Why Did the Early Christians Call Themselves ἡ ἐκκλησία?

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It is argued that ἐκκλησία was first used by the Hellenists, probably in Jerusalem, and that it was chosen because of its strong background in the LXX. This raises the issue of why ἐκκλησία was chosen rather than συναγωγή, which occurs over twice as often in the LXX. The case is put that ἐκκλησία was chosen because συναγωγή was already in use by Jewish communities as a designation for their groups and their buildings. This view has not been argued for in detail, and the implications of this choice have not been fully explored. Through the use of ἐκκλησία the Hellenists could express their continuity with the OT ‘assembly’ of the people of God and could also distinguish themselves from other Jewish communities, without making the claim that they alone were the heirs of that people.

Keywords: ἐκκλησία, συναγωγή, assembly, self-designations, the Hellenists, Jerusalem

1. When and Where was ἐκκλησία First Used as a Self-designation?

ἐκκλησία is used as a self-designation or label 114 times in the NT, with the meaning of ‘assembly’, ‘gathering’ or ‘community’.1 It has often been argued that ἐκκλησία was first used as a self-designation in Jerusalem by the Hellenists who are first referred to in Acts 6.1. The Jerusalem ‘Hellenists’ are best understood as Jewish Christians who spoke only Greek and understood little or no Aramaic, in contrast to the ‘Hebrews’ who spoke Aramaic as their mother tongue as well as at least some Greek. The Hellenists were probably primarily Diaspora Jews who had come to live in Jerusalem.2 These linguistic

1 See BDAG, 303-4.
differences led the two groups to worship separately and to develop significantly different emphases in their theology and practice.\(^3\)

We have good grounds for the historicity of the Hellenists. Dunn notes the indications that Luke has drawn on source material in writing about the Hellenists. He notes, for example, as four of thirteen points,\(^4\) that Luke is unlikely to have introduced the notes of dissension between Hebrews and Hellenists without some source, that since Luke is not interested in five of the seven people named in Acts 6.5 they probably came to him from a source, that the opposition to Stephen comes from other Hellenists (see \(^9\) 6.9-14) not the high priestly authorities as in Acts 3–5, and that ‘various linguistic peculiarities suggest a vocabulary provided by others’.\(^5\) Acts 6.9 with its reference to a synagogue\(^6\) for those who returned to Jerusalem from the Diaspora also supports the existence of the Jewish Christian Hellenists in Jerusalem.\(^7\)

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3 See also Acts 8.1; 11.19–21.
4 See Dunn, Beginning, 243–4; see also p. 256.
5 Dunn, Beginning, 244; with regard to vocabulary, for example, the only time the apostles are called ‘the twelve’ in Acts is in 6.2, ‘full of the Spirit’ is only found in this material (6.3, 5; 11.24) and \(\chi\rho\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\) is characteristic of it (6.8; 7.10, 46; 11.23). See also Barrett, Acts, 1.305, who notes that Luke here follows a ‘fresh tradition’ and concludes that Luke ‘did not invent the fact that in the early years in Jerusalem there were Greek-speaking Jews who became Christians’.
With regard to the use of ἐκκλησία by the Jerusalem Hellenists, Paul refers to his activity as a persecutor in Gal 1.13, 1 Cor 15.9 and Phil 3.6 and in the first two passages he says he persecuted ‘the assembly of God (ἡ ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ)’ while in Phil 3.6 he simply says he persecuted ‘the assembly’. Roloff suggests that in speaking of ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ, Paul ‘takes up the self-designation of the early Jerusalem church as “the church of God”, … [O]ne may proceed with the assumption that ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ (qē’al ‘el) was first a self-designation of the early community coming into existence after Easter’. A number of other scholars agree that here Paul is citing an existing way in which the Christians in Jerusalem whom Paul persecuted referred to themselves. While it is hard to say that the exact phrase ‘ἡ ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ’ was being used prior to Paul, since in Phil 3.6 he simply writes of being a persecutor of ‘the assembly’, that Paul uses ἡ ἐκκλησία when talking about his activity as a persecutor suggests he is recalling a designation used by the group he persecuted.

Galatians 1.22 reinforces the likelihood that ἐκκλησία was first used as a self-designation in Jerusalem and Judea. There we read: ‘and I was still unknown by sight to the assemblies of Judea that are in Christ (ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῆς Ἰουδαίας ταῖς ἐν Χριστῷ’). Paul is referring here to a time three years after his Damascus Road experience (Gal 1.18), and so to a very early period. As

9 See Schmidt in TDNT 3.516; J. Hainz, EKKLESIA. Strukturen paulinischer Gemeinde-Theologie und Gemeinde-Ordnung (Biblische Untersuchungen 9; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1972) 236, 251; H. Merklein, ‘Die Ekklesia Gottes. Der Kirchenbegriff bei Paulus und in Jerusalem’, Studien zu Jesus und Paulus (WUNT 43; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987) 301–2; W. Krauss, Das Volk Gottes. Zur Grundlegung der Ekklesiologie bei Paulus (WUNT 85; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1996) 112; M. Hengel and A. M. Schwemer, Paul between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 83; E. W. Stegemann and W. Stegemann, The Jesus Movement: A Social History of its First Century (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999) 262; A. du Toit, ‘Paulus Oecumenicus: Interculturality in the Shaping of Paul’s Theology’, NTS 55 (2009) 133. U. Schnelle, Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 84, 114 does not think that the pre-Christian Paul persecuted Jewish Christian Hellenists in Jerusalem and so Paul’s use of ἐκκλησία of those he persecuted would not be evidence for the use of the term in Jerusalem. Schnelle argues for this primarily on the basis of Gal 1.22: ‘I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea’. However, Gal 1.22 may indicate that Paul only persecuted Hellenists who then fled beyond Judea (Dunn, Beginning, 275), or it may be that there was ‘a persecution within Judea, directed by Saul/ Paul but involving minimal face-to-face contact with those affected’ (Dunn, Beginning, 275; see also 276–8; M. Hengel, The Pre-Christian Paul [London: SCM, 1991] 72–9; Hengel and Schwemer, Paul, 35–8). Hence Paul could say he was unknown by sight there. We have no reason then to doubt that Paul persecuted Hellenists in Jerusalem.
10 Schnelle, Apostle Paul, 560 n. 4 notes that ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ ‘is only found in Paul...and in literature dependent on him’ (with references); but my argument does not depend on the exact phrase ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ being used by the Hellenists.
Dunn notes, this passage implies that ‘Paul’s usage was not original to him or to his mission’. That in these four passages Paul chose to use ἐκκλησία rather than ‘the saints’, or ‘the brothers and sisters’, suggests the origin of the term in pre-Pauline Christianity and that ἐκκλησία was applied to the Jerusalem ‘assembly’ and to those in Judea.

