

6. *Is there a role to play for the Church regarding the Promised Land?*

Our response to this question requires us to define carefully what is meant by the expression, "The Church". So, we need to begin with an examination of the biblical data about The Church.

A. *Ekklesia* in the Newer Covenant Scriptures

The English word "church" is a translation of the Greek term *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) in the Newer Covenant Scriptures (hereafter "N.C."). The same is true for the German and Dutch words, both related to the English "church": *Kirche* and *kerk*. Fortunately the Latin-based languages, such as French and Spanish retain semblances of the original Greek word: *eglise* and *iglesia* respectively. In English, of the 114 occurrences of the word *ekklesia* and its variant grammatical forms in the Greek N. T., only five are not rendered "church." Except for two of those incidences, the context clearly determined that "church" was not the best translation. These two exceptions caught our attention and provide the backdrop for what we will say in this essay. We will discuss them separately very soon.

B. *Ekklesia* in the Septuagint (hereafter "LXX")

In the LXX, when *ekklesia* is used as a verb, as it is in Deuteronomy 4:10, it speaks of the act of "assembling." *Ekklesia* is also used as a noun to designate the "assembly" of Israel. There are actually many uses of this, we cite just a handful of examples: Deuteronomy 9:10; 18:16; 23:2, 3, 9 (8 in English); 31:30; Joshua 8:35, Judges 20:2; and 21:5, 8. All of this, of course, reflects an English translation of the term *ekklesia* from the LXX. Looking at the LXX alone, the word is simply *ekklesia*.

Let us now explore one of the "exceptions" mentioned earlier, Hebrews 2:12. This passage in the N.C. quotes Psalm 22:22 (21:23 in the LXX). The verse reads in the NASB: "I will proclaim your name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." In this passage, the LXX uses the Greek word *ekklesia* to render the Hebrew term *kahal* (קהל). The NASB renders it "assembly," the JPS, NIV, and KJV translate it "congregation".¹ Normally, an English translation of this verse would render *ekklesia* as "church." Interestingly, when we look at the use of this verse in the N. C. (Hebrews 2:12), we find that there is, indeed, one English version does render *ekklesia* as "church", the KJV.

¹ NASB — New American Standard Bible JPS — Jewish Publication Society bible
NIV — New International Version KJV — King James Version

For some reason, however, the KJV does not translate it as "church in its rendering of Psalm 22:22/21:21.

What is the point of this word study? Let us explain the matter the way we see it, as simply and as directly as possible. When we examine the uses of the Greek word that is most commonly translated "church," *ekklesia*, we can easily be drawn to the reality that, in a very real sense, The Church existed long before the events recorded in Acts chapter 2 occurred. We mention this passage because so many evangelical thinkers assert that The Church began on that infamous Shavuot (Pentecost). In short, we see adequate evidence, both linguistic and conceptual, to suggest that The Church began at a different Shavuot, that one which happened in Exodus 19 when the Lord made Israel into a nation by the giving of the Covenant of the Torah.²

C. Linguistic Evidence

The linguistic evidence for our suggestion was cited above. According to the LXX, Israel was called an *ekklesia*. Even the Newer Covenant refers to this reality in Acts 7:38. Stephen, before he was stoned was rehearsing the history of God's people, Israel. He clearly referred to Israel, in the Greek of Acts 7:38, as The Church (*ekklesia*). Many popular English translations, in a possible attempt to downplay this association, render *ekklesia* as "assembly" or "congregation." The KJV, however, *does* translate *ekklesia* in this verse as "church."³ We suggest that there is no need to back away from what seems like the obvious, i. e. that The Church was Israel, particularly the minority remnant of true believers within Israel.

D. Conceptual Evidence

Conceptually, there is every reason to bolster our suggestion. Look at the following comparisons between what many would characterize The Church in the N. C. with what we see of Israel from the Tanakh.

1. Both are a called-out people.

The term *ekklesia* means literally "called out." It is comprised of two Greek words: *ek* (ἐκ), which means "out of" or "from" and *kaleo* (καλεω), which means "to call", or "to summon."⁴ In the LXX it is one

² Perhaps Shavuot did not land on exactly the same day that the Lord gave the Torah on Mount Sinai, as the rabbis say. However, it was close to that date.

³ We do not want to give the impression that we adhere only to the KJV as the best English translation of the Scriptures. We do not. In the cases cited in this essay, the KJV happens to have good renderings.

