

Matthew 16:18-19

I understand that your ministry denies the existence of the Church, as a second body of elect. How do you approach Jesus' explicit words to Peter that He would build His Church?

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Matthew 16:18-19

“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” (NASU).

It is most amazing to see, how in various Messianic examinations of ecclesiology, there are almost no discussions of substance on Matthew 16:18, and not a great amount of consideration of the source language present.¹

Yeshua's statement, **“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church”** (NASU), has been traditionally interpreted by Roman Catholicism, that with the Apostle Peter began an unending line of papal succession, with Peter serving as the first bishop of Rome. Protestants, who obviously reject papal claims, tend to offer a variety of other explanations for who or what “this rock” (*tē petra*, τῆ πέτρα) is or represents. Some will adhere to “this rock” still representing Peter, or Peter as the main apostle representative of the other Apostles. Some adhere to “this rock” representing Peter's confession of faith in Yeshua as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16). And, others think that “this rock” represents the Messiah Himself, per various Tanach passages which describe God as the Rock (i.e., 2 Samuel 22:3).

I personally view “this rock” as being the Messiah Himself, and with authority being granted by Yeshua to His Disciples, as it can be said that the *ekklēsia* established has “been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Messiah Yeshua Himself being the corner *stone*” (Ephesians 2:20, NASU). Yeshua is the cornerstone, and the work of God's vessels in the world continue what He has started for His people.

Messianic examination of Matthew 16:18-19 has actually tended to focus more on the issue of binding and loosing—a well-documented Hebraism regarding prohibiting and permitting—and how what is in view pertains to the establishment of *halachah* or orthopraxy for the faith community.² This is an authority that the Messiah granted to the Apostles. As the issue of *halachah* is considered by today's Messianic people, there is a delicate balance that is often desired between Apostolic authority in the Messianic Scriptures, and fairly considering many of the perspectives and views of the Sages and Rabbis of Judaism. Yet, to the person interested in ecclesiology and

¹ Grk. *kagō de soi legō hoti su ei Petros, kai epi tautē tē petra oikodomēsō mou tēn ekklēsian kai pulai Hadou ou katischousin autēs* (κἀγὼ δέ σοι λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρῃ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ πύλαι ᾗδου οὐ κατισχύουσιν αὐτῆς).

Various Messianic versions have rendered Matthew 16:18 in the following ways:

“I also tell you this: you are Kefa, [which means 'Rock,'] 'and on this rock I will build my Community, and the gates of Sh'ol will not overcome it” (CJB).

“And I also tell you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My community; and the gates of *Sheol* will not overpower it” (TLV).

“I also tell you that you are Kefa. And on this bedrock I will build my community, and the powers of Sheol will not prevail against it” (The Messianic Writings).

² For an important review, consult Raymond F. Collins, “Binding and Loosing,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:743-745.

the identity of God's chosen, more attention should understandably be focused on Matthew 16:18 and not 16:19, and to the assembly that Yeshua stated He would establish.

In his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, Stern only comments on the term *ekklēsia*, which he renders as “community” in his JNT/CJB. He makes some connections between *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) and *qahal* (קָהָל):

“**Community**, Greek *ekklēsia*, which means ‘called-one ones,’ and is used in the Septuagint to translate Hebrew *kahal*, ‘assembly, congregation, community.’ The usual English translation of *ekklēsia* is ‘church’; and from it comes the word ‘ecclesiastical,’ meaning, ‘having to do with the church.’ The *JNT* sometimes uses ‘Messianic community’ or ‘congregation’ to render *ekklēsia*. What is being spoken about is a spiritual community of people based on trust in God and his son the Messiah Yeshua. This can be all people throughout history who so commit themselves, or a group of such people at a particular time and place, such as the Messianic community in Corinth or Jerusalem. The phrase, ‘the *ekklēsia* that meets in their house’ (Ro 16:5), refers to a particular congregation. Unlike ‘church,’ *ekklēsia* never refers to either an institution or a building.”³

While making a connection between the Greek *ekklēsia* and the Hebrew *qahal*, as well as some useful observations on the usages of *ekklēsia* in the Apostolic Scriptures—conspicuously absent from Stern’s remarks on Matthew 16:18, is how *qahal* is used in the Hebrew Tanach. What “community” or “assembly” is being established by Yeshua here?