The first time Luke uses ἐκκλησία is in Acts 5.11 of the assembly in Jerusalem; he then uses it of the ‘congregation in the wilderness’ in Stephen’s speech in Acts 7.38. The assembly in Jerusalem is spoken of in Acts 8.1, 3; 11.22; 12.1, 5; 15.4, 22 (and probably in 18.22), sometimes using the actual phrase, ‘the assembly in Jerusalem’ (Acts 8.1; 11.22). Further, in Acts 9.31 we read of ‘the assembly/church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria’ and from 11.26 onwards Luke speaks of the assembly in Antioch (11.26; 13.1; 14.27; 15.3) and elsewhere. Thus, at first, Luke associates ἐκκλησία with Jerusalem, and the surrounding region. This could be anachronistic, but given that Paul also uses ἐκκλησία of Jerusalem and Judea with reference to a very early time, this is confirmation that the term applied to an early, pre-Pauline period.

Several points suggest that the term originated with the Hellenists in particular. First, it seems likely that Paul persecuted the Hellenists rather than all of the earliest Christians, and so he is recalling an early designation of the Hellenists when speaking of his persecution. Secondly, the Hellenists are first mentioned in Acts 6.1, and as we have noted Luke first uses ἐκκλησία in Acts 5.11, and only regularly from Acts 8.1 onwards (recall that very little time elapses between Acts 6.1 and 8.1), so this again is in keeping with the Hellenists developing the term. Finally, we have no evidence for an underlying Aramaic term; the designation seems to have first emerged as the Greek term ἐκκλησία, rather than this being a translation of an earlier

11 Dunn, Beginning, 600. Note also 1 Thess 2.14.
12 R. I. Pervo, Acts (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 134 n. 83 thinks this with regard to Acts 5.11.
13 That Luke does not use ‘the assembly’ until Acts 5, and really only regularly from Acts 8 onwards, suggests it was not used in the very earliest days, but that after the passage of some time it was used in Jerusalem (as confirmed by Paul’s usage) and then elsewhere; see J. A. Fitzmyer, ‘The Designations of Christians in Acts and their Significance’, Unité et diversité dans l’Église. Texte officiel de la Commission Biblique Pontificale et travaux personnels des Membres (ed. Commission Biblique Pontificale; Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1989) 231.
15 See Dunn, Beginning, 274–8.
Aramaic designation. This evidence is in keeping with the term originating with the Hellenists, who are clearly associated with Jerusalem in Acts 6.

2. Why Did the Hellenists Call Themselves ἡ ἐκκλησία?

The use of ἡ ἐκκλησία, a term used in the LXX of ‘the assembly’ of Israel as we will see, clearly expresses the Hellenists’ theological conviction that their group was in continuity with that assembly of Yahweh. As Dunn notes, that it was first used in Jerusalem ‘implied the special status of the Jerusalem church as the focus and conduit of this continuity with the assembly of Yahweh and Israel’. But can we say more about why the Hellenists called themselves ἡ ἐκκλησία?

First, Roloff thought ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ could be the translation of יהושע, which he thought was attested in apocalyptic Judaism as a term for the eschatological company of God, as evidenced by 1QM 4.10 and 1QS a 2.4. Roloff thought this would explain why the NT used ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ rather than the LXX’s ἐκκλησία υφήλιου (a translation of ריכוז יושע); the source of the NT’s usage was not the LXX but apocalyptic Judaism. However, it is more likely that Paul preferred ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ over ἐκκλησία υφήλιου because the latter would have been confusing with regard to the referent of υφήλιος. To ensure that the rich element of continuity with the OT and its use of ‘the assembly of Yahweh/the Lord’ was preserved, υφήλιος would need to be taken to refer to Yahweh, yet apart from places where he quotes Scripture, Paul always uses υφήλιος to refer to Christ. If Paul and others before him did find a helpful precedent in the use of ἐκκλησία υφήλιου in the LXX, they substituted θεοῦ for υφήλιος, and in so doing emphasised the initiative and centrality of God in their experience of ‘gathering’. We can suggest that it was more straightforward to use ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ, which also continued to underline continuity with the OT assembly, without introducing confusion about to whom υφήλιος referred.

16 See du Toit, ‘Paulus’, 139 n. 100.
17 J. D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 539.
18 Roloff, ‘Ἐκκλησία’, 411. He understands יהושע as a terminus technicus based on Qumran usage, but this seems very unlikely. See also K. P. Donfried, ‘The Assembly of the Thessalonians: Reflections on the Ecclesiology of the Earliest Christian Letter’, Ekklesiologie des Neuen Testaments: Für Karl Kertelge (ed. R. Kampling and T. Söding; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1996) 405. Fitzmyer, ‘Designations’, 231 similarly notes the use of יהושע in 1QM 4.10 and comments: ‘A Palestinian Jewish religious use of qahal, even implying a relation to the OT expression of “the congregation of the people of God” (Judg 20.2), is thus seen as the background to the Christian use of the Greek ekklesía’. However, although the use of qahal and then ἐκκλησία in the LXX is very important, there is no reason to argue for the influence of usage at Qumran here.
19 See Dunn, Theology, 244–52 with usage on 244 n. 47.
20 See Dunn, Theology, 538.
of Jesus for the assembly could then be spelt out on some occasions using different language.\textsuperscript{21} We do not need to invoke the usage of \textit{לאלהק} in apocalyptic Judaism in order to explain NT usage of \textit{ἐκκλησία} τοῦ θεοῦ. Further, we now know that \textit{לאלהק} is not actually found at \textit{QSa} and so is very weakly attested at Qumran, and Schrage notes that \textit{ἐκκλησία} has no clear eschatological colouring in the \textit{LXX}.\textsuperscript{22}

Secondly, did the Hellenists choose \textit{ἐκκλησία} because of its use in the Greco-Roman city? The term was used from the fifth century BCE onwards for the political assembly of citizens of the polis, who met to make a range of decisions affecting their common life.\textsuperscript{23} \textit{ἐκκλησία} was also a designation for an association, although the term was not among the most common designations for these associations.\textsuperscript{24} This meant that it had a certain familiarity. Becker, for example, argues that this usage was a crucial factor in the adoption of \textit{ἐκκλησία} by Christians.\textsuperscript{25} With regard to Paul’s usage of \textit{ἐκκλησία}, we cannot rule out that the term had political overtones for Paul which enhanced its use, although in Paul’s writings there is no explicit discussion of the alternative ideas associated with the Greco-Roman usage of \textit{ἐκκλησία}, Paul never associates the word with other political language, and he sets up no explicit antithesis of one \textit{ἐκκλησία} against another—all of which suggest that its Greco-Roman meaning was not critical for its adoption by Paul.\textsuperscript{26}

However, in the case of the Hellenists, it is very unlikely that the term’s political overtones were significant since in their context in Jerusalem there was no civic \textit{ἐκκλησία};\textsuperscript{27} in Jerusalem the term has much stronger biblical and textual connotations, rather than contemporary and political ones. So while it seems clear that Paul took the use of \textit{ἐκκλησία} over from the Hellenists and in his contexts it may take on additional political overtones (although there is surprisingly no evidence for this), taking the \textit{Jerusalem} context of the Hellenists seriously means that we cannot explain its adoption there by invoking the usage of \textit{ἐκκλησία} in the Greco-Roman polis. In arguing that the usage of \textit{ἐκκλησία} in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} See for example Rom 16.16; Gal 1.22; 1 Thess 1.1; 2.14.
\item \textsuperscript{22} W. Schrage, ‘ “Ekklesia” und “Synagoge”. Zum Ursprung des urchristlichen Kirchenbegriffs’, \textit{ZTK} 60 (1963) 185.
\item \textsuperscript{25} J. Becker, \textit{Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 427.
\item \textsuperscript{26} See also Dunn, \textit{Theology}, 537.
\item \textsuperscript{27} For discussion see E. Schürer, \textit{The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ}, vol. 2 (rev. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 183, 197–8, 204–6.
\end{itemize}
theGreco-Roman city was a crucial factor in its adoption by Christians, Becker thus overlooks the strong connection of the term in Christian use with Jerusalem and Judea.

