

The Day of the Assembly

Reading: Exodus 19

Introduction

If you are a Christadelphian, I am sure you have had one of those times where you have told an interested friend you attend a Christadelphian church. It is that word “church” that can make us pause as we say it. As Christadelphians we have been conditioned to use the Greek word “ecclesia” in place of the word “church”. But it is hard to explain, so the word “church” is used as to not create confusion. That is understandable. In fact, some Christadelphians have taken that a step further and identify themselves as a “church” on their signage and online. I am not comfortable with that. Words are interesting. They are powerful. They spark emotions. They create perceptions. The word “church” is one of those words.

The Christadelphians have a long heritage of using the word “ecclesia” rather than “church”. Here is what Robert Roberts says at the beginning of the Christadelphian Ecclesial Guide (1884),

“To help in the development, and give scope for the exercise of this faithfulness, obedient believers were required to form themselves into communities, which, in Greek, were called ECCLESIAS. There is no exact equivalent in English for this term Ecclesia. It means an assembly of the called. “Church” (by which it is translated) has not this meaning, and has become objectionable through association with un-apostolic ideas and institutions. Consequently, the original term has to be employed.”

Brother Roberts dissuades against the use of “church” because of how most people employ that term. It has associations and definitions that are not helpful in creating a distinct people built on the foundation of truth.

The word “ecclesia” is special. What we want to do in this series is to make that word even more impactful. We would like to avoid the negative connotations of the word “church”, but we should also be drawn to the positive teachings of the word ecclesia. At the heart of it, this is a word study. It is a word study that took me in a different direction than expected. It took me to the Old Testament. If we tend to get lost in word definitions and connecting passages, then here’s the overall impact I think it should have:

1. We need a greater sense of community that the word ecclesia brings.
2. We need a greater sense of the connection with the ecclesia of the living God not just in space but in time. Going all the way back to the ecclesia in the wilderness.

Greater Sense of Community

Studying the word ecclesia should bring to us a greater sense of the need for a community which is established on the same principles and practices. We have always struggled with unity. Christadelphians especially think for themselves, they are opinionated, they are challenging. I do not think we would want it any other way. Those qualities though can rub against the sense of submission, accommodation and meekness that is so needed in a body, in the ecclesia.

The Central fellowship is based on ecclesial fellowship. We must develop a healthy respect for what God has provided in the ecclesia, our local community, and the brotherhood worldwide. Of course, to understand that better we should have a good sense of what the ecclesia was, not just in the New Testament but also in the Old.

Greater Sense of Connection

This is what we will be focusing on. Getting our minds around the concept of the ecclesia as it is today but also recognizing the roots that are revealed to us in the scripture. I have entitled this series “The Ecclesia in the Old Testament”. There will be a lot of that, but it is more about the connections between the ecclesia in the New Testament to the ecclesia in the Old Testament. The ecclesia was not something brand new. Its principles and practices were there from of old.

Israel is the ecclesia. I wrote that carefully. It is a mistake if we consider the church to have replaced Israel. That is called “replacement theology” and the Christadelphians have never believed that. What we are going to see will hopefully draw us closer to Israel.

Consider what Paul has to say in Romans 11. From the beginning in verse 1 he argues that God has not “cast away his people” meaning the natural Israelite. He compares Israel to an olive tree and in verses 17-18 he says,

“... if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in **among them**, and **with them** partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.”

Even at this time there were Gentiles in the ecclesia whose perspective of Israel was wrong. Therefore, we must really stop and ponder what Paul is saying here. We, as Gentiles, have been grafted into Israel. This is not an upside-down tree where the branches are supporting the roots. We are supported by the root. That is where the ecclesia gets its nourishment, “the fatness”.

What is the root? We see from verse 16 that it is comparable to the firstfruit. That is the first of the harvest offered to God as holy. Paul seems to be drawing from Hosea 9:10,

“I found Israel like grapes **in the wilderness**; I saw your fathers as the **firstripe** in the fig tree at her first time ...”

or Jeremiah 2:2-3,

“Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the LORD; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, **when thou wentest after me in the wilderness**, in a land that was not sown. **Israel was holiness unto the LORD, and the firstfruits of his increase...**”

Both Hosea and Jeremiah testify to the fact that Israel in the wilderness where the firstfruits, they were holy, or sanctified to Yahweh. Is Israel in the wilderness then the root? Let us explore this a little more and remember the exhortation for us is to “not be highminded, but fear” (v. 20).

