

Chapter 8

Building the Qāhāl

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The Future Tense

A number of theological systems take the beginning of the New Testament "church" to be the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.¹ That view is not consistent with the conclusions drawn in this book.² However, a legitimate question arises: if the *qāhāl* or ἐκκλησία of Matthew 16:18 has reference to the Messianic remnant within national Israel during the life of Jesus, why does he use the future tense:³ "I will build⁴ my *qāhāl*"?

The future tense is used for building an already-existing Israel or a portion thereof in several Old Testament passages. For example:

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the captives of Judah, whom I have sent out of this place *into* the land of the Chaldeans. For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them again to this land; and I will

1 Covenant theology: Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 93; dispensationalism: Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 136-137.

2 See chapter 7 and Appendix 1 for discussions of this issue.

3 οἰκοδομήσω: 1st person singular future active indicative of οἰκοδομέω, *to build, to erect*.

4 Allis points out that because Israel is often called the "house of Israel" in the Old Testament (e.g., Exod. 16:31; 40:38; Lev. 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:2-3; Ps. 98:3; Isa. 5:7; Jer. 2:4; 9:26; 31:31), it is quite appropriate for Jesus to use the verb "build" in Matthew 16:18 (*Prophecy and the Church*, p. 302, n. 31). It is similarly important to notice that the idea of "building" *Israel* is found in a number of texts: Ruth 4:11; Jer. 24:6; 31:4; 33:7. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, I:132, makes an interesting observation about 1 Pet. 2:5: "It is difficult to resist the impression that Peter recalls the words of Jesus to him on this memorable occasion [in Matt. 16:18]."

build them up and not overthrow them, and I will plant them and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know Me, for I am the LORD; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with their whole heart.'"⁵

Also:

Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them; and I will reveal to them an abundance of peace and truth. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned against Me and by which they have transgressed against Me. It will be to Me a name of joy, praise and glory before all the nations of the earth which will hear of all the good that I do for them, and they will fear and tremble because of all the good and all the peace that I make for it.⁶

Note that here we have precedent for using "build" to mean a future building or rebuilding of an existing "Judah" or "Israel" when something new was going to be done for it.

Therefore "I will build" does not require the creation of an entirely new entity. Rather, the central point of the statement is that the Messiah is going to greatly enlarge his already-existing Messianic *qāhāl* or ἐκκλησία based on acceptance of himself as Messiah, which is the content of Peter's confession. The *qāhāl*, or Messianic community, in Matthew 16 consists of Jesus' true disciples, but the future building of this *qāhāl* has four discernible components.

- First, the Jewish "remnant" will be significantly enlarged with the preaching of the apostles in Acts.
- Second, the Gentiles are to be brought into the Messianic community of Israel starting in Acts 10.⁷

5 Jer. 24:4-7.

6 Jer. 33:6-9.

7 Note that the first and second components of this future work of building the *qāhāl* represent Peter's use of the "keys of the kingdom of heaven," according to the view proposed in chapter 10.

Their incorporation will subsequently greatly increase with the preaching of Paul starting in Acts 13.

- Third, at the second advent of the Messiah, national Israel as a whole will accept Jesus as their Messiah and enlarge the remnant within Israel to "all Israel" when "all Israel will be saved."
- Fourth, the saving of "all Israel" will result in an even greater expansion among Gentiles to include whole nations.⁸

In What Sense Is the *Qāhāl* Built on Peter?

The first point to make is that the act of "building" the ἐκκλησία on a "rock" is metaphorical language. It has already been noted in chapter 6 that the ἐκκλησία *itself* is described by several different metaphors: one new man, the household of God, a holy temple, and the body of Christ. It should not come as a surprise that the *foundation* of the ἐκκλησία is also described by several different metaphors. Here the foundation is said to be a rock, which likely symbolized Peter. However, it is also said to be "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone."⁹ Elsewhere Jesus Christ alone is called the foundation of the ἐκκλησία.¹⁰ Therefore, since several different images are presented in the New Testament for the foundation of the ἐκκλησία, it is important to look for the truth taught by each of the images used.

Second, as with virtually everything else in Matthew 16:13-20, the concept of building something on an individual man has Jewish background. There is a midrash on Numbers 23:9 in Yalkut Shimoni, the best known and most comprehensive midrashic anthology covering the whole Bible.¹¹ Edersheim gives a summary of it and the allegory

8 For components three and four of this future work of building the *qāhāl*, see respectively "Israel's Restoration" in chapter 5 and "The Gentiles: Individuals and Nations" in Appendix 3.

9 Eph. 2:20.

10 1 Cor. 3:11.

11 According to Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p. 141, the written source for this midrash is later than the Gospels, but behind it lies a period of oral transmission. Hence it is quite likely that it was part of Jewish Haggadic lore in NT times.

it contains about a king.