More recent Messianic Jewish reflection on Matthew 16:18 can be seen in the commentary *Matthew Presents Yeshua, King Messiah*, by Barney Kasdan (2011):

“Many English Bibles translate the word *ekklesia* as ‘church’ but this is merely an English adaptation of the Greek which itself is derived from the Hebrew *kehilah*. Upon this inspired confession of Yeshua’s messianic identity the entire community of New Covenant believers (both the Jewish and Gentile branches) would be built. In fact, the physical setting of this dialogue strongly confirms this view. One can imagine Yeshua standing at the foot of the massive cliff at Caesarea Philippi and bending down to pick up one of the many stones. It would have been a graphic object lesson as he quite logically held up a small stone as a symbol of Peter and then pointed to the massive cliff as symbolic of the foundational confession of Yeshua’s messiahship.”⁴

Kasdan interjects his own observations here: the community that Yeshua came to establish has two branches, or is composed of two sub-communities. Yet, other than making some kind of connection between *ekklēsia* and *kehillah*, he has made no real exegetical observations of significance. Such details, as will be further explained, have been overlooked for far too long in Messianic examination of Matthew 16:18.

Perhaps the most detailed examination, to date, of Matthew 16:18-19 in the Messianic world, is found in Hegg’s 2009 volume, *I Will Build My Ekklesia* (pp 23-30). Aside from discussing the necessary spiritual implications of Yeshua’s *ekklēsia* emerging via His sacrifice for sinful humanity, the power of Sheol being nullified, and the necessary aspects of the Disciples and Apostles being granted authority to establish *halachah*/orthopraxy—what we should be most interested in, is whether or not this *ekklēsia* is a new assembly of chosen ones or elect. This makes the principal clause of interest, in Matthew 16:18, *epi tautē tē petra oikodomēsō mou tēn ekklēsian* (ἐπὶ τῆ πετρῆ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν), most worthy of attention. Hegg summarizes his thoughts on this:

“The statement of Yeshua in our text (Matt 16:18) not only promises the success of the *ekklesia* but it also discloses the methodology by which Yeshua would build His *ekklesia*. First, the use of the metaphoric ‘build’ (οἰκοδομήσω, *oikodomēsō*, ‘I will build’), envisions the assembly of believers as a ‘house’ or ‘building.’ This is in concert with the commonly used phrase ‘house of Israel’ or ‘house of Judah’ (בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל [*beit-Yisrael*] / יְהוּדָה בֵּית [beit-Yehudah]) so often found in the Tanach. Moreover, throughout the Apostolic Scriptures, the assembly of believers in Yeshua is pictured as ‘God’s house’ (θεοῦ οἰκοδομή [*Theo oikodomē*], 1 Cor 3:9), ‘God’s household’ (οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ [*oikeioi tou Theou*], Eph 2:19), and as a ‘spiritual house = Temple’ made up of ‘living stones’ (λίθοι ζῶντες οἰκοδομεῖσθε οἶκος πνευματικὸς [*lithoi zōntes oikodomeisthe oikos pneumatikos*], 1 Pet 2:5). This metaphoric language of the Apostles rests, no doubt, upon the words of Yeshua in our current text.”⁵

³ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 54.

⁴ Barney Kasdan, *Matthew Presents Yeshua, King Messiah: A Messianic Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer Books, 2011), 174.

⁵ Hegg, *I Will Build My Ekklesia*, 26.

Here, Hegg acknowledges some kind of connection between the concept of Yeshua building (Grk. verb *oikodomeō*, οἰκοδομέω) the *ekklesia*, and various Tanach concepts witnessed in the Apostolic Scriptures regarding Israel, God's House, God's Temple, etc. He further elaborates, in *I Will Build My Ekklesia* (2009), on how Yeshua's word is connected not just to the prophesied restoration of Israel, but also with the Abrahamic blessing spreading to the nations via His work:

"...[I]n some aspects the *ekklesia* is new, while in others it is not. It is new in the sense that it incorporates the ingathering of the elect from the nations, something that could not occur until the time of consummation. It is not new because the remnant of Israel had always constituted the people of God in an eternal sense, and thus existed before the incarnation of Yeshua.