The Ecclesia in the Wilderness

If Israel in the wilderness is the root that nourishes us, then that should trigger an echo in our mind. Maybe you have already thought of Stephen in Acts 7:38 when he calls Israel “the church in the wilderness”. It is interesting that Stephen here calls the congregation of Israel in the wilderness “the church” or ecclesia as it is in the original. Why would this term be applied to Israel if the ecclesia were some new thing? Turns out the word ecclesia was not new. It had been around for many years.

The Greeks

In the fourth century BC, around 330 BC, there was a constitution written most likely by Aristotle for the city of Athens. The heart of it was to formalize the practice of the Greek city ecclesia which had been in place for at least 200 years before. It was the main governing assembly which directed the policy of the city, declared war, elected generals and magistrates, raised funds, and made peace treaties. It would also judge private citizens, and in the case of banishment there had to be at least 6,000 citizens present.

In the wider Greek culture, the word ecclesia meant a duly convened assembly of citizens. Literally, it was the “called out ones” but with a special meaning to be summoned, to convene together, to judge and vote on political matters. It was a democracy with the slogan of “freedom and equality” for all its citizens.

Even in New Testament times, this is what the ecclesia was to the Greeks and Romans. Proof of this is seen in Acts 19 where the word ecclesia is translated assembly three times. Demetrius, a craftsmen of idols in Ephesus, upset over his loss of business due to the preaching of Paul, incites an assembly (v.32, ecclesia) to banish Paul and the believers from Ephesus. Demetrius meant this to be an official legal action, but it got out of hand as the unruly mob chanted “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” for two hours. Finally, the city clerk calmed the people and chastised Demetrius for not doing this in a “lawful assembly” (v.39, ecclesia) and he dismissed the assembly (v. 41, ecclesia).

The Septuagint (LXX)

Not only did the word ecclesia have a rich history with the Greeks and Romans before the time of Jesus but also with the Jews. The Jews in Alexandria Egypt in the 3rd century BC translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek and called it the Septuagint (abbr. LXX). This translation became widely used among the Jews (e.g. Philo and Josephus), some of its manuscripts even being found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Without a doubt the Apostles were familiar with the Septuagint translation. Stephen himself preached among Greek speaking Jews. We can be quite certain that this is why Stephen uses the word ecclesia here. It is a bridge to the Old Testament. Look at Acts 7:37-38,

“This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. This is he, that

was in **the church (ecclesia) in the wilderness** with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us"

The word "church" is the word "ecclesia". In modern translations you will see "congregation" or "assembly". You will notice here Stephen's emphasis is on the children of Israel at mount Sinai where the angel spoke to them the lively oracles. This is an important focal point. Where is Stephen getting this? He quotes Moses in verse 37 which is from Deut. 18:15. There is our bridge.

"The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb **in the day of the assembly (ecclesia)**, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not." (Deut. 18:15-16)

In the Septuagint the word assembly is translated ecclesia. The word ecclesia is used as a noun seventy-seven times in the Septuagint and seventeen times in other forms not used in the New Testament. One of these other forms is the word ecclesiastes (noun of agency) and ecclesiaston which are found seven times, all in the book of Ecclesiastes (1:1,2,12; 7:27; 12:8,9,10). It is translated as "preacher", meaning "one who speaks to the ecclesia."

In the Hebrew, the word is "qahal". According to the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia's entry on "Congregation" this word comes from "qol" which means "voice" and thus "call" or "summon". In the KJV it is translated most often "assembly" or "congregation". Therefore, its meaning in the Hebrew is the same as the Greek ecclesia. For the most part, but not always, the Septuagint translates qahal by ecclesia.

The Hebrew has other words for congregations or assemblies. One of these Hebrew words is "edah" which is translated as "congregation". In the Septuagint the word "edah" is usually rendered as "synagogue". Nobody knows how or why synagogues developed between the Old and New Testament but it is more than interesting how both these words are used in the Old Testament and how they would come to contrast in the New.