It is more likely that the use of ἐκκλησία in the LXX was the most crucial factor. As we have noted, through the use of ἐκκλησία they could express their continuity with the OT people of God. But given that the usage in the LXX seems to have been crucial, the key question becomes why these early Christians chose ἐκκλησία rather than συναγωγή. For as I will now seek to show, both terms are regularly found in the LXX with reference to the ‘assembly’ or ‘gathering’ of the people of Israel. Why was ἐκκλησία the term that was chosen by the Hellenists? But first I will discuss LXX usage.

3. Jewish Usage

Two Hebrew terms—לָהָק and הָדֵע concern us here. לָהָק has the basic meaning of ‘assembly’ and can be used of assemblies of a variety of kinds, including the assembly of the people of Israel. הָדֵע is best translated as ‘congregation’, and is regularly used of the people of Israel during the wilderness wanderings. לָהָק is translated in the LXX by ἐκκλησία times out of a total of occurrences; לָהָק is never translated by ἐκκλησία in its occurrences in Genesis–Numbers, with συναγωγή always being used on these occasions. הָדֵע is generally translated with συναγωγή in the LXX, and is never translated by ἐκκλησία.

Marshall comments, ‘Where qahal stresses more the idea of assembly, ‘edah denotes the group of people who may be assembled, but the two words can in fact be used with no real difference in meaning’. In this regard note Prov 5.14. ‘Now I am at the point of utter ruin in the public assembly (הָדֵעְולָהָק; LXX ἐκκλησίας καὶ συναγωγῆς)’. The two Hebrew terms are used together, and they seem synonymous; the LXX uses both Greek terms in which we are interested, again suggesting they can be considered as synonymous. In Ps 40.9–10 (LXX 39.10–11) לָהָק occurs twice; on the first occasion it is translated by ἐκκλησία, in the second by συναγωγή, which again indicates that the two Greek terms can be regarded as synonymous. The very close relationship between the two Greek terms is also indicated by the occurrence in the LXX of each noun with the verb related to the other noun. Thus ἐκκλησία and συνάξω are found together in 1

30 An exception is found, for example, in Judg 14.8, where לָהָק is translated by συστροφή.
Chapters 13.2; 2 Chronicles 30.13; Ezra 10.1 and Joel 2.16;33 συναγωγή and ἐκκλησία are found together in Lev 8.3 and Num 20.8.

As we have noted, in the LXX ἐκκλησία translates 73 times and is never used to translate 72. By contrast, συναγωγή translates 75 times (always in Genesis-Numbers and generally in the Prophets) and 130 times. The different translations of 73 seem to result from the idiosyncrasies of different translators.34 In total, ἐκκλησία is used 100 times in the LXX and συναγωγή 221 times.

ἐκκλησία is used in a range of expressions. The strongest sense behind ἐκκλησία is that of 'the act of assembly' or 'gathering', or an actual meeting together of people.35 The phrase 'the day of the assembly (ἡμέρα ἐκκλησίας)', when God spoke to Israel at the mountain, is found in Deut 4.10, the first use of ἐκκλησία in the LXX.36 'The assembly' can be qualified in a variety of ways relating to God: 'the assembly of the Lord' (Deut 23.1, 2, 3 [×2], 8; 1 Chron 28.8; Mic 2.5), 'the assembly of God' (Neh 13.1),37 and 'the assembly of the Most High' (Sir 24.2).38 'The assembly' can also be qualified by expressions relating to God's people. We regularly find the phrase 'all the assembly of Israel',39 'the assembly of the people of God' (Judg 20.2), 'all the assembly of Judah' (2 Chron 23.3; 30.24, 25), and 'all the assembly in Jerusalem' (2 Chron 30.2).

The simple phrase 'the assembly' is also regularly found,40 with the plural 'in assemblies (ἐν ἐκκλησίαις)' occurring in Ps 25.12 and 67.27 (LXX). ἐκκλησία can also be used of the 'assembly of the prophets' (1 Sam 19.20), the gathering of an army as it prepared for war (1 Sam 17.47; 2 Chron 28.14), an 'assembly of troops' (1 Macc 3.13), an 'assembly of evildoers' (Ps 25.5 LXX), and an 'assembly of a mob' (Sir 26.5).

33 ἐκκλησία and συνάγωγο are also found together in Did 9.4; see also K. Berger, 'Volkversammlung und Gemeinde Gottes. Zu den Anfängen der christlichen Verwendung von “ekklesia”', ZTC 73 (1976) 203.
34 Marshall, 'New Wine', 359; see also TDNT 7.802.
35 Its usage across the LXX is as follows: Deuteronomy; 9; Joshua: 1; Judges: 3; 1 Samuel: 2; 1 Kings: 4; 1 Chronicles: 8; 2 Chronicles: 24; Ezra: 5; Nehemiah: 6; Judith: 4; 1 Maccabees: 5; Psalms: 10; Proverbs: 1; Job: 1; Sirach: 13; Psalms of Solomon: 1; Micah: 1; Joel: 1; Lamentations: 1.
36 See also Deut 18.16; there is doubt about the text in Deut 9.10 and the Göttingen edition omits ἡμέρα ἐκκλησίας at the end of the verse.
37 In Neh 13.1 mss S and L read κυρίου against the other manuscripts, so there is some doubt about the phrase ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ here; see Fitzmyer, 'Designations', 230.
38 'Assembly of holy ones (ἐν ἐκκλησίαις ἁγίων)', where ἁγίων means angels, is found in Ps 88.6 (LXX); ἐκκλησία is used of an assembly for worship in Ps 21.23, 26.
39 See Deut 31.30; Josh 8.35; 1 Kings 8.14, 22, 55; 1 Chron 13.2; 2 Chron 6.3 (×2), 12, 13; 10.3; 1 Macc 4.59; Sir 50.13.
40 See Judg 21.5, 8; 1 Sam 17.47; 2 Chron 1.5; 29.23, 31, 32; 30.4, 17, 23; Neh 8.2; Jdt 6.16, 21; 7.29.

