

THE NAME OF THE CHURCH IN BOTH TESTAMENTS

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Before His arrest, Jesus prayed that His disciples be kept in the Father's name, "that they might be one, as We are one" (John 17:11-12). Thus in the Greek New Testament, the name of God's people as a *unified assembly* is *he Ekklesia tou Theou*, which is usually translated "the Church of God". This name appears twelve times in various forms in the New Testament. (Twelve, by the way, symbolizes *perfect organization* in Scripture.)

In five places, the name of the Church signifies the entire Body of Christ – the Church as a whole, with all its members (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 10:32; 1 Corinthians 11:22; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13). In four places, it signifies a local congregation, usually with the name of its location attached (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:5; 1 Timothy 3:15). In three places, speaking of the local congregations collectively, the phrasing used is "the Churches of God" (1 Corinthians 11:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4).

Since Christ is the Head of the Church under the Father, Paul also called the various congregations "the Churches of Christ" (Romans 11:16) – but the proper name is "the Church of God". All this is of course very familiar to longtime members of God's Church.

But did you know that the true name of God's people also appears in various forms twelve times in the *Old Testament*?

The Name of the Old Testament Church

How the name of the Church in the Old Testament is used can tell us much about the nature of the Church, both then and now. After all, the Church of the Old Testament and the Church of the New Testament, in prophetic terms, are *one* (Revelation 12:1-6).

Actually, the Hebrew name of the Church is found in two forms: *Qehal Yhwh* and *Qehal ha-Elohim*. Let us first consider the Divine names used in these forms. *Yhwh* (the pronunciation of which is not spelled out in the Masoretic Text) is the name usually translated "the LORD" (or sometimes "GOD"). We often translate this name "the Eternal". It is the *personal name* of the God of the Old Testament. *Elohim* is the Hebrew *kind or family name* of the Deity, and like *Yhwh* may be used as a form of personal address (compare Psalms 14 and 53, for example, where one is substituted for the other). Both names belong *pre-eminently* to the One we now call the Father, but they *also* belong to the One we now call the Son. Thus "the God of our fathers [the Father] glorified His Servant Jesus" through the resurrection, according to

Peter (Acts 3:13). So even in the Old Testament, the Church was kept in the Father's name, yet the Head of the Church was "the Rock that followed [Israel]...Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4) – the One who worked with humanity on the Father's behalf.

Now let us consider the word *qahal*. Here are its basic meanings: "1. *assembly* specifically convoked...2. *congregation*, as organized body" (*The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon*, p. 874b). When standing alone and referring to God's people, it may take either sense. However, the name *Qahal Yhwh/Qahal ha-Elohim* falls under the latter category (*ibid.*). For simplicity's sake, this article will consistently use "assembly" to translate *qahal*, but with the connotation of an organized body. (*Qahal* is simply the "noun construct" form of *qahal*; it means "assembly of".)

Already we see that *qahal*, when referring to God's people, implies *organization*. In various sacred and secular contexts, a *qahal* of whatever sort typically has *government from the top down* (by God, one or more leading men, or both). This includes (in prophetic fulfillment) the British Empire and Commonwealth, which was "a congregation (assembly or *qahal*) of nations" united and ruled over by the British Crown (Genesis 36:11).

Ten times in Hebrew Scripture, the name of God's people as an organized body is *Qahal Yhwh* (Numbers 16:3; 20:4; Deuteronomy 23:1,2,2,3,3,8; 1 Chronicles 28:8; Micah 2:5). Once it is "Your *Qahal*", referring back to Deuteronomy 23:1-8 (Lamentations 1:10). Once it is *Qahal ha-Elohim*, once again referring back to Deuteronomy 23:1-8 (Nehemiah 13:1).

"The congregation of (the children of) Israel" – *`Adat (Benê) Yisra'el* – is more commonly used (36 times); "the congregation of the LORD" (*`Adat Yhwh*) is also used (4 times). However, an *`edah* is properly a "*company assembled together by appointment, or acting concertedly*" (*New BDBG*, p. 417a). Typically, when it refers to Israel – and especially in *`Adat (Benê) Yisra'el* – *`edah* refers specifically to the *company that God brought out of Egypt* (*ibid.*). The name of the *religious assembly* of God's people, however, is properly *Qahal Yhwh*, *Qahal ha-Elohim*, or simply "the *Qahal*".