The words, synagogue and ecclesia, are very similar to each other. Much like if I said in English "assembly" or "congregation" you might say they were the same. In the Hebrew and Greek there is a slight difference. A synagogue or edah is a group of people whether gathered or not. The qahal is called or summoned more in a voluntary sense. The edah is gathered together more in an involuntary sense. Unfortunately, the KJV is not consistent in how it translates these words either as "assembly" or "congregation".

The Day of the Assembly

Let us get back to this passage in Deut. 18:15-16. It does not just mention the ecclesia but "the day of the ecclesia". Why does it mention a specific day? What was that day? From the context you can see it is talking about the incidence in Exodus 19-20 of Israel before Mt. Sinai. It so impacted Moses that he

recalls it 40 years later, a total of seven times in Deut. 4:10-20, 32-36; 5:2-5; 22-33; 9:8-11; 10:4 and here in 18:16-17.

Let's read Deut. 4:9-13,

“Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons; Specially **the day (LXX day of the ecclesia)** that thou stoodest before the LORD thy God in Horeb, when the LORD said unto me, **Gather (qahal/ecclesiaz)** me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children. And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire unto the midst of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness. And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice. And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.

Deut. 9:10 also mentions the “day of the assembly”,

“And the LORD delivered unto me two tables of stone written with the finger of God; and on them was written according to all the words, which the LORD spake with you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in **the day of the assembly (qahal/ecclesia).**”

From these three examples we can see there was a very significant day for the Israelites called the day of the assembly which they were never to forget. How could they? It involved the mountain being on fire, and the voice of God speaking to them, making a covenant with them, and giving them the lively oracles, even the ten commandments.

That day is recorded for us in Exodus 19.

“**In the third month**, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, **the same day** came they into the wilderness of Sinai.”

We are given some timing here as to the arrival of the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. It was in the third month on the same day. There is some question what day this is, but most take it to be the first day of the new moon.

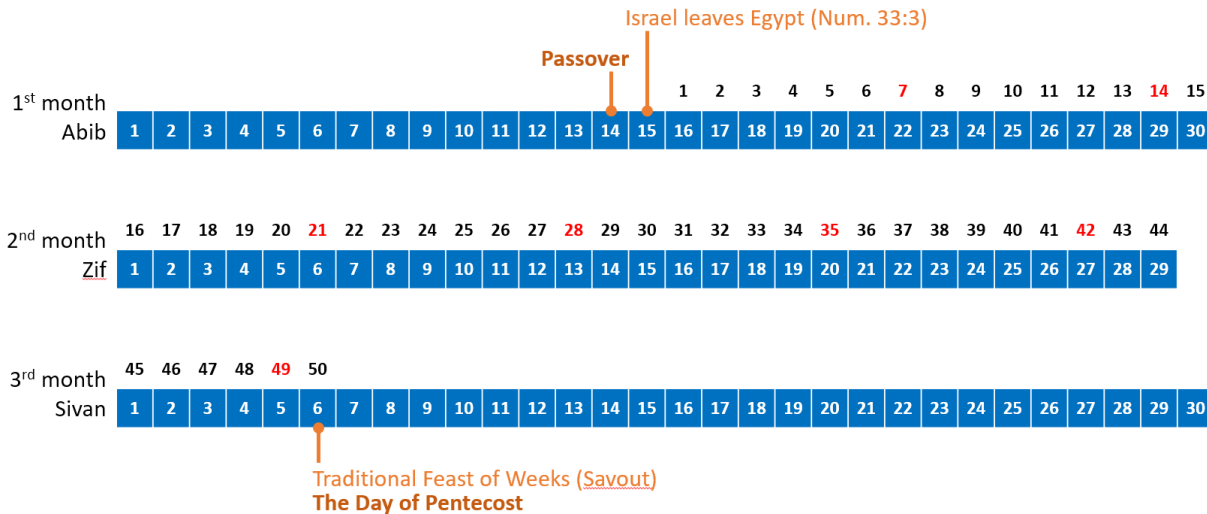
A chronology of Israel's time can be compiled from the following references in Exodus.

