.23-24). Even without the addition in the Hebrew text, it is clear that in v. 20 this is a band or group of prophets

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<sup>54</sup> Van Kooten (‘Church of God’, 527) offers different reasons to doubt Trebilco’s invocation of ἐκκλησία κυρίου .

(who are prophesying, meaning engaging in ecstatic utterances with unusual behaviour), not a meeting. Here ἐκκλησία is being used as a group designation. The Hebrew word translated as ἐκκλησία in v. 20 is הַקְּהִל. It is a *hapax* in the Hebrew Bible and its existence has been doubted, especially perhaps as being a transposition of הַלְּהִק. But it seems hardly likely that such a mistake would be made on the occasion of the clearest instance of ἐκκλησία meaning group. Whereas Park does not mention any of these instances of non-assembly usage, Korner takes note of 1 Sam. 19.20 and 1 Macc 3.13, recognising the latter as a group designation.<sup>55</sup>

While these Septuagintal uses of ἐκκλησία for groups rather than for a meeting or assembly provide a credible source for the adoption of the name by mixed Judean/non-Judean Christ-groups, the last one, in 1 Sam. 19.20, is a particularly likely source. There can be little doubt that this incident would have been widely known among Judean Christ-followers, since the saying ‘Is Saul also among the prophets?’ had become proverbial (1 Sam. 19.24). In addition, this saying also necessarily summoned up images of the ecstatic behaviour on the part of Israel’s king that made the scene memorable. The point of connection with the early Christ-movement is twofold. Firstly, ecstatic phenomena associated with the unexpected arrival of the Spirit formed the heart of the Pentecost event as described in Acts 2, which included Peter’s use of Joel 3.1-5, with its references to ‘your sons and your daughters prophesying’, ‘your young men’ seeing visions and ‘our old men’ dreaming dreams (Acts 2.17; Joel 2.28 [LXX]). This was behaviour analogous to that of Saul and to the ἐκκλησία of prophets in 1 Sam. 19.20. Secondly, and even more relevantly, it is likely (as noted above) that it was precisely the phenomenon of non-Judeans exhibiting charismatic phenomena, such as prophesying, that persuaded Judean Christ-followers

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<sup>55</sup> Korner, *Origin*, p. 102.



to admit them into their (Greek-speaking) Christ-groups without becoming Judeans, just as (in Luke's account) had happened to Cornelius: 'Then Peter declared, "Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"' (Acts 10.47).<sup>56</sup> For these reasons, I nominate the use of ἐκκλησία in relation to the band of prophets in 1 Sam 19.20 as the source of this designation chosen for themselves by the Christ-groups of Judea which Paul and other Judeans after him persecuted.

Were these mixed Judean/non-Judean Christ-groups in Judea unique in adopting the word ἐκκλησία as a self-designation? Korner has argued that Philo provides evidence for two such groups in Alexandria (*Virt.* 108; *Deus* 111). Yet he hedges his bets by observing that they were either 'assemblies or communities.'<sup>57</sup> In any event, even if some other group of Judeans, in a Greek-speaking environment outside of Judea, had adopted ἐκκλησία as a community designation in Egypt, that would not necessarily have been an obstacle to the Christ-groups in Judea doing the same.

### **The Connotations of Ἐκκλησία in the Greek-Speaking Cities of the Roman East**

While this result is highly significant in providing a Septuagintal source for the adoption of ἐκκλησία as a Christ-group self-designation (and excluding the ἐκκλησία of the Greek cities as a possible source) it should not be pushed too far. In particular, it is consistent with the Christ-movement ἐκκλησία in the cities of the Greek East, many of them established by Paul, imbibing some sense of identity for themselves

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<sup>56</sup> See Esler, 'Glossolalia and the Admission of Gentiles into the Early Christian Community'.