How the Name is Used in Context

Now let us look briefly at how the name of the "Old Testament Church of God" – "the church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38, KJV) – is used in context.

Numbers 16:3: Ironically, the first time *Qahal Yhwh* is used is in the context of Korah's rebellion, when he and his followers accused Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves "above *the congregation [assembly] of the LORD*". To Korah and his fellows, everyone in the assembly was holy, and thus allegedly equal in authority (same verse). In fact, the rebels were making a grab for power that *Yhwh* had not given them (verses 5-11). His *Qahal* was *not* a democratic assembly – as the rebels found out at the cost of their lives, families and property (verses 26-35).

Numbers 20:4: "Now there was no water for the *congregation [edah]*; so they gathered together against Moses and Aaron. And the people contended with Moses and spoke, saying: 'If only we had died when our brethren died before the LORD [in Korah's rebellion]! Why have you brought up *the assembly of the LORD* into this wilderness, that we and our animals should die here?'" (verses 2-4). Once again, the people challenged the human authority *Yhwh* had set over the *Qahal*, and once again He acted through that authority. This time, however, it went ill with Moses and Aaron because they failed to honor *Yhwh* by their actions (verses 7-13).

Deuteronomy 23:1-8: This passage discusses the *qualifications for membership* within the *Qahal Yhwh*. (The name itself is found no less than six times here.) In particular, Moabites and Ammonites were forbidden from entering, as were the descendants of mixed marriages with these peoples to the tenth generation (verses 3-6). (Ruth the Moabitess, being called of God to salvation, was a special case.) This command became the foundation of the "middle wall of division" between Jews and Gentiles in Judaism, which wall Christ removed in His New Testament Church (Ephesians 2:14-15).

1 Chronicles 28:8: Here David admonished Solomon to be obedient to God's commandments "in the sight of all Israel, *the assembly of the LORD*, and in the hearing of our God". Here "all Israel" is equated with the *Qahal Yhwh*. Here also, the need for the *Qahal's* leadership to keep *Yhwh's* commandments is underlined.

Micah 2:5: Unlike the New Testament Church, the *Qahal Yhwh* was "both Church and State". When certain men in Judah oppressed the poor by seizing their lands and properties, *Yhwh* threatened the whole nation with exile (verses 1-4). "Therefore you will have no one to determine boundaries by lot in *the assembly of the LORD*" (verse 5). Here it is *Judah* that is called "the assembly of the LORD". Israel had long since seceded from Judah (I Kings 12:19) and become paganized (compare Hosea 1:6-9 and 2:2-13).

Lamentations 1:10: This verse (which describes the fall of First Temple Jerusalem) acts as a sort of transition between *Qahal Yhwh* and *Qahal ha-Elohim*. “The adversary has spread his hand over all her pleasant things; for she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, those whom You commanded not to enter *Your assembly*” (compare Deuteronomy 23:1-8).

Nehemiah 13:1: “On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into *the assembly of God* [*Qahal ha-Elohim*], because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. So it was, when they had heard the Law, that they separated all the mixed multitude from Israel” (verses 1-3).

From *Qahal* to *Ekklesia*

In Hebrew Scripture, *Qahal Yhwh* is used exclusively before the Babylonian Exile of the Jews. *Qahal ha-Elohim* (the “*ha*” simply means “the”) is used exclusively afterward. Why did the name of the “Old Testament Church of God” change over time?

After the Babylonian Exile, even in the Scriptures themselves, *Yhwh* was used less and less and *Elohim* more and more (*New BDBG*, p. 218b). In effect, whether intentionally or not, the Jews put less and less emphasis on the *personal relationship* between God and Israel and more and more on His *universal relationship* with all mankind. This laid the foundation for the preaching of the Gospel by the “New Testament Church of God”, which would reflect the *family name* of the Deity.

In due time, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. In the Septuagint version, *qahal* is generally translated by the Greek word *ekklesia*. Anciently, *ekklesia* meant “*an assembly of the citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly.*” (The town crier would “call out” the voting citizens to their duties in the assembly, hence the name.) In Athens, the ordinary assemblies were called *kuriaoi ekklesiai* and were held four times in each *prutaneia* or period of 35-36 days; the extraordinary assemblies were called *sugkeltoi* (*The Abridged Liddell & Scott Greek-English Lexicon*, 1878, p 206).