Again, the Greek word *Petra*--Rock--('on this *Petra* [Rock] will I build my Church') was used in the same sense in Rabbinic language. It occurs twice in a passage, which so fully illustrates the Jewish use, not only of the word, but of the whole figure, that it deserves a place here. According to Jewish ideas, the world would not have been created, unless it had rested, as it were, on some solid foundation of piety and acceptance of God's Law--in other words, it required a moral, before it could receive a physical, foundation. Rabbinism here contrasts the Gentile world with Israel. It is, so runs the comment, as if a king were going to build a city. One and another site is tried for a foundation, but in digging they always come up with water. At last

they come upon a *Rock* (*Petra*, פֶּטְרָא [transliteration of the Greek word *petra*, πέτρα, into Hebrew letters]). So, when God was about to build His world, He could not rear it on the generation of Enos, nor on that of the flood, who brought destruction on the world; but "when He beheld that Abraham would arise in the future, He said: Behold I have found a *Rock* (*Petra*, פֶּטְרָא) to build on it, and to found the world," whence also Abraham is called a *Rock* (*Tsur*, צוּר) as it is said [Is. li.1]: "Look unto the *Rock* whence ye are hewn."¹²

Edersheim goes on to state that "just as Christ's contemporaries may have regarded the world as reared on the rock of faithful Abraham, so Christ promised, that He

12 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, II:82-83; emphasis original. The midrash quotes Isa. 51:1 to the effect that Abraham is called "the *Rock* whence ye are hewn." Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, III:307, in commenting on 51:1 argues that "in itself the rock is not Abraham..." However, in view of v. 2, it seems more likely that Franz Delitzsch, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2 vols., in vol. 7 in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols., C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975; original publication date, 1877), II:281-82, is correct: "Abraham is the rock whence the stones were hewn, of which the house of Jacob is composed; and Sarah with her maternal womb the hollow of the pit out of which Israel was brought to the light..." But Young is correct when he adds, "Both metaphors...symbolize Israel's solidarity and common origin" (n. 1).

would build His Church on the Petrine in Peter--on his faith and confession."¹³

However, Edersheim's analogy is not quite exact. According to him, just as the midrash describes the world built on faithful *Abraham*, so the Church would be built on Peter's *faith*. I argued in Chapter 2 that Jesus states he would build his *qāhāl* or ἐκκλησία on *Peter*. If that argument is accepted, the midrashic statement about Abraham and Jesus' statement about Peter are quite analogous.

It would seem likely, then, that the similarity between the two statements is too strong to be coincidental and that Jesus drew upon the Jewish legend in constructing his statement to Peter. Moreover, it is likely that Peter and the disciples, recalling this midrash, would have understood Jesus to be saying something somewhat similar, Peter the foundation Rock being analogous to Abraham the foundation Rock. Therefore, this familiar Jewish midrash provides a way to interpret the image Jesus uses for the foundation of his ἐκκλησία, namely, Peter the Rock.¹⁴

Note that according to the midrash it was Abraham's moral character and his commitment to God and his Law that qualified him to be symbolized as the rock on which to build the world.¹⁵ Similarly, it was Peter's confession of Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" that qualified him to be symbolized as the rock on which to build the ἐκκλησία. But this is metaphorical language in the case of both Abraham and Peter. Ladd rightly concluded, "the rock is Peter *the confessor*."¹⁶ Having seen the evidence in this confession of Peter's belief and faith in him as the Messiah, Jesus rejoices that Peter

13 Ibid., II:83.

14 This is not to say that Jesus took the midrashic story as an historical fact about the creation. He would simply be constructing his statement analogous to a statement in a familiar midrash to enable the disciples to better understand the meaning of his own statement.

15 Of course, the Mosaic law was not given until about 400 years after Abraham. He did, however, obey all God's commands to him, and he had faith in everything God promised, which faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). Perhaps the interpreter who originated the midrash assumed that God chose Abraham to be the rock based on his foreknowledge of Abraham's character and faith subsequent to his call in Gen. 12, since before that point Abraham presumably was an idolater. By contrast, Jesus picked Peter as the rock after he had demonstrated his faith in Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

16 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 110; emphasis added.

represents the rock to serve as the foundation of his ἐκκλησία. As Bruce comments, "Like the king in the Jewish parable, Jesus said in effect, 'Now at last I can begin to build!'"¹⁷ In the Jewish midrash, Abraham was the foundation rock of the world in the sense that his piety epitomized the piety required of that foundation. Similarly, Peter was the foundation of the ἐκκλησία of the Messiah in the sense that his belief in Jesus as the Messiah epitomized the belief required of that foundation.¹⁸

With regard to what benefits or powers such a statement would bestow upon Peter personally, it would be well to consider the same question with regard to Abraham as the rock on which God built the world. Did Abraham become the first head of the world? Did he have successors that also served as heads of the world? The answers are obvious. The metaphorical language of Jesus provides no more justification for the claims of the Roman Catholic Church than does the metaphorical language of the midrashic story provide any analogous claims for Abraham. This is symbolic language and simply presents a useful image. Other useful images for the foundation of the ἐκκλησία is the collective group "apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone"¹⁹ and of course Jesus himself.²⁰

17 Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p. 142.

18 If one instead takes the view that Peter's confession, rather than Peter personally, is the *petra* or rock, then the analogy could be modified as follows. As Abraham's character could serve as the moral foundation for the world, so Peter's belief could serve as the theological foundation of the ἐκκλησία. After all, the foundational theological tenet of the Messianic community is of necessity the belief that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, the Son of the living God.

19 Eph. 2:20.

20 1 Cor. 3:11.