

The Use of the Word Ἐκκλησία in the Septuagint

by Kyle Pope

The Greek Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (abbreviated Lxx) was widely read among Greek speaking Jews in the years leading up to Christ, and by Christians for generations after the first century. Inspired writers reflect this fact in their frequent quotations from the Lxx in the New Testament.¹ The Holy Spirit utilized this familiarity in the word choices and the use of words which New Testament writers employed to reveal the gospel in the pages of Scripture. As a result, much can be learned about the meaning of words and phrases in the New Testament, by considering the background of their use as illustrated in the Lxx.

The Law of Moses

The word ἔκκλησία, translated “church” in the New Testament, was used frequently in the Lxx. In this study we will survey all the uses of ἔκκλησία in the Lxx.² The first instances come in the Law of Moses. The assembly at Horeb, when the Lord spoke directly to the Israelites was called τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς ἔκκλησίας “on the day of the ἔκκλησία” (Deuteronomy 4:10). On this occasion God commanded Moses to Ἐκκλησιασον πρὸς με τὸν λαόν “gather [the verb form of ἔκκλησία] the people before Me” (Deuteronomy 4:10). It was on this occasion that God made His covenant with Israel (Deuteronomy 5:2) The Law will reference this important day by simply saying τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς ἔκκλησίας “on the day of the ἔκκλησία” (Deuteronomy 9:10; 18:16). The sacred assembly of Israel for worship and official business was the ἔκκλησιαν κυρίου “ἔκκλησία of the LORD.” The Law of Moses outlined very strict regulations about who could and could not εἰσελεύσεται “enter” ἔκκλησιαν κυρίου “the ἔκκλησία of the LORD.” One who was emasculated could not (Deuteronomy 23:1). One of illegitimate birth, and their offspring for ten generations could not (Deuteronomy 23:2). Ammonites, Moabites and their descendents for ten generations could not (Deuteronomy 23:3) and Edomites and their descendents for two generations could not (Deuteronomy 23:8). At the close of the book of Deuteronomy, the song of Moses was recited εἰς τὰ ὦτα πάσης ἔκκλησίας Ἰσραηλ “in the hearing of all of the ἔκκλησία of Israel” (Deuteronomy 31:30).

The Period of the Judges

After entering Canaan, this concept of the ἔκκλησία as a covenantal body is continued. When Joshua, as Moses had commanded assembles the people on Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, he reads the blessings, curses and commands of Moses also εἰς τὰ ὦτα πάσης ἔκκλησίας Ἰσραηλ “in the hearing of all of the ἔκκλησία of Israel” (Joshua 8:35 [Lxx 9:2f]).³ In the days of the Judges, when the concubine of the Levite was killed, all the leaders of the tribes came together and take their place ἐν τῇ ἔκκλησίᾳ τοῦ λαοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ “in the ἔκκλησία of the people of God” (Judges 20:2). Those who failed to come up to the ἔκκλησία were to be put to death (Judges 21:5).

¹ In some instances Old Testament quotations are closer to the Lxx than to the Hebrew text. For a thorough analysis of all texts see *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament: A Complete Survey* by Gleason L. Archer & G.C. Chirichigno (Moody Press: Chicago, 1983).

² There are some examples of the use of ἔκκλησία which are in some textual variants which are not cited in this study.

³ In some instances the chapter, verse and book divisions in the Septuagint differ from the that which is found in the Hebrew Bible, which most English translations follow. When these divisions differ the Septuagint (abbreviated Lxx) divisions are in brackets [].

The Kingdom Period

In the period of the kings, as David speaks to Goliath, he declares that all γνώσεται πᾶσα ἡ ἐκκλησία αὕτη “all this ἐκκλησία shall know” on that day, that τοῦ κυρίου ὁ πόλεμος “the battle is the Lord’s” (I Samuel 17:47 [Lxx I Kings 17:47]). In this instance the word seems to be more general in nature, including the company of Philistines together with the Israelites. The word can also refer to a small religious assembly. When Saul’s men are sent to capture David, they come to τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τῶν προφητῶν “the ἐκκλησία of the prophets,” over whom Samuel is acting as leader, and they themselves prophesied (I Samuel 19:20 [Lxx I Kings 19:20]). Before David brings the ark from Kirjath Jearim he speaks τῇ πάσῃ ἐκκλησίᾳ Ἰσραηλ “to all the ἐκκλησία of Israel,” who agrees to assist him (I Chronicles 13:2,4). When David announces to Israel that Solomon will build the temple, he stands up ἐν μέσῳ τῆς ἐκκλησίας “in the midst of the ἐκκλησία” (I Chronicles 28:2). On this occasion he charges them to be faithful κατὰ πρόσωπον πάσης ἐκκλησίας κυρίου καὶ ἐν ὧσιν θεοῦ ἡμῶν “in the sight of all the ἐκκλησία of the Lord and in the hearing of our God” (I Chronicles 28:8)⁴ Throughout David’s instructions to the people about Solomon they are referred to as the ἐκκλησία (I Chronicles 29:1,10,20).

