

GHS Session - Defining Terms

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Aim of This Paper

Language is the gift by means of which we receive the revelation of God. One of the most important factors in understanding God's heart in the mission of Jesus is to ask how we can understand the original terms used in the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic of the Scriptures so that we build well on the foundation laid in Messiah. My purpose in this short introduction to our theme for this gathering on Apostles and apostolicity is simply to ask the question how the Greek word *apóstolos* came to be used by the New Testament writers as the expression used to describe those Jesus sent out as His envoys, as well as to look a little at how it was or may have been used in other earlier contexts to enhance our understanding of what the original readers of the texts perceived.

The English language, in common with others, has imported a collection of theological and ecclesiological words in transliteration, rather than in translation. What do I mean by that? Take as an example the word baptism, from the Greek *báptisma*. This is not a translation of the Greek, which is connected with dipping or dying by immersion, but is an import of the Greek word into first Latin, as *baptismus* and then into the secondary languages which adapted it as their own. The same process has occurred with terms such as *diákonos*, deacon, *Shabbát*, Sabbath, *prebýteros*, presbyter and *epískopos*, bishop. These untranslated terms have then been overlaid with a superstructure of meaning which may more or less relate to their original purpose in the Greek.

The Greek word *apóstolos* was not coined by Jesus or the New Testament writers, is not a neologism. It already existed in the Hellenic culture, a substantive form from the verb *apostéllō*. The verb itself is a composite word, made of two parts, like so many Greek terms – *ápo* meaning out and *stéllō*, I send. Thus, in its most basic form, the word *apóstolos* means 'the one sent out' in a masculine form. A feminine form from the same verb, *apostolée* signifies in classical Greek a consignment or a sending. The word *apóstolos* is not found frequently in secular ancient Greek literature outside of the New Testament, but it does occur in a few places worth mentioning.

Apostolos in Greek Writings

The Greek statesman Demosthenes, writing in the fourth century BC uses the word in his oration concerning an award made to him, entitled *On the Crown*; here *apóstolos* describes a fleet or squadron of ships under his command, used in a maritime context.¹ In another oration against two persons, Evergus and Mnesibulus, a related word, *apostoléas* is used of the one sending², the despatcher, but this is different to *apóstolos*, who is the one despatched.

Elsewhere, the Greek writer Lysias uses the term *apóstolos* also to refer to a fleet sent out³ And the writer Dionysius of Halicarnassus uses an interesting form of *apostéllo*, i.e. *apostaléises* meaning a garrison or a colony, founded from a sending metropolis or mother city.⁴

Apostolos in the Greek Septuagint

Having found our word, then, in Greek literature, we might ask the question, where does the word *apóstolos* appear in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint (LXX)? Surely if the New Testament writers are drawing on Greek terms in their writings, there would be precedent for the use of the word in the books of the Old Testament?

The short answer is that the word does not appear in the best attested manuscripts of the LXX; the only places it appears is in much later versions of the LXX, in 1 Kings 14:6, where it would translate the Hebrew word *shaluach*, sent one, but this would be post New Testament times, when *apóstolos* was already in use in Christian terminology. It also is also suggested that it was used in Isaiah 18.2, again in later manuscripts, to translate the Hebrew word *Tzir*, meaning envoy. This

¹ Demosthenes, *On the Crown* 107, accessed at <https://scaife.perseus.org/reader/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0014.tlg018.perseus-grc2:107> on 20 01 2026

² Demosthenes, *Against Evergus and Mnesibulus* (oration 47) 26 accessed at <https://scaife.perseus.org/reader/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0014.tlg047.perseus-grc2:26?right=perseus-eng2> on 20 01 2026

³ Lysias 19 (*On the Property of Aristophanes*) 21 accessed at <https://scaife.perseus.org/reader/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0540.tlg019.perseus-grc2:21?right=perseus-eng2> on 20 01 2026

⁴ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 9.59 accessed at <https://scaife.perseus.org/reader/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0081.tlg001.perseus-grc2:9.59> 20 01 2026

Hebrew word is perhaps interesting as it does mean one sent on behalf of an authority, but it doesn't really offer much help.

However, what is the case is that the verb *apostéllo* does appear frequently, around seven hundred times in the LXX to translate the Hebrew verb *shalach*. For example, in Isaiah 61.1, 'he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted', the LXX has *apéstalken me*, the perfect tense of the verb. Again, in Genesis 45.7, the word *apésteilen gar me*, 'for He (God) sent me' is used by Joseph of his mission in Egypt to rescue his family. These factors together means that the term *apóstolos* in its initial use by Jesus and Paul would not have been a totally novel concept in the text of the Greek Scriptures.

