

Chapter 7

Identifying the Qāhāl

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In chapter 4 it was argued that the central message of Jesus was the "kingdom of heaven" and that by this phrase he referred to the Messianic kingdom of prophecy. This kingdom has both a present reality established by Jesus the Messiah at his first advent and a future, climactic establishment on earth at the second advent in complete fulfillment of all the Old Testament covenantal and prophetic promises to the nation of Israel. The spiritual blessings of salvation and eternal life are part of the present reality of the Messianic kingdom. Thus it was further argued that those who accept Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and who receive his proclamation of this kingdom must be viewed as subjects of the Messianic kingdom in the present. Such people would seem to constitute a "qāhāl of Messiah," an expression directly linked to the "qāhāl of Yahweh" and "qāhāl of Israel" in the Old Testament. Based on Paul's teaching in Romans 11 and Ephesians 2, this tentative suggestion can at last be made precise.

In chapter 3, a somewhat detailed study of קהָל (qāhāl) and ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia) as used in the Old Testament and LXX is given. In view of that background, Jesus' use of קהָל, or its Aramaic equivalent, in Matthew 16:18, could not help but make the Jewish mind think of the assembly of God's people Israel. Moreover, Matthew's choice of ἐκκλησία, the word whose function in the LXX is to translate קהָל, gives additional evidence that those who heard Jesus thought of the qāhāl of Israel in the Old Testament. Therefore, Peter and the other disciples who heard Jesus' statement would almost certainly infer this interpretation of it: the familiar qāhāl of Israel in the Old Testament was now being called by him the qāhāl of Messiah ("my qāhāl"). The disciples would see little difference between the two phrases because, after all, as

Peter had just confessed, Jesus was King Messiah, the Messiah of Israel.

In addition to the etymological evidence already adduced in chapter 3, two additional lines of evidence for this conclusion can be cited.

First: Jesus called twelve disciples and then *after* Peter's confession assigned them an eschatological role in the Messianic kingdom of sitting on twelve thrones, "judging the twelve tribes of Israel."¹ The disciples could not have taken this reference to Israel to be anything other than ethnic, national Israel. Nor did Jesus say anything to them to correct that interpretation. The disciples would view this new statement as entirely consistent with Jesus' recent reference to "his *qāhāl*" in Matthew 16:18. Both pointed to national Israel.

Second: consider the question these same disciples asked Jesus in Acts 1:6 just before his ascension: "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" There is not the slightest hint from Jesus that they were asking the wrong question or that the whole idea of restoring the kingdom to the nation of Israel was erroneous. Rather, he simply pointed out that the time when this restoration would occur was not for them to know. Therefore, their question and Jesus' answer indicate that the "*qāhāl*" of interest both to them and to Jesus was Israel.

Ladd seems to make the same observation:

This saying [in Matt. 16:18 should be interpreted]...in terms of the Old Testament concept of Israel as the people of God....He [Jesus] did not institute a new way of worship, a new cult, or a new organization. His preaching and teaching remained within the total context of Israel's faith and practice. Jesus' announcement of his purpose to build his ἐκκλησία suggests primarily...that ***the fellowship established by Jesus stands in direct continuity with Old Testament Israel.*** The distinctive element is that this ἐκκλησία is in a peculiar way the ἐκκλησία of Jesus: 'My ἐκκλησία.'²

1 Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30.

2 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 109-110; emphasis added. Ladd, however, draws exactly the wrong conclusion from this

Therefore, there was direct ethnic and vital continuity between this *qāhāl* of Messiah and national Israel. Moreover, as already observed, it is quite understandable that since Jesus is King Messiah, the Messiah of Israel, that the phrase *qāhāl* of Israel can now be called the *qāhāl* of Messiah, or as Matthew translated Jesus' statement, "my ἐκκλησία."

However, it seems hardly likely that Jesus could have considered the current leaders of Israel--the Scribes, Pharisees, and Saducees and others of the nation who rejected his message--to be members of his *qāhāl*. But again the historical use of *qāhāl* in the Old Testament gives evidence of what probably formed the background of Jesus' use of the term.

