

# Chapter 4

## *Preliminary Steps in Identifying the Qāhāl*

### *(Steps 1-3)*

#### **Steps 1-3 in Identifying the *qāhāl***

##### Step 1: What the *Qāhāl* Was Not

Edersheim argues that when קהָל (qāhāl) was used for the assembly of Israel as the people of God, the word emphasized their religious unity.<sup>1</sup> One can see evidence for this association when Moses uses this word in Deuteronomy 18:16: he refers to the time when Israel was assembled to receive the Law at Mt. Sinai.

It seems highly improbable that when Jesus used *qāhāl* he had in mind a highly structured organization or institution. A number of scholars can be marshaled who make this point. For example, Carson, Moo, and Morris:

Explicit references to "church" (ἐκκλησία [ekklēsia], Matt. 16:18; 18:17-18) are often taken to betray an interest in church order that developed only later. But these texts say nothing about church order. Bishops and deacons are not mentioned....The church envisioned is simply the messianic community.<sup>2</sup>

Also, F. F. Bruce:

Certainly it is not likely that he [Jesus] used the word ["church"] in the sense that it usually bears for us, but it is not unlikely that he used an

---

1 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, II:84.

2 Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 77.

Aramaic word which was represented in Greek by *ekklesia*, the term regularly rendered 'church' in the New Testament. And if he did, what did he mean by it? He meant the new community which he aimed to bring into being, the new Israel in which the twelve apostles were to be the leaders, leading by service and not by dictation.<sup>3</sup>

I do not agree with Bruce that Jesus was starting a "new Israel," a term often used in replacement theology/ammillennialism, or that such an entity ever did come into existence. However, the other points he made are relevant, namely, that Jesus did not use the term in the same sense as we do today and that the roots of the meaning intended by Jesus lie in the Old Testament.

R. T. France makes an exceptionally strong statement about what Jesus did *not* have in mind:

[I have argued] that ἐκκλησία has an obvious background in LXX usage, where it signifies the assembly of God's people, and that therefore its occurrence in Matthew's gospel is not in itself surprising, nor does it necessarily carry with it any sophisticated ecclesiology....

Matthew's two uses of ἐκκλησία do not, then, require us to believe that he knew, or even envisioned, a highly developed ecclesiastical organization....

A strong sense of the distinctiveness and theological significance of the new community of the people of God which is being brought into being through the ministry of Jesus does not in itself entail the early development of sophisticated structures for church government and organisation.<sup>4</sup>

Ralph Martin makes a similar comment but connects it with an argument raised by critics regarding the authenticity of these references by Jesus to a "church":

Thus it is more appropriate to translate the Greek

---

3 Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p. 141. A similar interpretation, viz., "that the Christian church now fills the role of the Old Testament congregation of God's people" is found in France, *Matthew: Evangelist & Teacher*, p. 211.

4 France, *Matthew: Evangelist & Teacher*, p. 243-244.

word [ἐκκλησία] by "people of God" than "church"...in this way meeting the argument that Jesus could not have envisioned an institutional body when using the words recorded in Mt. 16:18 and 18:17. No such concept is required, since He more reasonably had in view the eschatological people of God that He had come to gather in His ministry and beyond.<sup>5</sup>

The argument referred to in the previous citation is made by liberal critics who deny the authenticity of this account in Matthew's gospel.<sup>6</sup> Whatever entity eventually developed would, of course, be known to Jesus, being God. The question here is what "assembly" Jesus would build. France thinks it is an "eschatological people of God." Carson's description, "messianic community," is probably better.

However, before any final conclusions can be proposed regarding the identity of the *qāhāl* of God that Jesus would build, its relationship to the "kingdom of heaven" referred to by him in Matthew 16:19 must be examined.

J. C. Lambert argues in his article on "Church" in the old edition of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* that the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew 16:19 "is employed in a manner which, if it does not make the two expressions church and kingdom perfectly synonymous, at least compels us to regard them as closely correlative and as capable of translation into each other's terms."<sup>7</sup>

Lambert's suggestion, however, that the kingdom of heaven and the church (or *qāhāl* or assembly) are virtually synonymous is too strong. It is interesting to note that this view is modified in the comment by Geoffrey Bromiley in the revised article on "Church" in the new edition of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*:

To the extent that the Church is a fellowship of those who have accepted the kingdom, submitted to its rule, and become its heirs, we may rather believe that it is a creation and instrument and therefore a form and manifestation of the kingdom

---

5 Martin, "Peter," *ISBE*, III:804.

6 See footnote 2 in chapter 2.

7 J. C. Lambert, "Church," *Old ISBE*, I:651.

prior to its final establishment in glory.<sup>8</sup>

However, additional clarification is needed.

### Step 2: What Did Jesus Mean by "The Kingdom of Heaven"?

The subject of the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God preached by Jesus represents a vast literature in theological studies. Only a summary of what I believe to be the best view can be given here.

*First:* The two phrases, "kingdom of heaven"<sup>9</sup> (used only in Matthew) and "kingdom of God," are almost certainly used interchangeably.<sup>10</sup>

*Second:* According to George Eldon Ladd, Jesus himself probably used both forms,<sup>11</sup> though he likely favored "kingdom of heaven."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, regardless of the reason for the two different phrases in reference to the same

---

8 Bromiley, "Church," *ISBE*, I:693.

9 η βασιλεια των ουρανων, literally, "the kingdom of the heavens."

10 George Eldon Ladd, "Kingdom of God," *ISBE*, III:24: "...they are quite interchangeable (cf. Mt. 19:23 with v. 24; Mk. 10:23)." Also Carson, *Matthew*, p. 100: "There are enough parallels among the Synoptics to imply that 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven' denote the same thing (e.g., Matt 19:23-24 = Mark 10:23-25); the connotative distinction is less certain." (Note: the "denotation" of the two phrases addresses what "kingdom" the two phrases refer to; according to almost all scholars, they both refer to the same kingdom. The "connotation" of the two phrases is related to the reason for the use of "heaven" in the one and "God" in the other, that is, the distinction implied by the different terms.) Older dispensationalists have at times drawn a theological distinction between the phrases "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God," as, e.g., C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917) at Matt. 6:33. Such a distinction is generally no longer made within dispensational circles. As J. Dwight Pentecost, himself a dispensationalist, points out, "[Dispensational] premillennialists are accustomed to designating the eternal kingdom as the kingdom of God and the earthly program as the kingdom of heaven. Such a categorical distinction does not seem to be supported by Scriptural usage. Both terms are used in respect to the eternal kingdom...Both terms are used in reference to the future millennial kingdom...And both terms are used in reference to the present form of the kingdom" (*Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1958], pp. 433-434).