⁴ The meanings are taken from *A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition revised and edited by Fredrick William

of two terms (in its various grammatical forms) to render the Hebrew *kahal* (קהל). *Kahal* means "to call together, to meet together, ...to collect, assemble".⁵ Interestingly enough, the other more common term, is the Greek word, συναγωγή, from which we get the word "synagogue". But we will resist the temptation to explore this idea more fully!

Israel was called out of Egypt to serve God and to live in the Promised Land as people separate from that which is unholy. Moreover, the believing remnant of Israel was also "rescued...from the domain of darkness, and transferred...to the kingdom of His beloved Son", as it says in Colossians 1:13. The same, of course is true for The Church as we read about it in the N. C.

2. Both are a regenerated people.

For most of its history Israel was comprised of a nation that had mainly unbelieving people. These people were obviously unregenerate, as we would understand this concept from John chapter 3, and other passages in the N. C. However, there was, is, and always will be a minority of true believers in the Messiah among the people of Israel. We call this group of people, "The Remnant". This Remnant, according to Hebrews 4:2, was most certainly born from above in just the same way as any of us who claim that spiritual reality. We say this because of what we read in Hebrews 4:2: "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard" (NASB). This text states plainly that the very same Good News that God caused us to believe was also preached to ancient Israel. The context states that most of the nation did not receive it by faith. However, the implication is that there was also a remnant who did.

The Good News may be summarised into two basic realities:

a) "Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:4).

b) Secondly, all who believe in Yeshua the Messiah are new creations in Him, as Galatians 2:20 implies: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Messiah lives in me; and the *life* which I now

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⁵ קהל | *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner translated and edited under the supervision of M.E.J. Richardson. Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc. Version 2.5.

live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (NASB).

Both of these truths are integral theological components of the Gospel. As such, we must conclude that those who believed that Good News in the period of the Tanakh were regenerated just as we who are in Yeshua today, as Hebrews 4:2 clearly indicates. Hence, if being regenerated is one of the main spiritual realities of The Church, then consequently, it was one of the main spiritual realities of the remnant of ancient Israel. After all, they also were "The Church."

3. Both groups have a definite organizational structure with appropriate spiritual authority.

The N. C. informs us that there are two kinds of spiritual leaders for The Church, commonly called: elders and deacons. For example, 1 Timothy 3 provides a good summary of the qualifications necessary for one to be in one of these ministries.

It was the same concerning ancient Israel. Exodus chapter 18 describes how, through the advise of Jethro, Israel received an organizational structure. In fact when we read some of the qualifications for these leaders in Exodus 18:21, it begins to sound like those of the elders mentioned in 1 Timothy 3. Moreover, we find the expression "elder of Israel" used 14 times just in the Torah, not to mention the other parts of the Tanakh.

What about the leader referred to as a "deacon" in the N. C. church? We need to remember that the term deacon in the Greek simply means "servant." Although it is admittedly difficult to find what one would term "the office of a deacon" among the people of Israel as we read the Tanakh, nevertheless, the Torah certainly makes provision for the physical needs of God's people to be met by the assembly of Israel. We can only assume that there was an effective organizational structure that administrated such needs. Thus, those in charge of meeting those needs would have functions in the same way, as the "deacon" was intended to function.

4. Both groups have the same calling or a divine mission.

The first mention of the calling or mission of Israel is in Genesis 12:1-3. Here God told Abraham that he would be a blessing to all nations. This is part of the covenant that God made with him. This covenant was renewed with Isaac, Jacob, and the rest of Jacob's physical descendants. Thus, Israel was called by God to be a blessing to all the nations.

Secondly, according to Deuteronomy 4:5-9, Israel was called by God to make known to the world both who the true God is and also what His Wisdom (His Word) is, as they lived out His Torah in the Land.

Thirdly, in Isaiah 42:6 God tells Israel: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations... ." Israel was called by God to be a light to the nations of the world.

Israel also had a fourth part to their mission. They were called by God to host the Divine Presence on earth. Indeed, God dwelt in a special way first in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple. In addition to that, however, Israel was also granted the privilege of being the people through whom the Messiah would come into the world and among whom He would live.

Thus, Israel was given a mission by God to be a blessing to the nations, to inform the nations who God is and what His Word is, to be a light to the nations, and a host people for God's presence on earth. All of this, of course, was in addition, to being a set-apart and righteous people unto God in their every-day lives.