The phrase 'all the assembly' is found in 1 Chron 13.4, 29.1; 10.20 (×2); 2 Chron 1.3; 28.14; 29.26; 30.25; Ezra 2.64; 10.12, 14; Neh 5.13; 7.66; 8.17 and 'in the assembly' in 2 Chron 20.14; 1 Macc 2.56; Job 30.28; Sir 38.33.
Philo uses ἐκκλησία 23 times, 19 of which are references to Israel in the wilderness. He has a number of direct or indirect references to Deuteronomy 23,\(^{41}\) and also uses ἐκκλησία with reference to the Exodus (see Decal. 32, 45; Her. 251; Post. 143). While ἐκκλησία refers to an actual assembly or public meeting in some passages (Abr. 20; Decal. 32, 45; Her. 251; Prob. 138; Spec. 1.325; 2.44), in his references based on Deuteronomy 23 Philo has the congregation of Israel in view.\(^{42}\) The only place where ἐκκλησία refers to a local congregation is Virt. 108.\(^{43}\) There are also no eschatological connotations in Philo's use of the term.\(^{44}\)

Josephus uses ἐκκλησία 48 times. He uses the term of an assembly of Israel (Ant. 3.84, 188, 292, 300; 6.86; 9.250), of prophets (Ant. 6.222), of the army (Ant. 5.93), and of political assemblies of various sorts.\(^{45}\) He regularly uses phrases such as ‘calling the people together in assembly (συνεκκλήσας το πλῆθος εἰς ἐκκλησίαν)’, which recalls Greco-Roman usage,\(^{46}\) and at times he uses ἐκκλησία when the LXX has συναγωγή.\(^{47}\) This suggests that in his use of ἐκκλησία, Josephus is reflecting the fact that the term is well known in the Greco-Roman world, and so he is assisting his readers to understand events in Jewish history in terms that are familiar to them.

What do we conclude from this usage? Clearly, ἐκκλησία is a general word which does not refer to a particular type of assembly and so is not a technical term; the type or form of ‘assembly’ must be defined by the addition of further words, or by the context. Common usage includes speaking of Israel as ‘the assembly of the Lord’ or speaking of ‘all the assembly of Israel’. It does not have a particular eschatological reference.

As I have noted, συναγωγή is found 221 times in the LXX to speak of a ‘gathering’, ‘congregation’ or ‘assembly’, as a translation of πληθύνοντας and πληθύνοντας. It is used especially for the congregation of Israel’ (see, for example, Lev 8.3; Deut 5.22; 2 Chron 5.6), and in phrases like the ‘whole congregation of the sons of Israel’ (see Exod 12.3, 6; 47; 16.1–2, 6; 17.1; Lev 19.2; Num 1.2; 8.9). It is very closely associated with the covenant people in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers and in the Prophets.\(^{48}\)

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41 See Conf. 144 (x2); Deus 111; Ebr. 213 (x2); Leg. 3.8, 81 (x2); Migr. 69; Mut. 204; Post. 177; Somn. 2.184, 187; Spec. 1.325; Virt. 108; Five of these are direct quotations of Deut 23: Ebr. 213 (x2); Leg 3.81; Post. 177; Somn. 2.184.
42 See Du Toit, ‘Paulus’, 137.
44 See du Toit, ‘Paulus’, 137.
45 See Ant. 13.114, 216; 14.150; 16.135, 393; J.W. 4.162, 255. It can also be used of unofficial assemblies in J.W. 1.550, 666; 4.159.
46 See Ant. 12.164; see also 3.84, 300; 4.63, 142; 7.370; 9.8; 13.216. The only comparable expression in the LXX is found in Jdt 6.16.
47 Cf. Num 10.2 and Ant. 3.292; Num 16.2 and Ant. 4.22; Lev 8.3 and Ant. 3.188.
48 Many texts could be cited; see for example Exod 12.3, 6; 16.1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 22; Lev 4.13, 14, 15, 21; Num 1.2, 16, 18; 14.1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 27, 33–36; Deut 5.22; Isa 56.7–8; Ezek 37.10.
4. Why Did the Hellenists Choose ἐκκλησία Over Against συναγωγή?

Given this usage in the LXX, it seems clear that the Hellenists could have chosen either ἐκκλησία or συναγωγή as a self-designation for their meetings and for their group, in order to express their continuity with the OT ‘assembly’. Various explanations of the choice of ἐκκλησία over against συναγωγή have been offered. First, it has been suggested that the Hellenists chose ἐκκλησία rather than συναγωγή because of the way the former was used in the LXX. However, the two terms are more or less synonymous.49

Secondly, what about the use of either term with θεός or κυρίος? If the Hellenists wished to emphasize that they were a gathering ‘of God’, which term would they use? συναγωγή is found with θεός only in Ps 81.1 (LXX) where we read: ‘God stood in a gathering of gods (ὁ θεός ἔστη ἐν συναγωγῇ θεῶν)’. Here the reference is to the ‘council of God’ in heaven and not to an earthly ‘gathering’, ἐκκλησία θεοῦ is only found in Neh. 13.1: ‘it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God (ἐκκλησία θεοῦ)’. So neither term stands out with regard to its use with θεός.

When it comes to use with κυρίος, ἐκκλησία κυρίου is found seven times (Deut. 23.2, 3, 4 (x2), 9; 1 Chron 28.8; Mic 2.5), and συναγωγή κυρίου is also found seven times (Num 16.3; 20.4; 27.17; 31.16; Josh 22.16-17 (x2); in Num. 15.14 it is ἡ συναγωγή κυρίου), so there is almost nothing to choose between the terms in this regard.50 It seems unlikely then that a factor in the choice of ἐκκλησία over συναγωγή was the particular phrases in which either term was used in the LXX. As du Toit notes ‘there seems to be, theologically speaking, no convincing reason why the one was preferred to the other’.51

Thirdly, Schrage suggested that the early Christians did not adopt the term συναγωγή because of the particular associations of that term in contemporary Judaism, especially with regard to the centrality of the law and law observance in the contemporary Jewish ‘synagogue’.52 However, ἐκκλησία itself as a term is closely associated with the law in its use in the LXX (e.g. Deut 4.10; 9.10; 23.1,

49 H. J. Cadbury, ‘Note XXX: Names for Christians and Christianity in Acts’, The Beginnings of Christianitv Part 1. The Acts of the Apostles. Vol V Additional Notes to the Commentary (ed. K. Lake and H. J. Cadbury; London: Macmillan & Co., 1933) 387–8 suggests with regard to ἐκκλησία that it was ‘its LXX associations of dignity and of intimate relation with God rather than the usages of secular Greek, or any memory of etymology, that gave the term its appropriateness’. But this does not explain the use of ἐκκλησία over συναγωγή, since both terms had associations of ‘intimate relation[s] with God’, and if anything, since συναγωγή was used from Genesis–Deut 5.22, it was stronger in this regard.

50 See Schrage, Ekklesia’, 183.

51 Du Toit, ‘Paulus’, 139.

52 See Schrage, ‘Ekklesia’, 196–8; see also TDNT 7.829.
2, 3, 8; Josh 8.35; 1 Chron 28.8; Neh 8.2; 13.1). If the early Christians had wished to find a term for their ‘assembly’ that did not have strong connotations with regard to the centrality of the law, then we can suggest that they would have avoided ἐκκλησία altogether.

