

Ekklesia/Qahal (English word “church”)

I have heard that there really is no such thing as “the Church” in Scripture, and that the Hebrew and Greek terms used in the Bible can support this. Can you help me with this issue?

Some form of this summary appears in a wide array of articles and publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics

In the Apostolic Scriptures no reader can deny how *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) is used as a term to define the Body of Messiah, and so by extension it is rendered as “church” in most English translations of the New Testament. But whether this is an appropriate rendering or not is something critical to ask, because when many people encounter the word “church” they think not of a living and breathing group of Messiah followers, but instead of a building with a steeple.¹ *TDNT* offers some rather important remarks on the term *ekklēsia*:

“Since the NT uses a single term, translations should also try to do so, but this raises the question whether ‘church’ or ‘congregation’ is always suitable, especially in view of the OT use for Israel and the underlying Hebrew and Aramaic...‘Assembly,’ then, is perhaps the best single term, particularly as it has both a congregate and an abstract sense, i.e., for the assembling as well as the assembly.”²

This Christian commentary says that “assembly” would be the best, consistent translation for the word *ekklēsia*.³ The Septuagint, or ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible dating three centuries before Yeshua, frequently translates the Hebrew word *qahal* (קָהָל), or assembly/congregation, as *ekklēsia*. *Qahal* is one of the main Hebrew terms for “assembly” or “congregation” used in the Tanach, which almost exclusively refers to Israel. *TWOT* informs us that “usually *qāhāl* is translated as *ekklēsia* in the LXX.”⁴ When the martyr Stephen speaks of “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, KJV), *tē ekklēsia en tē erēmō* (τῆ ἐκκλησία ἐν τῆ ἐρήμῳ), “the church” here he is speaking of is actually the assembly/congregation of Israel.

The Hebrew word *qahal* is used in the Tanach to describe the people of Israel. *TWOT* indicates that “*qāhāl* may...designate the congregation as an organized body. There is *qahal yisrā’el* [קָהָל יִשְׂרָאֵל] (Deut 31:30), *qahal YHWH* [קָהָל יְהוָה] (Num 16:3, etc.), and *qahal ʾēlōhîm* [קָהָל אֱלֹהִים] (Neh 13:1) and then at other times merely ‘the assembly’ (*haqqāhāl* [הַקָּהָל]). We encounter...‘the assembly of the people of God’ (Jud 20:2). Of special interest is the phrase ‘congregation of the Lord’ (*qahal YHWH*) of which there are thirteen instances (Num 16:3; 20:4; Deut 23:2-4; Mic 2:5; 1 Chr 28:8). **It is the nearest OT equivalent of ‘church of the Lord’**”⁵ (emphasis mine).

When the Apostolic writers used the Greek word (ἐκκλησία), often rendered as “church” in our English Bibles, they did not see the *ekklēsia* as a separate assembly or group of people removed from Israel. **They**

¹ Note how there are various people one will encounter in the Messianic community, who will not use the term “church” because they somehow think it has pagan origins. **But** we do not readily use the term “church” to describe God’s people on theological grounds, and the confusion it frequently can cause. When “the Church” is typically referred to in the editor’s writings, it is primarily to refer to a religious institution. Consult the FAQ, “Church, word of pagan origin.”

² K.L. Schmidt, “*ekklēsia*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abrid. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 397.

³ Christian translations that render *ekklēsia* as “assembly” include Young’s Literal Translation and the Literal Translation of the Holy Bible by Jay P. Green. The Complete Jewish Bible by David H. Stern often uses phraseology like “Messianic community.”

⁴ Jack P. Lewis, “*qāhāl*,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:790.

⁵ *Ibid.*

considered the *ekklēsia* to be Israel, perhaps better viewed as an *Israel maximized* by the arrival of the Messiah, the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16).

It is not surprising by any means that one of the lexical definitions given for the word *ekklēsia* does in fact include “Israel.” Thayer states that “in the Sept. [*ekklēsia* is] often equiv. to קָהָל , *the assembly of the Israelites*.”⁶ *BDAG* further summarizes that not only does *ekklēsia* correspond to the “OT Israelites *assembly, congregation*,” but asserts how it was used by the early Messianic Believers “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.”⁷ This is because in an entirely classical context *ekklēsia* could have been used to describe a civil assembly, such as that of the Athenians,⁸ or even the Roman Senate. It is unfortunate that *ekklēsia* in most Bibles has been translated as “church,” whereas it would be best rendered as either “assembly” or “congregation,” with people able to have an easier time seeing that when Yeshua said that He came to “build” His assembly (Matthew 16:18), it is undoubtedly connected with the Father’s promise to “rebuild” Israel (Jeremiah 33:7).⁹

There are many references one will find in a diverse array of technical commentaries on the New Testament, where linguistic and theological connections between *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) and *qahal* (קָהָל) are made.

⁶ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 196.

⁷ 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.

⁸ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 239.

⁹ Consult the editor’s article “When Did ‘the Church’ Begin?”, appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*, which includes discussion on the linguistic connections between the verbs *banah* (בָּנָה) and *oikodomeō* (οἰκοδομέω), employed in Jeremiah 33:7; Matthew 16:18; and Jeremiah 33:7 (LXX).