

Paulus Oecumenicus: Interculturality in the Shaping of Paul's Theology*

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The growing recognition that Judaism and Hellenism were not mutually exclusive suggests that Paul should be studied from a point beyond the Judaism/Hellenism divide. After attending to the apostle's own multiculturalism, the relevance and implications of the 'beyond' position are assessed by means of an enquiry into Paul's use of *charis* and *ecclesia*. In both instances, intercultural convergence is indicated. However, the farewell to a dichotomous point of departure does not imply the denial of all distinctiveness. Studying the biblical documents from the 'beyond' position opens up new vistas and holds great promise for future NT research.

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1. Preliminary Observations

1.1 *Bridging the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*

The traditional notion of an unbridgeable dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism has a direct bearing on Pauline studies.

Paul the apostle was born and bred a Jew of the diaspora, nurtured in the traditions of his Jewish forebears, yet at the same time imbibing an all-pervading Hellenistic culture – hence a *Hellenistic Jew* in the full sense of the word, not merely a Jew who happened to preach and write in Greek. However, being simultaneously Hellenistic *and* Jewish encapsulates one of the most controversial issues in Pauline studies. What relative weight should we allocate to each of these epithets? Should the writer of at least seven of our oldest extant Christian documents be understood from a primarily Hellenistic perspective or a Jewish one? Or is this a false dichotomy?

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The presumption that Jewishness and Hellenism were two incompatible, in fact, strongly oppositional entities,¹ forced the quest for the authentic Paul into an either/or paradigm. First Ferdinand Christian Baur, followed by the history of religions school, created a thoroughly Hellenized Paul. A counter reaction was inevitable. The cumulative effect of the work of such divergent spirits as Paul Billerbeck, Joachim Jeremias, W. D. Davies, E. P. Sanders and many others largely succeeded in restoring a Jewish Paul.

The last few decades saw the pendulum moving backwards once more. Indications of affinity between Paul's *oeuvre* and Hellenistic culture are accumulating, thereby unmasking the one-sidedness of an exclusively Jewish approach. Following on the discovery that both Judaism and Hellenism were not monolithic entities, it is increasingly being recognized that Jewishness and Hellenism are, in many respects, not mutually exclusive. The either/or dichotomy is being unmasked as an ideologically based presupposition. In the wording of Engberg-Pedersen, we should now approach Paul from a point 'beyond the Judaism/Hellenism divide'.²

Does this farewell to a dichotomous approach then imply the denial of all distinctiveness? We know that even in multi-cultural societies distinctive identities and religious diversity can stubbornly hold their ground.³ The 'beyond' should therefore rather be understood as a vantage point – one which is not distorted by a massive either/or disposition, but which allows for communalities and convergences, but also for hard-core incompatibilities. These factors should be kept in mind when we turn to the manner in which Paul communicated the Christian message within shifting contexts. We start with two aspects of his own life setting.

1.2 *Situating Paul*

1.2.1 *Paul's own Multiculturalism*

In his well-known work *Tarsus or Jerusalem*, van Unnik stated quite categorically that these two cities represented two radically different worlds.⁴ The choice between Tarsus and Jerusalem was therefore one between two different Pauls: a universalistic, Hellenistic one, and a conservative, Jewish one. He set out to prove that Paul grew up in Jerusalem and that he was, in fact, a thoroughbred Palestinian Jew. However van Unnik's position can no longer be maintained. On the one hand, we know today that the first century Jerusalem was

1 The prominent scholar H. D. Betz ('Hellenism', *ABD* III 129) called emerging Christianity 'the intellectual and spiritual battleground on which the confrontation between Judaism and Hellenism was fought with unprecedented intensity'.

2 T. Engberg-Pedersen, 'Introduction', *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 6–7.

3 Cf. J. J. Collins, 'Cult and Culture: The Limits of Hellenization in Judea', *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* (ed. J. J. Collins and G. E. Sterling; Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Series 13; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001) 38–61 (39).

4 W. C. van Unnik, *Tarsus or Jerusalem. The City of Paul's Youth* (London: Epworth, 1962) 3–4.

already quite considerably Hellenized and, on the other, Acts 22.3 cannot be used as proof that Paul grew up in Jerusalem.⁵ We must accept that Tarsus and Jerusalem both played a formative role in his development. Paul should be understood as a complex, multicultural, first-century Mediterranean who integrated various influences into his own person. In a sense, he can be compared to the ‘pluralistic person’ of the social psychologists. He had what they describe as ‘the capacity to accommodate diverse cultural influences so that they become part and parcel of your personal and social self-identity’.⁶ He shared this with countless others in that cultural melting-pot which constituted the Mediterranean basin. In fact, social psychologists assume that ‘everyone has the potential to accommodate many kinds of continually changing selves within the self, and *actualise these selves within various life contexts*’.⁷ Paul’s letters undeniably reflect such a multicultural aptitude.

1.2.2 Paul between Ecumenicity and Ethnicity

What motivated Paul to express himself multiculturally? We should distinguish between his broad theological stance and how he envisioned his own missionary task.

Paul was convinced of the universal scope of the Christian gospel. It must suffice here to call to mind the inclusive character of passages such as Rom 1.16; 3.22–24; 5.18; 11.32; 15.7–12; 1 Cor 1.18–25. And he saw his personal mission as embedded in the universal scope of the gospel. For our purpose it is important to note that, although Paul’s correspondence primarily addressed gentile Christians, he would also have kept Jewish Christians in mind.⁸

1 Corinthians 9.19–23 articulates Paul’s missionary strategy. The main thrust of his assertion is that he went out of his way to identify with his culturally diverse audiences. He would have done everything possible to find those ‘beach-heads of identification’⁹ from where they would be willing to accompany him on his journey of persuasion.

The negative corollary to Paul’s rhetoric of inclusivity was the ever-imminent problem of inter-group prejudice. The delicate nature of inter-ethnic relations in general and actual socio-political friction between Jews and non-Jews in this period¹⁰ indicate that many first century Christian communities found themselves

5 See A. B. du Toit, ‘A Tale of Two Cities: “Tarsus or Jerusalem” Revisited’, *NTS* 46 (2000) 375–402.

6 W. Jordaan and J. Jordaan, *People in Context* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 3rd ed. 1998) 635.

7 Jordaan and Jordaan, *People in Context*, 636 (my italics).

8 Cf. L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *Paul the Missionary* (CBET 34; Leuven: Peeters, 2003) 252–6.

9 E. E. White, *The Context of Human Discourse. A Configurational Criticism of Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1992) 216.

10 See, e.g., C. D. Stanley, ‘“Neither Jew nor Greek”: Ethnic Conflict in Graeco-Roman Society’, *JSNT* 64 (1996) 101–24.

within a highly explosive situation.¹¹ Paul would have done his utmost not to alienate sections of his ethnically diverse audience. Negatively, he would tread lightly where group sensitivities were at stake and, positively, he would accentuate their common Christian identity.¹²

1.3 *The Purpose of this Study*

My purpose is to assess the relevance and implications of the view from 'beyond' by applying it to some selected Pauline themes. What picture emerges from the possible convergence of motifs from divergent cultural backgrounds? I shall restrict myself to two key themes in Pauline soteriology and ecclesiology, namely, χάρις and ἐκκλησία.

2. Grace¹³ in Paul

2.1 *By Way of Introduction*

Grace signifies the theological sense which Paul made of his Damascus experience. It forms the gateway to his soteriology and certainly constitutes a central theological theme in Paul. However, I shall focus only on those aspects pertinent to this enquiry.

2.2 *New Impetus from Hellenistic Research*

The ground-breaking work of Wetter¹⁴ on the honorific inscriptional material and the magical papyri, followed by the research of scholars such as Danker¹⁵ and, most recently, that of Joubert¹⁶ and Harrison,¹⁷ impacted dramatically on the traditional Jewish approach to χάρις. Harrison in particular made an invaluable contribution in this regard. The bearing of the Hellenistic notion of χάρις on Paul can no longer be ignored.