Few would argue that as the pages of the N.C. unfold, The Church has exactly the same mission as Israel has. First, Galatians 3 tells all believers that Abraham is the father of all who trust in Messiah. Therefore, all believers are called to be a blessing to everyone around them. This is, after all, what we read in 1 Peter 3:9 "not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing."

Secondly, Yeshua commissioned his students to make disciples wherever they go on earth (Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8). Making disciples for Yeshua means among other things to make the nature of the true God known and to help people to understand His Word.

Thirdly, Yeshua told his students that they are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). Furthermore, Paul told the Ephesians, "you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light" (Ephesians 5:8, NASB).

As for the final purpose of Israel, to be a people hosting God's presence on earth, is not Yeshua in the lives of all who trust Him? Does not Paul refer to His people as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19)?

There is one important difference, however, between the mission as it is revealed in the Tanakh and as it is revealed in the N. C. For the most part, Israel was called to fulfil this mission by being a nation, living in the Land and providing a place where the nations of the world would come to them to learn about God and His Word. There were exceptions to this, of course, such as people like Jonah who went out to the nations with the Good News. And, of course, undoubtedly, there were also believing Israelites who carried the Good News with them outside of

Israel on their personal journeys. However, there was no specific call of God for the nation to go out to the nations with the Good News. This, however, does not mean that the nations never heard the Good news.

A good example of gentiles who believed the Good News is in Isaiah 56:6-8.

As we come to the pages of the N. C. we find something different taking place. Armed with the accomplishment of our atonement with the long-awaited life and ministry of the Messiah, God's people are now called by Him to actively take the Good News out to the four corners of the earth. We need to note that this is not a new mission. It is merely a new *method* to carry out that ancient mission. This is a critical point to remember. Before this time, the four corners of the earth travelled through Israel. With the assignment of a new divine method, God made adequate provision for His people to be empowered with such a task by sending His Spirit to empower His people. This is the essence of the events recorded in Acts chapter 2.

E. Implications and Conclusions

We have attempted to demonstrate that, in essence, both linguistically and conceptually, The Church not only existed in the times of the Tanakh, but that The Church was actually the believing remnant of Israel. In other words, The Church was/is Israel.

We realize that this is a rather radical statement to make. We should clarify it more fully before we move on. When we say that The Church is Israel. First we do not mean that we should actually call ancient Israel "The Church." Of course, as we have demonstrated, theologically and linguistically we would have a right to do so. But, we need to bear in mind all that the term "church" means today before we label Israel "The Church." Over the centuries the expression "The Church" has acquired many cultural accoutrements that do not correctly reflect its original biblical nature. For this reason alone, we will refrain from dubbing Israel with the title, "The Church."

Secondly, when we call Israel "The Church," we do not mean to say that the church referred to in the pages of the N. C. has in any way replaced Israel. This may have been evident from this essay. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to emphasize it.

When we refer to Israel as "The Church" what we mean is that the original body of called-out, regenerated believers, organized with godly leadership, and armed with a divine mission was Israel. This biblical entity, when speaking in English, happens to be labelled linguistically as "the church." In Hebrew it would be otherwise. In Hebrew it was mostly called *hakahal* (הקהל) with its various grammatical forms. In Greek, it

was named *he ekklesia* (η εκκλησια), with its various grammatical forms.

These truths shed a whole new light on the topic of this essay. We were asked, "*Is there a role to play for the Church regarding the Promised Land?*" If Israel is The Church, then the answer to the question is self-evident. Perhaps, then, the question might need to be re-phrased. Perhaps, the question should be *Is there a role to play for the **believing gentiles** regarding the Promised Land?* There are several things we can say to answer this question.

1. Isaiah 56:8-9

Gentiles have always been a part of God's on-going body of believers, called Israel ("Remnant" Israel). We have alluded to Isaiah 56:6-8 already in this essay. This is actually an important passage for our purposes now. In it, we are told that there existed a remnant of believing gentiles, as well as a remnant of believing Israelites. Moreover, these believing gentiles did not perceive of themselves as replacing Israel as the chosen people of God. Thirdly, these believing gentiles came to Israel and actively participated in the temple in Jerusalem with their believing brothers and sisters from among Israel. In short, they considered themselves to be on an equal basis in approaching God with their counterpart from Israel.

2. Ephesians 2:11-3:6

This passage has several important things to say regarding the relationship between gentile and Jewish believers. We cannot embark on a full exposition now, it is not the purpose of this essay. However, we do want to explore a few important points from the passage.⁶

⁶ This might be a good place to mention an important issue dealing with Ephesians 2-3, which we will not discuss in the main part of this essay. In Ephesians 3:4-5, Paul speaks of the revelation regarding the relationship between Jewish and gentile believers in God's Church as a "mystery."