Reference	Yr/Mo/Day	Description
Ex. 19:1	1/3/1	Israel comes to the wilderness of Sinai and encamps before the mount.
Ex. 19:3	1/3/2 ¹	Moses' first ascension into the mount. Receives God's promise to take Israel as his people.
Ex. 19:7		Moses descends and tells the people the words of the Lord.
Ex. 19:8	1/3/3	Moses' second ascension. Returns the words of the people to the Lord. Instructions to prepare people for meeting God on the mount.
Ex. 19:14		Moses descends and prepares the people for the third day (cp. v. 10-11)
Ex. 19:16	1/3/6	In the morning, the people come before the mount to meet with God
Ex. 19:20		Moses' third ascension. God instructs to make sure people do not come up.
Ex. 19:25		Moses descends, speaks to the people, God speaks the 10 commandments (20:1-17). People respond in fear.
Ex. 20:21		Moses' fourth ascension. Receives various commandments (20:22-24:2)
Ex. 24:3		Moses descends and recounts all the commandments God gave him
Ex. 24:4	1/3/7	Early in the morning Moses builds an altar and sanctifies the people. People vow obedience.
Ex. 24:9		Moses' fifth ascension with Aaron and others. The nobles see God. Moses ascends higher to be with Yahweh (v. 12-13,15,18).
Ex. 24:16	1/3/12	Cloud covers the mount for six days
Ex. 24:16-18	1/3/13	On the seventh day God calls to Moses out of the cloud and Moses goes into the midst of the cloud. Moses in the mount 40 days and nights receiving instructions for the Tabernacle.
Ex. 32:15	1/4/23 ²	Moses descends after 40 days, breaks the tablets upon seeing the people worshipping the golden calf.
Ex. 32:30-31	1/4/24	Moses' sixth ascension to seek forgiveness for the people.
Ex. 33:4		Moses returns the Lord's words to the people. Moves tabernacle outside the camp. Pleads with God to go with him and to see his glory.
Ex. 34:4	1/4/25	Moses' seventh ascension with new tablets. Given revelation of Yahweh's name. In the mount for another 40 days and night (34:28)
Ex. 34:29	1/6/5	Moses comes down after 40 days and his face shines. Instructs people to build tabernacle.
Ex. 40:17	2/1/1	Tabernacle is reared up. Aaron and his sons consecrated for 7 days (Lev. 8:33-35)
Lev. 9:1	2/1/8	Sin and burnt offering for Aaron and the people. Nadab and Abihu offer strange fire (10:1,19)
Nu. 10:11	2/2/20	Israel departs from Mt. Sinai

¹ The second and third day are not designated in Scripture but are from a common Jewish interpretation used to put the 50th day of Pentecost on Sivan 6th.

² I have calculated the 40 days as excluding the 6 days the cloud covers the mount.

The chronology uses a common Jewish method that puts the 50th day after coming out of Egypt on the sixth day of the first month. They call it the counting of the omer. The chart below shows the counting of these days.³



Why is this important? Because the “day of the ecclesia” in the Old Testament is on the exact same day of the ecclesia in the New Testament. In Acts 1:4 Jesus told the disciples to “not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father.” Wait for what? We are told in Acts 2:1,

“And when **the day of Pentecost was fully come**, they were all with one accord in one place.”

This day was the end of the counting of the seven weeks. This is the same period type of jubilee. From the day of firstfruits to the full harvest. The types are so perfect. They are so aligned.

- At Sinai there was fire. For the Apostles at Pentecost there was fire.
- At Sinai the word of God was given. At Pentecost the spirit uttered the word in tongues.
- At Sinai there was the prophet Moses. At Pentecost there was the greater Prophet, the Lord Jesus (fulfilling Deut. 18)
- At Sinai there was a covenant. At the day of Pentecost the new covenant was offered.

The Covenant

This covenant is expressed in Exodus 19:4-6,

“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then **ye shall be a peculiar treasure** unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And **ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation**. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.”

³ You can get an app for your phone to help you count the omer.

This was the promise to Israel in the day of the assembly. Brothers and sisters, it is our promise too. Peter lifts these words right out of this context and puts into the context of the New Testament ecclesia in 1 Peter 2:9,

“But ye are a chosen generation, **a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people;** that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”

Peter is here showing that everything promised to the ecclesia in the wilderness was fulfilled in the new covenant ecclesia. Earlier in verse five he said we are a “spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.” That pretty much entails everything under the law now shown its fulfillment in the believers. Those branches were broken off and we have been grafted into that nation. As Jesus said in Matt. 21:43,

“Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.”

