

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

## LECTURE I.

### *THE WORD ECCLESIA.*

THE subject on which I propose to lecture this term is *The early conceptions and early history of the Christian Ecclesia*. The reason why I have chosen the term Ecclesia is simply to avoid ambiguity. The English term *church*, now the most familiar representative of *ecclesia* to most of us, carries with it associations derived from the institutions and doctrines of later times, and thus cannot at present without a constant mental effort be made to convey the full and exact force which originally belonged to *ecclesia*. There would moreover be a second ambiguity in the phrase *the early history of the Christian Church* arising out of the vague comprehensiveness with which the phrase 'History of the Church' is conventionally employed.

It would of course have been possible to have recourse to a second English rendering 'congregation', which has the advantage of suggesting some of those

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)

elements of meaning which are least forcibly suggested by the word 'church' according to our present use. 'Congregation' was the only rendering of *ἐκκλησία* in the English New Testament as it stood throughout Henry VIII.'s reign, the substitution of 'church' being due to the Genevan revisers; and it held its ground in the Bishops' Bible in no less primary a passage than Matt. xvi. 18 till the Jacobean revision of 1611, which we call the Authorized Version. But 'congregation' has disturbing associations of its own which render it unsuitable for our special purpose; and moreover its use in what might seem a rivalry to so venerable, and rightly venerable, a word as 'church' would be only a hindrance in the way of recovering for 'church' the full breadth of its meaning. 'Ecclesia' is the only perfectly colourless word within our reach, carrying us back to the beginnings of Christian history, and enabling us in some degree to get behind words and names to the simple facts which they originally denoted.

The larger part of our subject lies in the region of what we commonly call Church History; the general Christian history of the ages subsequent to the Apostolic age. But before entering on that region we must devote some little time to matter contained in the Bible itself. It is hopeless to try to understand either the actual Ecclesia of post-apostolic times, or the thoughts of its own contemporaries about it, without first gaining some clear impressions

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)*THE WORD ECCLESIA.*

3

as to the Ecclesia of the Apostles out of which it grew; to say nothing of the influence exerted all along by the words of the apostolic writings, and by other parts of Scripture. And again the Ecclesia of the Apostles has likewise antecedents which must not be neglected, immediately in facts and words recorded by the Evangelists, and ultimately in the institutions and teaching of the Old Covenant.

In this preliminary part of our subject, to say the least, we shall find it convenient to follow the order of time.

I am sorry to be unable to recommend any books as sufficiently coinciding with our subject generally. Multitudes of books in all civilised languages bear directly or indirectly upon parts of it: but I doubt whether it would be of any real use to attempt a selection. In the latter part of the subject we come on ground which has been to a certain extent worked at by several German writers within the last few years, and I may have occasion from time to time to refer to some of them: they may however be passed over for the present.

*The sense of the word in the Old Testament.*

The Ecclesia of the New Testament takes its name and primary idea from the Ecclesia of the Old Testament. What then is the precise meaning of the term Ecclesia as we find it in the Old Testament?

The word itself is a common one in classical Greek

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and was adopted by the LXX. translators from Deuteronomy onwards (*not* in the earlier books of the Pentateuch) as their usual rendering of *qāhāl*.

Two important words are used in the Old Testament for the gathering together of the people of Israel, or their representative heads, 'ēdhāh [R.V. congregation] and *qāhāl* [R.V. assembly].

Συναγωγή [*Synagogē*] is the usual, almost the universal, LXX. rendering of 'ēdhāh, as also in the earlier books of the Pentateuch of *qāhāl*. So closely connected in original use are the two terms Synagogue and Ecclesia, which afterwards came to be fixed in deep antagonism!

Neither of the two Hebrew terms was strictly technical: both were at times applied to very different kinds of gatherings from the gatherings of the people, though *qāhāl* had always a *human* reference of some sort, gatherings of individual men or gatherings of nations. The two words were so far coincident in meaning that in many cases they might apparently be used indifferently: but in the first instance they were not strictly synonymous. 'ēdhāh (derived from a root *y'dh* used in the Niphal in the sense of gathering together, specially gathering together by appointment or agreement) is properly, when applied to Israel, the society itself, formed by the children of Israel or their representative heads, whether assembled or not assembled.

