

Chapter 3

The ἐκκλησία

ἐκκλησία: The Aramaic and Hebrew Behind Its Use Here

Due to the use of the word ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*), translated "church" in most modern English translations, some radical critics question the authenticity of Matthew 16:18 and 18:17,¹ and this affects one's explanation of the meaning of these verses. However, as Karl Schmidt points out,

Even those who do not assume their inauthenticity, and they especially, are faced with great difficulties of exposition. Exposition is equally difficult whether we work with the present Greek [text of Matthew] or with the original [language] used by Jesus....Only when we have expounded the Greek text can we fix on the Semitic equivalent for ἐκκλησία. But only when we have fixed on this equivalent can we engage in true exposition.²

The basic meaning of ἐκκλησία in secular Greek was *public assembly*,³ in earlier days summoned by a herald.⁴ However, the section "General Observations" in chapter 2 has already argued that here Jesus and Peter were speaking Aramaic and that the background to their whole exchange is thoroughly Jewish. Matthew's use of the Greek word ἐκκλησία in his translation of the Aramaic spoken by Jesus is no exception. Moreover, Jesus speaks as if the disciples would know exactly what he was referring to. They raise no questions, and Jesus offers no explanations. Clearly, the reference is to something familiar to Jews.

1 These critics argue that the NT church was a later development and that Jesus' message was about the "kingdom of God," not the "church" found in Paul's letters.

2 Schmidt, "ἐκκλησία," *TDNT*, III:518.

3 *Ibid.*, III:513. It is used in this sense even in the NT in Acts 19:32, 39, 41.

4 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Church," *ISBE*, I:693.

Yet it remains the case that in all four gospels ἐκκλησία is used only in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17. Three questions arise:

(1) Why did Matthew use ἐκκλησία to translate the word Jesus used?

(2) What was the Aramaic word Jesus actually used?

(3) What is the Hebrew word to which it can ultimately be traced?

Only when the exegete answers these three questions can he identify that which Jesus would build.

In tracing the idea of *assembly* contained in the word ἐκκλησία back through the Aramaic to the Hebrew, there are two words in the Old Testament that might stand behind its use by Matthew: קָהָל (*qāhāl*) and עֵדָה (*‘ēdā*).⁵

The basic meaning of קָהָל (*qāhāl*) is *assembly, convocation, company, congregation*.⁶ In the LXX it is usually translated by ἐκκλησία, but in thirty-six instances συναγωγή (*sunagōgē* or *synagogue*) is used.⁷ Conversely, and perhaps more significantly, ἐκκλησία is almost always a translation of קָהָל, so that was clearly the function of ἐκκλησία in the LXX.⁸ The word קָהָל can refer to an assembly of any sort and purpose, although often religious in purpose. Of special importance for this inquiry is its use in phrases such as "*qāhāl* of Yahweh,"⁹ "*qāhāl* of

5 From the root עָדָה.

6 *BDB*, p. 874.

7 Jack P. Lewis, "*qāhāl*," *TWOT*, II:790.

8 According to Schmidt, "*ἐκκλησία*," *TDNT*, III:529, "*ἐκκλησία* is **almost** always a rendering of קָהָל" (emphasis added); he cites no exception. However, according to Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament* (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck u. Verlagsanstalt, 1975; original publication date, 1897), I:433, ἐκκλησία occurs **only** as a rendering of קָהָל or a word built on קָהָל.

9 Thirteen times. E.g., Num. 16:3; 20:4; Deut. 23:2-4 (Heb.; 1-3, Eng.); 1 Chron. 28:8; Mic. 2:5.

Elohim,"¹⁰ and "qāhāl of Israel."¹¹ The LXX translates "qāhāl of Yahweh" as ἐκκλησίαν Κυρίου (assembly of the LORD) in some places¹² and as συναγωγήν Κυρίου (synagogue of the LORD) in other places.¹³ The phrase, qāhāl of Yahweh, "is the nearest OT equivalent to 'church of the Lord.'"¹⁴

With regard to συναγωγή (synagogue), although it is at times used in the sense of "a gathering" in the LXX, its predominant use is "the whole congregation of Israel."¹⁵ According to Schrage, "There are no obvious inner reasons why קהל should sometimes be rendered ἐκκλησία and other times συναγωγή."¹⁶ It should be noted that in the LXX συναγωγή is never used of the house of meeting.¹⁷ However, in NT Judaism as well as the NT itself, συναγωγή is used almost exclusively for the "house of meeting," i.e., "the synagogue."¹⁸

Therefore, on the basis of this evidence alone, it would

10 Neh. 13:1.

11 E.g., Lev. 16:17; Deut 31:30; Josh. 8:35; 1 Kings 8:14; 12:3; 1 Chron. 13:2. A similar phrase is found in Ps. 149:1: בְּקִהְלֵי הַקְּדוֹשִׁים , "in the qāhāl of the godly ones" ("the congregation of the saints" in the KJV). The LXX translates the phrase, εν ἐκκλησία οσων.