We should understand Paul's use of "mystery," not in a Hellenistic way, but according to Paul's Hebrew mind frame. It might be possible to understand "mystery" in terms of the Hebrew word usually rendered "secret" (*sod*, סוד). A *sod* was something which was revealed but not something found easily in the surface reading. In other words, it is possible to find the information Paul is addressing in Ephesians in the Tanakh, but it is not readily seen. It takes one being enlightened by God to see it, which is what Paul was saying. We thank our son, Yo'el, for bringing this insight to our attention.

a. It was considered a problem that gentiles were once considered to be excluded from being a part of Israel.

At the start, note that when Paul speaks of Israel in this passage, he is referring to the believing remnant of the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Paul's mind the world was divided into two groups of ethnic people: Israelites (commonly called "Jewish People" and gentiles.

In 2:11-12, Paul lists several things that were disadvantages for the gentiles. Among others, he says that they were excluded from citizenship in Israel. he does not mean citizenship with The Church because The Church has no citizenship.

b. The Atoning work of Yeshua changed things for the gentiles.

We read in 2:13 that in Messiah gentiles have been "brought near." This expression in the Hebraic mind of Paul means that gentiles were brought near to God through the sacrifice of Yeshua.⁷ However, in light of the context, especially verse 12, Paul might also be implying that through the sacrifice of Yeshua, gentiles were also brought near to Israel.

This interpretation is supported by the language Paul uses in 2:19. He says that in Messiah gentiles are no longer "foreigners and aliens." The expression "foreigners and aliens" was used often in the Torah to designate people who were not Israelites, but living among the Israelites. Here Paul says that Jewish believers are not to consider gentiles believers in such a way. The implication is that they are not part of the on-going stream of God's people called Israel, His Church.

Moreover, when Paul refers to gentile believers in 2:19 as "fellow citizens with God's people" (NIV), he means just that: The continuing stream of God's people has been the believing remnant of the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — Israel. Gentiles were formerly excluded from being part of Israel. Now in Messiah, they are brought in and made "fellow citizens."

It is important to note that being fellow citizens does not make gentile believers "Jews." The exact terminology is not quite worked out. They do not change their physical ethnicity. But in a very real, though rather undefined sense, they are to be considered to be part of Israel.

⁷ This makes more sense when we remember that the Hebrew term usually translated "sacrifice" (*korban*, קָרְבָּן) in the Tanakh means "to bring someone near." In Hebraic thinking, when one brought what is called "sacrifice" in English, he was bringing something which helped him to draw close to God.

c. Gentile believers have not replaced Israel as God's chosen people.

The "Church" consists of an equality of Jewish and gentile believers in Yeshua. Here in Ephesians, Paul presents a picture where The Church has continually existed. It is called Israel right from the start in the Tanakh. The addition of the gentiles does not negate the on-going existence of the believing remnant of Israel, God's true Israel. Rather, they are merely added on.

d. As part of Israel, gentile believers also share in Israel's calling and covenants.

Paul says in 3:6 (a continuation of the same passage) that when gentiles are brought into being a part of Israel they are made "fellow partakers of the promise in Yeshua the Messiah through the Gospel." Of course this would naturally mean that gentiles in Messiah are fellow partakers of the promise of eternal life and forgiveness of sins. However, in light of the context, it might also be fair to say that, as participants in the household of Israel, they are also participants in all of the promises Israel possess, i.e. the covenants of promise.

3. Romans 11

It might be argued that one of the main themes of Romans is the theme of Justification by Faith. Indeed, Paul explores in great depth the whole doctrine of justification and its many ramifications.

At the conclusion of that doctrinal section of the book, chapters 1-9 and before Paul embarks on some practical applications of the doctrine of justification in chapters 12-16, there is a short section about Israel in chapters 9-11. In light of the context, it might be possible to say that one of the main purposes of this section is to show that God made Israel to be a graphic illustration of what it means to be justified by faith.

In short, Israel was chosen by grace, granted promises by grace, and kept as God's chosen people by grace — none of these being based on their merit. God relates to all of His people in the same way that He relates to Israel. In Messiah we also were chosen by grace, granted God's promises by grace, and kept by God's grace — personal merit does not enter into the picture.