11 M. G. Brett, 'Interpreting Ethnicity', *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. M. G. Brett; Biblical Interpretation Series 19; Leiden/New York: Brill, 1996) 3–22 (9–15).

12 See J. M. G. Barclay, '“Neither Jew nor Greek”: Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul', in *Ethnicity* (ed. Brett), 197–214 (211–12).

13 'Grace' is used here as a cover-term for a semantic domain which includes χάρις, ἔλεος and οἰκτιρμός with their cognates.

14 G. P. Wetter, *Charis. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des ältesten Christentums* (UNT 5; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913).

15 F. W. Danker, *Benefactor. Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1982).

16 S. J. Joubert, *Paul as Benefactor: Reciprocity, Strategy and Theological Reflection in Paul's Collection* (WUNT 2. Reihe 124; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); 'CHARIS in Paul: An Investigation into the Apostle's Performative Application of the Language of Grace within the Framework of his Theological Reflection on the Event/Process of Salvation', *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology* (ed. J. G. van der Watt; NovTSup 121; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005) 187–211.

17 J. R. Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace in its Graeco-Roman Context* (WUNT 2. Reihe 172; Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

2.3 *Χάρις in the Salutatio of Paul's Letters*

The Pauline *salutatio* typically contains a combination of *χάρις* and *εἰρήνη*, qualified by an *ὄπο* preceding the divine names.

The exact genesis of the Pauline letter greeting is uncertain.¹⁸ There is a long-standing majority position that Paul's choice of *χάρις* was consciously influenced by the *χαίρειν* greeting of the traditional Greek letter.¹⁹ The deft acoustic play between *χαίρειν* and *χάρις* may have played a role, but also more fundamental reasons.²⁰ Furthermore Paul balances *χάρις* by adding *εἰρήνη*, which reflects the traditional Jewish peace greeting. By substituting *χαίρειν* with the two nominatives 'grace' and 'peace', the *salutatio* changed into a wish (may grace and peace be with you) or, more probably, a blessing (grace and peace to you). Both the addition of *εἰρήνη* and the switch to a benediction reflect Jewish influence.²¹ Early Jewish epistolography²² and liturgical conventions come into play. However, this process also may have evolved the other way round, first reflecting Jewish benedictory traditions in which *ἔλεος* and *εἰρήνη* functioned prominently, and ending up with the present Pauline *salutatio*.²³ In that case, Paul's general preference for *χάρις*, undergirded by the attractiveness of the *χαίρειν-χάρις* word-play – which would certainly have startled *and* pleased discerning Greek ears – effectuated the substitution of *ἔλεος* by *χάρις*.

For our enquiry, a decision between these alternatives is of little consequence. Important is the fact that Paul's consistent choice for the dyadic greeting indicates his sensitivity for both Greek and Jewish cultural preferences.

18 But cf. G. A. Gerhard, 'Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des griechischen Briefes I', *Philologus* 64 (1905) 27–65.

19 Inter alia J. L. White, 'New Testament Epistolary Literature in the Framework of Ancient Epistolography', *ANRW* II 25/2, 1730–56 (1740); H.-J. Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament. A Guide to Context and Exegesis* (English version, with revisions and additions, of *Die antike Briefliteratur und das Neue Testament* [UTB 2022]) (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2006) 18–20, 361.

20 Paul loved such acoustic effects. Cf. BDF §488. More fundamentally, he would have wanted to replace an epistolary cliché with something meaningful.

21 K. Berger, 'Apostelbrief und apostolische Rede. Zum Formular frühchristlicher Briefe', *ZNW* 65 (1974) 191–231 (191–207); Klauck, *Ancient Letters*, 361.

22 For the peace-greeting in Semitic and Jewish letters, see inter alia E. Lohmeyer, 'Probleme Paulinischer Theologie', *ZNW* 26 (1927) 158–73 (158–64); J. A. Fitzmyer, 'Some Notes on Aramaic Epistolography', *JBL* 93 (1974) 201–25 (214–16); C. Breytenbach, '“Charis” and “eleos” in Paul's letter to the Romans' (Seminar paper presented at the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense 2007; to be published in *BETL*; used with consent of the author) 1–22 (19–20).

23 This was, in essence, the position of Lohmeyer, 'Probleme', 158–64; recently taken up by Breytenbach, 'Charis', 19–22.

2.4 Χάρις, ἔλεος and οἰκτιρμός

Linguists have often faulted NT scholars for their logo-centrism. Linguistic theory requires that we should rather work with semantic fields. In referring to God's benevolent dealings with man, χάρις, ἔλεος and οἰκτιρμός (with their cognates) belong to the same semantic field and should therefore be studied together. In Paul, divine χάρις signifies God's kindly disposition and beneficial action towards undeserving humans.²⁴ It can best be translated by 'kindness' or 'favour'. The meanings of ἔλεος and οἰκτιρμός overlap significantly²⁵ and both are semantically close to χάρις. However, in contra-distinction to the latter, they include a strong element of concern or compassion.²⁶ Ἐλεος in Paul could probably best be translated as 'pity' or 'mercy' and οἰκτιρμός as 'tender mercy' or 'compassion'. However, viewed from a diachronic perspective, there is another difference: ἔλεος and οἰκτιρμός both have significantly stronger OT-Jewish connotations than χάρις. Being the regular LXX translation for the strongly covenantal term חַסֵּד, ἔλεος occurs three times more than χάρις. Χάρις, in turn, is the regular translation equivalent for חַסֵּד and then mostly in the sense of finding favour with someone, especially God. Significantly enough, probably due to Greek influence, the proportional occurrence of χάρις increases in the LXX deuterocanonical literature and the situation is dramatically reversed in Philo²⁷ as well as in Paul.²⁸

Breytenbach²⁹ recently called attention to the importance of the Jewish tradition which depicted God as the compassionate and merciful One. The trajectory of this tradition, or variants thereof, can be followed from LXX Exod 34.6 (cf. 33.19), through the prophets and the Psalms, into early Jewish literature and liturgy (cf. also Luke 1.50, 54, 58, 72, 78).³⁰ Paul was certainly steeped in this tradition. One would have expected him to choose ἔλεος to verbalize the benevolence of God. His decision to use χάρις instead, was probably due to

24 For Paul, God's grace was much more than a mere positive attitude. It was benevolence *in action*. Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 322.

25 Ἐλεος/ἐλεέω/ἐλεάω/ἐλεήμων and οἰκτιρμός/οἰκτείρω/οἰκτίμων were 'twin' concepts. Their concatenation served to strengthen the impact of a statement: LXX Exod 33.19; 4 Kings 13.23; Ps 24.6; 39.11 etc.

26 J. P. Louw and E. Nida, *Greek-English Lexikon of the New Testament based in Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988) 1.751.

27 Where χάρις appears 345 times and ἔλεος only 48 times.

28 In Paul's undisputed letters, χάρις, χαρίζομαι and χάρισμα, with God as subject, appear at least 71 times (some instances are equivocal) and ἔλεος and ἐλεέω/ἐλεάω, with God as subject, only ten times.

29 'Charis', 6–8. But see also H. J. Stoebe, 'חַסֵּד', *THAT* II 601–4.

30 See Breytenbach, 'Charis', 6–8.

- (a) The greater semantic versatility of χάρις.³¹ We know from the LXX that ἔλεος, like ἰσχυρῶς, could be used reciprocally.³² However, its semantic range did not cover ‘thankfulness’, which did form part of the semantic spectrum of χάρις.³³
- (b) The pervasive use of χάρις in Hellenistic benefaction.
- (c) The critical reserve towards ἔλεος in the Hellenistic intellectual tradition and particularly the radical Stoic attack on the passions.³⁴

The three important contexts in which Paul actually used ἔλεος/ἐλεέω/ἐλεάω, namely, Rom 9–11; 15.9 and Gal 6.16 are especially revealing. In all three instances, the influence of the OT-Jewish ἔλεος tradition,³⁵ functioning within a salvation-historical context,³⁶ is evident. Romans 9–11 focuses on Israel in the new dispensation: in Rom 9.14–18, ἐλεέω/ἐλεάω occurs four times (cf. also 9.23), and οἰκτίρω twice. The LXX quotation from the key verse Exod 33.19 highlights God’s mercy and compassion towards Israel. The Jewish connotations are undeniable. The same is true of Rom 11.30–32. Although the ἐλεέω word-group, in this case, is used predominantly for God’s mercy towards the nations, the broader context focuses on God’s universal future for Israel and the nations. In 15.9, ἔλεος appears in a similar salvation-historical context. The same is true of the rather unusual Pauline pronouncement of ‘peace and mercy...on the Israel of God’ in Gal 6.16.

