

Church, word of pagan origin

I have heard that the English word “church” is of pagan origins. Is there any substantiation to support this?

There is debate over the origins of the English word church, but before we can address this, we need to have a proper understanding of the Greek word *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία), which in our Bibles is commonly rendered as “church.” Is “church” an appropriate translation of this word?

LS defines *ekklēsia* as “an assembly of the citizens regularly summoned, the legislative assembly” and “in N.T. the Church, either the body, or the place.”¹ In the Apostolic Scriptures, *ekklēsia* is used as a term to define the Body of Messiah, and thus by extension, is rendered as “church” in most English translations of the New Testament. *TDNT* remarks that “Since the NT uses a single term, translations should also try to do so, but this raises the question whether ‘church’ or ‘congregation’ is always suitable, especially in view of the OT use for Israel and the underlying Hebrew and Aramaic...‘Assembly,’ then, is perhaps the best single term, particularly as it has both a congregate and an abstract sense, i.e., for the assembling as well as the assembly.”² This Christian commentary says that “assembly” would be the best, consistent translation for the word *ekklēsia*.

The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Tanach, the Septuagint (LXX), produced approximately 300 years before Yeshua the Messiah, frequently translates the Hebrew word *qahal* (קָהָל), or assembly/congregation, as *ekklēsia*. *TWOT* tells us that “usually *qāhāl* is translated as *ekklēsia* in the LXX.”³ When the Apostolic writers used the Greek word *ekklēsia*, often rendered as “church” in our English Bibles, they did not see the *ekklēsia* as a separate assembly or group of people away from Israel. Rather, they considered the *ekklēsia* to be Israel (albeit an enlarged community of Israel internally diverse, incorporating many more from the nations alongside of the Jewish people). It is not surprising by any means that one of the definitions given for the word *ekklēsia* does in fact include “Israel.” *Thayer* states that “in the Sept. often equiv. to קָהָל, the assembly of the Israelites.”⁴ It is unfortunate that *ekklēsia* in most Bibles has been translated as “church,” whereas it would be best rendered as either “assembly” or “congregation.” Two Christian translations that render *ekklēsia* as “assembly” include Young’s Literal Translation and the Literal Translation of the Holy Bible by Jay P. Green. The Complete Jewish Bible by David H. Stern often uses phraseology like “Messianic community.”

As it relates to whether or not the English word “church” is of pagan origins, there are a number of differing opinions. *ISBE* indicates that it comes from “Gk. *kuriakós*—‘belonging to the Lord’; NT *ekklēsia*—‘gathering’; Lat. *ecclesia*.”⁵ *NIDB* further remarks on how, “The English word derives from the Greek *kuriakos* (belonging to the Lord), but it stands for another Greek word *ekklēsia* (whence ‘ecclesiastical’), denoting an assembly.”⁶ *Smith’s Bible Dictionary* has a slightly different view of the origins of the English word “church,” remarking, “The derivation of the word is generally said to be from the Greek *kuriakon*, ‘belonging to the Lord’. But the derivation has been too hastily assumed. It is probably connected with kirk, the Latin *circus*, *circulus*, the Greek *kuklos*, (κύκλος), because the congregations were gathered in circles.”⁷

Regardless of if you believe that the English word “church” comes from the Greek *kuriakos*, meaning something that belongs to the Lord, or the Latin *circus* via *circulus*, because the early congregations gathered in circles, there is no substantial proof that it is from a word of pagan religious origins.

¹ *LS*, 239.

² K.L. Schmidt, “*ekklēsia*,” in *TDNT*, 397.

³ Jack P. Lewis, “*qāhāl*,” *TWOT*, 2:790.

⁴ *Thayer*, 196.

⁵ G.W. Bromiley, “Church,” in *ISBE*, 1:693.

⁶ Bromiley, “Church,” in *NIDB*, 218.

⁷ *E-Sword 8.0.8: Smith’s Bible Dictionary*. MS Windows 9x. Franklin, TN: Equipping Ministries Foundation, 2008.

There are a few Messianics you may encounter, in their criticism of our Christian brothers and sisters who are not Torah observant, who say that they are part of “the kirk” or “the kirch” and that the English word “church” is of pagan origins. (*Die Kirche*, pronounced *keer-kay*, is simply the German word for “the church.”) Their problem, aside from this being a non-substantiated belief, is that they are trying to insult others and incite them, rather than reason with them from the Word of God about who the true assembly is.

The true assembly or *qahal/ekklēsia* is the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12). While we believe that *ekklēsia* is properly rendered as either “assembly” or “congregation” in English (“assembly” is probably slightly better than “congregation”), saying that the word “church” is of pagan origins is a poor excuse in light of a bigger problem. The bigger problem is getting people to theologically see that there is no separate assembly of elect called “the Church,” and that there is only one *ekklēsia*, the assembly of Israel. This has to be proven from more than just vocabulary, but specifically from the calling and mission the Lord has placed upon His people—a separate “Church” **or** not.⁸

⁸ For a further discussion of related topics, consult the author’s publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?*