It seems much more likely that we should seek a simpler explanation for the Christian use of ἐκκλησία rather than συναγωγή. They adopted ἐκκλησία because the more prominent term in the LXX—συναγωγή—was already in use. While others have noted this view, it has not been argued for in detail, nor has all the evidence for this explanation been considered. In addition, the implications of this choice have not been fully explored.

But we should not think that συναγωγή was unattractive as a term for the Hellenists. συναγωγή was used in eschatological contexts in the LXX, in a way that ἐκκλησία was not (with the single exception of Joel 2.16). Thus in Ezek 37.10 συναγωγή is used: ‘And I prophesied just as he commanded me. And the breath came into them, and they lived and stood upon their feet, a very great gathering of other texts could be cited. The reason for this eschatological use in the LXX is not inherent in the meaning of συναγωγή but rather is caused by the fact that συναγωγή is used in the translations of the Prophets in the LXX, to the virtual exclusion of ἐκκλησία. We can suggest that such eschatological use of συναγωγή could have been a very positive feature of the word for the

53 See Berger, ‘Volksversammlung’, 184 and n. 92. See also Philo Post. 143; Her. 253; Decal. 32 (where ἐκκλησία is associated with Torah by Philo); Josephus Ant. 4.176–183, 309.
54 G. Strecker, Theology of the New Testament (New York/Berlin: de Gruyter; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 181 n. 8 comments with regard to the use of συναγωγή κυρίου: ‘Since, however, at the time of Paul this expression had already been practically monopolized by Hellenistic Judaism, the Christian community had to use the less precise εκκλησία’. However, I do not think that ἐκκλησία was any ‘less precise’. Note also K. Stendahl, ‘The Church in Early Christianity’, Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 167 with regard to the use of ἐκκλησία: ‘And, after all, the alternative συναγωγή was otherwise occupied’. See also McCready, ‘ΕΚΚΛΕΣΙΑ’.
56 See also Isa 56.8; Jer 38.4, 13; Ezek 38.4, 15; Ps. Sol. 17.43–44. Schrage, ‘Εκκλησία’, 186 notes that the lack of use of συναγωγή in the NT is made even more surprising by the fact that some of these verses, which use συναγωγή in an eschatological context, are actually quoted in the NT; thus Ezek 37.10 is quoted in Rev 11.11 and Isa 56.7 in Mark 11.17.
57 In the Prophets, ἐκκλησία is only found in Joel 2.16, Mic 2.5, and Lam 1.10. There are other uses of συναγωγή that may well have made the word very attractive to someone like Paul; see, for example, the phrase ‘συναγωγή ἐθνῶν’ in Gen 28.3; 35.11; 48.4; cf. Rom 16.4; see also Schrage, ‘Εκκλησία’, 184. However, that Paul does not use the term, despite such promising usage in the LXX, can be explained by its contemporary use by Jewish communities, as I will argue below.
Hellenists, adding force to the need to find an explanation for why they did not use it.

I will now seek to show that συναγωγή was already in use by contemporary Jewish communities and will suggest that this led the Hellenists to use the other term that was found in the LXX—ἐκκλησία.

4.1. Contemporary Jewish Communities were Already Using συναγωγή

While debate continues about the origin of the ‘synagogue’ building, it is clear that συναγωγή with the meaning of ‘gathering’ or ‘congregation’, was used before it had the sense of ‘building (in which we gather)’. συναγωγή with the sense of ‘congregation’ is found throughout the LXX including in later texts such as 1 Macc 2.42; 3.44; 7.12; 14.28; Sir 1.30; 4.7; 16.6; 21.9; 24.23; 41.18; 43.20; 45.18; 46.14, Sus 41, as well as in the Pseudepigrapha in texts such as T. Levi 11.5; Ps. Sol. 10.7; 17.16, 43–44. συναγωγή is not used for a place of assembly in the LXX or the Pseudepigrapha. While Philo uses συναγωγή with reference to a building as we will shortly see, he also use the term of ‘the congregation’ of Israel four times, in quotations of Num 27.16–17 in Agr. 44 and Post. 67. Four inscriptions from the Bosporus Kingdom, dating from 52 CE to the second century CE, call the congregation συναγωγή and the building προσευχή.

Alongside this Jewish use of συναγωγή for a ‘gathering’ or ‘congregation’, which is by far the earliest use and goes back to the LXX, we have the growing use of the term for a building. Around 40 CE Philo writes of Essenes calling their sacred places συναγωγαι: ‘For that day [the seventh] has been set apart to be kept holy and on it they abstain from all other work and proceed to sacred spots which they call synagogues (συναγωγαι). There, arranged in rows according to their ages, the younger below the elder, they sit decorously as befits the occasion with attentive ears’. Clearly συναγωγαι refers to ‘synagogue’ buildings

58 On the origin of the ‘synagogue’ see Binder, Temple Courts; A. Runesson, The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study (ConBNT 37; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001); B. Olsson and M. Zetterholm, eds. The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins until 200 CE (CBNT 39; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003); Catto, Reconstructing προσευχή was the earliest term used for ‘the building’, and hence for a physical ‘synagogue’, in the third century BCE in Egypt; see JIGRE 22.117 (246–221 BCE). On the range of terms used for the ‘synagogue’ building see Binder, Temple Courts, 91–154.

59 On συναγωγή see Schrage in TDNT 7.798–841; Binder, Temple Courts, 92–111.

60 Josephus writes of a ‘συναγωγή’ of books in Ant. 1.10 and of water in Ant. 15.346. He also uses the term of buildings as we will shortly see.

61 See IJO 1. BS 18 (52 CE); IJO 1. BS 5 (81 CE); IJO 1. BS 6 (late first–early second century CE [?]); IJO 1. BS 7 (first–second century CE); see D. Noy, A. Panayotov, and H. Bloedhorn, Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis. Vol. 1. Eastern Europe (TSAJ 101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 299–301, 260–83; BS 18 is from Phanagoria and BS 5–7 from Panticapaeum.

here; we have good reason to think that there were Essene communities in and around Jerusalem, so there could have been Essene ‘synagogues’ in this area.\footnote{63}

The Theodotos inscription (\textit{CJ J} 2.1404) uses \textit{συναγωγή} with the clear sense of a building, with reference to Jerusalem. Kee had suggested a mid- to late third-century CE date for this inscription,\footnote{64} but Kloppenborg has argued convincingly for a pre-70 CE dating.\footnote{65} The inscription describes Theodotos, who seems to have rebuilt and enlarged the synagogue, as ‘son of an archisynagōgos and grandson of an archisynagōgos’ and ends by speaking of the ‘synagogue’ ‘which his fathers founded (ἡν ἐθεμελίωσαν οἱ πατέρες [α]ὐτοῦ) with the elders and Simonides’.\footnote{66} The \textit{συναγωγή} building then was founded a number of decades prior to the time when the Theodotos inscription was written. Kloppenborg notes therefore that the inscription ‘attests a synagogue building in Jerusalem, probably constructed in the early first century C.E. or perhaps the latter part of the first century B.C.E.’\footnote{67}

Further, \textit{CJ ZC} 72 from Bernike, Cyrenaica, dated 55–56 CE, uses \textit{συναγωγή} of both the congregation and the building.\footnote{68} A little later, Josephus uses \textit{συναγωγή}
of a building in *Ant*. 19.300, 305 (Dora); *B.J.* 2.285, 289 (Caesarea); *B.J.* 7.44 (Antioch).\(^6^9\) The Gospels also give evidence for *συναγωγή* used of buildings (e.g. Mark 1.29; 3.1, 6; 12:38–39; Matt 23.6; Luke 7.5; 11.43; 20.46), as does Acts (18.7 and probably 6.9). Although it has been argued that this usage is anachronistic (particularly by Kee),\(^7^9\) this has not been generally accepted,\(^7^3\) and in a number of these passages *συναγωγή* clearly refers to a building.\(^7^2\) In others, such as Acts 13.43, the sense of ‘gathering’ or ‘community’ continues (cf. 13.14).