The situation is, therefore, that Paul regularly used χάρις in view of the fact that the majority of his readers/auditors were Greek-speaking non-Jews. But in contexts where strong Jewish associations and sensitivities were at stake, he preferred ἔλεος.³⁷ In formulating, in varying contexts, the benevolence of God towards undeserving humans, Paul did not hesitate to utilize concepts from both Jewish and Greek cultural storehouses. He moved freely from the one to the other, but did so with sensitivity. Keeping in mind that the majority of his addressees were non-Jewish, he preferred χάρις; but within contexts focusing on Israel’s religious heritage and future hopes, he applied ἔλεος. He did not

31 Harrison, *Grace*, 287.

32 Stoebe, ‘ἰσχυρῶς’, 600–18.

33 The reciprocal potential of χάρις to verbalize both grace bestowed and grace returned (= thanks) was already cryptically formulated by Sophocles: ἡ χάρις χάριν φέροι *Oed. Col.* 779; χάρις χάριν γὰρ ἔστιν ἡ τίκτουσ’ ἀεὶ *Ajax* 522.

34 See esp. D. Konstan, *Pity Transformed* (Classical Interfaces; London: Duckworth, 2001). Cf. Apollonius’ disdainful dictum, quoted by Cicero: ‘nothing dries more quickly than a tear’ (*Inv.* I 109).

35 Breytenbach, ‘Charis’, 6–16.

36 Already R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 5. Aufl. 1965) 283 pointed to the salvation-historical connotations of ἔλεος in Rom 9–11 and 15.9.

37 Admittedly, there are a few exceptions: Rom 12.8; 1 Cor 7.25; 2 Cor 4.1 and Phil 2.27.

fuse these two traditions but juxtaposed them, respecting the cultural preferences of both Greeks and Jews, thus also reflecting the inclusiveness of God's grace.

2.5 *Unilateral and Reciprocal*

The qualifications 'unilateral' and 'reciprocal' regularly surface in discussions on grace in Paul.³⁸ In theological parlance, the first term indicates the absolute character of God's action over against any human participation, while the second reflects bilateral involvement. This differentiation is then used to contrast the unilateral character of grace in Paul with its reciprocal nature in Hellenism. Although one can appreciate the motive behind this theologoumenon, it is nevertheless misleading. As we shall note, it will be more appropriate to accept that Paul also viewed grace as reciprocal, although he saw the roles within this bilaterality as radically disproportionate. He thought in reciprocal terms, but redefined reciprocity. Reciprocity need not imply commensurality or repayment. *It all depends on how reciprocity is defined.* Thanking and honouring God is already a form of reciprocity.³⁹ Working on a debt of love (Rom 1.14; 13.8) is genuinely reciprocal.

In Paul, the dual structure of the grace event is clearly evident in Rom 6.17; 7.25, 1 Cor 15.57 and 2 Cor 2.14. In each case, a graceful action of God calls forth χάρις on the part of believers. In 2 Cor 2.14, for example, the χάρις of believers is their response to the privilege of sharing in God's triumph.

The two collection chapters (2 Cor 8–9) are in their entirety an exercise in reciprocity. Bilaterality is, for example, clearly active in 8.9: in effect, this artful implicature states, 'In Jesus Christ, God has been so incredibly kind to you; can you find it in your heart not to respond appropriately?' This would have been a real knock-over. In 8.13–15, balanced reciprocity, as encapsulated in the ἰσότης principle, is also quite evident. Reciprocity is once more active in 2 Cor 9.14–15: the reference to the 'surpassing χάρις of God' immediately triggers the χάρις τῷ θεῷ. God's kindness obliges.

A grateful response is not restricted to a 'thank you' or a collection effort. In Rom 12.1–2, the οἰκτιρμοί of God motivates the consecration of one's life to God. Gratitude may also take the form of praise and honouring God. In Rom 11.28–36, the references to God's ἔλεος elicit a resounding doxology (11.33–36). Similarly, the eulogy in Rom 15.9–12 is a response to God's mercy (15.9).

38 E.g. Dunn, *Theology*, 322–3; Harrison, *Grace*, passim.

39 Paul would agree with Graeco-Roman moralists who regarded gratitude as the first essential reaction within the reciprocal cycle: 'He who receives a benefit with gratitude repays his first instalment' (Seneca *Ben.* II 22). See also S. C. Mott, 'The Power of Giving and Receiving: Reciprocity in Hellenistic Benevolence', in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (FS M. Tenney; ed. G. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 60–72 (64).

The reciprocal character of χάρις may also be reflected in Paul's use of εὐχαριστέω/εὐχαριστία.⁴⁰ It may not be coincidental that εὐχαριστέω in the thanksgiving sections of Paul's undisputed letters (except for 2 Corinthians and Galatians), follows so closely on χάρις in the *salutatio*. Paul may have felt that his εὐχαριστέω should resonate to the immediately foregoing grace and peace benediction.

What would have influenced Paul to apply the reciprocal character of χάρις so effectively? In view of

- (a) the strongly reciprocal character of Hellenistic grace;
- (b) the pervasiveness of benefaction ideology in the first-century Mediterranean context and
- (c) χάρις being, in the words of Harrison, the very 'leitmotiv of benefaction', it seems obvious that, in Paul's language of grace, he applied the grid of Hellenistic benefaction.

2.6 *The Abundance of Grace, the Augustan Golden Age and the Quinquennium Neronis*

Whenever Paul elaborates on grace, his style tends to 'explode' into language of excess. Most exegetes agree that his eulogy in Rom 5.15–21 on the superabundance of grace draws upon Jewish apocalyptic expectations.⁴¹ Harrison does not deny Jewish influence, but argues that the reign of grace in Rom 5.12–21 should be equally situated in the Roman eschatology of the Augustan era.⁴²

The reign of Augustus was indeed proclaimed and celebrated as the dawning of a golden age, characterized by peace and abundance⁴³ – and not without reason, in view of the reform measures of Augustus, the stabilized socio-political situation and the impressive growth in Rome's glory. The initial years of Nero

40 Professor Cilliers Breytenbach first drew my attention to this. Due to shared research interests, we have had several discussions on χάρις. I wish to thank him for sharing his stimulating insights with me.

41 F. Hauck, 'περισσεύω κτλ.', *ThWNT* VI, 58–60; M. Theobald, *Die überströmende Gnade. Studien zu einem paulinischen Motivfeld* (Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1982) 92; M. C. de Boer, *The Defeat of Death. Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (JSNTSup 22; Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) 168–9. For the eschatological abundance motif, cf. Isa 25.6; 27.6; Amos 9.13; Ezek 49.7–12 and particularly 4 Ezra 8.52 (*praeparata est habundantia*).

42 Harrison, *Grace*, 227. But see also Danker, *Benefactor*, 347. R. Jewett, *Romans. A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 381, emphasizes the Jewish apocalyptic background of this passage, but also refers to the 'excess of benefaction in the civic cult'.