11 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 64.

12 Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 110, n. 12.

kingdom, the question arises as to why the other gospel writers use "kingdom of God" exclusively.<sup>13</sup> As is noted in the next point, a Jewish audience would understand the meaning of "the kingdom of the heavens." So Matthew, in writing to that audience,<sup>14</sup> would tend to use it far more often than "kingdom of God."<sup>15</sup> The other gospels always used "kingdom of God" because "kingdom of the heavens," as Ladd also points out, "would be meaningless to the Greek ear."<sup>16</sup> Gentiles would interpret the phrase something like "kingdom of the sky."

*Third:* The most common explanation for the two different phrases

is that Matthew avoided "kingdom of God" to remove unnecessary offense to Jews who often used circumlocutions like 'heaven' to refer to God.<sup>17</sup>

However, Matthew does use "kingdom of God" four or five times.<sup>18</sup> In view of this, there might be another explanation that would prompt him to use "kingdom of heaven" more often but not exclusively. Alford suggests that

from the use of it [the phrase "kingdom of heaven"] by St. Matthew here, and in ch. iv. 17; x. 7, we may conclude that it was used by the Jews, and understood, to mean *the advent of the Christ [Messiah]*, probably from the prophecy in Dan. ii. 44; vii. 13, 14, 27."<sup>19</sup>

---

13 Except for a very unlikely use in John 3:5. The manuscript evidence overwhelmingly favors "kingdom of God."

14 Carson, Moo, and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 79.

15 Thirty-four times.

16 Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, p. 110, n. 12.

17 Carson, *Matthew*, p. 100; examples cited are Dan. 4:26; 1 Macc. 3:50, 60; 4:55; Luke 15:18, 21. Also, Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I:267: "...the word 'heaven' was very often used instead of 'God,' so as to avoid unduly familiarizing the ear with the Sacred Name." Similarly, David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1989), p. 16: "The word 'Heaven' was used in pious avoidance of the word 'God'...and to this day Hebrew *malkhuth-haShamayim* ('Kingdom of Heaven') substitutes in Jewish religious literature for 'Kingdom of God'..." There seems little doubt that this is the prevailing theory among scholars.

18 6:33 (in some MSS); 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43.

19 Alford, *The Greek Testament*, I:19; emphasis original.

It is certainly the case that in Jewish idiom the word "heaven" was often substituted for "God." But I think there is merit in the view that the actual origin of the use of "heaven" with "kingdom" is to be found in Daniel chapters 2 and 7. If Matthew used "kingdom of heaven" to avoid offending pious Jews, it is difficult to explain why he did not substitute the phrase "kingdom of heaven" for his four or five uses of "kingdom of God." Moreover, the Daniel connection may help to explain the meaning of the kingdom itself, which does not turn on which of the two phrases is used. Whatever the reason for the use of "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew, however, it is clear why "kingdom of God" was used exclusively in the other gospels: Gentiles would not have understood the decidedly Jewish phrase "kingdom of the heavens."

*Fourth:* there is little doubt that the kingdom of heaven was the central theme of Jesus' ministry.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore somewhat surprising that there is considerable disagreement about the meaning of this kingdom, especially in view of the next point.

*Fifth:* with reference to meaning, it must be noted that both John the Baptist and Jesus use the phrase "kingdom of heaven" without any explanation of what they meant by it.<sup>21</sup> This would imply that they expected their Jewish hearers to understand the term. Robert Culver argues,

Jesus Himself never defined the kingdom of God nor does any New Testament passage do so. Jesus seems to have spoken of it on the reasonable assumption that His hearers, schooled by the Palestinian synagogues, already knew, or thought they knew, what the kingdom of God would be, as described in the Torah, Nebhiim and Kethuvim.<sup>22</sup>

---

20 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 57: "Modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus." James Stalker, "Kingdom of God," *Old ISBE*, III:1805: "...in the Synoptics, at least, it [the kingdom of God] is His watchword, or a comprehensive term for the whole of His teaching." See Matt. 4:17, 23; 5:20; 8:11; 10:5-7; 13:11; 18:1-4; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; et al.

21 Matt. 3:2; 4:17.

22 Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), p. 857. The three Hebrew terms at the end of the quotation are the names of the three divisions of the Old Testament according to Jewish reckoning: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. *Tanakh*, the common Jewish name for the Old Testament, is an acronym based on these three words in

What, then, was the significance of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" to the Jewish people at that time? There is no lack of sources, especially among dispensationalists, who would argue that the answer to this question is the eschatological Messianic kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament.<sup>23</sup> However, although this view is near the truth, the situation is not quite that simple. There is the Old Testament and Rabbinic background to consider, as well as the very real possibility that the "kingdom of heaven" in the teaching of Jesus had both present and future aspects. The place to begin, then, is with the Old Testament background.

## 1. The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

Ladd is one of the most prolific evangelical writers on the subject of the kingdom.<sup>24</sup> He summarizes his view of the nature of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament as follows:

...while there is considerable diversity in the description of the Kingdom in the Old Testament, ***it always involves an inbreaking of God into history when God's redemptive purpose is fully realized.*** The Kingdom is always an earthly hope, although an earth redeemed from the curse of evil. However, the Old

---

Hebrew.

23 E. g., Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1989), p. 614: "Both John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1-2) and Jesus (Matt. 4:17) came proclaiming that *the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. Neither John nor Jesus, nor the particular gospel writers recording these events, tried to define the nature of this kingdom, obviously expecting the audience to understand what they meant by that term; and well they might since Jewish audiences had common knowledge of the Old Testament and understood the nature of the Messianic Kingdom...the common Jewish understanding of the kingdom in first century Israel was that of a literal earthly kingdom centered in Jerusalem and ruled by Messiah. The obvious origin of such a view was the literal understanding of the Old Testament prophets."

24 The following are noteworthy: "The Kingdom of God: Reign or Realm," *Journal of Biblical Literature* LXXXI (1962):28-55; *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959); *Jesus and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964); *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974; an updated edition of *Jesus and the Kingdom*); and *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974).