Binder concludes his discussion of this evidence.

*συναγωγή* came first to signify the larger congregation of Israel, then individual congregations, and, last of all, the buildings wherein the congregations met. Exactly when *συναγωγή* was undergoing the metonymic process is unclear. Given the numerous uses of this word for a building in the first century C.E., a dating of about a century earlier seems most likely for Syro-Palestine. Given the numerous uses of this word for a building in the first century C.E., though an earlier date cannot be ruled out.\(^7^5\)

With regard to Jerusalem and Judea then, it seems clear that by the 30s CE *συναγωγή* was regularly in use by Jewish communities of their ‘gathering’ or ‘congregation’ but almost certainly also of their buildings. Particular local evidence for this is the Theodotos inscription and Philo’s mention of Essene ‘synagogues’.

4.2. *The Choice Made by the Hellenists to Use ἐκκλησία*

I suggest that as time went on, a collective label with the meaning of ‘gathering’ or ‘community’ was needed by the early Jewish Christians—probably the

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\(^6^9\) On these see Binder, *Temple Courts*, 99–103, who argues that they reflect the situation pre-70 CE. C. Claussen, ‘Meeting, Community, Synagogue—Different Frameworks of Ancient Jewish Congregations in the Diaspora’, *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins until 200 C.E.* (ed. Olsson and Zetterholm) 151 n. 35 points out: ‘It is worth noticing that Josephus nearly always uses *συναγωγή* when he refers to synagogues in Israel. The only exception is the *προσευχή* in Tiberias (Vita 277, 280, 293)’. *Bellum Judaicum* was written in the mid-70s, *Antiquitates* in the mid-90s (see Kloppenborg, ‘Theodotos’, 253). Note that *B.J.* 7.44 refers to the second century BCE.


\(^7^2\) J. D. G. Dunn, ‘Did Jesus Attend the Synagogue?’, *Jesus and Archaeology* (ed. Charlesworth) 220.

\(^7^3\) Mark 12.39; Luke 7.5; 11.43; 20.46.

\(^7^4\) Binder, *Temple Courts*, 110–11. See also Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *Ancient Synagogue*, 54 who note that *συναγωγή* (when compared to *προσευχή*) ‘appears to have held the widest currency inside Palestine during the Second Temple period’. Note that *συναγωγή* is very rarely used for Christian communities; see T. Benj. 11.2–3; Ign. *Pol*. 4.2; Justin *Dial*. 63.5; see J. Lieu, ‘The Synagogue and the Separation of the Christians’, *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins until 200 C.E.* (ed. Olsson and Zetterholm) 193.
Hellenists—in order to speak of themselves as ‘a group’; this would simply be a linguistic necessity, and it was probably among the Hellenists that the sense of being a separate group, with an identity that was quite distinctive in comparison with the wider Jewish community, first developed. Of course, the Hellenists will still have seen themselves as within that wider Jewish community, and will have continued to think of themselves as Jews; I will suggest that those who chose to use the designation of ἐκκλησία saw themselves as part of two groups simultaneously—ἡ ἐκκλησία and ἡ συναγωγή. Given that the Jewish Christian Hellenists saw themselves as part of and in continuity with Israel, the most obvious place to look for a collective label with the meaning of ‘gathering’ was the LXX.\(^\text{74}\) I suggest that the strongest contender for a ‘collective group label’ in the LXX was συναγωγή. It was the most common way in the LXX of speaking of Israel ‘gathered together’. However, συναγωγή was already in use by ‘non-Christian’ Jews of their ‘gathering’, with the meaning of both ‘the community which gathers’ and ‘the building in which they gather’. Hence I suggest the Hellenists opted for ἐκκλησία—the somewhat less common term in the LXX, although still found quite extensively.

But why did the Hellenists in Jerusalem not use συναγωγή as well as and alongside the ongoing Jewish use of συναγωγή? They could certainly have done so, particularly by adding some form of additional designation. Recall Acts 6.9. ‘Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia’. We also have a number of examples of ‘named’ ‘synagogues’ in Rome; Lampe suggests that in the first century CE there were five such συναγωγαί including the συναγωγή of the Hebrews, and of the Vernaculi.\(^\text{75}\) Hence the Hellenists could have called themselves ἡ συναγωγή of the Lord Jesus Christ, or ἡ συναγωγή of the believers’ or some such label.

But as far as we are aware, this route was not taken, with Jas 2.2 being the single exceptional use of συναγωγή for a Christian assembly. It seems that ‘sharing’ συναγωγή was regarded as problematic in a way that sharing the use of some other self-designations (such as ‘brothers and sisters’) was not.\(^\text{76}\) It is relatively easy to see why this was the case. Given that συναγωγή came to function as a public and proper name in a vicinity for both a group and a building, it would be

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\(^{74}\) The argument of Schrage, ‘Ekklesia’, 178–202 that the influence of the LXX was minor, and that ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ was primarily a Christian creation (rather than being based on the LXX) has not proved convincing; see for example du Toit, ‘Paulus’, 134–42.

\(^{75}\) See P. Lampe, From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 432 and n. 20; the other three were of the Augustenses, the Aprippenses, and the Volumnenses.

\(^{76}\) Note the very limited use of συναγωγή in the Apostolic Fathers; see Ign. Pol. 4.2; Herm. Mand. 11.9, 13, 14; see also Irenaeus Haer. 4.31.1–2.
important for the Hellenists to be able to distinguish themselves from such a group and so joint use of this self-designation would be problematic. The Jewish Christian Hellenists would want to say, ‘We are “us” (although we are also part of “them”), and the collective noun used needed to express this distinctiveness. Further, one can designate oneself internally as ‘οἱ ἀδελφοί’ without claiming that you are the only ones who can use that label. Joint Jewish Christian use of οἱ ἀδελφοί with Jewish communities is thus non-problematic—the designation was not functioning as a public, proper name among Jews at the time. But it is more problematic when συναγωγή had come to be used as a public, collective noun in the way that our evidence reveals.

