

When Did “the Church” Begin?

by J.K. McKee

In the annals of Christian teaching, Protestant or Catholic, one common thread often runs throughout: the institution known as “the Church” sees itself as being separate from Israel. As some would dogmatically declare, “The Church is not Israel!” and depending on your view, this is correct. The Church institution by-and-large does not consider itself part of, or at times even related to, Israel. While there are some who do recognize that our faith is connected to Israel, that is about as far as it goes. In many ways Christian theologians have incorrectly “divided” and have mishandled the Word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15), favoring to “pick-and-choose” which Scriptures “apply to them” and to Israel, leading to inconsistencies regarding their understanding of the Bible.

Are these observations intended to accuse all Christians of anti-Semitism or an anti-Israel spirit? Absolutely not. There are many Christian Believers who do consider themselves “related” to Israel in some form. Rather, we question the centuries-old concept of division between “the Church” and Israel. As the world gets more and more uncertain and news stories of Israel, the Middle East, and sermons on the Second Coming become far too frequent, the question of ecclesiology, or the study of God’s elect, should become relevant to the Christian Believer. How is the one who has put his or her trust in Israel’s Messiah, Yeshua, related to Israel?

Arguably, the study of the identity of “the Church” might be the most important doctrine outside that of salvation. This study determines what group of people, or *elect*, the born again Believer belongs to. It has a direct impact on the continued validity of the Torah or Law of Moses for Believers, and whether or not the pre-tribulation rapture teaching is Scriptural. It also determines whether or not the Believer is a part of the Commonwealth of Israel, or is separate. Consider what the Apostle Paul wrote to Titus:

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Messiah Yeshua, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:11-14; cf. Deuteronomy 4:20; 7:6; 14:2; 16:18).

The Apostle Peter also says,

“This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER *stone*,’ and, ‘A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE’; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this *doom* they were also appointed. But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God’s* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY” (1 Peter 2:7-10; cf. Hosea 1:10-11; 2:23).

If you have noticed closely, both Paul and Peter appropriate language from the Tanach or Old Testament regarding the calling of Ancient Israel and apply it to Believers in Yeshua. Why do they do this? In Deuteronomy 7:6, our Heavenly Father proclaims, “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” This people, obviously, was the nation of Ancient Israel. By the time of the Messiah’s ministry, neither the Lord’s plan for the world nor His plan for His people had changed (Malachi 3:6). The Apostles make it clear that God is seeking “for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14, RSV).

The key to properly understanding what “the Church” actually is, is that we must understand the fact that our Father in Heaven is seeking only *one people* for His own possession. This people is the restored nation of Israel. The Father does not have two groups of elect, but rather one.

It is necessary that we examine “the Church” versus Israel dichotomy that exists in many theological circles, and whether or not the two groups are separate, or are actually one and the same. We will examine what occurred at Pentecost, and what Yeshua the Messiah really meant when He said “upon this rock I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18). Most important, we seek to establish what the purpose of God’s people is, firmly establishing that He has but one group of elect.

What Is an Ekklesia?

The Greek word commonly translated as “church” in English Bibles is *ekklesia* (ekkl hsia). *BDAG* indicates that *ekklesia* means “**a casual gathering of people, an assemblage, gathering,**” and “**people with shared belief, community, congregation.**”¹ It notes that “the term” *ekklesia* “apparently became popular among Christians in Greek-speaking areas for chiefly two reasons: to affirm continuity with Israel through use of a term found in Gk. translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, and to allay any suspicion, esp. in political circles, that Christians were a disorderly group.”² The primary Hebrew equivalent of *ekklesia* is *qahal* (I hq). *BDB* indicates that *qahal* means “assembly, convocation, congregation.”³

In the Greek Septuagint, or ancient translation of the Hebrew Scriptures produced approximately 300 years before the Messiah, the word *qahal* is usually translated as *ekklesia*, the same word in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) translated into English as “church.” What is important to note in this case is that the *ekklesia*, or congregation/assembly of the Septuagint, is Israel. In Acts 7:23-39, Stephen equates the *ekklesia* or “church” as being Israel:

“This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, a prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. This is he, that was in the **church [ekklesia] in the wilderness** with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and *with* our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust *him* from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt” (Acts 7:37-39, KJV).

What is interesting is that the King James Version translators rendered *ekklesia* as “church” in Acts 7:38, whereas most other versions read “the congregation in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, NASU; cf. NKJV, RSV, NRSV) or “assembly in the desert” (NIV). This “wilderness church,” as we might call it, was Ancient Israel.