Testament hope is always ethical and not speculative. It lets the light of the future shine on the present, that Israel may be confronted by history in the here and now. For this reason there is a coalescing of the near and the distant future. God will act in the near future [either] to save or judge Israel, but he will also act in the indeterminate future to bring about the fulfillment of the eschatological hope. The prophets do not sharply distinguish between the near and the distant future, for both will see the act of God for his people.<sup>25</sup>

There are elements of this statement that are helpful and accurate. It is a fact that during the period of the Old Testament, God had broken into history in acts of judgment and salvation, involving both his people Israel and the Gentile nations. Often these acts are described as a manifestation of the "day of Yahweh," namely, historical antecedents of the final climactic manifestation of that "day" at the second advent of Christ.<sup>26</sup> However, this hardly tells the full story. Moreover, it is doubtful whether an antecedent appearance of the day of Yahweh should be called an "inbreaking" of "the kingdom." Ladd apparently does not see the historical mediatorial kingdom of Israel as the kingdom of God in the Old Testament. The "inbreaking" in the Old Testament called the "day of Yahweh" is not the inbreaking of the "kingdom of God" but rather the inbreaking of God himself in the affairs of his kingdom of Israel.

Alva McClain offers a much better and more comprehensive analysis of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament. Neither the term "kingdom of God" nor "kingdom of heaven" per se are used in the Old Testament. However, "kingdom," Hebrew מְלֻכּוּת (*malkuth*), is mentioned frequently. Based on the Scriptural data, McClain presents a series of observations that at first appear to be almost contradictory:

First, certain passages present the Kingdom as something which has *always existed*; yet in other places it seems to have a definite historical

---

25 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 61; emphasis added.

26 For example, Obad. 15; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Isa. 13:6; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Ezek. 30:3.



*beginning* among men. (Compare Ps. 10:16 with Dan. 2:44.)

Second, the Kingdom is set forth in Scripture as *universal* in its scope, outside of which there is no created thing; yet again the Kingdom is revealed as a *local* rule established on earth. (Compare Ps. 103:19 with Isa. 24:23.)

Third, the Kingdom sometimes appears as the rule of God *directly*, with no intermediary standing between God and man; yet it is also pictured as the rule of God through a *mediator* who serves as a channel between God and man. (Compare Ps. 59:13 with [Ps.] 2:4-6.)

Fourth, it has been noted that often the Bible describes the Kingdom as something wholly *future*; whereas in other texts the Kingdom is said to be a *present* reality. (Compare Zech. 14:9 with Ps. 29:10.)

Fifth, the Kingdom of God is set forth as an *unconditional* rule arising out of the sovereign nature of Deity Himself; yet, on the other hand, it sometimes appears as a Kingdom based on a *covenant* made by God with man. (Compare Dan. 4:34-35 with Ps. 89:27-29.)<sup>27</sup>

From these data, McClain draws the following conclusion:

In one sense it would not be wholly wrong to speak of *two kingdoms* revealed in the Bible. But we must at the same time guard carefully against the notion that these two kingdoms are absolutely distinct, one from the other. There is value and instruction in thinking of them as *two aspects* or phases of the one rule of our sovereign God. In seeking for terms which might best designate these two things, I can find nothing better than the adjectives "universal" and "mediatorial." These are not exactly commensurate terms, of course, but describe different qualities; the first referring to the *extent* of rule, the latter to the *method* of rule.

---

<sup>27</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974; original publication date, 1968), pp. 19-20; emphasis original.

Nevertheless, in each case the designated quality seems to be the most important for purposes of identification.

As we proceed with the discussion, therefore, the terms used will be the *Universal Kingdom* and the *Mediatorial Kingdom*.<sup>28</sup>

He goes on to summarize the characteristics of the Universal Kingdom in the Old Testament under several headings:<sup>29</sup>

1. This Universal Kingdom Exists Without Interruption Throughout All Time (Ps. 145:13)
2. The Universal Kingdom Includes All That Exists in Space and Time (1 Chron. 29:12)
3. The Divine Control in the Universal Kingdom Is Generally Providential (Ps. 148:8)
4. The Divine Control in the Universal Kingdom May Be Exercised at Times by Supernatural Means (Dan. 6:27)
5. The Universal Kingdom Always Exists Efficaciously Regardless of the Attitude of Its Subjects (Dan. 4:35)

However, it is the Mediatorial Kingdom that is most relevant to the subject at hand. McClain defines it as follows:

The Mediatorial Kingdom may be defined tentatively as: (a) the rule of God through a divinely chosen representative who not only speaks and acts for God but also represents the people before God; (b) a rule which has special reference to the earth; and (c) having as its mediatorial ruler one who is always a member of the human race.<sup>30</sup>

The establishment of the Mediatorial Kingdom in history took place at Mt. Sinai with Moses as the first

---

28 Ibid., p. 21; emphasis original.

29 Ibid., pp. 22-31. McClain actually had seven headings in his discussion, but the first five were the most relevant to the purpose here.

30 Ibid., p. 41.

mediatorial ruler.<sup>31</sup> There Israel was constituted a nation and a kingdom.

Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and *how* I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel."<sup>32</sup>

This kingdom, the kingdom of Israel, with whom God subsequently made the Davidic covenant,<sup>33</sup> continued until the Babylonian exile. Prior to, during, and following that exile, it was also this kingdom whose restoration as the **Messianic kingdom** becomes the subject of prophecy. This prophecy can be summarized as follows. At the second advent of Jesus, the Messiah, he will:

- Regather all of Israel back to the land God promised them as an everlasting possession: Isaiah 11:10-12; Ezekiel 37:15-28; Micah 2:12-13; Zech. 8:1-8; 10:8-12.
- Reestablish the kingdom of Israel and rule the world from Jerusalem on the throne of David: Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:3-8; 30:8-9; 33:14-16; Hosea 3:4-5; Amos 9:11-12.

According to McClain,

---

31 The Mediatorial Kingdom spans both the time of the judges and of the kings. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 52-53: "Some have tried to distinguish too sharply between the period from Moses to Samuel and the period of the kings, referring to the former as the 'theocracy' and the latter as the 'kingdom'...Actually the two periods are *one*, if considered from the standpoint of Jehovah's regal relation to the nation of Israel...We must not forget that in this kingdom it is *God*, not man, who rules. And this theocratic rule could be, and was historically, mediated through divinely chosen leaders of various types, whether prophets, judges, or kings" (emphasis original).