43 Harrison, *Grace*, 227–33. See also P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Jerome Lectures, 16th series; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992) esp. 167–238; D. Castriota, *The Ara Pacis Augustae and the Imagery of Abundance in Later Greek and Early Roman Imperial Art* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1995) esp. 124–69.

were hailed by optimistic visions of the return of the Augustan golden age. This euphoria was spearheaded by no less than Seneca, acting together with Burrus as mentor for the young incoming *princeps*. Again, these expectations were not without a measure of justification.⁴⁴ Good governance was initiated. Corruption was combated. The famous *pax romana* seemed to re-establish itself. What was later called the *quinquennium Neronis* was remembered as ‘the happiest period of the Empire since the death of Augustus’.⁴⁵

Paul’s description of the bountiful reign of grace may therefore also be profiled against the Roman motif of a dawning golden age. If so, *Roman culture* enters here as a third factor in Pauline interculturality. We have here a conflation of Jewish and Roman expectations, christologically transformed.⁴⁶

2.7 *Silhouetting Grace in Paul against its Jewish and Hellenistic Backgrounds*

Both the Jewish and the Hellenistic cultural worlds left their imprints on Paul’s thinking about grace. We start with his recasting of Hellenistic benefaction motifs.

In comparing grace in Paul with Hellenistic benefaction, it would be unfair to extrapolate some of the latter’s most negative manifestations and present them as typical. Certainly, there were many instances of genuine philanthropy on the one hand and sincere gratitude on the other.⁴⁷ However, we cannot ignore contemporary criticism of benefaction practices⁴⁸ and the many indications that they became stereotyped and exteriorized.

The *structural* correspondence between grace in Hellenistic benefaction and in Paul is evident. Both are reciprocal. Within this reciprocity, *χάρις* indicates both the gift bestowed by the benefactor and the positive reaction of the beneficiary. In both spheres, *χάρις* may involve vertical or horizontal interaction.

44 B. M. Levick, ‘Nero’s Quinquennium’, *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* (ed. C. Deroux; Collection Latomus 180; Brussels: Éditions Latomus, 1983) 3.211–25; M. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (London: Batsford, 1984) 37–66.

45 W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 5th ed. 1914) xiv. For the historical uncertainties surrounding this *quinquennium*, cf. O. Murray, ‘The “Quinquennium Neronis” and the Stoics’, *Historia* 14 (1965) 41–61; Levick, ‘Nero’s Quinquennium’; Griffin, *Nero*, 37–8, 83–7.

46 For the importance of Christ’s death within this context, see de Boer, *Defeat*, 168.

47 Graeco-Roman moralists tried to put benefaction theory and practice on a loftier level. In his *De Beneficiis*, Seneca wrote extensively on this. He criticized the *do ut des* approach and indicated that gift giving has its own intrinsic reward: ‘Otherwise it would have been, not a benefaction, but a bargaining’ (*Ben.* II 31.2). Cf. Joubert, *Benefactor*, 40–50; T. Engberg-Pedersen, ‘Gift-giving and God’s *Charis*: Pierre Bourdieu, Seneca in *De Beneficiis* and Paul in Romans 1–8’ (Seminar Paper presented at the 2007 Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense; used with consent of the author) 4–7, 15–16.

48 Cf., e. g., Mott, ‘Power’, 67; Zeller, *Charis bei Philon*, 20–26; and esp. Harrison, *Grace*, 114–46, 192–209. Significantly, this critique came mainly from Hellenistic-Jewish writers and Graeco-Roman moralists.

In both, gratitude was to be expected of the beneficiary. In both, χάρις on the part of the beneficiary could be in the form of or complemented by praise or the bestowal of honour. This correspondence undeniably indicates that Paul was significantly influenced by Hellenistic benefaction conventions. Only when we delve deeper, differences become manifest.

The first and most obvious difference is that, contrary to the mostly material and often socio-political connotations of grace in Hellenistic benefaction, grace in Paul is constantly *religious* in character. The source of all grace is always and exclusively God and Jesus Christ. Even χάρις between Christian communities (2 Cor 8–9) rests on the basis of God's grace.⁴⁹ At the same time, it primarily addresses humanity's religious needs, particularly the remission of sin.⁵⁰

The second difference is that of motivation. Whereas God's grace is totally unconditional, Hellenistic benefaction was to an important extent governed by the *do ut des* principle. Would-be benefactors would consider what return they could get from their beneficence – whether in the form of loyalty, power, honour or material benefits. Benefaction was often regarded as a kind of loan.⁵¹ It was therefore only natural to select those beneficiaries who were able to make a worthwhile counter-gesture. According to Paul, God offered his grace free of any condition or expectation of repayment (Rom 3.24; 5.15–17). He offers it to rebels who bereaved him of his honour (Rom 1.21, 23, 25 etc.). His motivation was not the *do ut des* principle. It was divine love which prompted him to extend grace towards the godless (Rom 5.6–11).⁵²

A third difference was the contingent and precarious character of Hellenistic benefaction. It depended on the changing fortunes and whims of benefactors, including the gods,⁵³ while Christian grace, as Paul defines it, is a constant life experience. Hence he can speak of 'this grace in which we stand' (Rom 5.2). Christian life exists under the dominion of grace (Rom 5.17–21; 6.15). Grace is a power which escorts and protects.⁵⁴

Regarding the Jewish roots of grace, the apostle took up the basic Jewish tradition of the kindness and mercy of Yahweh which flows like a broad stream through the entire OT and the early Jewish period and which would have been

49 Joubert, *Benefactor*, 136–7, 178–80.

50 In Hellenism, the beneficence of the gods usually took the form of concrete favours – cf. Joubert, 'CHARIS in Paul', 188. They did not provide for salvation beyond death, the mystery religions being the only exception – H. Dörrie, 'Gnade A I-II', *RAC* XI 331–3.

51 Mott, 'Power', 61; Zeller, *Charis bei Philon*, 14.

52 H. Schlier, *Der Römerbrief* (HThKNT VI; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1977) 153, calls this grace 'staunenswert...ohne jegliche Analogie'.

53 Cf. Konstan, *Pity*, 124 (also 105–16).

54 Zeller, *Charis bei Philon*, 133.

most positively received by him. God is never obliged to bestow grace⁵⁵ – not initially, and also not as a result of manifestations of gratitude on the part of believers.⁵⁶ He bestows grace for reasons of his own. At decisive points Paul radically transcends the ethos of Hellenistic benefaction. Love as the motivation for God’s action (Rom 5.8) is Jewish to the core.

Most importantly, christology was the diagnostic feature which decisively distinguished grace in Paul from Hellenistic grace. In all of Paul’s closing benedictions, *χάρις* is followed by a genitive of origin, identifying Jesus Christ the Lord as its source. And being christological, all Pauline grace is grace of the cross.⁵⁷ It is God’s love in Christ (Rom 8.35, 39) which gives Christian *χάρις* its own special *proprium*.

2.8 Conclusion

Paul is sensitive to differentiate between Jewish and Greek traditions. In his *letter-greetings*, he respects the cultural conventions of the two main constituencies among his addressees by first using *χάρις* – thereby alluding to the traditional Greek greeting – and then coupling it with the typical Jewish peace salutation, both reinterpreted from and integrated into a Christian perspective. *Elsewhere* in his letters he normally uses *χάρις*, respecting the sentiments of his mainly non-Jewish addressees; but where Jewish salvation-historical associations intersect with Christian hopes, he uses *ἔλεος*. This would appeal to both groups across the cultural divide.

In his communication of grace, he applies all the linguistic and socio-cultural tools available to him. He takes up the OT-Jewish concept of God as the compassionate and merciful One, merges it with the basic structure and linguistic apparatus of Hellenistic benefaction and sends it through the christological prism. Thus both heritages are transformed. Jesus is now the agent and source of grace. And, most importantly, moving through this christological filter, grace acquires a cruciform shape.

3. Ecclesia

3.1 Introductory Remarks

The roots of the NT *ἐκκλησία* concept have been hotly debated. Recently Ferdinand Hahn stated confidently that this bone of contention has at last been resolved,⁵⁸ but many will disagree with him.

55 Cf. the repeated combination of *δωρεά(ν)* with *χάρις* to emphasize the unsolicited, free character of grace (Rom 3.24; 5.15, 17).

56 In his excellently documented article, Mott, ‘Power’, amply demonstrated how original donors, including the gods, were obligated to continue their generosity when fitting gratitude was bestowed (esp. 63–7).