At the first Passover, while Israel was still in Egypt, they are called "the whole assembly (*qāhāl*) of the congregation of Israel."³ Later Moses recounts for Israel

observation. He goes on to state that this ἐκκλησία is "the true Israel" where "Jesus sees his disciples taking the place of Israel as the true people of God." So Ladd apparently sees continuity with the OT *qāhāl* of Israel because Jesus' disciples were drawn from this *qāhāl* and then became the new, "true" *qāhāl*. On the contrary, however, there is no hint that Jesus wanted to replace ethnic Israel. His disciples certainly did not understand him to teach that (cf. Acts 1:6-8), and Paul teaches just the opposite in Rom. 11:1-28. Ladd, of course, sees little future for ethnic Israel except for coming to faith in large numbers at some vague point in the future (p. 539). In the entry "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p. 23, Ladd says with regard to the OT covenants and promises to national Israel, "I do not see how it is possible to avoid the conclusion that the New Testament applies Old Testament prophecies to the New Testament church and in so doing identifies the church as spiritual Israel." He is entirely incorrect in that statement. On the other hand, Ladd is correct in not identifying "the kingdom of heaven" with "the church." He states, "If the dynamic concept of the Kingdom is correct, it is never to be identified with the church. The Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced. In biblical idiom, the kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the people of God's rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it. The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself. Jesus' disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God; the church is a society of men" (*A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 111). Also: "It is not helpful even to say that the church is a 'part of the Kingdom,' or that in the eschatological consummation the church and the Kingdom become synonymous" (p. 113).

3 Exod. 12:6.

what took place at Mt. Sinai when the people heard Yahweh give the Ten Commandments. He describes them as "your assembly (*qāhāl*) at the mountain."⁴ It was at Mt. Sinai at the giving of the law and the making of the Sinaitic covenant that Israel was constituted a nation before God.⁵ Thereafter throughout the Old Testament Israel is often called a *qāhāl* in various expressions such as "*qāhāl* of Yahweh"⁶ and "*qāhāl* of Israel."⁷

Much later in Israel's history, a very important use occurs: *the remnant* that returned from the Babylonian captivity⁸ is called "the *qāhāl*,"⁹ the "*qāhāl* of Elohim,"¹⁰ and the "*qāhāl* of the exiles."¹¹ It would appear to be this usage related to a remnant that forms the direct background of Jesus' use of קְהָל (qāhāl) in Matthew 16:18.

However, he refers to a *new remnant* within Israel, the Messianic assembly or community:¹² those who will not only inherit the eschatological Messianic kingdom when established on earth at the second advent of the Messiah, but who are also the subjects of that kingdom in the present by accepting Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. They form the "*qāhāl* of Messiah," or "my *qāhāl*" = "my ἐκκλησία."

Carson notes that Jesus' statement that he will build his ἐκκλησία is "classic messianism."¹³ Continuing he adds, "Implicitly, then, the verse [Matt. 16:18] also embraces a claim to messiahship. The 'people of Yahweh' become the people of Messiah." Albright and Mann agree:

A Messiah without a Messianic Community would have

4 Deut. 5:22.

5 See Exod. 24:1-8; Deut. 5:1-4. Note also that Stephen describes Israel during Moses' time as the "ἐκκλησία in the wilderness" (Acts 7:37-38).

6 E.g., Num. 16:3; 20:4; Deut. 23:2-4 (Heb.; 1-3, Eng.); 1 Chron. 28:8; Mic. 2:5.

7 E.g., Lev. 16:17; Deut. 31:30; Josh. 8:35; 1 Kings. 8:14; 12:3; 1 Chron. 13:2.

8 See Jer. 29:10-14; Ezra 9:8, 13-15; Neh. 1:2.

9 Ezra 2:64; 10:12, 14; Neh. 5:13; 8:2.

10 Neh. 13:1.

11 Ezra 10:8; Neh. 8:17.

12 The phrase "messianic community" is used by Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 77, when commenting on "the church" in Matthew 16:18.

13 Carson, *Matthew*, p. 369.

been unthinkable to any Jew, and how precisely one Jewish group (at least) thought of that Community has been brought sharply into focus by the Qumran literature.¹⁴

Putting together all the data reviewed thus far in this chapter, the following conclusion emerges:

The *qāhāl* is the Messianic assembly or community within national Israel.

If this is the correct interpretation of "my *qāhāl*" or "my ἐκκλησία" as used by Jesus in Matthew 16:18, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that this Messianic community, the new remnant within national Israel, is the "remnant according to God's gracious choice" as described by Paul in Romans 11:5.

However, though Jesus knew this remnant would remain a remnant, it is also true that from the standpoint of God's program, once the atonement had taken place, there was more to be done in the presentation of the Messiah and his kingdom to the nation of Israel. Consider again the question of the disciples in Acts 1:6, which occurred after the death and resurrection of Jesus and after all his teaching during those subsequent forty days "concerning the kingdom of God."¹⁵ It shows that they still fully expected the soon restoration of Israel and the establishment of the Messianic kingdom on earth. The answer given to them by Jesus indicates that it was necessary to continue the presentation of the gospel to national Israel and to offer that possibility. In this light, consider the invitation offered to the nation of Israel by Peter in Acts 3:17-21:

And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Therefore repent and return,

14 Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, p. 195.