32 Exod. 19:3-6.

33 2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17; Ps. 89.

Beginning with the Mediatorial Kingdom in Old Testament history, we may note that some have tried to erect an absolute separation between the historical kingdom [of Israel] and the future kingdom of prophecy. All such attempts have failed and must fail, for the vital connection between the two will be clear from many passages...Certainly, the future kingdom is to be a genuine revival and continuation of the "throne of David." In a very real sense there is but one Mediatorial Kingdom of God.<sup>34</sup>

But again the question arises: to what did Jesus refer by "the kingdom of heaven" in his preaching and ministry? That question is directly addressed in point number 3 to follow.

## 2. The Rabbinic Background

After reviewing two other strands of Jewish thinking, apocalyptic Judaism<sup>35</sup> and the Qumran sect,<sup>36</sup> Ladd has this to say about Rabbinic literature:

The rabbinic literature developed a similar eschatology [as in the apocalyptic literature and the Qumran community], but made somewhat more use of the term "the kingdom of the heavens." ***The kingdom of God was the reign of God--the exercise of his sovereignty.*** Throughout the course of human history,

---

34 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 42.

35 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 61: "Apocalyptic Judaism...had diverse hopes. Some writers emphasize the earthly, historical aspect of the Kingdom (En. 1-36; Ps. Sol. 17-18), while others emphasize the more transcendent aspects (En. 37-71). However, the emphasis is always eschatological. In fact, Jewish apocalyptic lost the sense of God's acting in the historical present. At this point, apocalypticism had become pessimistic--not with reference to the final act of God to establish his Kingdom, but with reference to God's acting in present history to save and bless his people. Jewish apocalyptic despaired of history, feeling that it was given over to evil powers. God's people could only expect suffering and affliction in this age until God would act to establish his Kingdom in the Age to Come."

36 Ibid., p. 62: "The Qumran community shared a similar hope for the Kingdom [as in the apocalyptic literature]. In the eschatological consummation, they expected angels to come down and join battle with them--'the sons of light'--against their enemies--'the sons of darkness'--and give victory to the Qumranians over all other people, whether worldly Jews or Gentiles."

God exercised his sovereignty through his Law. Anyone who submits to the Law thereby submits himself to the reign of God. When a Gentile turns to Judaism and adopts the Law, **he thereby 'takes upon himself the sovereignty (kingdom) of God'** [quoting G. Dalmon]. Obedience to the Law is thus equivalent to the experience of God's kingdom or rule. **It follows that God's Kingdom on earth is limited to Israel.** Furthermore, it does not come to men; it is there, embodied in the Law, available to all who will submit to it.

At the end of the age, God will manifest his sovereignty in all the world....In this age, God's rule is limited to those who accept the Law; at the end of the age, it will appear to subjugate all that resists the will of God.<sup>37</sup>

Edersheim writes similarly:

According to Rabbinic views of the time, the terms 'Kingdom,' 'Kingdom of heaven,' and 'Kingdom of God' (in the Targum on Micah iv. 7 'Kingdom of Jehovah'), were equivalent....

This 'Kingdom of Heaven' or 'of God,' must, however, be distinguished from such terms as 'the Kingdom of the Messiah' (*Malkhutha dimeshicha*), 'the future age (world) of the Messiah' (*Alma deathey dimeshicha*), 'the days of the Messiah,' 'the age to come' (*sæculum futurum*, the *Athid labho*--both this and the previous expression), 'the end of days,' and 'the end of the extremity of days' (*Soph Egebh Yomaya*). This is the more important, since the 'Kingdom of Heaven' has so often been confused with the period of its triumphant manifestation in 'the days,' or in 'the Kingdom, [*sic*] of the Messiah....'

A review of the many passages [in Jewish literature?] on the subject shows that, in the Jewish mind, **the expression 'Kingdom of Heaven' referred, not so much to any particular period, as in general to the Rule of God**--as acknowledged, manifested, and eventually perfected. Very often it

---

37 Ibid., p. 62; emphasis added; italics on "come" and "resists" original.

is the equivalent for personal acknowledgment of God: **the taking upon oneself of the 'yoke' of 'the Kingdom,' or of the commandments**--the former preceding and conditioning the latter.<sup>38</sup>

So both Ladd and Edersheim agree in their assessment of the Rabbinic use of the terms "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" at the time John the Baptist and Jesus appeared on the scene:

- The phrases are equivalent to "the reign of God."
- To take on the yoke of the Torah is to take on the kingdom (or rule) of God.

Both also agree that Jesus' use of "the kingdom of heaven" reflects this background and meaning. Ladd writes,

The Hebrew word [*malkuth*] has the abstract dynamic or idea of reign, rule, or dominion....In late Judaism, the Kingdom of God means God's rule or sovereignty. This is also the best point of departure for understanding the Gospels....<sup>39</sup>

Likewise, Edersheim:

As we pass from the Jewish ideas of the time to the teaching of the New Testament, we feel that while there is *complete change of spirit*, the form in which the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven is presented is substantially similar.<sup>40</sup>

The difference "of spirit" according to Edersheim is a difference in that to which man must submit. For the follower of Jesus, it is not the Torah.

---

38 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I:266-267; italics original; bold added. Continuing, Edersheim gives additional detail: "Accordingly, the Mishnah gives this as the reason why, in the collection of Scripture passages which forms the prayer called '*Shema*,' the confession, Deut. vi. 4 &c., precedes the admonition, Deut. xi. 13 &c., because a man takes upon himself first the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and afterwards that of the commandments. And in this sense, the repetition of this *Shema*, as the personal acknowledgment of the Rule of Jehovah, is itself often designated as 'taking upon oneself the Kingdom of Heaven.'"

39 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 63.

40 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I:269; emphasis original.