57 Rom 5.1–11 and esp. vv. 6–8; 5.15–20; 8.32.

58 F. Hahn, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 2.480.

In the search for the roots of the NT ἐκκλησία, the either/or bias is often glaringly evident. Whereas Erik Peterson, some 80 years ago, aligned the NT ἐκκλησία with the meetings of the Greek δῆμος,⁵⁹ Leonhard Rost declared categorically that Jesus derived the word and concept of ἐκκλησία from the OT. In appropriating ἐκκλησία, the early church expressed its conviction to be the new Israel, the true people of God.⁶⁰ Instead of even considering that the Greek notion of ἐκκλησία could have contributed to the application of ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ to individual churches, Rost resorted to a theological argument.⁶¹

Peterson and Rost represent two extremes. More recent studies show a greater openness towards bridging the divide. Klaus Berger's position is commendably sophisticated: Hellenistic Judaism derived its understanding of ἐκκλησία from the provincial and monarchic manifestations of ἐκκλησία in Hellenism, and, subsequently, Hellenistic Jewish Christianity, although it borrowed the *name* ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ from Jewish terminology, appropriated the *content* of ἐκκλησία from Hellenistic Judaism.⁶² But here also the lady's slip is showing. Although Berger is much more nuanced than Peterson, his work still reveals a predisposition towards minimizing the effect of Israelite-Jewish traditions.⁶³ A third position is that of Schrage.⁶⁴ He does not deny some influence on the part of the LXX; however, he is convinced that ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ was primarily an early Christian creation. But let us move *in medias res*.

3.2 The Pauline Spectrum

Ἐκκλησία is not the only prominent early Christian self-designation in Paul. Ἅγιοι is also quite conspicuous.⁶⁵ Paul applies these two designations so self-evidently that most researchers agree that they originated from pre-Pauline Christianity. I shall argue that the ἐκκλησία title originated within Greek-speaking early Christian circles in Jerusalem, spreading from there to Antioch.

In Paul, the semantic range of ἐκκλησία covers the following:

- 1 The *event* of a (congregational) meeting, as in 1 Cor 11.18; 14.19, 28, (34, 35 – Pauline authorship disputed).

59 E. Peterson, *Die Kirche* (München: Beck, 1929) 14–15 and nn. 18–19.

60 L. Rost, *Die Vorstufen von Kirche und Synagoge im Alten Testament* (BWANT 4. Folge Heft 24; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938) esp. 154.

61 Rost, *Die Vorstufen von Kirche und Synagoge*, 155.

62 K. Berger, 'Volksversammlung und Gemeinde Gottes. Zu den Anfängen der christlichen Verwendung von "ekklesia"', *ZThK* 73 (1976) 167–207 (171–84, 186, 204, 206).

63 According to him the evidential basis for connecting the NT ἐκκλησία with Israel of the desert period is too small ('Volksversammlung', 185; cf. 'Kirche II. Neues Testament', *TRE* XVIII 214).

64 W. Schrage, '“Ekklesia” und “Synagoge”. Zum Ursprung des urchristlichen Kirchenbegriffs', *ZThK* 60 (1963) 178–202.

65 Occurring 25 times.

- 2 An *entity* in the sense of a local congregation. The bulk of Pauline occurrences fall within this category.⁶⁶
- 3 In a few instances, to which we shall return later, Paul may be referring to the supra-local, that is, the universal church, of which the individual churches are local manifestations.

Bearing this Pauline spectrum in mind, let us now pay attention to ἐκκλησία in the LXX⁶⁷ and in the writings of Philo.

3.3 *Ecclesia in the LXX and Philo – A Broad Overview*⁶⁸

3.3.1 *Ecclesia in the LXX*

The unmarked meaning of ἐκκλησία in Greek is the *event* of ‘coming together’, a ‘meeting’. Within various contexts, this event can then become more specific, for instance, as a political or religious assembly. In the LXX, the more specific meanings *assembly of the Lord* (ἐκκλησία κυρίου) and *assembly of Israel*, particularly in the form of the prolifically used *whole assembly of Israel* (πᾶσα ἐκκλησία Ἰσραήλ),⁶⁹ are especially relevant. Since in old Israel we cannot divide the religious from the political, both specified meanings refer to the same assembly: the one being qualified from its divine perspective, the other from its ethnic composition.⁷⁰ Like (πᾶσα) ἐκκλησία Ἰσραήλ, ἐκκλησία κυρίου was an inclusive, supra-local term, embracing the entire people of God.

Ἐκκλησία κυρίου occurs seven times in the LXX (Deut 23.2, 3, 4 [*bis*], 9; Mic 2.5; 1 Chron 28.8 [cf. also Lam 1.10]), while ἐκκλησία θεοῦ appears in Neh 13.1 and ἐκκλησία ὑψίστου in Sir 24.2. Noteworthy is that לַאֲסֵפָה appears at least twice in the Qumran documents (1QSa 2.4; 1QM 4.10).⁷¹ However, the presence of the ἐκκλησία κυρίου motif is not restricted to those instances where the divine genitive specifically indicates that the ἐκκλησία is the assembly of the

66 Paul uses ἐκκλησία 39 times as a group designation: Rom 16.1, 4, 5, 16, 23; 1 Cor 1.2; 4.17; 6.4; 7.17; 10.32; 11.16, 22; 12.28; 14.4, 5, 12, 23, [33]; 15.9; 16.12, 19 (*bis*); 2 Cor 1.1; 8.1, 18, 19, 23, 24; 11.8, 28; 12.13; Gal 1.2, 13, 22; Phil 3.6; 4.15; 1 Thess 1.1; 2.14; Phlm 2. The bulk of these refer to local congregations (three of the latter to house churches: Rom 16.5; 1 Cor 16.19; Phlm 2).

67 I purposefully chose the LXX as point of departure since the choice for ἐκκλησία most likely originated within the pre-Pauline Greek-speaking Christian movement.

68 Josephus is not helpful in this regard. He uses ἐκκλησία 48 times, but ἐκκλησία κυρίου/θεοῦ is completely lacking. His ἐκκλησία is thoroughly Hellenized.

69 Or small variations: Deut 31.30; Josh 9.2–3; 3 Kings 8.14, 22, 55; 12.3 (A); 1 Chron 13.2, 4; 2 Chron 6.3 (*bis*) etc.

70 Thus ἐκκλησία κυρίου is the *assembled λαὸς κυρίου*; cf. Rost, *Vorstufen*, 13; O. Linton, ‘Kirche I. Bedeutungsgeschichtlich’, *RAC* IV 907–11.

71 Professor Elisha Qimron, co-editor of 4Q396 (see E. Qimron & J. Strugnell, *Qumran Cave 4 V* [DJD 10; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994]), also known as 4QMMT^c – informed me that 4Q396 1–2i (line 40) may also have contained the phrase לַאֲסֵפָה. (There is a *lacuna* after לַאֲסֵפָה.)

Lord. In, for example, Deut 4.10; 9.10 (A² B); 18.16, ἐκκλησία is used absolutely, but the divine genitive is implied.⁷² It should also be kept in mind that, originally, the meanings of ἐκκλησία and συναγωγή overlapped significantly, as can be gleaned from Num 16.3 and 20.4 where קהל לך is translated by συναγωγή κυρίου instead of ἐκκλησία κυρίου.

There is an intriguing aspect to the semantic development of ἐκκλησία κυρίου. In Deut 23, where this phrase occurs five times, several *entry conditions* are stipulated. It seems likely that ἐκκλησία is here understood as a closed group with boundary markers and entrance requirements. The ἐκκλησία is becoming an entity which is not restricted to the occasion of the meeting event, but outlives it. This becomes even clearer in the tradition emanating from Deut 23. In Neh 13.1–3, separating those of foreign descent from the ἐκκλησία actually means excommunication from the people of Israel. The ἐκκλησία κυρίου is no longer a one-off assembly; it has acquired a permanent existence of its own⁷³ and the meeting-aspect has become supplementary. The same may be true of Lam 1.10. In 1QSa 2.4 and 4Q396 1–2i line 40, this Deuteronomistic tradition surfaces again. In both instances לך most probably refers to the *congregation* of Qumran. Regarding the second text, Fabry is of the opinion that לך functions as a fully fledged self-designation for the Qumran community⁷⁴ (cf also CD 7.17).