The Jewish Version

While what we call the New Testament was written in Common Greek, we must remember that Jesus and the first disciples were living their daily lives in a Jewish, Aramaic-speaking culture. The Aramaic word for apostle is *shlichah* (plural *shliche*), and is used in the Syriac Aramaic peshittah versions of the New Testament where Greek has *apóstolos*. This also corresponds very closely to the classical Hebrew word *shaliach* (plural *shlichim*), used in the Hebrew translation of the Greek Scriptures. Since these first apostles were moving in their Jewish cultural setting, it is very possible they would have been known as *shliche Yeshua*, ones sent by Jesus.

While the word does not appear in the Old Testament, a *shaliach* is a recognised term in rabbinical Judaism for one sent to represent another, just as Eliezer was sent to represent and act for Abraham in Genesis 24. Again, this would have not been an unfamiliar concept to the first followers of Jesus. The *shaliach* in fact was legally enabled by the *sholeach* (the sender) to act on their behalf. The connection of the term to the verb 'to send' is obvious, coming as it does from the root *shalach*, he sent.

What I want to highlight in this exploration of the origins of the term apostle is that it already had connotations when used by the New Testament writers. When they used the word, it would have been interpreted as having an origin in the word send, in Hebrew as well as Greek. One of the problems we have in our use of the word apostle in English version is that we do not have the same connection to the

original languages, leaving the way open to interpretation which invests religious words with more freighted meaning than the original communicates.

Translating not Transliterating

If we actually translated the word *apóstolos* instead of transliterating it, we would have to employ some term meaning 'sent out' or 'commissioned'. There are words in English which carry this idea, such as *envoy*, *ambassador* or *delegate*. The word *missionary* also carries something of the same meaning, though again that has connotations in Christian usage which could add complexity. A main benefit of understanding *apóstolos* as envoy or delegate is that in the context of following Jesus, it keeps the focus on the One sending, not the one sent. In this context then I am not suggesting abandonment of the English term apostle, but a fresh hearing of it, as one very much dependent on the Sender, with the focus of attention on Him rather than on the one sent.

Jesus The Apostle

It is worth noting that in Hebrews 3:1, Jesus Himself is called the 'Apostle and High Priest of our profession'. (Interestingly the New Living Translation translates *apóstolos* here as 'Messenger', while rendering the word elsewhere, as in Romans 1.1, 'apostle', somewhat inconsistent.) This means that the Messiah Himself is an envoy, sent by the Father. This all believers would readily recognise, as He Himself pointed constantly to His Father's will as an indispensable factor in His ministry, thus He says 'I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak.' (John 12.49 NKJV) In this sense, the first apostles of the Lamb would take their lead from the Master who is totally given over to the fulfilment of the will of another, of His Father, always ready to ascribe the glory to Him, rather than pulling the focus to Himself.

There is one occurrence that would be worth looking at in this context. In John 13:16 we read 'the servant is not greater than His Lord: neither is he that is sent greater than he who sent him.' (NKJV) The Greek of this verse actually has 'neither is an *apóstolos* greater than he who sent him.' What is key here is that this is in the passage where Jesus has knelt in a towel and washed His apostles' feet! He is speaking to the

ones who are His envoys, telling them that they cannot do other than follow His example of sacrificial service, laying down their lives for Him, for one another and for the world. The apostolic mission is one of service and self-giving; Jesus Himself as the chief apostle in this Upper Room on the night before His crucifixion models that complete yielding of Himself for the love of the world.

The Apostolic 'Superstructure'

When we stand and look from our vantage point of twenty centuries of history behind us, perhaps we might question how we have come to build such a superstructure (and an almost totally Gentile superstructure at that) on the basis of a gift of service to the body of Messiah, modelled in humility by Jesus Himself, the Apostle of our profession. I would suggest that if we lose sight of the dependence of the apostle on the sender, we can turn the word into whatever we want, using it to build a hierarchy of privilege instead of carrying with it the challenge of what Paul describes as being 'men condemned to death.. a spectacle to the world'. (1 Cor.4.9 NKJV)

I suggest that if we simply rendered the English word as 'apostled' rather than as 'apostle', we would create more the sense of delegation and representation than it has had in the unfolding of Christendom. Very often, 'apostle' has come to mean a Prince or General of the Church, with a focus on authority and control rather than on service and equipping others, the emphasis of Paul's use of it in Ephesians 4.11. In the creed we share, we confess one holy, catholic and apostolic church, and in a sense every disciple of Jesus carries an apostolic calling in the original sense of being commissioned by Jesus to share His good news with the world.

As we continue with our listening to one another in this Spirit-led gathering, can we put under scrutiny our assumptions about the language we use around apostles and apostolicity so that we anchor our actions and witness in the sure rock of Jesus the Messiah, the great Apostle and High Priest of our profession?