When Christ says, that 'except a man be born from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God,' He teaches, in opposition to the Rabbinic representation of how 'the kingdom' was taken up, that a man cannot even comprehend that glorious idea of the Reign of God, and of becoming, by conscious self-surrender, one of His subjects, except he be born from above.<sup>41</sup>

The problem with Edersheim's view is the almost total lack of connection of the "kingdom of heaven" preached by John and Jesus to the prophesied Messianic kingdom. As already quoted, he categorically states the "'Kingdom of Heaven' or 'of God,' must, however, be distinguished from such terms as 'the Kingdom of the Messiah.'" Although he adds that the kingdom of heaven will have its triumphant manifestation in the eschatological days of the Messiah, this is far from sufficient to understand the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in the gospels.

Ladd's view comes closer to a correct understanding. He incorporates the fact that in Judaism there is a final, eschatological manifestation of this kingdom:

In any case, throughout all Judaism, the coming of God's Kingdom was expected to be an act of God--perhaps using the agency of men--to defeat the wicked enemies of Israel and to gather Israel together, victorious over her enemies, in her promised land, under the rule of God alone.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Ladd argues at length for one of the important keys to unlocking the use of "kingdom of heaven" by Jesus.

If a majority of scholars have approached a consensus, it is that the Kingdom [preached by Jesus] is in some real sense both present and future.<sup>43</sup>

But Ladd still falls short by not seeing that the use of "kingdom of heaven" by Jesus is based explicitly on the prophesied Messianic kingdom of the Old Testament and that

---

41 Ibid.

42 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 63.

43 Ibid., p. 59.

alone. However, McClain, who does take this view,<sup>44</sup> also misses an important fact: he takes most, if not all, references to the kingdom in Jesus' ministry as a direct reference to its eschatological form, namely, the millennial kingdom. Moreover, he argues that Jesus "offered" the establishment of this kingdom to Israel, an offer the nation rejected.<sup>45</sup> Thus in McClain's view the kingdom preached by Jesus was exclusively future.

The view proposed here is based in part on the analysis by Robert Culver, which seems to take the best from Ladd and McClain.<sup>46</sup> The *qāhāl* or *ekklēsia* ("church") has a definite connection to the kingdom of heaven. This is obvious from Matthew 16:18-19, but other texts provide additional information to explain that connection and in turn help identify the *qāhāl* of Matthew 16:18.

### 3. Jesus' Use of "Kingdom of Heaven": The Proposed Answer

This answer for the meaning of the kingdom of heaven preached by John and Jesus is presented under several headings.

#### *This Age and the Age to Come*

The Bible seems to speak of two "ages": the present age and the age to come.<sup>47</sup> But there is an overlap: this age has not yet ended and yet we are already "tasting" of the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6:5). Therefore, the age to come has begun with the first advent, but the present age does not end until the second advent.

It is this overlap to which the phrase "the last days" apparently refers, and it covers the period between the two advents. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:15-21, Peter cites Joel 2:28-32 and claims that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the outpouring predicted by Joel ("this is that," v. 16).<sup>48</sup> Therefore, "the last

---

44 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 281: "The gospel records always connect the Kingdom proclaimed by our Lord with the Kingdom of Old Testament prophecy." See also pp. 275-276, 279.

45 Ibid., pp. 304-313.

46 Culver, *Systematic Theology*, 864-868.

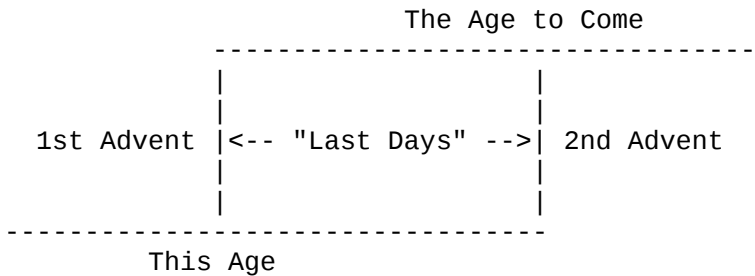
47 Matt. 12:32; 28:20; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:21.

48 τούτο ἐστὶν τὸ εἰρημένον. εἰρημένον (*eirēmenon*) is the neuter nominative singular perfect passive participle of εἶπον (*eipōn*), to



days," the phrase with which Peter begins his citation, began in connection with the first advent (cf. Heb. 1:2).

The relationship between the two ages and the last days can therefore be graphed as follows.<sup>49</sup>



The mission of Jesus and the kingdom of heaven that he preached must both be viewed in light of the two ages and their overlap.

*The Messianic Kingdom as a Present Reality in Jesus' Ministry*

*First:* "The kingdom of heaven" announced by John<sup>50</sup> and Jesus<sup>51</sup> was indeed the Messianic kingdom of Old Testament prophecy, the restored kingdom of Israel.

It was suggested earlier that the phrase "kingdom of the heavens" might have originated from the prophecy in Daniel 7:13-14:

I kept looking in the night visions,  
 And behold, with the clouds of heaven  
 One like a Son of Man was coming,  
 And He came up to the Ancient of Days  
 And was presented before Him.  
 And to Him was given dominion,

---

say, to speak. Thus: "this is the having-been-spoken [thing] through the prophet Joel..."

49 The graph shown here is mine, though derived, with some modifications, from Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 68, and Ladd's older work, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), p. 42. Ladd attributes the basic structure of all these graphs to Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1952).

50 Matt. 3:1-12.

51 Matt. 4:17.

Glory and a kingdom,  
That all the peoples, nations and *men of every*  
language  
Might serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
Which will not pass away;  
And His kingdom is one  
Which will not be destroyed.

Stalker suggests that "these passages in Dn1 form undoubtedly the proximate source of the phrase [kingdom of the heavens]..."<sup>52</sup> However, whether or not this is the case, the assertion that "kingdom of heaven" in Jesus' teaching was the prophesied Messianic kingdom is argued at length as this proposed view is developed.

*Second:* The Messianic kingdom had arrived in the person of King Messiah himself and was thus now among the people of Judah. That seems the clear intent of Matthew 3:2 and 4:17:

The kingdom of heaven is at hand.<sup>53</sup>

In an especially important text making the same point, Luke 17:20-21, Jesus claimed that the kingdom of God is present and in the very midst of his enemies:

Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here *it is!*' or, 'There *it is!*' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."