Contrary to this line of thought, Berger categorically states that, before the NT, both לך and ἐκκλησία were used only as designation for an ‘aktuell versammelte Gemeinschaft’.⁷⁵ It is not clear how Berger can concede that we do find evidence of ‘generelle Kriterien von Gruppenmitgliedschaft’ in the unfolding of the Deut 23 tradition⁷⁶ but still persist in denying that before the NT לך/ἐκκλησία became a ‘Gruppenbezeichnung’. One is inclined to ask how a group designation could be imagined without a group.⁷⁷

The work of Jesus Ben Sirach requires special attention since this document bears important marks of interculturality. Searching for the happy medium between accommodation and preservation,⁷⁸ Sirach’s use of ἐκκλησία reflects a striking amalgam of Greek and Jewish patterns:

72 See F.-L. Hossfeld, ‘Gottesvolk als Versammlung’, in *Unterwegs zur Kirche. Alttestamentliche Konzeptionen* (ed. J. Schreiner; QD 110; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1987) 130–1. Cf. also Judg 20.2.

73 As nowadays in ‘Assemblies of God’ the focus is not on the event of meeting but on a church.

74 H.-J. Fabry, ‘לך qahal V’, *ThWAT* VI 1219–20.

75 ‘Volksversammlung’, 187, 188.

76 ‘Volksversammlung’, 190; cf. also K. Berger, ‘Kirche II. Neues Testament’, *TRE* XVIII 215. He even affirms that in 4QFlor 1, where Deuteronomy 23 is taken up once more, we have a group designation (‘Volksversammlung’, 189).

77 This inconsistency was also noticed by H. Merklein, ‘Die Ekklesia Gottes. Der Kirchenbegriff bei Paulus und in Jerusalem’, *BZ* 4 (1979) 48–70 (60–2).

78 Cf. T. Middendorp, *Die Stellung Jesu Ben Siras zwischen Judentum und Hellenismus* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

- 1 Sirach basically has the meaning of a Greek δῆμος in mind. Nevertheless, the Jewish theocratic idea is not yet abandoned.⁷⁹ This is clear from 24.2, where he changes the traditional ἐκκλησία κυρίου to ἐκκλησία ὑψίστου in order not to offend Greek-oriented readers.⁸⁰
- 2 In most cases, ἐκκλησία (like לַחַד in Sirach's Hebrew text) refers to political meetings. In contrast, ἐκκλησία in Sir 50.13, 20 designates a markedly cultic occasion.⁸¹ However, in the Jerusalem of ca. 200 BCE where the local authorities were also a priestly aristocracy, we should not differentiate too strictly between political and religious meetings.⁸² It would therefore be risky to identify the ἐκκλησία of Sir 24.2 as a purely political meeting. The fact that it is called an ἐκκλησία ὑψίστου rather points towards a primarily religious occasion. It is significant that here, under Greek influence, the term which traditionally had an inclusive, supra-local connotation, now refers to a local assembly. In fact, almost all the instances of ἐκκλησία in Sirach indicate local assemblies.⁸³
- 3 Ἐκκλησία is never used in an eschatological sense.

3.3.2 Philo

Ἐκκλησία in Philo shows the following contours:

- 1 No less than 19 of Philo's 23 references to ἐκκλησία deal with Israel's desert traditions.⁸⁴ Hermeneutically, he actualizes these in favour of his philosophical argument.
- 2 In these references, ἐκκλησία and in particular ἐκκλησία θεοῦ and variants thereof are self-evident designations. They have a cultic connotation and are (almost) always inclusive. The only instance where ἐκκλησία indicates a local congregation is *Virt.* 108: 'And if any of them (scil. the Egyptians) should wish to go over to the Jewish community (τὴν Ἰουδαίων πολιτείαν) they must...be favoured in such a way that the third generation is invited to the congregation (εἰς ἐκκλησίαν) and to partake in the divine words'. But even here there

⁷⁹ Middendorp, *Stellung*, 158.

⁸⁰ Middendorp, *Stellung*, 62, 184. Avoidance of the Yahweh name also contributed to this (cf. Neh 13.1 and Qumran).

⁸¹ A twin concept to ἐκκλησία κυρίου, namely, πᾶσα ἐκκλησία (υἰῶν) Ἰσραήλ is used.

⁸² Cf. Middendorp, *Stellung*, 140–55; N. A. Dahl, *Das Volk Gottes. Eine Untersuchung zum Kirchenbewusstsein des Urchristentums* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2. Aufl. 1963) 63–4.

⁸³ 15.5; 21.17; 23.24; 24.2; 30.27 (33.18); 34 (31).11; 38.33; 39.10; 44.15; in 26.5 an 'unruly multitude'.

⁸⁴ Exodus references are: *Dec.* 32, 45; *Her.* 251; *Post.* 143. Direct or indirect references to Deuteronomy 23 are: *Conf.* 144 (*bis*); *Deus* 111; *Ebr.* 213 (*bis*); *Leg.* 3.8, 81(*bis*); *Migr.* 69; *Mut.* 204; *Post.* 177; *Somn.* 2.184, 187; *Spec.* 1.325; *Virt.* 108. Of these, five contain direct quotations from Deut 23: *Conf.* 144; *Ebr.* 213; *Leg.* 3.81; *Post.* 177; *Somn.* 2.184; cf. *Virt.* 106.

seems to be a correlation between the local Jewish community and the Jewish people as a whole. To join a local ἐκκλησία means becoming part of the Jewish people.

- 3 Like Sirach, Philo avoids ἐκκλησία κυρίου. He uses it only in direct quotations from Dtn 23 (*Leg.* 3.81; *Post.* 177; *Ebr.* 213; *Conf.* 144). Otherwise he replaces it with ἐκκλησία θεοῦ (*Leg.* 3.8; *Ebr.* 213), ἐκκλησία θεία (*Conf.* 144), ἐκκλησία ἱερά (*Deus* 111; *Migr.* 69; *Somn.* 2.184, 187) or ἐκκλησία τοῦ πανηγυρόνου (*Mut.* 204; cf. *Leg.* 3.81).
- 4 Ἐκκλησία indicates an assembly in *Abr.* 20; *Dec.* 32, 45; *Her.* 251; *Prob.* 138; *Spec.* 1.325; 2.44. Of these, *Abr.* 20; *Prob.* 138 and *Spec.* 1.325; 2.44 refer to public meetings in the Greek sense. However, most of Philo's ἐκκλησία statements referring to Deut 23 seem to have the *congregation* of Israel in mind.⁸⁵ Berger also accepts unequivocally that in *Virt.* 108 Philo refers to a community – the parallelism between πολιτεία and ἐκκλησία being obvious.⁸⁶
- 5 Nowhere in Philo does ἐκκλησία have eschatological connotations.

3.3.3 *Resumé*

The upshot of this overview is the following:

- 1 We followed the use of ἐκκλησία κυρίου and its variants from Deuteronomy, through Mic 2.5; Lam 1.10, 1 Chron 28.8, Neh 13.1, Sirach and Philo, also including some significant references to Qumran.⁸⁷ 'Assembly of the Lord', although not used prolifically, was a persistent and meaningful concept which stayed alive in the collective consciousness of the Jewish people well into the NT era. It was a precious part of Israel's heritage, which rekindled perceptions of a pristine, foundational period when they were established as a nation, chosen by and holy unto Yahweh.
- 2 The tendency to substitute the genitive κυρίου by means of other divine qualifications first appeared in Neh 13.1 (cf. Qumran) but then also in Sir 24.2 and very prominently in Philo. In the case of Sirach and Philo, not only avoidance of the tetragrammaton, but also Greek influence would have played a role.
- 3 Although ἐκκλησία normally focused on the *meeting* event, there are a number of instances, particularly in the Deut 23 tradition, where the focus

85 Notably *Conf.* 144 (*bis*); *Deus* 111; *Ebr.* 213 (*bis*); *Leg.* 3.81 (*bis*); *Migr.* 69; *Mut.* 204; *Post.* 177; *Somn.* 2.184, 187. Conceded by Berger, 'Volksversammlung', 189–90.