Solomon took the πᾶσα ἡ ἐκκλησία “all the ἐκκλησία” to Gibeon where the ark was (II Chronicles 1:3). There the ἐκκλησία inquired of the Lord (II Chronicles 1:5). When the temple was completed, Solomon blessed the ἐκκλησία (I Kings 8:14, 22, 55 [Lxx III Kings 8:14, 22]; II Chronicles 6:3) then stands before the altar and prays ἔναντι πάσης ἐκκλησίας Ἰσραηλ “before all the ἐκκλησία of Israel” (II Chronicles 6:12,13). On this occasion the ἐκκλησία feasted for seven days (I Kings 8:65 [Lxx III Kings 65]; II Chronicles 7:8). After Solomon, πᾶσα ἡ ἐκκλησία Ἰσραηλ “all the ἐκκλησία of Israel” came before Rehoboam to appeal for relief from their burdens (II Chronicles 10:3).

During the time of Jehoshaphat, he stands ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ Ἰουδα “in the ἐκκλησία of Judah” in prayer to God (II Chronicles 20:5). After he prays, a prophet stands up ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ “in the ἐκκλησία” and urges them to follow Jehoshaphat (II Chronicles 20:14). When Joash is crowned, πᾶσα ἐκκλησία Ἰουδα “all the ἐκκλησία of Judah” made a covenant with him in the house of God (II Chronicles 23:3). When Hezekiah restored sound worship in Judah, the ἐκκλησία laid their hands on the male goats of the sin offering (II Chronicles 29:23). As the offerings were made the ἐκκλησία “worshipped” with singers and trumpeteers (II Chronicles 29:28). Having consecrated themselves, the ἐκκλησία brought their sacrifices totaling 70 bulls, 100 rams and 200 lambs for burnt offerings (II Chronicles 29:31,32). Under Hezekiah πᾶσα ἡ ἐκκλησία ἡ ἐν Ἱερουσαλημ “all the ἐκκλησία in Jerusalem” kept the Passover, as it had not been held since David and Solomon (II Chronicles 30:2,4,13,17,23, 24,25).

The prophets indicate a number of things about the ἐκκλησία. It was ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ κυρίου “in the ἐκκλησία of Lord” that land was divided by lot (Micah 2:5). When Israel is urged to repent, Joel urges them to ἀγιάσατε ἐκκλησίαν “consecrate ἐκκλησία” (Joel 2:16). Clearly the ἐκκλησία held a sacred import. Ἐκκλησία is used synonymously with the word θεραπείαν which is literally a “service” (Joel 2:15). When Babylon conquers Jerusalem and destroys the temple, Jeremiah declares that those whom God had commanded μὴ εἰσελθεῖν “not to enter” had come εἰς ἐκκλησίαν σου “into your [i.e. God’s] ἐκκλησία” (Lamentations 1:10). This may reflect an association of the place of ἐκκλησία with the ἐκκλησία itself.

⁴ The Hebrew text calls as witness “all of Israel” and “the congregation of the LORD,” which may illustrate the fact that that not all who dwelt in Israel were considered part of the ἐκκλησία of the LORD.