The answer Jesus gave the Pharisees is likely purposely enigmatic. But it is relatively clear what he meant by ἐντός ὑμῶν (*entos humōn*). Though some versions translate this phrase "within you," it is best taken to mean "in your midst," as translated above in the *NASB*.<sup>54</sup> Jesus here

---

52 Stalker, "Kingdom of God," *Old ISBE*, III:1805.

53 Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Luke 10:9, 11 all have ἤγγικεν (*ēggiken*), 3rd person singular perfect active indicative of ἔγγιζω (*eggizō*), *to approach or to come near*. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, I:24, translates the phrase as "has come, has drawn near." AG, p. 212, suggests "has come."

54 The phrase ἐντός ὑμῶν can be translated either as "within you" or "in your midst." To believers, of course, one could say that the kingdom of God is "within you," meaning "in your heart." Indeed Mark

claimed that in his own person the kingdom of God was in the midst of the Pharisees.

*Third:* A number of attendant blessings of the prophesied Messianic kingdom, short of the full, climactic restoration of the kingdom of Israel, did in fact become a present reality during Jesus' ministry.

(1) For example, in Isaiah 61:1-3 the Messiah is pictured as the proclaimer of good news:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
Because the LORD has anointed me  
To bring good news to the afflicted;  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to captives  
And freedom to prisoners;  
To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD  
And the day of vengeance of our God;  
To comfort all who mourn,  
To grant those who mourn *in* Zion,  
Giving them a garland instead of ashes,  
The oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
The mantle of praise instead of a  
spirit of fainting.  
So they will be called oaks of righteousness,  
The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.

Commenting on this passage, Walter Kaiser states,

Isaiah first supplies the credentials of the coming Messiah. He will be endowed with the Spirit of the Lord so that he can carry out his role as a prophet (cf. Isa 11:2; 42:1; 49:8; 50:4-5, where the prophet predicted that the Messiah would be gifted with the Spirit of God).<sup>55</sup>

In Luke 4:14-21 Jesus himself claimed that in his present ministry he fulfilled this Messianic prophecy:

---

10:15 indicates that the kingdom of God must be received "in the inner man." However, Jesus would hardly say that the kingdom of God is "within" *the Pharisees* in this sense. Therefore, Jesus' intent is surely "in your midst."

55 Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 183. Note that the Hebrew word *Messiah* means "anointed." Kings and priests were often anointed by oil in the OT, but the Messiah is here said to be anointed with the Spirit of the Lord. Cf. Matt. 3:16, 17.

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. 15 And He *began* teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all.

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME,  
BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO  
THE POOR.  
HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE  
CAPTIVES,  
AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND,  
TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED,  
TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.”

And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Note, however, that Jesus quoted only part of the prophecy from Isaiah. Kaiser explains this as follows:

The mission of the anointed Servant is multiple: (1) he will proclaim the good news of the gospel to the poor; (2) he will bind up and heal the hearts of those who have been broken and burdened; (3) he will proclaim freedom for the captives that sin has taken hostage; (4) he will release the prison doors and set free those bound by spiritual darkness and guilt, and (5) he will proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, including all the blessings of the messianic age.

At this point in his reading, Jesus began his exposition, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:21). ***In an inaugurated eschatology, these five things were already fulfilled during our Lord's first advent, at least partially, though their full realization awaits his***

**second coming.** But our Lord deliberately appears to have avoided two more aspects of his mission as included in Isaiah 61, since he could not say that they were being even initially fulfilled: (6) the proclamation of the day of the Lord, and (7) the comforting of all who mourn. "The day of the vengeance of our God" will be the final period of history when God judges evil and concludes history with a bang as he introduces his eternal rule and reign on earth. And those who mourn should remember that there will be an ultimate blessing for them, for one day they too will be comforted (Mt 5:4; cf. Rev 21:3-4).<sup>56</sup>

Thus, Jesus states that a number of blessings of the prophesied Messianic kingdom are present during his first advent. Other aspects of that kingdom await his second advent and the establishment of his reign over the restored kingdom of Israel--as well as over the whole earth--from the throne of David in Jerusalem.

(2) Another example is seen in Jesus' response to John's question in Matthew 11:1-6, also making reference to Isaiah 61:

When Jesus had finished giving instructions to His twelve disciples, He departed from there to teach and preach in their cities.

Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent *word* by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: *the* BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and *the* lame walk, *the* lepers are cleansed and *the* deaf hear, *the* dead are raised up, and *the* POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me."

Carson comments as follows:

Jesus' answer briefly summarized his own miracles and preaching, but in the language of Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1, with possible further allusions to 26:19; 29:18-19. At one level the answer was

---

56 Ibid., pp. 183-184; emphasis added.

straightforward: Isaiah 61:1 is an explicit messianic passage, and Isaiah 35:5-6, although it has no messianic figure, describes the return of God's people to Zion with accompanying blessings (e.g., restoration of sight). Jesus definitely claimed that these messianic visions were being fulfilled in the miracles he was performing and that his preaching the Good News to the poor...was an explicit fulfillment of the messianic promises of Isaiah 61:1-2 as [he also claimed in] Luke 4:17-21. The powers of darkness were being undermined; the kingdom was advancing (cf. v. 12).

But there is a second, more subtle level to Jesus' response. All four of the Isaiah passages refer to judgment in their immediate context: e.g., "your God will come...with vengeance; with divine retribution" (35:4); "the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa 61:2). Thus Jesus was allusively responding to the Baptist's question: the blessings promised for the end time have broken out and prove it is here, even though the judgments are delayed...<sup>57</sup>

Again, some blessings of the promised kingdom were being fulfilled, while other aspects awaited its climactic, eschatological establishment on earth.

*Fourth:* Jesus stated in Matthew 12:24-28 that the kingdom of heaven had come into direct conflict with the kingdom of Satan and had secured the victory:

But when the Pharisees heard *this*, they said, "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons."

And knowing their thoughts Jesus said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast *them* out? For this reason they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

---

57 Carson, *Matthew*, p. 262.

"Has come" is the verb ἐφθασεν (*ephthasen*), which must imply actual presence.<sup>58</sup> So here the Messianic kingdom is a present reality in the sense that the power of that kingdom in the person of the Messiah has attacked and defeated Satan, even though the final victory will occur with the full, climactic establishment of the Messianic kingdom on earth at the second advent.