86 Berger, 'Volksversammlung', 190: 'Der entscheidende Schritt ist damit getan.'

87 However, the argument that the Christian adoption of ἐκκλησία derived exclusively from apocalyptic Judaism as manifested in Qumran (K. Stendahl, 'Kirche II. Im Urchristentum', *RGG*³ III 1298–9 and especially J. Roloff, *Die Kirche im Neuen Testament* [GNT 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993] 83; *EWNT* I 1000) atomizes a much longer tradition and has a very slender documentary basis.

shifted to the *group* who attended these meetings. The shift from a *meeting* to a *group*, from assembly to congregation, was obviously not that dramatic.

- 4 Originally ἐκκλησία κυρίου was an inclusive, supra-local term, referring to the entire people of God. In contrast, due to Greek influence, Sirach uses ἐκκλησία in a local sense. This is also the case in Philo *Virt.* 108.⁸⁸
- 5 Ἐκκλησία did not have eschatological connotations *per se*. The semantic overloading of OT motifs is a pertinent example of what James Barr dubbed ‘illegitimate totality transfer’. Only when ἡγῶ/ἐκκλησία was contextualized into a broader, eschatological framework, as in Qumran, did it acquire eschatological connotations.

3.4 *Ecclesia in the Pre-Pauline Jesus Movement*

3.4.1 *Finding a name*

For the Jesus movement, the initial period was one of self-definition. In their search to express their identity and to describe their religious ‘home’ within or alongside Jewry,⁸⁹ the early Christians adopted a variety of names such as ‘disciples’, ‘holy ones’, ‘brothers’, ‘the elect’, ‘(followers of) the Way’, ‘Christians’.⁹⁰ The function of these names was to reveal something typical and/or positive (honorific, inspirational) about the new movement.⁹¹ Ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ was such a prestigious self-designation⁹² which aligned the Jesus movement with the coveted tradition of Israel as the people of God.⁹³

3.4.2 *Why ecclesia tou theou and not ecclesia kuriou?*

The choice for ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ is in keeping with the tendency in Jewish sources to replace the tetragrammaton with other divine titles.⁹⁴

88 W. Schrage showed how *synagoge* followed the same route: From an originally inclusive term, it became a local designation – ‘Ekklesia’, 193, 195; ‘συναγωγή’, *ThWNT* VII 805–7.

89 For the same process in Qumran, cf. Müller, ‘*qahal*’, 618. H. Braun, *Qumran und das Neue Testament* (2 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1966) 2.146–9, compares the two processes.

90 Cf. W. G. Kümmel, *Kirchenbegriff und Geschichtsbewusstsein in der Urgemeinde und bei Jesus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2. Aufl. 1968) 16–9; W. Schenk, ‘Die ältesten Selbstverständnisse christlicher Gruppen im ersten Jahrhundert’, *ANRW* II 2/2, 1357–467; Roloff, *Kirche*, 82–3.

91 These in-group designations should be distinguished from derogatory nicknames originating from opposition groups and which were in certain instances appropriated as honorific.

92 In 1QM 4.10 ‘assembly of God’ is one of several prestigious and inspiring insignia on the war banners of the community.

93 Pace, inter alia, Dahl, *Volk Gottes*, 267–76; Merklein, ‘Ekklesia Gottes’, 62–63; Dunn, *Theology*, 537–43; Hahn, *Theologie*, II 480–1; T. Söding, ‘Ekklesia und Koinonia. Grundbegriffe paulinischer Ekklesiologie’, *Catholica* 2 (2003) 111–12.

94 This agrees with the NT tendency to replace *kyrios*, in referring to God, by *theos*. Whereas in the LXX the ratio of *kyrios* to *theos* is roughly 2:1, it is in the NT (excluding quotations) roughly 1:40.

3.4.3 *Why ecclesia and not synagoge?*

Schrage proved the fallacy of playing off these two terms against one another.⁹⁵ Although the LXX used ἐκκλησία as a translation for *ἡῶ* almost twice as often as συναγωγή,⁹⁶ there seems to be, theologically speaking, no convincing reason why the one was preferred to the other. Although Schrage's own theory for the choice of ἐκκλησία has not been found convincing,⁹⁷ he was nevertheless correct in arguing that the choice for ἐκκλησία should rather be sought in first-century group dynamics. At this stage, the synagogue system was already well established. The Jesus followers needed a name that would not only express their belief that they were the rightful heirs of the precious convictions, values and hopes of Israel, but also distinguish them from contemporary Judaism. For the emerging Christian movement blatantly to claim to be the 'synagogue of God' would be to invite confrontation. Therefore ἐκκλησία was an obvious choice.

3.4.4 *In which circles did the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ title originate?*

Although ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ would have been less offensive to Jewish ears, the claim to such a coveted title was still a drastic one. It should therefore rather be ascribed to the 'Hellenists', that is, the (more progressive) Greek-speaking Christian Jews⁹⁸ in Jerusalem, than to the theologically conservative so-called 'Jewish Christians'.⁹⁹ Having originated in Jerusalem,¹⁰⁰ it would have spread to Antioch and elsewhere.

3.4.5 *Concluding remarks about ecclesia in the pre-Pauline Hellenistic church*

- 1 Like other early Christian titles, and in keeping with its traditional use, ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ would have designated the Jesus movement in its totality. However, the need to identify individual churches would arise when the Jesus movement settled in multiple locations. We already noted how Ben Sirach adapted to the Greek convention of using ἐκκλησία for a local assembly. Likewise, the pervasive presence of Greek ἐκκλησίαι would have induced

95 See Schrage 'Ekklesia', 189–94.

96 Roloff's statement (*Kirche*, 83 n. 67) that the LXX preferred to translate *qahal* with *synagoge* is incorrect. Ἐκκλησία translated *ἡῶ* 69 times and συναγωγή only 35 times – cf. *HRCS* s.v.

97 His argument was that the 'Hellenists' could not identify with the centrality of the law in the synagogue.

98 Cf. K. L. Schmidt, 'καλέω κτλ.', *ThWNT* III, 519–20; Campbell, 'Origin', 131; Schrage, 'Ekklesia', 198; M. Hengel, 'Zwischen Jesus und Paulus', *ZThK* 72 (1975) 201. For the theological position of the 'Hellenists', see Schrage, 'Ekklesia', 196–200; H. Räisänen, 'Die "Hellenisten" der Urgemeinde', *ANRW* II 26.2 1502–3.

99 It is scarcely by accident that the only NT reference to a Christian synagogue occurs in James 2.2.

100 It cannot be absolutely ruled out that, similar to Qumran, already the Aramaic-speaking church may have called itself the *לֵא הֵוָה/אֵלֵהוּ*, but this is less likely.

early Christians to apply this title to individual churches.¹⁰¹ Once again we have to reckon with a confluence of Jewish and Greek ideas: the Jewish heritage manifesting itself in envisaging the ἐκκλησία as an inclusive, supra-local entity, Greek convention manifesting itself in the application of this title to local churches. There was another facilitating factor: theologically speaking, the divine genitive indicated that there was no essential difference between the ecumenical ἐκκλησία and an individual one.¹⁰²

- 2 As we have seen, the early Christians were not the first or unique in implementing the semantic shift in ἐκκλησία towards a group. However, they implemented this transition on a much grander scale.
- 3 The Christian innovation also did not lie primarily in their claim to be the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ. Qumran did the same before them. It was their association with Jesus Christ which differentiated them from other ἐκκλησίαι and which qualified their existence as eschatological.

3.5 *Back to ecclesia in Paul*

3.5.1 *A bird's-eye view*

In Jerusalem or Antioch Paul would have become acquainted with the Christian use of the ἐκκλησία title. He applies ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ eight times,¹⁰³ but the divine genitive is implied in all his references to ἐκκλησία as an institution. References to local churches dominate overwhelmingly.¹⁰⁴ This is perfectly understandable in light of his pioneering pastoral work. Hellenistic convention would undoubtedly have acted as a catalyst in this process of individualization.