יְהוָה (hasidim) is the plural of the masculine adjective קָדוֹשׁ (hasid) meaning *kind* or *pious*, but here used substantively to mean *pious one* or *godly one* (BDB, p. 339). As used in Ps. 149:1-2, the expression "the qāhāl of the godly ones" in v. 1 seems to be parallel to "Israel" and "the people of Zion" in v. 2. However, Franz Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 3 vols., in vol. 5 in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols., C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975; original publication date, 1867), III:412, seems to limit the expression to the faithful within Israel. The word is used by itself (without qāhāl) many times in the Psalms (30:5; 31:34; 37:28; 85:9; et al.). It is of interest that this same word יְהוָה (Hasidim), *pious ones*, was the name of the group that played a major supportive role in the Maccabean revolt (168-165 B.C.). It is even of more interest that this adjective is a cognate of חֶסֶד (hesed), an important noun in biblical theology meaning *goodness*, *kindness* (BDB, p. 338).

12 E.g., Deut. 23:2-3; Micah 2:5.

13 E.g., Num. 16:3; 20:4.

14 Lewis, "qāhāl," *TWOT*, II:790.

15 Wolfgang Schrage, "συναγωγή," *TDNT*, VII:803-804.

16 *Ibid.*, VII:802.

17 *Ibid.*, VII:805.

18 *Ibid.*, VII:807. Cf. AG, pp. 790-791.

be reasonable to conclude that קָהָל, in the sense of *assembly* or *congregation*, is the Hebrew word behind whatever Aramaic word Jesus used, and that his use reflects the *qāhāl* of Yahweh in the Old Testament.

The basic meaning of עֵדָה ('*edā*) is *assembly, congregation, multitude, people*.¹⁹ '*edā* occurs 145 times in the Old Testament and is translated συναγωγή 127 times in the LXX; '*edā* is never translated by ἐκκλησία.²⁰ It is used alone²¹ and, as with *qāhāl*, '*edā* is also used in phrases such as "'*edā* of Yahweh"²² and "'*edā* of Israel."²³ In the examples cited in the footnotes, "'*edā* of Yahweh" is translated συναγωγή Κυρίου, *congregation of [the] Lord*.

Is the meaning of קָהָל (*qāhāl*) and עֵדָה ('*edā*) the same? A distinction is difficult to draw, and the words "seem to be synonymous for all practical purposes."²⁴ In fact, in Numbers 16:3 the two words are used in successive clauses in the same sense:

They assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone far enough, for all the congregation [עֵדָה ('*edā*)] are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly [קָהָל (*qāhāl*)] of the LORD?"

19 *BDB*, p. 417.

20 In view of this fact, it is rather curious that one scholar makes the following claim: "Linguistic researches show, however, that the true equivalent of *ekklēsia* is the Heb. '*edā* ('assembly') or Aram. *kānīštā* ('gathering')." See Ralph P. Martin, "Peter," *ISBE*, III:804.

21 E.g., Exod. 16:22; 34:31; Lev. 4:15; Num. 15:24; Josh. 20:6.

22 E.g., Num. 27:17; 31:16; Josh. 22:16.

23 E.g., Exod. 12:3; Lev. 4:13; Num. 16:9; Josh. 22:20; 1 Kgs. 8:5.

24 Jack P. Lewis, "'*edā*," *TWOT*, I:388. Lewis writes similarly in his entry "*qāhāl*," *TWOT*, II:790: "In general, the terms are synonymous." Also, Schrage, "συναγωγή," *TDNT*, VII:802: "no essential distinction in meaning."

On the other hand, since עֲדָה (*‘ēdā*) is never translated by ἐκκλησία in the LXX, it is reasonable to conclude that קְהָל (*qāhāl*) or its Aramaic equivalent is what was spoken by Jesus in Matthew 16:18 and translated by Matthew as ἐκκλησία.

What, though, was the most likely Aramaic word spoken by Jesus? The Hebrew word קְהָל does come into Aramaic as a loan word and is used in the Targumim;²⁵ the spelling is changed only slightly: קְהָלָא.