Later, however, *ekklesia* came to mean *any kind of convoked assembly*. Thus, when the Septuagint used *ekklesia* to translate *qahal*, the Greek word absorbed in context the connotations of the original Hebrew word (which typically implied an *assembly under top-down leadership*). New Testament Greek used the vocabulary of the Septuagint extensively, including *ekklesia*. Thus *ekklesia* passed into the New

Testament with the original connotations of *qahal* intact, and new ones were added to them in context – including the idea of the assembly being composed of those God had “called out” of the world.

New Testament Greek scholar Edward W. Goodrick puts it this way: “The Christian writers of the New Testament were converts from Judaism. When they became Christians, they had no idea of abandoning their Jewish faith. They brought with them a theological vocabulary with Greek terms from the Hebrew Bible *via* the LXX [Septuagint]. And with little or no change, they used these terms in the New Testament they were writing.

“New Testament scholars, therefore, must retrace their steps. Often a New Testament Greek word is nothing more than a different symbol for the same Old Testament Hebrew word. (...) [Thus] to fail to study the Old Testament *qahal*, is to fail to understand the important New Testament word, *ekklesia*” (*Do It Yourself Hebrew and Greek: Everybody’s Guide to the Language Tools*, Zondervan/Multnomah, 1980, p. 9:4).

But Dr. Goodrick adds, “The New Testament adds considerable content to *ekklesia* (church), not found in either the Classical [Greek] literature or even the Septuagint” (p. 10:2). A study of how *ekklesia* is used in various contexts to refer to the Church will reveal that content. It’s a study worth making!

The Name of the New Testament Church

In the Septuagint, *Qahal ha-Elohim* is translated as *Ekklesia Theou*. Thanks to a quirk of Greek grammar, this phrase means exactly the same as *he Ekklesia tou Theou*: “the Assembly (Church) of God”. Both forms are used in New Testament Greek, though the longer form is more usual. (When a “noun phrase” is definite in Greek, either both nouns must have articles or neither must.)

Leaving aside Jesus’ prayer in John 17, it is entirely reasonable that the Greek name of the New Testament Church was directly inspired by the Septuagint translation of Nehemiah 13:1. The fact that Judaism continued to call its own assemblies by the correct biblical Hebrew name supports this conclusion. Since the Church saw itself as the heir of the biblical religion, it would have been natural for it to use God’s name for that religion, just as Judaism used the same name for the same reason. But did the fact the Jewish assemblies were still using the proper name prove they were still being used by God to do His Work (aside from preserving the Hebrew Scriptures and related traditions, of course)?

Did you ever notice that in all twelve places where “the Church of God” is found in the New Testament, the speaker or writer who used the name was the apostle Paul? As a former disciple of Gamaliel and a former member of Pharisaic Judaism, Paul would have known full well the implications of *Qahal ha-Elohim* and its Greek equivalent *he Ekklesia tou Theou*. By calling the Church by that name, he was implying that the Church Jesus founded – *not Judaism after Christ’s crucifixion* (compare Matthew 21:33-43) – was the remnant and legitimate heir of the *Qahal ha-Elohim* of the Old Testament (compare Romans 11:1-7). In that light, Paul’s distinction between “Judaism” and “the Church of God” becomes all the more meaningful (Galatians 1:13-14). So does his mention of “the Churches of Judea...in *Christ*” in the same context (verse 22).

But God was now making a different emphasis through the name of His Assembly or Church (*Qahal, Ekklesia*). Instead of underlining His *personal relationship* with Israel, He was underlining His potential *family relationship* with all humanity. Thus, instead of being called (in modern English terms) “the Church of the LORD (the Eternal, *Yhwh*)”, God’s religious assembly is called “the Church of God (*Elohim, Theos*)”. Truly, it is kept in the name of the Father, which name is pre-eminently *God* (John 1:1).

Moreover, while the Holy Spirit was *in the midst of* the Old Testament Church to instruct it (Isaiah 63:11; Nehemiah 9:20), it was *within or upon* only a relative few of its members (Numbers 11:29). In the New Testament Church, access to God’s Holy Spirit is available to all that fulfill the necessary conditions. Salvation was not offered the Old Testament Church as a whole, but it *is* offered to the New Testament Church.

The passages describing the Old and New Testament Churches (and there are many more) have rich and profound lessons for us all. May they help us grow in understanding of what God’s true Church is and always has been: the *organized assembly* of God’s people doing God’s Work in the world! ###