The rendering of the word *ekklesia* is dependent on context. However, the very fact that *ekklesia* can and does mean in many places “an assembly of Israelites” should instigate some thinking for your average Christian and whether or not “the Church” is an entity separate from Israel. The early Believers understood *ekklesia* as being connected to the assembly of Israel. Why do Believers today largely miss out on this?

Was the Messiah Starting Something New?

A common defense for those claiming that “the Church” is an entity separate from Israel is that Yeshua tells us “upon this rock I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18). Notably, Roman Catholics misinterpret this verse to support the non-Biblical doctrine of papal secession through the Apostle Peter. Protestants, following in this wake, use the same verse to support the fact that “the Church” was a “new” group of elect that started at Pentecost. What was Yeshua telling us? In its entirety, the Messiah’s dialogue in Matthew 16:13-20 states,

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.’ Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ” (NASU).

In the verses, where Yeshua allegedly states that “the Church” will begin with Peter, what Peter does is that he tells Yeshua that He is indeed the Messiah. Yeshua confirms this to him, and then says “on this rock I will build My church.” Protestant expositors are agreed that the rock the Messiah was talking about was Himself, and not Peter, a human being. But, they are not sure as to what it means to “build.” The Greek verb *oikodomeōw* (*oikodomeōw*), most often translated as “build” in Matthew 16:18, can mean “to build.” However, it also means, “*build up again, restore,*” most notably, “**to help improve ability to function in living responsibly and effectively, strengthen, build up, make more able**” (BDAG).⁴ AMG defines it as “to rebuild or renew a building decayed or destroyed.”⁵

With these definitions in mind, the question of whether or not “the Church” is a new thing becomes easier to answer. Did Yeshua establish something entirely new, or did He strengthen something already existent? And if it was already existent, what was it?

Considering the fact that a substantial amount of Christian theology is focused around the entity known as “the Church,” it would be logical to assume that there are prophecies in the Tanach or Old Testament concerning its existence. While there are prophecies such as Isaiah 53 speaking of Yeshua, the Suffering Servant, foretelling His atoning work for us, we would expect some similar treatment about the new body that God would *supposedly* later establish as salvation went out into the world. Sadly for those who believe that “the Church” has been established as a second group of elect, there are no such prophecies. On the contrary, all of the prophecies relating to the Messiah regard His coming to restore Israel and bringing Israel into its glory. Isaiah 49:5-6 is one such prophecy:

“And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and My God is My strength), He says, ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’”

It is interesting that while there are no explicit prophecies in the Tanach speaking of the Messiah establishing a new assembly of elect, “the Church,” Yeshua’s own words scarcely speak of such a phenomenon, either. G.W. Bromiley notes in *ISBE*,

“In the teaching of Jesus Himself there is little mention of the Church. The only two references in the Gospels are both in Matthew (16:18: ‘On this rock I will build my church,’ and 18:17: ‘Tell it to the church’). In the second of these the reference might be to the Jewish synagogue, though the general context of Mt. 18 seems to suggest the emergent Christian community. Apart from the critical questions raised by some scholars, these verses give rise to many problems. For example, do they denote the intention of Jesus to found a Church?”⁶

There are no prophecies that speak or allude to the establishment of a second assembly of elect by the Messiah. There are only those that speak of the restoration of Israel. When you look at the vocabulary of Matthew 16:18, it only confirms Yeshua’s mission to restore Israel.

In Jeremiah 33:6-8 our Heavenly Father promises, “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.” The critical promise here from the Lord regarding Israel is that He “will rebuild them as they were before” (NIV). The Hebrew verb rendered as “rebuild” in this passage is *banah* (בָּנָה) appearing in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice), which in the Hebrew Scriptures can have several different applications, including: “to **build**,” “to **rebuild**,” “to **work on a building**,” or “to **build a family**” (*HALOT*).⁷ In the passage from Jeremiah “rebuild” is obviously the best translation. The Greek Septuagint reflects this, rendering *banah* with *oikodomeōw* (*oikodomeōw*), the same verb used in Matthew 16:18 speaking of Yeshua’s establishing of “the Church”:

“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build [*oikodomeōw*] My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

What Actually Occurred at Pentecost?

