
THE CHURCH OF GOD, MESSIANIC JUDAISM AND GENTILE CHRISTIANITY

The Hebrew and Greek Scriptures make clear that *God names things what they are*. If we understand what God Himself calls His chosen people, we will understand much about what they are.

What then is the *biblical* name for God's elect as an organized entity? Is it merely "the Body of Messiah"? And is that Body to be divided into "Messianic Jews" and "Gentile Christians", each with different beliefs and practices?

Much more is at stake here than the self-identity of believers in the Messiah. After centuries of persecution by Gentile Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism looks upon "the Church" as a Gentile religion seeking to "assimilate" Israel. To counter this fear and prejudice, Jews who believe in Jesus call their religion "Messianic Judaism". They insist on using the original Hebrew form of Jesus' name (*Yeshua*), and on keeping a greater or lesser amount of culture and tradition inherited from Rabbinic Judaism.

In effect, Rabbinic Jews say "you can't be Jewish and believe in Jesus." Messianic Jews say "it is Jewish to believe in Jesus." *Both of them miss the point*. According to both the Hebrew Bible (Jeremiah 9:25) and the New Testament (Romans 2:25), unless one is "circumcised in heart", *one is not a Jew at all*, regardless of ethnic descent! Moreover, the New Testament asserts that "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" in the spiritual sense, but only those who believe in and obey Jesus the Messiah (Romans 9:6 and following passages).

The solution, then, does not lie in creating a "Messianic Jewish" identity separate from (or even in tandem with) that of "Gentile Christianity". It lies in understanding what our English translation "the Church of God" really implies.

A Well-Meaning Translation

In his *The Jewish New Testament*, Dr. David Stern substitutes "the Messianic Community" for "the Church (of God or Christ)". This well-meaning translation attempts to bring out the Jewish background of "the Church" while defusing Jewish prejudices against the New Testament.

Yet Dr. Stern's translation actually obscures the truth about "the Church" and its relation to Israel. When one looks at the actual Greek and Hebrew terms which lie behind "the Church of God" in our English New Testaments, one discovers that "the Church" by its very biblical name proclaims its roots in Israel and the Hebrew Scriptures.

English to Greek to Hebrew

Part of the problem is the English word "church" itself. It derives ultimately from the Greek word *kuriakos*, "of the Lord", and from the phrase (*doma*) *kuriakon*, "the Lord's (house)" (American Heritage Dictionary, *church*). It focuses on the building (rather than the people who worship in it) as being "of the Lord".

But "the Church of God" translates word-for-word the Greek phrase *he Ekklesia tou Theou*. *Ekklesia* originally denoted a Greek popular legislature: an *assembly of citizens literally called out* (by the town crier) from their normal routine. In the Septuagint version, *ekklesia* normally translates the Hebrew word *qahal*: an *assembly called together*, usually under a single leader (whether human or Divine). This latter concept carries over from the Hebrew Bible via the Septuagint into the Greek New Testament.

In effect, "the Church of God" is an English translation of a Greek translation of a Hebrew phrase. The original Hebrew is *Qahal ha-Elohim*: literally, "the Assembly of God". Neither *qahal* in the Hebrew Bible nor *ekklesia* in the New Testament means "community", Messianic or otherwise. Rather, both terms (when referring to God's people) denote an *organized assembly* called together for worship and instruction, and under God's direction through human leaders.

Twice Twelve Times

Qahal ha-Elohim is found in Nehemiah 13:1, where it is parallel to the phrase *Qahal Yehawweh* ("the assembly of the LORD") in Deuteronomy 23:2-8. (Lamentations 1:10 has "your *qahal*", which likewise refers back to Deuteronomy 23:2-8.) *Qahal Yehawweh* occurs ten times: in Numbers 16:3; 20:4; Deuteronomy 23:1, 2 (twice), 3 (twice), 8; 1 Chronicles 28:8; and Micah 2:5. Thus *Qahal Yehawweh/ha-Elohim* occurs (in various forms) *twelve times* in the Hebrew Bible -- and the number twelve is associated with *perfect organization*.

The phrase *he Ekklesia tou Theou* (so-called because the "New Testament Church" is kept in the name of God the Father, *ho Theos*: John 1:1-2; 17:11; Ephesians 3:14-19) likewise is found *twelve times* in various forms in the New Testament. One finds it in Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 10:32; 11:16, 22; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4; and 1 Timothy 3:5, 15.

So God's own name for His people as an organized entity, under the New Covenant, is essentially the same as the name He used under the Old Covenant. Since there is no perfect translation of that name (with all its connotations) into English, in Jewish contexts I use either the English phrase "the Church of God" (which at least openly connotes belief in Yeshua as Messiah), or else the Hebrew phrase *Qahal ha-Elohim* (or simply *ha-Qahal* or "the *Qahal*").

Paul and the *Qahal*

Like the Hebrew Bible, Rabbinic Judaism (the heir of Pharisaic Judaism) uses *qahal* to refer to a religious assembly as such. When the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinics speak of God's people as a "community" or "congregation", they use the Hebrew term *edah*. The Septuagint generally translates this word as *sunagogos*, from which we get the English word "synagogue". (This same Greek word is found in James 2:2, in the sense of "congregation".)