The Theodotos inscription indicates just this sort of ‘public’ use of συναγωγή as a name in Jerusalem. We are told that Theodotos ‘built the assembly hall (τὴν συναγωγήν) for the reading of the Law and for the teaching of the commandments and the guest room, the chambers, and the water fittings, as an inn for those in need from foreign parts, (the synagogue) which his fathers founded with the elders and Simonides’. This makes it clear that the whole complex was a very public building, which offered accommodation for Jews who lived beyond Jerusalem’s immediate environs. Further, as Kloppenborg notes: ‘Although the first portion of the inscription describes various portions of the building, the final relative clause (hēn ethemel[iō]san...) treats all these features collectively, as part of the synagogē’. We can suggest that συναγωγή functions here as a public and prominent proper name—travellers would go looking for ‘ἡ συναγωγή’, part of which offered accommodation. And as noted earlier, the inscription gives evidence for a ‘synagogue’ building which was almost certainly constructed prior to Jesus’ lifetime.

We can suggest then that a term which was as public and prominent as συναγωγή would be well recognized in Jerusalem—people would know of its current use, and current reference to particular ‘gatherings’ and to particular places. Philo’s mention of Essene συναγωγαί, which probably included buildings in the vicinity of Jerusalem, reinforces this, as does the reference to the synagogue in Jerusalem in Acts 6.9. We can understand then why Hellenists in

79 Not all Jewish communities seem to have used συναγωγή since other terms were used too; but that συναγωγή was used in such a public way, including in Jerusalem, is our concern here.
80 Even if (as seems unlikely) Acts 6.9 refers only to a community and not a building (see TDNT 7.837; Catto, Reconstructing, 166–7 for discussion of this), it is still relevant here since the location is clearly Jerusalem and ‘the synagogue of...’ seems to be a known title. Note that Acts 24.12 and 26.9–11 show that Luke clearly thought that in Paul’s time there were several ‘synagogue’ buildings in Jerusalem.
Jerusalem would want to use a term that was different from such a public collective term as *συναγωγή*.  

Of course other (non-Christian) Jews could have used ἐκκλησία for their gatherings, as well as *συναγωγή*; it simply seems that, as far as we know, none of them were using ἐκκλησία with reference to a contemporary ‘assembly’ in the way they were using *συναγωγή*, and thus that ἐκκλησία was ‘free’.  

Accordingly, I suggest the Hellenists in Jerusalem chose ἐκκλησία because the main alternative term, *συναγωγή*, was already in public use and because ἐκκλησία was the most obvious alternative collective self-designation. It had the same sort of positive features as *συναγωγή*—primarily a strong LXX background. But it also had the key advantage that it was ‘not in use’, apart from in the polis. Further, it became a way to distinguish themselves from ἡ *συναγωγή*, which we can understand was both desirable and necessary.

There are two NT passages which suggest that ἐκκλησία was chosen as an alternative to *συναγωγή* and in order to avoid *συναγωγή*. These are not connected with the Hellenists, and reflect Luke’s usage (probably in the 80s), but that in these passages ἐκκλησία is found when *συναγωγή* was the obvious word to use, adds weight to my argument. First, in Acts 7.38 Luke has Stephen saying, ‘He [Moses] is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness (ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐν τῇ ἔρημῳ) with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors’. In Stephen’s speech, Luke is developing a typological relationship between Moses, who is rejected by the people (7.25-29, 39-42) but who is to be ruler and deliverer (7.35), and Jesus, who is similarly rejected

81 In the Greco-Roman world *συναγωγή* was used by groups other than Jews; see Liddell & Scott, 1692; Schrage in *TDNT* 7.800–1; *New Docs* 3, p. 43; *New Docs* 4, p. 202. But this wider use would be much less significant in Jerusalem than the Jewish use of *συναγωγή*.

82 ἐκκλησία does not feature among the terms used by Jewish communities for themselves and their buildings discussed by Binder, *Temple Courts*, 91–154. With reference to the present, Josephus uses ἐκκλησία of ad hoc ‘assemblies’ rather than as a name for ‘the community’, in the way that *συναγωγή* was used; see *Ant.* 19.332; *B.J.* 1.550, 654, 666; 4.159, 162, 255; 7.412; *Vita* 268.

83 Another option here may have been λαός, but it did not have the sense of a ‘gathering’ or ‘assembly’ that was present with both ἐκκλησία and *συναγωγή*, so may have been discounted because of this.

84 That ἐκκλησία was known in the Greco-Roman world and so was a familiar term to new Gentile converts (see Klauck, ‘Volk Gottes’, 290; Stegemann and Stegemann, *Jesus Movement*, 263) may have facilitated its use in the Pauline mission, and elsewhere, but I have argued above that because the term was adopted in Jerusalem by the Hellenists, the LXX is the most important background. But this very familiarity in the Greco-Roman world could lead to confusion (which ‘assembly’ are you talking about?) and Paul’s usage of the term in the address of his letters can be seen to be implicitly addressing this at times; see further Donfried, ‘Assembly’, 395.

85 See du Toit, ‘Paulus’, 139.
(7.52) but who is ‘Leader and Saviour’ (5.31).86 One dimension of this Lucan typology is that between Moses and the ‘assembly in the wilderness’ on Mount Sinai (Acts 7.38) on the one hand, and Christ and the ‘assembly (ἐκκλησία)’, spoken of in Acts 5.11 and regularly from Acts 8.1, on the other. But the LXX only uses ἐκκλησία and ἔρημος together in 2 Chron 1.3. By contrast, συνεκκλησία and ἔρημος are found together in the LXX in Exod 16.1, 3, 10; 17.1; Num 13.26; 14.2, 35; 20.1, 4; 27.3, 14; 32.15; Sir 45.18. In addition, the first occurrence of ἐκκλησία in the LXX is in Deut 4.10, with συνεκκλησία being used right through Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, with a total of 129 occurrences in these three books. It would seem that Luke has introduced ἐκκλησία in this context in Acts 7.38, when the LXX would normally use συνεκκλησία with regard to the time in the wilderness. Why? We can suggest that Luke does not want to use συνεκκλησία at this point; this would be to use the word Jewish communities were using for their contemporary gatherings, and in the passage in Acts 7 he is drawing a typology between Moses and Jesus. So Luke must use ἐκκλησία and avoid συνεκκλησία, and thus make a connection with the Christian use of ἐκκλησία.87 This is evidence in favour of our proposal therefore.