15 Acts 1:3.

so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.

This invitation clearly implies that Peter and the other apostles fully expected wide-spread acceptance of Jesus as Messiah within Israel, which would then be followed by his return and the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. Peter and the apostles made no break with Judaism and made no attempt to establish a separate religious community.¹⁶ Moreover, many Jews did accept Jesus as their Messiah. The *qāhāl*, or Messianic remnant, grew.

But Israel as a whole did not repent and accept this invitation. Some twenty-five years later Paul in Romans 11 would picture Israel as an olive tree with most of its natural branches broken off. The "remnant according to God's gracious choice" was still just a remnant. The "*qāhāl* of Messiah," called by Matthew the ἐκκλησία in 16:18, remained a remnant within ethnic Israel and had not grown to encompass the nation as a whole. The happy event when the "*qāhāl* of Messiah" fully and completely equals the "*qāhāl* of Israel" would have to await the second advent after the fullness of the Gentiles comes in. But as a result of Israel's "stumbling" during this interadvent period, Gentiles have been grafted into Israel, as argued briefly in the section, "The Olive Tree Analogy" in chapter 5, and more fully in Appendix 2. The limited sense in which Gentiles become "part" of Israel is developed, defined, and delimited in detail in Appendix 3. The final conclusion reached can be stated as follows:

16 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 348-349: "The pentecostal experience did not lead the first Christians to break with Judaism and to form a separate and distinct community. On the contrary, this new fellowship appeared outwardly to be nothing but a new Jewish synagogue, which recognized Jesus as the Messiah. They continued the Jewish worship of God in the temple (Acts 2:46); and doubtless, 'the prayers' included the regularly stated Jewish prayers. That the first Christians did not break with Jewish practices is attested by the attitude of the populace (Acts 2:47; 5:13). Such statements could not be made had the disciples of Jesus rejected the Jewish religion and worship in favor of the new Christian way. Their Christian faith was simply added to their old Jewish religion."

Gentiles today become part of Israel only in a **very limited covenantal sense**:

The sense is simply **sharing Israel's spiritual covenantal blessings of salvation directly through Israel during the interadvent period before they are ultimately granted directly to the Gentiles as member nations in "His people" at the second advent in the climactic fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant.**

However, at the point just before the engrafting of the Gentiles, the *qāhāl* (ἐκκλησία) of Messiah was limited to the remnant within national Israel. Then as a result of salvation being sent to the Gentiles, the *qāhāl* (ἐκκλησία) of Messiah was expanded to include believing Gentiles. Thus, in relation to Paul's olive-tree analogy, the *qāhāl* (ἐκκλησία) became coextensive with all the branches vitally connected to the root of the olive tree, both natural (the remnant) and wild (the believing Gentiles).¹⁷ The term "*qāhāl* (ἐκκλησία) of Messiah" is now the way reference can be made to all believers.

Then, taking into account the study made of Ephesians 2, the following terms are all equivalent:

- The *qāhāl* (ἐκκλησία) of Messiah from Matthew 16:18
- The one new man
- The one body
- The household of God
- The holy temple
- The ἐκκλησία of Ephesians and of the New Testament letters in general

The *qāhāl* of Messiah, the description from Matthew 16:18, is the fundamental name and essence of the group. It is the Messianic community, the believing remnant, within national Israel begun during Jesus' ministry. But since the *qāhāl* or Messianic community is within national

¹⁷ Since the remnant consisted of the believing segment within ethnic, national Israel, it should not be said that the Gentiles were incorporated into the remnant. That would be contrary to Paul's teaching through the olive tree analogy.

Israel, it is precisely by being added to the Messianic community that Gentiles ipso facto become "part" of national Israel in the limited sense defined above during this interadvent period. Note carefully, however, that since the Messianic community is intrinsically within Israel, none of these six expressions are coextensive with national Israel per se.

Finally, since those who become members of the *qāhāl*, or Messianic community, not only inherit the eschatological Messianic kingdom but also become subjects of that kingdom in the present, its membership, like that of the *qāhāl*, now includes believing Gentiles as well as believing Jews.¹⁸

Several points must be stressed.

- "Israel" is never redefined. The word always has reference to national, ethnic Israel or occasionally¹⁹ the believing remnant within it.
- All the New Testament terms that refer to believers--the ἐκκλησία of Matthew 16:18, the ἐκκλησία of the Pauline letters ("the church"), and the four metaphors of Ephesians 2--are entirely based and founded on national Israel and "the covenants of the promise" made with her. All these terms refer to the Messianic community within national Israel. No new entity was ever brought into existence separate from Israel.
- Salvation comes to the Gentiles through Israel and only through Israel.