Nevertheless, there probably are a few exceptions. Reflecting on his past in Judaism, Paul states in Gal 1.13 that he was persecuting (ἐδίωκον) the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ and was trying to annihilate it (ἐπόρθουν αὐτήν). Significantly enough he then spells out this single entity (cf. αὐτήν) as consisting of *the congregations in Judea* (1.22–24). Through his action against the congregations in Judea he aspired to exterminate the church of God in its entirety.¹⁰⁵

101 The self-evident way in which Paul applied this term to local congregations indicates that he inherited it.

102 Recently M. Wolter, 'Von der Entmachtung des Buchstabens durch seine Attribute', *Sprachgewinn. Festschrift für Günter Bader* (ed. H. Assel and H.-C. Askani; Arbeiten zur Historischen und Systematischen Theologie 11; Münster: Lit-Verlag, 2008) 149–61 (155–60), drew attention to the far-reaching semantic implications of this genitive in Paul. I would like to thank him for his thought-provoking insights which he kindly shared with me.

103 1 Cor 1.2; 10.32; 11.16, 22; 15.9; 2 Cor 1.1; Gal 1.13; 1 Thess 2.14; cf also Acts 20.28.

104 Of the 39 instances of ἐκκλησία as a Christian self-designation (cf. n. 66), at least 31 refer to local congregations.

105 J. Hainz, *Ekklesia. Strukturen paulinischer Gemeinde-Theologie und Gemeinde-Ordnung* (BU 9; Regensburg: Pustet, 1972) 233–4, influenced by Holl, argued that ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ in

Evidently Paul saw a direct correlation between the church as a whole and the concrete, local churches. Both essentially belong together, being qualified by the divine genitive. In 1 Cor 12.28, he uses a statement about the ecumenical church (cf. the ‘apostles’) to bring home how believers should behave within the Corinthian congregation. What is valid for the one is valid for the other (Gal 1.13; 1 Cor 15.9; cf. 1 Cor 10.32; 11.22; Phil 3.6). Also Bultmann’s gut feeling that the *adscriptiones* of both 1 Cor 1.2 and 2 Cor 1.2 actually meant ‘to the church of God in so far as she is situated in Corinth’, may not be far off the mark.¹⁰⁶ At any rate, we can safely reckon with at least three instances (Gal 1.13; 1 Cor 12.28; 15.9) where Paul, in keeping with early Christian custom, used ἐκκλησία in an inclusive sense.

In Paul it is even more apparent that Jesus Christ was the factor which transformed this new ἐκκλησία from a primarily Jewish off-shoot into a Christian one. This is indicated by the qualification of ἐκκλησία as being ‘in Christ (Jesus)’ (1 Thess 2.14; Gal 1.22), ‘in the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Thess 1.1) or simply ‘the ἐκκλησία of the Christ’ (Rom 16.16).

3.5.2 *Resumé*

Since our enquiry focuses on the *roots* of ἐκκλησία in Paul and not on his theology of ἐκκλησία, a few concluding remarks must suffice:

- 1 In keeping with the historical development of the early Christian ἐκκλησία concept, its holistic character formed the initial focus. However, Paul’s concern for the young churches within the orbit of his responsibility necessitated a focus on individual congregations. He was conscious of the universal church and, within the broad scope of his missionary vision, it was indeed important to him. But at this stage it was not yet an object of focused theological contemplation. In Ephesians and Colossians, as later in the Didache,¹⁰⁷ a more articulate view of the ecumenical church came into focus.
- 2 In Christ ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ became a thoroughly eschatological concept, closely associated with, but still to be differentiated from ‘kingdom of God’.
- 3 If ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ indicated that the church was the new, eschatological people of God, how did Paul envisage the relation between this new ἐκκλησία and Israel? In a bold statement (Gal 6.16), he called the church

Gal 1.13 was a technical term for the mother church. However, Paul’s specification that the *congregations in Judea* (1.22–23) were in fact the object of his persecution, makes this problematic.

106 Bultmann, *Theologie*, 96; also F. Hahn, ‘Die Einheit der Kirche nach dem Zeugnis des Apostels Paulus’, *Ekklesiologie des Neuen Testaments: Für Karl Kertelge* (ed. R. Kampling and T. Söding; Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1996) 288–300 (288), and Dunn, *Theology*, 540.

107 Cf. the moving eucharistic prayers in *Did.* 9.4; 10.5.

'the Israel of God'. This re-definition of Israel¹⁰⁸ may either imply that the church replaced the historical Israel or that 'Israel' now included Israelite as well as non-Israelite believers. Πᾶς Ἰσραήλ in Rom 11.26 vindicates the latter option. The future coming together of πᾶς Ἰσραήλ will signal the final stage of a long trajectory originating in the desert traditions of Israel. This emphasizes salvation-historical continuity, not discontinuity. Ἐκκλησία τοῦ Θεοῦ is therefore to be understood, not in the spirit of confrontation, but as an open invitation to join in as God's salvation-historical drama draws towards its close.

- 4 Once again we have to reckon with a synergism of OT-Jewish and Hellenistic elements.¹⁰⁹ Whereas in the original OT view of ἐκκλησία κυρίου Israel was holistically seen as a holy people belonging to God, the Greek convention of using ἐκκλησία to indicate the assembly of the local δῆμος triggered and promoted the application of ἐκκλησία to local assemblies, as reflected particularly in the letters of Paul. Theologically, the OT heritage of Israel as the 'assembly of God' redefined christologically, indicates that the church, in its supra-local as well as its local sense, is the repristinated kernel of God's people, praying and working for the consummation of 'all Israel'.

4. Major Conclusion

By the time the NT documents were written, more than three and a half centuries of inter-group contact between Hellenistic and other cultures had passed. From around the middle of the first century BCE, Roman presence also made itself felt. For too long our research paid scant attention to the impact of interculturality. After the work of Martin Hengel and others, we should have known better. For too long we thought in terms of an either/or dichotomy and were hampered by ideological predispositions and tunnel vision. Our new approach should rather be one that focuses beyond the cultural divide. But this 'beyond' should not, in turn, become a new shibboleth. It should signify an unbiased openness to the possibility of interculturality. We may often find that various cultures interacted, as in the case of χάρις and ἐκκλησία. In other instances it may turn out that a certain motif had either a Jewish or a Hellenistic or even a different (e.g. Roman) provenance. Also, infatuation with diverse cultural roots should not blind our eyes to the creative energy set free within an emerging faith movement such as early Christianity. And finally, the both-and does not mean that, theologically, Jewish and other influences balance one another. The Israelite basis of the Christian message remains its

108 Wolter, 'Entmachtung', 158, aptly describes it as a 'semantische Neubestimmung des Israel-Begriffs'.

109 Thus in particular Hahn, 'Einheit', 289, and *Theologie*, 1.275, 2.480-1.

inalienable fountain-head. The waters flowing from that source certainly intermingled with other streams but did not forfeit their essential character. Certain elements in the Jewish-Christian religious tradition proved irreconcilable with Hellenism. In this more narrowly defined sense the 'battlefield' metaphor *does* contain an important truth. It will be necessary to distinguish between such hard-core biblical convictions and values, and the cultural vehicles by means of which they were communicated.

The study of origins may certainly help us to understand the genesis and development of NT notions. It may also provide us with important clues as to their semantics. But we should be cautious. Genetics are not decisive. Decisive is the way in which the early Christians adopted, adapted and contextualized these notions into their own religious universe. Only a conscientious synchronic study of individual NT texts will reveal how various cultural and religious phenomena were received and transformed in moving through the christological prism.

An exercise along these lines will certainly be full of pitfalls. One should, for instance, ask how thoroughly certain ideas or formulations were adopted – for instance, in the case of borrowed metaphors. Nevertheless, the 'beyond' position may deliver us from many former cul-de-sacs. It also holds promise for the future. As such, it may indeed signify the closing of one chapter and the beginning of a fascinating new one.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Additional note: This may eventually result in a new Kittel.