There is a second and similar example in Acts 20.28. Here, Luke has Paul say, ‘Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock...to shepherd the assembly of God (ποιμαίνειν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ) that he obtained with the blood of his own Son’. The strongest OT parallel is Isa 43.21, with its image of God redeeming Israel. But there is also an allusion to Ps 74.2, ‘which significantly follows a verse in which Israel is likened to a flock’.88 Psalm 74.1–2 (MT) reads, ‘Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your congregation (הַעֲנָיָתָם), which you acquired long ago, which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage’. However, in the LXX, Ps 73.2 reads ‘μνήσθητι τῆς συνεκκλησίας σου’. It seems clear that, while Luke has made an allusion to Ps 73.2 (LXX), he has amended συνεκκλησία to ἐκκλησία.89 We may again suggest that this is because of a deliberate choice against the word συνεκκλησία; it was currently used by the Jewish community, so Luke needs to change συνεκκλησία to the Christian


89 See Binder, Temple Courts, 499 n. 44; see also Schrage in TDNT 7.829 n. 199.
alternative, ἐκκλησία, when he is discussing the ‘gathering’ that was obtained by Christ’s blood. In so doing, he made a link with the on-going Christian use of ἐκκλησία, but he also avoided the term currently in use in Jewish communities. Of course, what we are seeing here is Luke’s usage, but this suggests that a Christian author writing towards the end of the first century might have had the same sort of reasons for the choice of ἐκκλησία as the original Hellenists. This comparative evidence thus backs up the suggestion that the Hellenists used ἐκκλησία so as to avoid συναγωγή.90

5. Implications of the Use of ἐκκλησία and the Avoidance of συναγωγή

That both ἐκκλησία and συναγωγή were terms from the LXX for the ‘assembly’ of Yahweh is crucial here. The Jewish Christian Hellenists could use ἐκκλησία to claim theological continuity with the OT people of God, without thereby saying that other Jews were not the OT people of God.91 If there had

90 Josephus’ use of ἐκκλησία and συναγωγή may be relevant here. Josephus uses ἐκκλησία 48 times, and συναγωγή only eight times (six times with reference to a building [Ant. 19.300, 305 (x2); B.J. 2.285, 289; 7.44], once of a collection of water [Ant. 15.346], and once of books [Ant. 1.10]); by contrast LXX usage is 100 and 221 respectively. Further, Josephus consistently uses ἐκκλησία in contexts where the LXX has συναγωγή, completely avoiding the use of συναγωγή of the people in the OT despite its popularity in the LXX (compare Num. 10.2 and Ant. 3.292; Num 16.2 and Ant. 4.22; Lev 8.3 and Ant. 3.188; in Num 16.1–40, the LXX uses συναγωγή 17 times, but in retelling this story in Ant. 4.14–58 Josephus uses ἐκκλησία four times, and συναγωγή not at all). It may be that one reason for Josephus’ usage is that συναγωγή was already in use in a specialised sense for contemporary Jewish ‘gathering places’, ‘synagogues’, and so he does not want to confuse his readers by using συναγωγή in conjunction with his accounts of Moses and the wilderness generation (for example), even though the LXX consistently does so. He thus generally reserves συναγωγή for use with the technical sense of ‘building’ and regularly replaces the LXX’s συναγωγή with ἐκκλησία. The Hellenists would then be doing the same thing as Josephus—avoiding συναγωγή and using ἐκκλησία—and for a very similar reason—because of the way συναγωγή was currently in use among Jewish communities. However, two other reasons can be given for Josephus’ usage. First, ἐκκλησία was well known and so Josephus may prefer to use a term which was very familiar to his readers (as noted in n. 81 above, συναγωγή was also known beyond Jewish circles, but ἐκκλησία was better known). Secondly, Mason has shown that Josephus has a keen interest in the πολιτεία of Israel in the Antiquities, where he regularly uses political language for Israel and her constitution; see S. Mason, ‘Should Any Wish to Enquire Further (Ant. 1.25): The Aim and Audience of Josephus’s Judean Antiquities/Life’, Understanding Josephus: Seven Perspectives (ed. S. Mason; JSPSup 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 80–7. It would be logical for Josephus to use the political term ἐκκλησία of Israel then and to avoid using συναγωγή which was not used for a political assembly. Thus Josephus’ usage may not be comparable to that of the Hellenists.

been but one LXX term for ‘the assembly/gathering’, then the Hellenists, in taking over that one ‘proper name’, could have been making the claim that ‘we are the true assembly of God; you (other “Jews”) are not’. But given that there were two terms with very similar backgrounds, the use by the Hellenists of the term that was not currently in use in Jerusalem as a name for a Jewish community (as far as we can tell) was a way of distinguishing themselves from ἡ συναγωγή without claiming to replace ‘the synagogue’ as ‘the people of God’, either textually or historically. They were simply adopting an alternative term. I suggest that this sort of logic may well have been crucial in adopting ἐκκλησία in the first place.

This also means that the adoption of ἐκκλησία by the Hellenists did not involve taking a polemical stance over against the Jewish use of συναγωγή. This is in accordance with the recognition that there is no evidence for a polemical use of ἐκκλησία by the early Christians, which in turn suggests the adoption of the term was not contentious.

The use of ἐκκλησία in this way by Jewish Christian Hellenists also does not mean that those who used ἐκκλησία as a self-designation were no longer part of ἡ συναγωγή. ἐκκλησία can be used as an additional designation—we are part of ἡ συναγωγή but we are also part of ἡ ἐκκλησία which is forming within it. The use of a different collective noun is crucial at this point. It is quite straightforward for a person or a group of people to belong to two groups with different self-designations simultaneously. This is clearly what Paul wants to do. Since there are two different (but strongly connected) collective names for the two groups, he can do this in a quite straightforward way. We can suggest that the Hellenists saw things similarly. So we should not think that the evolution of another public and collective label for ‘the Christian group’ suggested the early Jewish Christians only belonged to one group.

6. Conclusions

I have argued that the origin of the use of ἐκκλησία can be traced back to the Hellenists in Jerusalem and that its use ‘aligned the Jesus movement with the

92 See Dunn, Theology, 538; Cadbury, ‘Names’, 387. Schrage, Ekklesia, 186–7 notes that the only OT passage containing ἐκκλησία that is used in the NT is Ps 22.22 (LXX 21.23) quoted in Heb 2.12, and there the emphasis is not on ἐκκλησία but on τοῖς ὁδεγοῖς μου.
93 Rom 9–11 indicates this most clearly, where Paul shows that he still sees himself as part of ‘Israel’ (the designation he uses most often in the passage, e.g. 9.4, 6, 27, 31; 10.19, 21; 11.2, 7, 11, 23, 25, 26) whilst clearly belonging to the ‘Christian group’. In 1 Cor 9.20–22 he also shows that he continues to see himself as ‘a Jew’; 2 Cor 11.24 with its mention of the 39 lashes from the Jewish συναγωγή also indicates this. One could also imagine that Paul might have hoped a whole συναγωγή would accept his message, at which point they could be called both συναγωγή and ἐκκλησία; see Seccombe, ‘New People’, 364.
coveted tradition of Israel as the people of God. 94 ἐκκλησία was used as a collective name for their ‘assembly’ because of its use in the LXX and because the main alternative, συναγωγή, was already in use by the non-Christian Jewish community (with the sense of both ‘community’ and ‘building’). ἐκκλησία was then used to distinguish the Christian assembly from that of ἡ συναγωγή without suggesting that they were no longer part of ἡ συναγωγή. That both terms were used in the LXX for ‘the assembly of Yahweh’ (and in many other expressions in both cases) was a great advantage—members of the ἐκκλησία could express their continuity with the OT people of God, the OT ‘assembly’, without claiming that they alone were the heirs of that people.