On the other hand *qāhāl* is properly their actual

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE WORD ECCLESIA.

5

meeting together: hence we have a few times the phrase *q̄hāl* 'ēdhāh 'the assembly of the congregation' (rendered by the LXX. translators in Ex. xii. 6 πάν τὸ πλῆθος συναγωγῆς υἰῶν Ἰσραήλ, in Num. xiv. 5 where no equivalent is given for *q̄hāl* πάσης συναγωγῆς υἰῶν Ἰσραήλ) and also *q̄hāl* 'ān 'the assembly of the people' (rendered in Judg. xx. 2 ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ λαοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, in Jer. xxvi. (LXX. xxxiii.) 17 πάση τῇ συναγωγῇ τοῦ λαοῦ). The special interest of this distinction lies in its accounting for the choice of the rendering ἐκκλησία: *qāhāl* is derived from an obsolete root meaning to call or summon, and the resemblance to the Greek καλέω naturally suggested to the LXX. translators the word ἐκκλησία, derived from καλέω (or rather ἐκκαλέω) in precisely the same sense.

There is no foundation for the widely spread notion that ἐκκλησία means a people or a number of individual men *called out* of the world or mankind. In itself the idea is of course entirely Scriptural, and moreover it is associated with the word and idea 'called,' 'calling,' 'call.' But the compound verb ἐκκαλέω is never so used, and ἐκκλησία never occurs in a context which suggests this supposed sense to have been present to the writer's mind. Again, it would not have been unnatural if this sense of *calling out* from a larger body had been as it were put into the word in later times, when it had acquired religious associations. But as a matter of fact we do not find that it was so. The original *calling out* is simply the calling of the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)

citizens of a Greek town out of their houses by the herald's trumpet to summon them to the assembly and Numb. x. shews that the summons to the Jewish assembly was made in the same way. In the actual usage of both *qāhāl* and *ἐκκλησία* this primary idea of summoning is hardly to be felt. They mean simply an assembly of the people; and accordingly in the Revised Version of the Old Testament 'assembly' is the predominant rendering of *qāhāl*.

So much for the original and distinctive force of the two words, in Hebrew and Greek. Now we must look a little at their historical application in the Old Testament.

'*ēdhāh* is by far the commoner word of the two in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Joshua, but it is wholly absent from Deuteronomy. The two words are used in what appears to be practically the same sense in successive clauses of Lev. iv. 13; Num. xvi. 3; and they are coupled together, *ἐν μέσῳ ἐκκλησίας καὶ συναγωγῆς*, in Prov. v. 14 (LXX.). Both alike are described sometimes as the congregation or assembly of Israel, sometimes as the congregation or assembly of Jehovah; sometimes as the congregation or the assembly absolutely. In the later books '*ēdhāh* goes almost out of use. It is absent from Chronicles except once in an extract from Kings or the source of Kings (2 Chr. v. 6). It recurs (in the sense of congregation of Israel, I mean) but two or three times in the Psalms and the same in the Prophets.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE WORD ECCLESIA.

7

In these, and in the poetical books, *qāhāl* is hardly more common, but it abounds in Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. It would seem that after the return from the Exile this, the more definite and formal word, came to combine the shades of meaning belonging to both. Thus *ἐκκλησία*, as the primary Greek representative of *qāhāl* would naturally for Greek-speaking Jews mean the congregation of Israel quite as much as an assembly of the congregation.