Books of Poetry

In the books of poetry, Job in the midst of his sorrow says ἔστηκα δὲ ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ κεκραγῶς “I have stood in the ἐκκλησία crying” (Job 30:28). In the Psalms, praise occurs ἐν μέσῳ ἐκκλησίας “in the midst of the ἐκκλησία,” (Psalm 22:22 [Lxx 21:23]) and ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ μεγάλη “in the great ἐκκλησία” (Psalm 22:25 [Lxx 21:26]). The Psalmist avoids the ἐκκλησίαν πονηρευομένων “ἐκκλησία of evildoers” (Psalm 26:5 [Lxx 25:5]). The Psalmist will give thanks ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ πολλῇ “in the great ἐκκλησία” (Psalm 35:18 [Lxx 34:18]). The Psalmist declares his willingness to proclaim God’s lovingkindness and truth to the ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ μεγάλη “great ἐκκλησία” (Psalm 40:10 [Lxx 39:10]). When ἐκκλησία is used in the plural it may refer to smaller assemblies of each tribe. The Psalmist calls upon the reader to bless God in the ἐν ἐκκλησίαις “in the ἐκκλησίαι” (Psalm 68:26-27 [Lxx 67:27-28]). Or, it may refer to the repeating assemblies of the “great ἐκκλησία.” The Psalmist promises to bless the Lord ἐν ἐκκλησίαις “in the ἐκκλησίαι” [Psalm 26:12 Lxx 25:12]). The heavens praise God’s wonders and faithfulness ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ἁγίων “in the ἐκκλησία of the saints” (Psalm 89:5 [Lxx 88:6]). The Psalmist admonishes man to exalt God ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ λαοῦ “in the ἐκκλησία of people” (Psalm 106:32). The Psalmist charges Israel to worship God in the ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ὁσίων “in the ἐκκλησία of the saints” (Psalm 149:1). In the book of Proverbs, when the wise man warns against adultery in the book of Proverbs, he foresees a time when regret will overwhelm the sinner, as they realize they have come to κακῶ ἐν μέσῳ ἐκκλησίας καὶ συναγωγῆς “ruin in the midst of the ἐκκλησία and συναγωγή⁵” (Proverbs 5:14).

Post-Exile

When the exiles return, as Ezra prays a συνήχθησαν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀπὸ Ἰσραὴλ ἐκκλησία πολλή σφόδρα, ἄνδρες καὶ γυναῖκες καὶ νεανίσκοι “a very large ἐκκλησία of men, women and children from Israel gathered to him” (Ezra 10:1 [Lxx II Esdras 10:1]). When they realize that many had taken pagan wives a proclamation to gather in Jerusalem is issued. Whoever refused to assemble διασταλήσεται ἀπὸ ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἀποικίας “would be separated from the ἐκκλησία of the settlement” (Ezra 10:8 [Lxx II Esdras 10:8]). As the people gather together, Ezra declared to the people that they must put away their pagan wives and the πᾶσα ἡ ἐκκλησία “all the ἐκκλησία” agrees to do as Ezra has said (Ezra 10:12 [Lxx II Esdras 10:12]). Nehemiah, in accordance with the Mosaic law, recognizes that μὴ εἰσέλθωσιν Ἀμμωνῖται καὶ Μωαβῖται ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ θεοῦ “Moabites and Ammonites were not to enter the “ἐκκλησία of God” (Nehemiah 13:1 [Lxx II Esdras 23:1]). On the return from exile, Ezra reads the book of the Law ἐνώπιον τῆς ἐκκλησίας “before the ἐκκλησία” and the entire kept the feast of tabernacles (Nehemiah 8:2, 17 [Lxx II Esdras 18:2,17]). The entire ἐκκλησία after the return from exile was 42,360 (Ezra 2:64 [Lxx II Esdras 2:64]; Nehemiah 7:66 [Lxx II Esdras 17:66]). When Nehemiah realizes that the Israelites were charging usury from their brethren he calls a ἐκκλησίαν μεγάλην “great ἐκκλησία” to rebuke them, and the εἶπεν πᾶσα ἡ ἐκκλησία Ἀμην “all the ἐκκλησία said ‘Amen’” to his appeal (Nehemiah 5:7,13 [Lxx II Esdras 15:7,13]).

⁵ Συναγωγή was used synonymously with ἐκκλησία in the Lxx to refer to religious assemblies of the Jews. By the first century συναγωγή referred to an assembly and the place of the assembly. In the New Testament, while a congregation of Christians was most often called an ἐκκλησία, it could also be called a συναγωγή (James 2:2). While in the New Testament ἐκκλησία always refers to the assembly itself, after the New Testament ἐκκλησία, like συναγωγή referred to the assembly and the place of assembly. After the New Testament as well, a συναγωγή was exclusively a Jewish assembly, while an ἐκκλησία was exclusively a Christian assembly.