<sup>57</sup> Korner, *Origin*, pp. 127-149, at p. 149.

from the character and workings of the ἐκκλησία—that is, the voting assemblies—of those cities. In this they would resemble the numerous voluntary associations which regularly adopted the titles of functionaries in the city-states in their own internal organisation. For in many important respects the Christ-movement was closely comparable to such associations and would be seen as such by their members and by outsiders. This idea actually originated with Edwin Hatch in 1881 and has become very popular recently, finding a powerfully persuasive case in John Kloppenborg’s recent volume *Christ’s Associations*, with Kloppenborg accurately noting at one point that ‘There is little doubt that to the outside observer Christ assemblies would have resembled other associations.’<sup>58</sup>

A great strength of Young-Ho Park’s *Paul’s Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly* is to provide a well-argued account of Paul’s Christ-groups in such a context. Thus, having thoroughly explored the perhaps surprisingly ample functioning of the ἐκκλησία in the Greek city-states in the first century CE (pp. 5-61) and analogous phenomena among Judeans (pp. 62-97), he maintains (especially in pp. 98-150) that Paul used ἐκκλησία as a civic term to characterise his addressees in each city as the honourable assembly of God and to provide him with an authoritative platform from which to speak to this ἐκκλησία. He further argues that there were diplomatic nuances to the word ἐκκλησία that allowed Paul to locate his Christ-groups in a web of translocal relationships.

Writing four years before Park, van Kooten suggested that it transpires from Paul’s description of the Christian ἐκκλησία that its actual functioning mirrors the

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<sup>58</sup> Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches: Eight Lectures Delivered Before the University of Oxford* (London: Rivingtons, 1881), pp. 1-55; Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations*, p. 54.

operations of the civic assemblies. He nominated the following areas where this occurs (here mentioning only some of the evidence he cites):<sup>59</sup>

1. The ἐκκλησία is a place of instruction. Thus, just as Paul says in 1 Cor. 4.17 that he teaches (διδάσκω) his ways in Christ everywhere in every ἐκκλησία, so Dionysius of Halicarnassus claims that speakers in all the ἐκκλησίαι teach (διδάσκοντες) the people present (*Ant. rom.* 8.71.5);
2. The factions and divisions within the ἐκκλησία that are evident in 1 Cor. 11.18-19 mirror the same phenomena present in civic ἐκκλησίαι everywhere, particularly as fiery speakers threw them into confusion;
3. Paul's advocacy of the use of *ratio* ('reason') in the ἐκκλησία (e.g. 1 Cor. 14.19) and his warning against *mania* (e.g. 1 Cor. 14.23) parallel these characteristics in the civic assemblies;
4. The meetings of the Christ-followers ἐκκλησίαι were open to outsiders (1 Cor. 14.23), as were the civic assemblies; and
5. Just as Paul did not permit women to speak in the ἐκκλησία (1 Cor. 14.33-35, assuming this is genuine), so too women were generally not permitted to speak in the civic assemblies.

These are perhaps points of comparison rather connection, given that showing a chain of causation from political ἐκκλησίαι to Paul's ἐκκλησίαι in these areas would be difficult, since it would necessitate eliminating other factors. Nevertheless, they are extremely suggestive in situating the character and identity of Paul's groups within

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<sup>59</sup> Van Kooten, 'Church of God', pp. 540-547.

the wider web of Greek politics and social relations, and I will now propose a sixth area, overlooked by van Kooten but very much in the spirit of his proposal. In 2 Cor. 2.5-11 (and later in 7.12) Paul is speaking of some member of the Corinthian Christ-group who has committed an infraction (ἀδικία) and has received some unspecified punishment. In 2.6 Paul writes: ‘For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough’ (ικανὸν τῷ τοιοῦτῳ ἡ ἐπιτιμία αὕτη ἢ ὑπὸ τῶν πλειόνων). This reference to a punishment set by the majority must presuppose a vote by the group on some occasion where some were in favour of a particular punishment proposed for the man and some were against. This scenario takes us straight into the dynamics of the political ἐκκλησία as a voting assembly on contested issues in the Greek cities of the East and indicates the adoption of this key function by the Corinthian Christ-group. This would appear to illustrate the pro-*dēmokratia* dimension to the Pauline communities proposed by Korner,<sup>60</sup> although he has overlooked 2 Cor. 2.5-11 in his illuminating discussion.