But קְהָלָא is not the only possibility. In Rabbinic literature, neither קְהָל nor עֲדָה are very frequently used. Rather the expression בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל is fairly common and means "gathering of Israel." בְּנֵי־סֵת (*kənēset*) is the noun of the verb כָּנַס, meaning *to gather, to assemble, or to collect*.²⁶ This Hebrew noun, then, becomes another loan word in Aramaic with the spelling changed as follows: בְּנֵי־שְׁתָּא (*kəništā*).²⁷ However, whether בְּנֵי־סֵת or בְּנֵי־שְׁתָּא can

25 The *Targumim* (plural of *Targum*) are Aramaic paraphrases (interpretive translations) of all the Old Testament books except Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

26 *BDB*, p. 488, and Schmidt, "ἐκκλησία," *TDNT*, III:524-525. In the OT only the verbal form occurs. Note that the noun is used in modern Hebrew for the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, the legislative branch of the government.

27 Schmidt, "ἐκκλησία," *TDNT*, III:525-526, suggests it is "highly probable" that Jesus used this Aramaic noun, entering the language as a loan word from the Hebrew *kənēset*. However, he then takes *kəništā* to be the Aramaic equivalent of the Greek συναγωγή and proceeds to develop an unlikely interpretation that Jesus refers to a new separatist "synagogue" similar to other groups known to exist within Judaism that viewed themselves as the true representatives of Judaism. "For such a separate group represents the remnant of Israel on which depends the continued life of all Israel as the people of God. Similarly the community of God is embodied in the synagogue of Jesus the Messiah. In the apparent paradox of this *pars pro toto* [Latin for "part (taken) for the whole"] arrangement lies the very essence of the genuine synagogue and of the genuine community of Jesus Christ. The founding of the ἐκκλησία by Jesus at Mt. 16:18...consists solely and simply in this process of separating and

be considered the word behind ἐκκλησία in Matthew 16:18 is highly questionable. First, linguists generally associate them with συναγωγή not ἐκκλησία.²⁸ Second, primitive Christianity clearly associated itself with an ἐκκλησία and avoided the word συναγωγή.²⁹

Thus the most likely Aramaic word spoken by Jesus in Matthew 16:18 was אִלְהָא, which is the Aramaic spelling of the Hebrew loan word אִלְהָא (qāhāl). The Jewish background, then, to that which Christ would build was the qāhāl of Yahweh in the OT.³⁰

In this regard, Stephen makes an interesting statement in Acts 7:37-38 in his speech given before the Sanhedrin:

This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.' This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the

concentrating His band of disciples." This interpretation loses much of its force by the fact that Matthew did not use the word συναγωγή but ἐκκλησία. Also note the opposite opinion of Schrage, "συναγωγή," *TDNT*, VII:829-830: "That Jesus Himself formed a συναγωγή of His own, or that his disciples thought of themselves as a sect of this type within Judaism, must be regarded as highly improbable." George Eldon Ladd agrees: "Jesus showed no purpose of establishing a separate synagogue" (*A Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979], p. 110).

28 Schmidt, "ἐκκλησία," *TDNT*, III:525, and Schrage, "συναγωγή," *TDNT*, VII:829.

29 Schrage, "συναγωγή," *TDNT*, VII:808, cites a number of reasons why the early Christians did this. One is that συναγωγή had lost the universal character that marked it in the LXX and was primarily used for the local congregation; ἐκκλησία could be used either for a local congregation or the entire community. Second, in NT times συναγωγή was restricted even more to the building in which a local Jewish congregation met.

30 Many scholars see this association. For example: Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 109: "ekklesiā is a biblical term designating Israel as the congregation or assembly of Yahweh, rendering the Hebrew word qahal." R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist & Teacher* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), p. 211: "This [ἐκκλησία] was a familiar term to a Greek-speaking Jew, being the regular LXX translation of qahal, the 'congregation' of the people of God." Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 172: "Matthew is the one Gospel that mentions the church (16:18; 18:17). A basis in the Old Testament is to be discerned here (cf. Acts 7:38), for Jesus' hearers were familiar with the idea of the assembly or congregation of the Lord. The element of newness [here in Jesus' exchange with Peter] was the distinctiveness of this predicted entity as belonging to Jesus."

angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and *who was* with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you.

Compare the text in Deuteronomy 18:15-16:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.'

The word Luke used in Acts 7:38, translated "congregation" in the *NASB*, was ἐκκλησία; the word Moses used in Deuteronomy 18:16, translated "assembly" in the *NASB*, was קָהָל; and the word used in the LXX at Deuteronomy 18:16 to translate קָהָל was ἐκκλησία. What word, then, did Stephen actually speak? Probably the Aramaic אַקְהָלָא, or, because he was addressing the Sanhedrin, perhaps even the Hebrew קָהָל itself. But the point is twofold:

- The Jewish mind thought in terms of the assembly of Yahweh or the assembly of Israel (Yahweh's people) when hearing קָהָל or its Aramaic equivalent.
- The Greek word used in the LXX to translate קָהָל was almost always ἐκκλησία.

What assembly, then, was Jesus referring to in Matthew 16:18 that he described as a קָהָל (*qāhāl*)?