Ἐκκλησία Word Family

Two other words in the ἐκκλησία family are found in the Septuagint that are not in the New Testament: ἐκκλησιάζω the verb form “to call an ἐκκλησία” and ἐκκλησιαστής the noun of agency “one who speaks to the ἐκκλησία.” The most common name of the book of Ecclesiastes is drawn from the Septuagint’s title, and the reference throughout the book to the “preacher” (Ecclesiastes 1:2,12; 7:28; 12:8,9, 10). The verb form occurs when the people are called before the tabernacle for the consecration of Aaron and his sons: καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν συναγωγὴν ἐκκλησίασον ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν τῆς σκηνῆς τοῦ μαρτυρίου “and all the συναγωγὴ was called to an ἐκκλησία at the door of the tabernacle of testimony” (Leviticus 8:3). The verb is used when God tells Moses ἐκκλησίασον τὴν συναγωγὴν “call the συναγωγὴ to an ἐκκλησία” (Numbers 20:8). It is on this occasion that Moses presumptuously strikes the rock bringing forth water at Kadesh, yet is himself condemned not to enter Canaan, because, as the Lord tells him οὐκ ἐπιστεύσατε ἀγίασαι με ἐναντίον υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ “you did not believe me to honor me before the children of Israel” (Numbers 20:12). The verb is used when the Lord commanded the gathering at Horeb, on the occasion when He spoke from the cloud and fire to the Israelites, He commands Moses Ἐκκλησίασον πρὸς με τὸν λαόν “call to ἐκκλησία the people before Me” (Deuteronomy 4:10). This occasion, as noted above, was then known of simply as τῆ ἡμέρα τῆς ἐκκλησίας “on the day of the ἐκκλησία” (Deuteronomy 4:10). In connection with the command that the people were to gather every seven years for the reading of the Law, the verb was used. God commands ἐκκλησιάσας τὸν λαόν, τοὺς ἄνδρας καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας καὶ τὰ ἔκγονα καὶ τὸν προσήλυτον τὸν ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ὑμῶν “call to ἐκκλησία the people: the men and women and their offspring and the proselyte⁶ in your cities” (Deuteronomy 31:12). When Moses called an assembly of the leaders of the tribes in order to read the Law to them, he uses the verb saying ἐκκλησιάσατε πρὸς με τοὺς φυλάρχους ὑμῶν καὶ τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους ὑμῶν καὶ τοὺς κριτὰς ὑμῶν καὶ τοὺς γραμματοεισαγωγεῖς ὑμῶν “call to ἐκκλησία before me the leaders of the tribes and the elders and the judges and the court-scribes” (Deuteronomy 31:28). Moses calls heaven as his witness that he had taught them God’s word. The verb is used when “David called out to ἐκκλησία all Israel” upon the return of the ark (I Chronicles 13:5). Finally, the verb is used when a fast is called to pray for deliverance from the edict to kill the Jews. Esther sends a message to Mordecai, saying ἐκκλησίασον τοὺς Ἰουδαίους τοὺς ἐν Σούσοις καὶ νηστεύσατε ἐπ’ ἑμοῖ “call to ἐκκλησία the Jews in Susa and fast for me” (Esther 4:16).

⁶ Προσήλυτον means literally, “one who has arrived at a place, a sojourner,” but in latter usage referred to “one who has come over to Judaism, a convert, a proselyte” (Liddell & Scott).

Conclusion

It is evident from the use of ἐκκλησία in the Lxx that the word held a deep significance for Greek-speaking Jews. Although an ἐκκλησία could be merely a crowd of people (I Samuel 17:47 [Lxx I Kings 17:47]) or an assembly of “evil-doers” (Psalm 26:5 [Lxx 25:5]), the “ἐκκλησία of the LORD” was the covenantal assembly of Israel (Deuteronomy 4:10). This body, when assembled, worshipped God (II Chronicles 29:28,31,32), appealed to God (II Chronicles 20:5), repented to God (Joel 2:16), and made choices for the nation as whole (I Chronicles 13:2,4; Ezra 10:12 [Lxx II Esdras 10:12]). To stand “in the midst of the ἐκκλησία” was a significant responsibility (I Chronicles 28:2; II Chronicles 20:5). To face shame before the ἐκκλησία was to be avoided (Proverbs 5:14). Not all who dwelt among the Israelites could enter the ἐκκλησία (Deuteronomy 23:1-3, 8). To fail to come together in the ἐκκλησία was a serious breach of duty (Judges 21:5; Ezra 10:8 [Lxx II Esdras 10:8]). Although the ἐκκλησία could include men, women and children (Ezra 10:1 [Lxx II Esdras 10:1]), there is no example of a woman addressing what the Lxx calls the ἐκκλησία.