18 In the preaching and teaching of Paul and the other apostles, however, "the kingdom" is not emphasized as much as it was in the Gospels by Jesus, perhaps because "the kingdom," with its OT background, would have less meaning to new Gentile believers than the term ἐκκλησία (assembly). However, "the kingdom" was definitely part of the message of Paul and the apostles--to the Samaritans (Acts 8:12), the Jews (Acts 19:8; 28:23), and the Gentiles (Acts 14:22; 20:25; 28:31; Col. 1:12, 13; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5; et al.). I submit that "the kingdom" referred to in these texts is the Messianic kingdom = "the kingdom of heaven" preached by Jesus, which has both a present and future reality. The future eschatological Messianic kingdom on earth (also called the millennial kingdom), will consist of the redeemed nation of Israel as well as the redeemed Gentile nations.

19 Rom. 9:6; Gal. 6:16.

Yes, this view of "the church" is complicated because the reasoning from the *qāhāl* of Matthew to the olive tree of Romans to "the church" of Ephesians is lengthy and technical. But each link in the chain seems strong. It would, of course, be much easier to say that "the church" in the New Testament is something "new": either "the new Israel," also called "the true Israel," (replacement theology/amillennialism) or something unprophesied and completely distinct from the nation of Israel, which still has a prophetic role to play as a nation (dispensationalism). But that is not the picture we have in Romans 11. "The church," the ἐκκλησία, in the New Testament is wholly Hebraic in its origin, nature, and standing--a continuation of the *qāhāl* in the Old Testament, now called the "*qāhāl* of Messiah" since King Messiah's first advent. It is the Messianic community within national Israel. Gentiles are not saved separate from Israel; they have been grafted into Israel and in this way receive the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic covenant during the interadvent period in order to make Israel "jealous," while the bulk of national Israel has been temporarily cut off of their own olive tree, leaving only a "remnant" of natural branches on the tree along with these engrafted wild branches. At the second advent when "all Israel will be saved," the *qāhāl* of Messiah will no longer contain a mere remnant of Israel but the nation as a whole, and the Gentiles as nations distinct from the nation of Israel will directly receive the blessings of salvation in the climactic fulfillment of the provision in the Abrahamic covenant that through Israel all the nations of the earth will be blessed.²⁰

The picture in Ephesians 2 is the same. To quote Horner, "Gentiles are not saved to constitute the Church, but are 'brought near' to an unidentified entity by means of

²⁰ Gen. 12:3; 22:18. Gentile salvation is always through Israel in the sense that it is always based on the Abrahamic covenant, one of Israel's covenants (cf. Rom. 9:4). However, Appendix 3 argues at some length that during the interadvent period the spiritual blessings of salvation for the Gentiles represent a precursive or partial fulfillment of this provision of the Abrahamic covenant and come to them, not directly, but as a result of their becoming "part" of Israel and sharing the blessings of salvation with the Jewish members of the *qāhāl*. It further argues that at the second advent, this provision of the Abrahamic covenant will be climatically fulfilled as salvation flows directly to the Gentiles as nations distinct from the nation of Israel, as indicted in the prophets (e.g., Zech. 2:10-12).

Christ's atonement."²¹ Based on the clear linguistic connection between verses 12 and 19, that entity is national Israel,²² enabling the Gentiles to share in Israel's spiritual blessings of salvation through her covenants, from which they are now no longer strangers.

Objections to this Identification

The One New Man

What about the "one new man" in Ephesians 2:15? The scholars who view the church as "the new Israel" and those who take the church as a new group distinct from Israel both cite this verse in support of their views. However, Horner suggests that the "one new man" is not "new" in the sense of replacement, but that it is a "fulfillment newness."²³ The *qāhāl* of Messiah (or ἐκκλησία of Messiah) is new in the sense that it now includes Gentiles as fellow citizens of Israel, a new development in time in the on-going fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant which promised that all the nations would be blessed through Israel. As Horner goes on to say, this one new man, also called the household of God, "is essentially and foundationally Hebrew, with Zion as its headquarters."²⁴

Jews, Greeks, and the Church

Another objection might be raised by 1 Corinthians 10:32:

Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.

