**the festal host** (so the word imports) **of  
angels, and the assembly of the firstborn   
which are written in heaven** (who  
are these? Why are they put with the  
angels? Why does the Writer place **God the  
Judge of all** between the assembly of the  
firstborn and the spirits of just men made  
perfect? These, says Delitzsch, are three  
closely connected questions, and among the  
very hardest in our Epistle. The answers  
to them are very various, Many understand   
**the assembly of the firstborn** of  
the firstfruits of the Christian church  
(Rey. xiv. 4): so De Wette, “those who  
are fallen asleep in the faith of Christ, and  
possibly also glorified by martyrdom, who  
have entered earlier than others, as it were  
the firstborn, into blissful union with God  
and Christ.” As Delitzsch observes, if we hold them to be martyrs, the following  
words, **and to God the Judge of all**, might  
have a certain propriety from Rev. vi. 9 f.,  
where the souls of the martyrs under the  
altar cry, “*How long ....dost thou not***judge** *and avenge our blood, &c.?*” But  
this view seems altogether to fail when we  
attempt to explain by it the words, **written  
in heaven**. Those of whom our Lord says,  
Luke x. 20, “*Rejoice, because your names  
are written in heaven,*” are *yet living on  
earth*. According to St. Luke’s manner of  
speaking, the firstborn are hereby designated   
as enrolled (in Luke ii. 1, 3, 5, he  
uses the word here rendered “*written*” for  
enrolling in the census) in the heavenly  
roll: and Scripture usage seems to demand  
that we consider one thus described, as  
not yet in possession of everlasting life in  
the fullest sense, but as destined to life [see  
Acts xiii. 48]. This would forbid us from  
thinking of the 141,000 whom St. John  
saw with the Lamb on the heavenly Zion,  
who bore on their foreheads the name of  
the Lamb and of the Father. For this sealing   
was among the insignia of their eternal  
glorification: whereas the being enrolled  
in the book of life is the token to us, while  
here below, of our heavenly citizenship, and  
seems to lose all its significance, as soon as  
we have entered the heavenly city and need  
no assurance of our citizenship either for  
ourselves or for others. So that though we  
are tempted, both by the fact of their being  
classed with the angels, and by their being  
*firstborn* (so we have “*firstfruits from* *among men,*” Rev. xiv. 4), to identify these  
with the *thousands* seen by St.John, we must  
give up the parallel, these *persons written  
in heaven* being not yet citizens of heaven  
who have taken up their fall citizenship by  
passing through death, but persons to whom  
their citizenship is assured, they being as  
yet here below. Add to which, that they  
are distinguished from the spirits of just  
men made perfect, by the term **assembly** or  
**chureh** [*ecclesia*]: and that it would he  
difficult or rather impossible, on this hypothesis,   
to give any account of the sense  
or arrangement of the two following clauses.  
Just as inadmissible is it, or even more so,  
to understand by the firstborn the patriarchs   
and saints of the Old Test., and then  
by **spirits of just men made perfect**, not  
the Old Test. but the New Test. saints.  
So that, to say nothing of other varieties of  
interpretation not worth mentioning, there  
is no way left but to see, in the words, *the  
assembly of the firstborn written in heaven*,  
THE CHURCH BELOW. And this view, far  
from being a last refuge, is justified by  
every consideration. For 1) thus *ecclesia*  
is explained, which every where, when used  
of men and not of angels, Ps, lxxxix. 5,  
designates the assembly of saints on earth:  
2) the adjunct *written in heaven* is  
accounted for, indicating as it does the  
heavenly charter of the church below, the  
invisible side of their sonship and citizenship   
(see 1 John iii. 2), with which in this  
description of heaven we are mainly concerned:   
3) we get an explanation of the  
choice of the term *firstborn* to describe  
Christian believers. The Writer having  
given the warning example of Esau, who  
for a morsel of meat sold his birthright,  
has prepared the way for such a designation,   
while at the same time, as Knapp  
rightly remarks, the long sentence beginning   
at ver. 18 aims at this “that Christians  
may be defended against unbelief, and  
may learn to know their rights of inheritance.”   
There is no distinction between  
first-born and later-born Christians, but all  
Christians as such are called firstborn  
because of their heritorship of the heavenly  
inheritance. We may also remark that  
thus the analogy with the firstborn of Israel  
is completely fulfilled. They were dedicated