*Fifth:* The present reality of the Messianic kingdom can also be seen in the realm of salvation, forgiveness, and righteousness. For example, the term "kingdom of heaven" is employed by Jesus as an equivalent of "eternal life" and "treasure in heaven."<sup>59</sup> To quote Culver,

Hence the age to come...has already broken into the present age with the Advent of Messiah; believers in the Messiah...have already entered Messiah's kingdom and already participate in some of the blessings of that properly future kingdom. They now 'have eternal life' (John 3:16); they already have 'passed from death to life' (John 5:24). Their 'life' [is] now already 'hidden with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3) and [they] shall 'appear with him in glory' when 'Christ...appears' (Col. 3:4). They...have even 'tasted...the powers of the age to come' (Heb. 6:5).<sup>60</sup>

Ladd writes similarly:

The mission of Jesus brought not a new teaching but a new event. It brought to men an actual foretaste of the eschatological salvation. Jesus did not promise forgiveness of sins; he bestowed it. He did

---

58 Matt. 12:28 and Luke 11:20 both have ἐφθασεν (*ephthasen*), 3rd person singular 1st aorist active indicative of φθάνω (*phthanō*), *to have just arrived* or simply *to arrive, to come*; here *to come upon someone* (AG, p. 864). Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 66, offers this comment: "A vigorous debate has been waged over the precise meaning of the Greek word *ephthasen*, 'has come.' Many have interpreted the word to designate proximity, not actual presence. But other uses [Rom. 9:31; 2 Cor. 10:14; Phil. 3:16] make it clear that the verb connotes actual presence, not mere proximity." Carson, *Matthew*, p. 101, connects the two verbs: "It is possible, but not certain, that the verb [ἐγγίκεν] has the same force as *ephthasen* in 12:28." See footnote 52 in this chapter.

59 Matt. 19:16-26.

60 Culver, *Systematic Theology*, p. 866. Note also Ladd's comment: "...inheriting eternal life and entrance into the Kingdom of God are synonymous with entering the Age to Come" (*A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 64).

not simply assure men of the future fellowship of the Kingdom; he invited men into fellowship with himself as the bearer of the kingdom. He did not merely promise them vindication in the day of judgment; he bestowed upon them a present righteousness. He not only taught an eschatological deliverance from physical evil; he went about demonstrating the redeeming power of the Kingdom, delivering men from sickness and even death.

This is the meaning of the presence of the Kingdom as a new era of salvation. To receive the Kingdom of God, to submit oneself to God's reign meant to receive the gift of the Kingdom and to enter into the enjoyment of its blessings. The age of fulfillment is present, but the time of consummation still awaits the Age to Come.<sup>61</sup>

*The Messianic Kingdom as a  
Present Reality between the Advents:  
Its Connection to the Qāhāl*

The "mysteries of the kingdom" span the interadvent period during which the *qāhāl* ("church") is being built. To quote Culver, some aspects of the Messianic kingdom

were and remain incompletely revealed. Certain 'mysteries of the kingdom of heaven' were made known to the circle of loyal disciples (Matt. 13:11 KJV) but not repeated to us....

These 'mysteries' were made known in parables (Matt. 13 KJV; Mark 4; Luke 18) but were only partly understood then and now. They have to do with principles of evangelism over the long church age to come. All eight of the 'seminar of parables' relate to this missionary program. Matthew 10, which in chronological order followed the seminar of kingdom parables, told them and succeeding generations what procedures to follow in the age-long mission of world evangelism. These chapters are inexplicable without explicit, planned intention on the part of Jesus as instruction for the church of Christian believers through the age in which we live [the

---

61 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 80.



interadvent period].<sup>62</sup>

Although Jesus' ministry was limited primarily to Israel, as discussed in the next section "Jesus and Israel," it should be noted that this evangelistic program is definitely to include the Gentiles. However, this fact is developed far more fully by Paul, especially in Romans 11 and Ephesians 2, and is recounted in chapters 5 and 6 of this book.

### *The Messianic Kingdom as Future*

Despite all the aspects of the Messianic kingdom that became a present reality with the advent of Messiah, there is nevertheless another aspect to Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of heaven as the Messianic kingdom: its future coming as an eschatological event. The salvation and regathering of ethnic, national Israel to the land promised them in the Abrahamic covenant and the establishment of the Messianic kingdom on earth in power and glory with Messiah reigning from Jerusalem on the throne of David is yet future. It awaits his second advent. This also is made clear in the teaching of Jesus, for example, in Matthew 19:27-28:

Then Peter said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Also, in Luke 19:11-27 Jesus gives a parable because "they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately." The parable indicates that the king, King Messiah himself, will be absent for an extended period of time.

Again, in Matthew 24:3 the disciples ask Jesus, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" This prompts the well-known Olivet discourse. According to Jesus' answer, it is only after the "gospel of the kingdom shall

---

62 Culver, *Systematic Theology*, p. 865.

be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come" (verse 14). According to verses 30-31, at that time,

the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

Note also that *after* the resurrection, and *after* Jesus had "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,"<sup>63</sup> and *after* he had "presented Himself alive...appearing to them over a *period of forty days* and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God,"<sup>64</sup> *then* the disciples ask in Acts 1:6, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" They knew from both prophecy and Jesus' post-resurrection teaching that the kingdom would be restored to Israel. They questioned him only regarding the timing, and he made no correction to the factual basis of the question.

It is quite clear, therefore, that during Jesus' entire ministry the center of his preaching was the prophesied Messianic kingdom and that it continued to be the focus of his attention in his post-resurrection teaching ministry.

In this regard it is also important to take note of the fact that the apostles, including Paul, continued to preach "the kingdom of God" throughout the Book of Acts.<sup>65</sup> In addition, Paul makes the following claim in Acts 28:17-20 (emphasis added):

After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he *began* saying to them, "**Brethren, *though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers***, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. But when the Jews objected, I was

---

63 Luke 24:45.

64 Acts 1:3.

65 Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23, 31.

forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation. For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for ***I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.***"

### *Conclusion*

It is instructive to consider remarks by both Ladd and Culver in order to arrive at a tenable conclusion. Ladd writes,

...the basic structure of Jesus' thought is the eschatological dualism of the two ages. It is the coming of God's kingdom (Mt. 6:10) or its appearing (Lk. 19:11) that will bring this age to its end and inaugurate the Age to Come....