Note that all of the New Testament references to "the Church of God" come from the mouth or pen of the apostle Paul, a former Pharisee! In calling Jesus' disciples by a Greek translation of the Hebrew phrase *Qahal ha-Elohim*, he marked them as *the remnant and legitimate heir* of the *Qahal ha-Elohim/Yehawweh* of Hebrew Scripture (cf. Romans 9-11). In other words, "the Church of God" is not merely a "Messianic Community"; it is *the religious assembly of God's elect!* Few observant Jews of the time (whether Hebrew- or Greek-speaking) would have missed the point -- or have failed to be provoked to jealousy by it (cf. Romans 11:13-14)!

Yet the *Qahal ha-Elohim* is not composed of Gentiles trying to "assimilate" Israel. Rather, it is composed of Israelites testifying to, and in time "assimilating" the Gentiles (Acts 15:13-18; Amos 9:11-12). The *besorah* (in Greek, *euangelion*; in English, "gospel" or "glad tidings") is "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16-17).

So what is the relationship between the *Qahal ha-Elohim* and "Judaism" -- or for that matter, between the *Qahal* and what many Jewish scholars call "Gentile Christianity"?

The *Qahal* and "Messianic Judaism"

Nowhere does the New Testament call ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus "Messianic Jews". All believers, Israelites and Gentiles alike, are called *Christians* in Greek-based English; the equivalent in Hebrew-based English would be *Messianics* (Acts 11:26; 1 Peter 4:14-16). There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile in Messiah (Galatians 3:27-29). They live by the same Divine commands

(Galatians 7:19). They share in one calling and all that goes with it (Ephesians 4:1-6).

We must remember that the leaders of Judaism, not Paul or the other disciples of Jesus, called the followers of Jesus "the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5; cf. verses 14-15). Paul, himself a Jewish believer, made a clear distinction between his life in Judaism and his life in the *Qahal ha-Elohim* (Galatians 1:13-22). Jesus characterized Pharisaic Judaism as human tradition nullifying Divine *Torah* (Matthew 15:1-9; Isaiah 29:13-14). *Never* did Jesus or Paul call the religion of the Hebrew Bible "Judaism". That's what the *Greeks* called the *Jewish national religion*, something far different by Jesus' day from the faith God gave to Israel through Moses and the prophets.

Believers in Jesus, whether Jewish or Gentile, must not be shy about calling a spade a spade. "Judaism" is a humanly-devised religious philosophy. The *Qahal ha-Elohim* is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15-16).

The *Qahal* and "Gentile Christianity"

So "Messianic Judaism", from the Bible's point of view, is an *oxymoron* -- but so is "Gentile Christianity". The *Qahal ha-Elohim* is by definition an Israelite, not a Gentile religion. Gentiles are to be grafted into Israel, not the other way around (Romans 11:17-24).

Acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Messiah (and doing what He says: Matthew 7:21-23) does not turn an Israelite into a Gentile. Rather, both Israelites and Gentiles in the *Qahal ha-Elohim* are "Jews inwardly" (Romans 2:28-29). They all walk in the "obedience of faith", just as their father Abraham walked (Romans 16:25-27; 4:16-24; Genesis 17:1-8; 26:1-5).

But thanks to the "mystery of iniquity" already at work in Paul's day (2 Thessalonians 2:7), most Gentile and even Jewish believers have never known what being a Christian (or "Messianic") really means. For centuries, they have accepted a "gospel" which proclaims Jesus (by whatever name) as Lord and Messiah while misrepresenting what He stands for (Matthew 24:4-5; Mark 13:5; Luke 21:8; Revelation 6:1-2).

"Gentile Christianity" is what it is because it has absorbed the paganism of those who profess it. It has turned its back (to a greater or lesser degree) on the foundation of the *Torah*: the Ten Commandments. It has done this largely by scorning one point of that "law of liberty" (James 2:10-12): the biblical Sabbath (*Shabbat*), which is a sign between God and the "Israel of God" (Exodus 31:12-17).

Moreover, Gentile Christianity has substituted paganized myths for biblical truths about the nature of God, the plan of salvation and the purpose for which God created humanity. Is it any surprise that this system has persecuted both the Jews and the true *Qahal ha-Elohim* -- or that both have had to resist "assimilation" by this system, even at the cost of their lives?

Tragically, Messianic Judaism has largely accepted this system's false teachings without question. But God commands *all* His people to come out of this system (whether it be the "Mother Church" or its many "daughters"), lest they participate in its sins and share in its eventual punishment (Revelation 17:5; 18:4).

The Mission of the *Qahal*

One of Gentile Christianity's most basic errors is that God is trying to "save the world" in this age. Yet nowhere does Scripture say this. Rather, through the *Qahal ha-Elohim*, God is "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ [in Hebrew, *Yeshua ha-Mashiach*]" (cf. Acts 20:20-21). The *Qahal* preaches "good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ [*Yeshua ha-Mashiach*]" (Acts 8:12). But not until the Kingdom of God is established will the "veil" of spiritual blindness be lifted from "all nations" (Isaiah 25:7), including national Israel (Romans 11:25-32).

Until that day comes, the *Qahal ha-Elohim* is to preach the good news of the coming Kingdom of God to all nations (Mark 16:15-17). It is to baptize those who believe that message, and to teach them everything that Jesus commanded His original *Jewish* apostles (Matt. 28:19-20). There should be no mistaking Jesus' intent: if the Torah is binding on the Jew, then it is binding on the Gentile (Matt. 5:17-20).

There is therefore no need to divide Jews from Gentiles in the Body of Messiah in order to avoid offense. If one preaches the truth, it will prove a stumbling block to both Jews and Gentiles alike (1 Cor. 1:22-23). But "to those who are called [into the *Qahal ha-Elohim*], both Jews and Greeks, [the Messiah is] the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). ###