In the midst of this section about Israel, Paul was explaining to the congregation in Rome how believing Jews and believing gentiles relate to each other in the body of Messiah. He utilizes the picture of an olive tree to illustrate his point.

This grafting in has some important implications for gentile believers.

a. No Replacement

Paul says that believing gentiles do not replace Israel as God's chosen people. Rather, they are simply grafted into Israel, as one would graft an olive branch into an olive tree. This is in keeping with what Paul taught in Ephesians 2-3. Israel, particularly the believing remnant, is posited as the continuing stream of God's people ("The Church"). Gentiles merely become part of Israel when they become believers in Yeshua.

b. Olives, not Oranges

When we are told that gentiles are grafted in to the Olive tree, which we call Israel, it is assumed that they would take on characteristics of olives and not oranges. This has several implications.

First, the Torah given to Israel, becomes their Torah also. Secondly, the covenants made with Israel become their covenants, too. Thirdly, Israel's history takes on new meaning to believing gentiles; it is now part of their history. Moreover, those things that interest or seem important to the believing remnant of Israel might also acquire new importance to believing gentiles. Finally...

c. The Land

What about the Land of Promise? We are finally addressing the specific nature of our assignment! If believing gentiles are considered to be fellow citizens with Israel, grafted in to Israel, sharers in Israel's Torah, history, and interests, would it also make sense that their appreciation of the Land of Israel also be changed? It would seem natural that if gentiles are grafted in to Israel, they also would share in the promises of Land along with the rest of Israel. At the very least, this relationship with Israel would cause them to have a more biblical appreciation for the literal promises of a homeland for the physical remnant of Israel.

However, it might be possible to go one step further. If the Land is promised to the believing remnant of Israel and gentiles in Messiah are grafted in to Israel and are now fellow citizens with God's people, then we would expect to find that God would also grant them the privilege of a place in that Promised Land.

Indeed, we might have just such a promise in Ezekiel chapter 47. Ezekiel 47 comes in a context where the prophet is giving us a picture of the future. Beginning with chapter 40, Ezekiel told us of a future Temple where Messiah will have His Throne on earth. This is clearly yet in the future, in the millennial age.

Then, following a discussion about allocating the Land of Promise to the twelve tribes of Israel and where the boundary of each tribe would

be, Ezekiel reveals to us a most remarkable prophecy about those believers who are not Israelites, the gentiles. He writes:

You shall divide it by lot for an inheritance among yourselves and among the aliens who stay in your midst, who bring forth sons in your midst. And they shall be to you as the native-born among the sons of Israel; they shall be allotted an inheritance with you among the tribes of Israel. You shall give the stranger an allotment within the tribe where he resides — declares the Lord God. (Ezekiel 47:22-23, NASB).

Here the prophet says that in the future there will be gentiles who want to live among Israelites. The Israelites are to consider them as native-born Israelites. The Hebrew describes such people as "those who live or take residence (*gerim*, גרים)" among the Israelites.⁸ Yet, they are to be considered as "native born, or full citizens"⁹ with the Israelites. Ezekiel then continues by saying that such people will be allotted an "inheritance" among the tribes. "Inheritance (*nachalah*, נחלה)" is the term that is used biblically to describe the Promised Land, which God swore by covenant oath to give as a homeland to the physical people of Israel. In the future, Ezekiel says believing gentiles shall also have such an inheritance if they so desire. This is a sacred promise of God.

How have we answered the question "*Is there a role to play for the Church regarding the Promised Land?*" We have answered it by saying that, in reality, Israel, particularly the believing remnant of Israel was the name for the on-going stream of God's people, which we call, "The Church." Therefore, the true Church naturally relates to The Promised Land the way any Israelite would. We have even shown that there is a real possibility that all who are part of God's people will eventually be granted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel in the Promised Land of the future – those from among the gentile believers who desire to receive such an inheritance.

As Jewish believers in Yeshua, we would like to conclude this essay by stating to the gentile believers: Although the modern Israeli government and religious establishment would strongly disagree, biblically speaking, "Our Land is your Land, too"!

⁸ Despite what modern rabbis would tell us, *gerim* does not mean "converts to Judaism"! In the Bible they are simply those who live or dwell among a people who are foreign to them. The Israelites, for example, were *gerim* while they sojourned in Egypt (Exodus 6:4 and Deuteronomy 26:5, among other passages).

⁹ ארז, | *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, translated and edited under the supervision of M.E.J. Richardson. Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc. Version 2.5.