The [eschatological] coming of God's Kingdom will mean the final and total destruction of the devil and his angels (Mt. 25:41), the formation of a redeemed society unmingled with evil (Mt. 13:36-43), perfected fellowship with God at the messianic feast (Lk. 13:28-29). In this sense, the Kingdom of God is a synonym for the Age to Come.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, to Culver it is quite clear

that the kingdom of heaven has plain reference sometimes to the era of Messiah's reign on earth in the future predicted by the prophets of the Old Testament and sometimes to a living hope of Israel in Jesus' time.<sup>67</sup>

### Step 3: Jesus and Israel

Due to the close proximity of the phrase "the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19) to the *qāhāl* or assembly to be built by Jesus the Messiah (Matt. 16:18), the previous excursus into the nature of that kingdom preached by Jesus was necessary in order to address the identity of the *qāhāl*. Based on that study, then, the following conclusion is

---

<sup>66</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 64.

<sup>67</sup> Culver, *Systematic Theology*, p. 866.

drawn:

The "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew 16:19 is in fact the Messianic kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament. It has both a present reality beginning with the first advent and a future, climactic, eschatological manifestation at the second advent.

For those who accept the Messiah of Israel during the interadvent period, it brings the blessings of salvation, for as Peter himself said, no one but the Messiah has the "words of eternal life."<sup>68</sup>

Thus Jesus as Messiah inaugurated a time of fulfillment prior to the eschatological consummation that will follow his second advent. But if through his ministry at his first advent the Messianic kingdom invaded history, it must follow that those who receive his proclamation of that kingdom would not only inherit its eschatological manifestation, but would also be the subjects of the Messianic kingdom in the present. In a phrase, such people would seem to constitute a "qāhāl of the Messiah." However, to make this statement more precise requires several more steps. The first is to determine how Jesus viewed Israel, the covenant people of God, during his earthly ministry.<sup>69</sup>

The central point to make in this regard is that Jesus, the Messiah of Israel,

did not undertake his ministry with the evident purpose of starting a new movement either within or outside of Israel. He came as a Jew to the Jewish people. He accepted the authority of the Old Testament, conformed to temple practices, engaged in synagogue worship, and throughout his life lived as a Jew. Although he occasionally journeyed outside Jewish territory, he insisted that his mission was directed to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel"

---

68 John 6:68.

69 That the people or nation of Israel were in fact the covenant people of God is argued in Appendix 1 of this book. See also Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, pp. 567-604, for an excellent presentation of the biblical data.

(Mt. 15:24). He directed the mission of his disciples away from the Gentiles, commanding them to preach only to Israel (Mt. 10:5-6). The reason for this is not difficult. Jesus took his stand squarely against the background of the Old Testament covenant and the promises of the prophets, and recognized Israel, to whom the covenant and the promises had been given, as the natural "sons of the kingdom" (Mt. 8:12). The saying about the lost sheep of the house of Israel does not mean that the Gentiles were not also lost but that only Israel was the people of God, and to them therefore belonged the promise of the Kingdom. Therefore his mission was to proclaim to Israel that God was now acting to fulfill his promises and to bring Israel to its true destiny. Because Israel was the chosen people of God, the age of fulfillment was offered not to the world at large but to the sons of the covenant.<sup>70</sup>

With regard to the Roman Catholic Church, this evidence from the mission of Jesus makes it difficult to conclude that in his statement to Peter in Matthew 16:18 Jesus envisioned founding a *qāhāl* that would become a gargantuan, highly structured Gentile institution, separate from Israel, in which Jews would have a part only if they not only joined that institution but assimilated into its ritual, renouncing all Jewish ritual that gave them identity as the true covenant people of God. Other denominations within Christianity view "the church" that Jesus would build as less monolithic than the Roman Catholic Church but nevertheless just as separate from Israel. So the question still remains as to what exactly Jesus meant by his *qāhāl*. To answer this question it is important to observe the spread of the gospel after the ascension.

The Book of Acts traces this spread from Jerusalem to

---

<sup>70</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 106-107. Ladd's use of the word "evident" at the beginning of this quote leaves his assessment of the Scriptural data he amasses in question. I argue that this data shows that Jesus had absolutely no intention, "evident" or otherwise, of starting a new movement. With regard to the ministry of Jesus being limited to Israel, Culver, *Systematic Theology*, p. 865, has this comment: "The special Jewishness of Jesus' first proclamations and limitation of His life and ministry to the Land of Israel and its people is to be accounted for by the simple fact that the redemptive events of Gospel history had to transpire among the Jews and at their city to provide salvation in a spiritual kingdom."

Judea to Samaria and finally to the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>71</sup> Yet the "new covenant" of Jeremiah that Jesus inaugurated by his death<sup>72</sup> was made "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah"; no mention is made of the Gentiles.<sup>73</sup> As Paul himself writes, the covenants and promises belong to Israel.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, in the Abrahamic covenant, God promised that through Abraham and his seed--Israel--all the nations of the world would be blessed.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, though the covenants and promises were made exclusively with Israel as the chosen people of God, Gentiles are to be included in the blessings of these covenants, *but it is only through and never apart from*

---

71 See Acts 1:8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." The gospel reaches Samaria in Acts 8, the Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10, and spreads to Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire with the missionary journeys of Paul in Acts 13-28.

72 Luke 22:20: "And in the same way *He took* the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.'"

73 Jer. 31:31-34: "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

74 Rom. 9:3-5: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen."

75 Gen. 12:1-3: "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.'" When this covenant is repeated to Abraham in Gen. 22:18, the following detail is added: "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." This is also the way the covenant is repeated to Isaac in 26:4. When repeated to Jacob in 28:14, it is "in you and in your seed." (Note that 22:18, 26:4, and 28:14 all use

the same Hebrew word, זרע, "seed," although the *NASB* inconsistently translates it as "descendants" in 26:4 and 28:14.

*Israel*. This is what Paul teaches through his analogy of the "olive tree" in Romans 11 and "strangers to the covenants of promise" in Ephesians 2.

Romans 11 and Ephesians 2 represent two of the most important systematic and didactic passages in the New Testament. Both demonstrate that Gentile salvation is through Israel and only through Israel. This fact has important implications for interpreting the *qāhāl* or *ekklēsia* in Matthew 16:18. However, Paul's central theme in each of these two chapters is also important in this endeavor. In Romans 11 it is Israel, while in Ephesians 2 it is the Gentiles. These two texts are discussed in chapters 5 and 6 of this book, respectively.