Within evangelical Christianity, it is usually taught that “the Church” entity was born at Pentecost. The Scriptures do plainly attest, “that day there were added about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). Pentecost is in actuality the appointed time of *Shavuot* (תּאִבּוּב), specified in Leviticus 23:15-22. In Jewish theology, it is the day when the Torah or the Law was given to the people of Israel. This happened almost 1,300 years prior to the Holy Spirit being poured out at the Upper Room, on which “three thousand men of the people fell that day” (Exodus 32:28b). On the Pentecost or *Shavuot* following Yeshua’s Ascension into Heaven, the Apostle Peter gave a riveting message to those assembled: “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Yeshua the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death... Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Messiah—this Yeshua whom you crucified” (Acts 2:22-23, 36).

The Book of Acts tells us that on this *Shavuot*, men believing in the God of Israel from all over the known world came to gather in Jerusalem, both those who were observant Jews and proselytes (Acts 2:9-11). Peter did not proclaim to the crowds amassed “*We’re starting the Church!*” Rather, he proclaimed that Yeshua was both “Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). Peter proclaimed that He was the promised Messiah of Israel and that the people were to “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Yeshua the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2:38-39). Peter explained that what occurred on this day was prophesied by Joel:

“[B]ut this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ‘AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,’ God says, ‘THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT and they shall prophesy. AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW, BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME. AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED’” (Acts 2:16-21; cf. Joel 2:28-32).

Pentecost, or this *Shavuot*, did not initiate something new, but rather it fulfilled various prophecies of Joel and it was when the good news of Messiah Yeshua was presented to those gathered in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit was poured out as was prophesied by Yeshua (Acts 1:8) and three thousand came to faith in the Messiah, paralleling the three thousand who were killed following the first *Shavout* some 1,300 years earlier.

A Challenge to Christians

If one were to ask any sincere Christian what the purpose of our faith is, he or she would probably tell you that it is to go out and fulfill the Great Commission given to us in Matthew 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” The individual would be correct; we are commanded by Yeshua to go out and proclaim salvation and repentance in His name, and disciple others in His teachings. Although much of Christianity sees itself as separate from Israel, Christian Believers will actually identify their purpose as being the same as Israel’s: **to be a light to the nations, representatives of God’s Kingdom on Earth**. Little do they realize that the *ekklesia*, the true called out assembly of Believers, *is Israel*. Before His ascension into Heaven, the Disciples asked Yeshua, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). From what is recorded after the Messiah ascended, two angels told them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Yeshua, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). The Disciples’ question regarding Israel’s restoration was not really answered (Acts

1:7), so they went and proclaimed the good news of Yeshua's death, burial, and resurrection to those "in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8), as they were commanded to do.

Was this going out to proclaim the good news the beginning of something new, as in an entity known as "the Church"? Not at all. We know this because Yeshua came to restore the Kingdom to Israel. Israel is the conduit by which all the world can be blessed. Israel is supposed to be a light to the nations and so that the world might know that the God of Israel is the One True God.

Throughout the Scriptures, our Lord Yeshua is called the light of the world (John 1:9; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9; 12:46). Notably, He is also called the light of Israel (Isaiah 10:17), but nowhere in the Bible is Yeshua the Messiah called "the light of the Church." There is no separate group of elect outside of Israel. If you are born again, you are part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12). For many centuries the Christian Church has helped bring many people into a relationship with the Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). However, our days present new challenges and many Christians are searching for more. Many have been asking new questions, and are seeing themselves as not being separate from Israel. They want to know what to do. What do any of us do when confronted with the reality that Believers are part of that eternal people that will reign with Yeshua from Jerusalem?

Conclusion

If Yeshua indeed came to restore Israel, and not create a new "Church," should this not change our understanding of our call as part of our Heavenly Father's "called out" people of Israel? If we are not separate from, but instead are a part of Israel, should that not cause us—at the very least—to rethink our relationship to the Jewish people and the Hebraic origins of our faith? Should we not consider the Jewish people as a part of our spiritual family who need to know Yeshua, the Savior of all Israel? Moreover, as a part of Israel, should we not rethink the concept embraced by many who think they are part of "the Church," which is that the Messiah will "rapture the Church at any moment" so that the God of Israel can deal with "Israel" during the Tribulation period? Even more so, should we not start looking at the whole Bible as being for us, rather than splitting it up between Israel and "the Church" because of the false teachings promulgated by dispensationalism? Certainly, we all have much to think and pray about.

¹ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303.

² Ibid.

³ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 874.

⁴ *BDAG*, 696.

⁵ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 1030.

⁶ G.W. Bromiley, "Church," in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:693.

⁷ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:139.