As part of the wider movement in New Testament studies to construe the texts as responses to or even subversions of Rome and its imperial ideology, Richard Horsley has argued that the Pauline ἐκκλησία constitutes ‘a community of a new society alternative to the dominant imperial society.’<sup>61</sup> ‘The assembly’, he argues, ‘stands diametrically opposed to “the world” as a community of “saints”’.<sup>62</sup> Thus the members should keep away from Roman courts; maintain the assembly’s independence and autonomy; avoid the local cults that were essential to the cohesion of the Roman empire; by taking the eucharistic bread share in the body of Christ, not

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<sup>60</sup> Korner, *Origin*, pp. 202-213

<sup>61</sup> Horsley, ‘Paul’s Assembly as an Alternative Society’, p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

the body of citizens; not become a client to a member or members of the community acting as a patron or patrons; and contribute to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem that was ‘diametrically opposed to the tributary political economy of the empire.’<sup>63</sup>

Claims that Paul and other New Testament authors aim actively to subvert Roman values have been subject to sustained critique, generally, in my view, for good reason.<sup>64</sup> More relevant here, however, is the detailed and reasonably well founded critique that Korner makes to Horsley’s position as just discussed.<sup>65</sup> His own position is that Paul uses ἐκκλησία to designate ‘a permanent collective identity’ that ‘reflects civic ideology for the creation of an alternative society that is not counter-imperial, nor a trans-local parallel political organization.’ This view is in accord with the Pauline data. His next step, however, introduces a major difficulty. ‘Rather,’ he suggests, ‘Paul views each *ekklēsia* community as a trans-local Jewish voluntary association that was socially accessible to Greco-Roman participants.’<sup>66</sup>

This is plausible except for the word ‘Jewish’ and, indeed, for the entirety of his argument that Paul’s use of ἐκκλησία served to assist him to keep his communities closely integrated with ethnic Israel.<sup>67</sup> Korner discusses this issue under the heading of ‘supersessionism’, meaning whether ‘the promises and covenants that were made with the nation of Israel ... now allegedly belong to another group that is

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 230-236.

<sup>64</sup> See Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2008); and John Barclay, ‘Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul’, in his *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), pp. 363-387.

<sup>65</sup> Korner, *Origin*, pp. 182-188.

<sup>66</sup> Korner, *Origin*, p. 213.

<sup>67</sup> Korner, *Origin*, pp. 213-262.

not national Israel.’<sup>68</sup> I would prefer to recast this in terms of ‘ethnic’ rather than ‘national’ Israel to bring us closer to the historical realities of the first century CE. It is necessary to distinguish the historical question, what Paul thought of this issue, and the theological one, whether in fact Christianity has replaced ethnic Israel or, since this becomes a question for the present, the Jewish people (however one might describe their identity).

As to the historical question, Korner essentially takes the position very ably argued in recent years by the ‘Paul within Judaism Perspective’,<sup>69</sup> namely that Israel and the multi-ethnic church are ‘distinct yet covenantally related socio-religious entities’.<sup>70</sup> While a detailed treatment of this matter is not possible within the scope of this article, a few observations are in order. As already argued, Paul had joined a version of the Christ-movement that existed in defiance of Judean ethnic identity by allowing intimate table-fellowship (critically in the sharing of the one loaf and the one cup of the Lord’s Supper) with non-Judeans. In so doing a new form of trans-ethnic identity had come into the world that cannot be designated ‘Jewish’ (or, more accurately, ‘Judean’), a difference which was enhanced by this new movement imbibing features of the political assemblies of the Greek cities and of Greco-Roman voluntary associations. The result was a marked distinction in the identities of the multi-million and ancient Judean ethnic group on the one hand, and the new, tiny and

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<sup>68</sup> Korner, *Origin*, p. 17, citing Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2010), p.10.

<sup>69</sup> See Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (eds), *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First Century to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), and Mark D. Nanos, *Reading Paul Within Judaism: Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos Volumes 1-4* (Eugene, OR: 2017-2018).

<sup>70</sup> Korner, *Origin*, p. 19.

insignificant ἐκκλησίαι of the Christ-followers on the other.<sup>71</sup> Some other voluntary associations are known to have contained members of different ethnic groups,<sup>72</sup> and it is with these that the Christ-movement is most comparable. It is self-evident that a group that combines people of different ethnic identities cannot itself be ethnic in character. Perhaps members of other voluntary associations would have regarded it as strange that these Christ-followers had, uniquely in the Greek East, chosen to designate their groups as ἐκκλησίαι. Nevertheless, they would have recognized the affinities on many levels between their associations and those of the Christ-followers.