In the Apocrypha both *συναγωγή* and *ἐκκλησία* are to be found: but it would take too long to examine the somewhat intricate variations of sense to be found there<sup>1</sup>. But with regard to these words, like many others of equal importance, there is a great gap, in our knowledge of the usage of Greek Judaism. Philo gives us no help, the thoughts which connect themselves with the idea of a national *ἐκκλησία* being just of the kind which had least interest for him; and Josephus's ostentatious classicalism deprives us of the information which a better Jew in his position might have afforded us. For our purpose it would be of peculiar interest to know what and how much the term *ἐκκλησία* meant to Jews of the Dispersion at the time of the Christian Era: but here again we are, I fear, wholly in the dark.

<sup>1</sup> There is an indication that *συναγωγή* was coming to mean the local congregation in Sir. xxiv. 23 and especially in Ps. Sal. x. 7. 8.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The sense of the word in the Gospels.*

It is now time to come to the New Testament and its use of *ἐκκλησία*, bearing in mind that it is a word which had already a history of its own, and which was associated with the whole history of Israel. It is also well to remember that its antecedents, as it was used by our Lord and His Apostles, are of two kinds, derived from the past and the present respectively. Part, the most important part, of its meaning came from its ancient and what we may call its religious use, that is from the sense or senses which it had borne in the Jewish Scriptures; part also of its meaning could not but come from the senses in which it was still current in the everyday life of Jews. We may be able to obtain but little independent evidence on this last head: but it needs only a little reflexion to feel sure that in this as in other cases contemporary usage cannot have been wholly inoperative.

The actual word *ἐκκλησία*, as many know, is in the Gospels confined to two passages of St Matthew. This fact has not unnaturally given rise to doubts as to the trustworthiness of the record. These doubts however seem to me to be in reality unfounded. If indeed it were true that matter found in a single Gospel only is to be regarded with suspicion as not proceeding from fundamental documents common to more than one, then doubtless these passages would



Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)*THE WORD ECCLESIA.*

9

be open to doubt. But if, as I believe to be the true view, each evangelist had independent knowledge or had access to fresh materials by which he was able to make trustworthy additions to that which he obtained from previous records, then there is no *a priori* reason for suspecting these two passages of the First Gospel.

It is further urged that these passages have the appearance of having been thrust into the text in the Second Century in order to support the growing authority of the Ecclesia as an external power. An interpolation of the supposed kind would however be unexampled, and there is nothing in the passages themselves, when carefully read, which bears out the suggestion. Nay, the manner in which St Peter's name enters into the language about the building of Messiah's Ecclesia could not be produced by any view respecting his office which was current in the Second Century. In truth, the application of the term *ἐκκλησία* by the Apostles is much easier to understand if it was founded on an impressive saying of our Lord. On the other hand, during our Lord's lifetime such language was peculiarly liable to be misunderstood by the outer world of Jews, and therefore it is not surprising if it formed no part of His ordinary public teaching.

It will be convenient to take first the less important passage, Matt. xviii. 17. Here our Lord is speaking not of the future but the present, instructing

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00755-9 - The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia, and Four Sermons

Fenton John Anthony Hort

Excerpt

[More information](#)

His disciples how to deal with an offending brother. There are three stages of ἔλεγχις, or bringing his fault home to him; first with him alone, next with two or three brethren; and if that fails, thirdly with the ἐκκλησία, the whole brotherhood. The principle holds good in a manner for all time. The actual precept is hardly intelligible if the ἐκκλησία meant is not the Jewish community, apparently the Jewish local community, to which the injured person and the offender both belonged.

We are on quite different ground in the more famous passage, Matt. xvi. 18. At a critical point in the Ministry, far away in the parts of Cæsarea Philippi, our Lord elicits from Peter the confession, "Thou art the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," and pronounces him happy for having been Divinely taught to have the insight which enabled him to make it: "Yea and I say to thee," He proceeds, "that thou art Peter (Πέτρος, *kēphā'*), and on this πέτρα I will build my Ecclesia and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

Here there is no question of a partial or narrowly local Ecclesia. The congregation of God, which held so conspicuous a place in the ancient Scriptures, is assuredly what the disciples could not fail to understand as the foundation of the meaning of a sentence which was indeed for the present mysterious. If we may venture for a moment to substitute the name Israel, and read the words as