This verse clearly differentiates between "Jews," "Greeks," and "the church of God" and seems to make the church completely distinct from both Jews and Gentiles. How then can the ἐκκλησία be the Messianic community within national Israel? To answer this question, first note Hodge's comment on this verse:

They [the Corinthian Christians] were to be thus

21 Horner, *Future Israel*, p. 271.

22 It should be noted, however, that Horner does not draw this conclusion.

23 Horner, *Future Israel*, p. 274.

24 Ibid.

careful with respect to all classes of men, Christians and non-Christians. The latter are divided into the two great classes, the Jews and Gentiles.²⁵

The Messianic community consists of believing Jews within national Israel. If, as Hodge suggests, the "Jews" here are unbelieving Jews, then there is nothing to prohibit Paul from drawing a distinction between the Messianic community and those Jews who are in unbelief. Both are non-overlapping groups within national Israel. This contrast remains valid even after believing Gentiles are added to the Messianic community. Also, the "Gentiles" in this verse are likewise almost certainly a reference to unbelieving Gentiles. Therefore, we have the three-fold distinction: (1) the Messianic community within national Israel, (2) the unbelieving Jews, also within national Israel, and (3) the unbelieving Gentiles outside national Israel. There is no overlap between these three groups.

Since giving offense or stumbling is mentioned in 10:32, perhaps this verse should be compared with 1:23:

But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness.

In this verse, the stumbling was inevitable: unbelieving Jews stumble at the preaching of the cross, but it must be preached nevertheless. But the stumbling in 10:23 is avoidable. Why let unbelieving Jews stumble by seeing believing Gentiles eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols? Paul does seem to be thinking of unbelieving Jews in both verses.²⁶

Conclusions

Therefore, the conclusions reached are as follows:

25 Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972; original publication date, 1857), p. 202.

26 In Acts 15:29 and Rom. 14:13-21 there is concern for causing *believing* Jews to take offense if Gentiles eat certain foods. However, this fact does not prohibit Paul from also being concerned about giving offense to unbelieving Jews or making them stumble. His heart's desire is for their salvation (Rom. 10:1).

- The *qāhāl* or ἐκκλησία of Matthew 16:18 was a continuation of the *qāhāl* of Yahweh = *qāhāl* of Israel in the Old Testament. It is the *Messianic community within national Israel*.
- In terms of the olive tree metaphor of Romans 11, the *qāhāl* consists of the branches on the olive tree vitally connected to the root and receiving its nourishment or blessing of salvation.
- The Abrahamic covenant stated that through Israel all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Salvation comes to the world through Israel and only through Israel.
- Today both the believing remnant and the believing Gentiles are currently receiving covenantal and Messianic-kingdom blessings, a mere precursor to the final, climactic, eschatological fulfillment in the Messianic age.
- The "church" (ἐκκλησία) referred to in Ephesians and elsewhere in the New Testament is the *qāhāl* defined in this chapter.
- However, the salvation and blessing of national Israel itself, not the salvation and blessing of the Gentiles, remains the preeminent component of God's plan as developed in the Old Testament covenants and prophets. The central goal of this plan is that "all Israel" be saved.
- The point in time at which the natural branches are grafted back into their own olive tree and "all Israel" is saved coincides with the second advent. At this event the "*qāhāl* of Messiah" fully and completely will equal the "*qāhāl* of Israel" and no longer represent a remnant within Israel. This restoration brings about the eschatological manifestation of the Messianic kingdom during which all the spiritual blessings, as well as all the physical and national blessings, promised to Israel will be fulfilled. The central feature of these physical/national blessings is full restoration to the land given to Israel as an everlasting possession. The nation of Israel was, is, and always will be the chosen people, the covenant people of

God, the "*qāhāl* of Yahweh" and now of his Messiah.

- As a result of all Israel being saved at the second advent, even greater blessings will then flow to the Gentiles. During the interadvent period, Gentiles receive the blessings of salvation as *individuals*; with the restoration of Israel, Gentiles will receive the blessings of salvation as *nations*.²⁷ However, neither individual Gentiles nor Gentile nations will ever receive or fulfill in any sense any of the physical and national blessings promised to the nation of Israel.

One point in this summary is so important that it bears repeating. This *qāhāl*, this ἐκκλησία of Matthew 16:18, this "church" of the New Testament, this "household of God" in Ephesians 2:19, as Horner states, "***is essentially and foundationally Hebrew, with Zion as its headquarters.***"²⁸

Note that the headquarters is *Zion*, not *Rome*.

27 See "The Gentiles: Individuals and Nations" in Appendix 3.

28 Horner, *Future Israel*, p. 274. It should be noted that in personal communication with me, Dr. Horner stated that he considers the church "essentially and foundationally Hebrew" because it is rooted in Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant. I agree, but I would add more: its origin, nature, and standing is squarely within national Israel.