Paul himself recognised the strong boundary that his predecessors in the Christ-movement and he himself had erected vis-à-vis ethnic Israel. This is why their Christ-groups had been persecuted by Judeans. Paul's sense of the boundary also emerges with great clarity in Rom. 9.1-5 when he speaks with great sadness of his co-ethnics, the Israelites, 'to whom belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises, and to them belong the patriarchs' and from whom came the Messiah (Rom. 9.4-5). In other words, they will persist with all these aspects so redolent of ethnic identity, and Paul and his Christ-groups will continue in their separate identity. The distance between them is profound and agonising for Paul. Moreover, when Paul says to the Corinthians that they are 'the temple of God' (1 Cor. 3.16; 2 Cor. 6.16), this is not a way of connecting them with

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<sup>71</sup> See Steve Mason and Philip F. Esler, 'Judaean and Christ-Movement Identities: Grounds for a Distinction', *NTS* 63 (2017), pp. 493-515.

<sup>72</sup> Examples include a group of Sarapis devotees in Thessalonika (Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, No. 77, pp. 357-362), a group engaged in mysteries in Kyme (Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations*, No. 105, pp. 86-94), and a group of Anubiasts in Smyrna, *ibid.*, No. 136, pp. 298-302.

ethnic Israel, as Korner suggests,<sup>73</sup> but rather of offering them a very different and rival modality of God's presence. And when Paul describes the End, it is in the terms of 1 Thess. 4.13-18, not as a gathering of Judeans and non-Judeans to Jerusalem (the so-called 'restoration theology') as some 'Paul within Judaism' scholars suggest.<sup>74</sup> Yet later, however, in Rom. 11.28-29 Paul summarises the distinction but notes that 'the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable'. When the full number of non-Judeans have come in, 'all Israel will be saved' (Rom. 11.25-26). So Paul envisages Israel and the Christ-movement both continuing to the end when Israel will be saved; the Christ-movement has most certainly not replaced Israel. At the same time, Paul's outlook was indelibly shaped by the traditions of Israel and its understanding of God, and a close connection with Israelite scripture has continued among Christians in the two millennia since. The Jewish roots of Christianity are undeniable. Christians have a relationship with Jews that they have with no other religion. That is the historical dimension.

As to the theological dimension, in December 2015 an agency of the Roman Catholic Church, the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, pronounced a

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<sup>73</sup> Korner, *Origin*, p. 249.

<sup>74</sup> See Paula Fredrickson, 'Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2', *JTS* 42 (1991), pp. 532-564. For a detailed critique of the idea that Paul adopts 'restoration theology', see Philip F. Esler, 'The End-time in 1 Enoch, Paul and Matthew: Continuity and Discontinuity', in Meron Gebreananaye, Logan Williams, Francis Watson (eds), *Beyond Canon: Early Christianity and the Ethiopic Textual Tradition*, Library of New Testament Studies 643 (London: T&T Clark), pp. 9-22.



view similar to Paul's, from a nuanced and satisfying theological perspective.<sup>75</sup> Having adopted what Paul says in Romans 11, this document states: 'That the Jews are participants in God's salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery.'<sup>76</sup> On the basis of this understanding it later adds that 'the Catholic Church neither conducts not supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews.'<sup>77</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The development of an identity for the Christ-movement different and separate from its source in the Judean people in Judea—both those born in Judea and Greek-speaking Judeans from the diaspora living there—began as early as the 30s of the first century CE. This occurred when Greek-speaking Judean Christ-followers admitted into their groups non-Judeans who had been baptized in the Spirit and manifested charismatic phenomena. The development of that identity continued apace in the Greek cities where Paul carried his Gospel. His use of the word ἐκκλησία to describe Christ-groups individually and collectively, although it originated in Septuagintal usage adopted by the Christ-groups he persecuted, acquired connotations from the role of ἐκκλησία in the cities of the Greek East. This allowed the Christ-movement

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<sup>75</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, "'The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable": A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4).'

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 36.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 60.

to continue developing an identity distinct from that of ethnic Judeans and recognisably similar to the Greco-Roman voluntary associations. At the same time, within these Christ-groups numerous elements of Judean tradition continued to be utilised, although they acquired fresh meanings as they were removed from their ethnic source. Yet Paul did not think the Christ-movement would replace Israel, and contemporary theology endorsing the continuing validity of divine promises that were made to Israelites in the past to their spiritual, cultural and in some cases physical descendants, the Jewish people today, holds close to his thought.