We are that “**holy nation**” as long as we bear the fruits thereof or else, we can be broken off just like the wicked branches. We then are now a “**royal priesthood**”. Royal because we are king priests after the order of Melchizedek. Just as Jesus was born king of the Jews and as of yet has not received his kingdom, so we to, in Him, will be made to rule and perform our priestly functions which we are now practicing. We are also a “**peculiar people**”. The word “peculiar” means purchased. Purchased, or redeemed, by the blood of Christ (v. 19).

It takes a while to ponder this and let it really sink in. This is the ecclesia that Peter is talking about. Just as incredible as the words sounded to Israel on the day of the assembly so too, they should seem awesome to us. How are we going to be that royal priest, that holy nation, that peculiar people?

The Ecclesia of the Firstborn

There is one more New Testament commentary on the “day of the assembly” (of Exodus 19) that we should consider. It is found in Hebrews 12:18-25. Notice the contrast here between verses 18-21 and 19-24. The word “and” (Greek “kai”) helps us to break it down into eight sayings for each.

For ye are not come unto

1. the mount that might be touched,
2. and that burned with fire,
3. nor unto blackness,
4. and darkness,
5. and tempest,
6. and the sound of a trumpet,
7. and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (For they could not endure that which was commanded, if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart:

8. And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:)

But ye are come unto

1. mount Sion, (Ex. 24:1,12-13)
2. and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,
3. and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly (Ex. 24:11)
4. and church (ecclesia) of the firstborn, which are written in heaven,
5. and to God the Judge of all, (Ex. 24:11)
6. and to the spirits of just men made perfect,
7. and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant,
8. and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. (Ex. 24:8)

In the last eight you will notice that they seem to be in pairs. The first contrast is of course with the mountains. In Exodus it was a physical mountain you could see and touch. We have come to mount Sion, one which we have seen with the eye of faith, just as Abraham looked for a city whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10). Have you come to that city? Like Abraham can you see it? As we come together as a body in the ecclesia, do we encourage one another with this vision?

In the next couplet, the verse division unfortunately breaks the true structure of this passage. The phrase “general assembly” belongs to the company of angels. It is the word “panegusis” and is the only place used. It refers to a festal gathering of people to worship God.

This is how the ESV reads in verses 22-24,

But you have come to

1. Mount Zion (Ex. 24:1,12-13)
2. and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,
3. and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, (Ex. 24:11)
4. and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,
5. and to God, the judge of all, (Ex. 24:11)
6. and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,
7. and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,
8. and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Ex. 24:8)

What does it mean though that we have come to “an innumerable angels in festal gathering”? It might help us to consider all of these phrases and their parallels to the ecclesia in the wilderness. Not on the day of assembly but on the day following, which is Exodus 24. They are all in Exodus 24.

The last one, the sprinkled of blood, is in Exodus 24:8,

“And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD hath made with you concerning all these words.”

Hebrews has much to say about this in chapter 9. This typified the true sacrifice; which bloods purges our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Moses, Aaron, his two sons and the seventy elders (the assembly of firstborns?) then go into the mount and see God (Ex. 24:10). We know from the principles of God manifestation that they saw angels. Then verse 11 seems to indicate why these angels are in festal gathering for they eat and drink with them.

Finally, we have the God, the judge of all, which relates to Exodus 24:11 where God does not lay his hand upon them. They are made righteous in the sight of God and are spared instant death.

The amazing thing is that if you put yourself in this scene, if you truly experience it, then the Hebrews passage says you have come to even greater things in the ecclesia. This is what the ecclesia is preparing us for. To be the “ecclesia of the firstborn”. The word firstborn is plural in the Greek. We are firstborns because we have been born again in the Lord Jesus Christ, the first begotten from the dead. We are the firstborns because like the Levites we have been taken to be God’s firstborns, the royal priesthood. We are the firstborns because like the nobles on whom God laid not his hand, we are leaders of the people, being examples unto the flock.

Conclusion

These are the verses that fill us with awe when we come to consider the ecclesia. God has called us to be saints, collectively. Hopefully, as you have considered these words, qahal and ecclesia, your paradigm of the ecclesia has been brought more into focus. We are the branches grafted into the tree of Israel. It supports us. Any church that does not have the hope of Israel as its base is no “church” at all.

Next study: Jesus’ Instruction for His Ecclesia

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