"...If, as we have suggested, the *ekklesia* in its simplest definition is 'the people of God,' and if we further define the *ekklesia* in eternal aspects as 'those who have a true saving relationship with God,' then the remnant of Israel throughout the ages constituted the *ekklesia* of God. When, however, Yeshua declared 'I will build my *ekklesia*,' He was envisioning the consummation—the completion of the promise made to Abraham. His *ekklesia* would be the realization of the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31-34) in which the Torah of God would be written on the heart. What is more, Yeshua teaches us that it would be through His own death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession that the ingathering of the Gentiles would take place. His final commission to the Apostles (Matt 28:18-20) makes this clear, for the commission is given on the basis that 'all authority has been given to Me in heaven and earth.' His *ekklesia*, then, would be 'new' in the sense that it would be fashioned to include the elect from the nations. The ingathering of the Gentiles, that necessary step to bring the covenant promises to fruition, was the new aspect of Yeshua's *ekklesia*. And this new aspect would require instruction and setting forth of those divinely ordained measures by which Jewish and Gentile believers could be reckoned as that 'one new man' (Eph 2:15), demonstrating the equal blessing of God to both through Yeshua's saving work.

"But the ingathering of the Gentiles was not to a new entity. They would be gathered into the believing remnant of Israel, which was also necessary for the fulfillment of God's promise. For He told Abraham, 'in you all the families of the earth will be blessed' (Gen 12:3). Granted, elsewhere the promise is stated 'in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed' (Gen 22:18), and we know that the 'seed' can be understood as Yeshua Himself (cf. Gal 3:16). But it is 'both-and' not 'either-or.' The elect of the nations would be blessed 'in you' (=in Abraham's family) and 'in (or by) your seed' (=Messiah). Thus, the ingathering of the nations in the final harvest is new. But the covenant people into which the Gentiles are gathered is not new—they constitute the believing remnant of Israel throughout the ages."⁶

I fully agree with Hegg's conclusions above. But, one of the answers to the issue, of what assembly Yeshua intended to establish, can be easily deduced by conducting one of the most basic parts of Inductive Bible Study: seeing where the verb "**build**" appears elsewhere, either in the Apostolic Scriptures or Greek Septuagint. This is one important feature of the discussion over "upon this rock I will build My community" (Matthew 16:18, TLV), that I have yet to see any Messianic examiner, to date, really consider.

The verb translated as "**will build**" in most English Bibles, is the Greek future active indicative *oikodomēsō* (οἰκοδομήσω). Here are some key places where *oikodomēsō* appears in the Greek Septuagint (LXX), which need not escape our notice:

"Almighty Lord God of Israel, thou hast uncovered the ear of thy servant, saying, **I will build thee a house** [LXX: *oikon oikodomēsō soi*, οἶκον οἰκοδομήσω σοι; MT: *bayit ebeneh-lakh*, בַּיִת אֶבֶנֶה לְךָ]: therefore thy servant has found *in* his heart to pray this prayer to thee" (2 Samuel 7:27, LXE).

"And it shall come to pass, if thou wilt keep all the commandments that I shall give thee, and wilt walk in my ways, and do that which is right before me, to keep my ordinances and my commandments, as David my servant did, that I will be with thee, **and will build thee** [LXX: *oikodomēsō soi ikon*, οἰκοδομήσω σοι οἶκον; MT: *u'baniti lekha bayit*, וְבִנִיתִי לְךָ בַּיִת] a sure house, as I built to David" (1 Kings 11:38, LXE).

"I will establish thy seed for ever, **and build up** [LXX: *oikodomēsō*, οἰκοδομήσω; MT: *u'baniti*, וְבִנִיתִי] thy throne to all generations. Pause" (Psalm 89:4, LXE).

⁶ Ibid., pp 29, 30.

“For I will build thee, and **thou shalt be built** [LXX: *oikodomēsō se kai oikodomēthēsē*, οἰκοδομήσω σε καὶ οἰκοδομηθήσῃ; MT: *eb’neikh v’niv’neit, וְנִבְנֶה לְךָ וְנִבְנֶה*], O virgin of Israel: thou shalt yet take thy timbrel, and go forth with the party of them that make merry” (Jeremiah 31:4 [38:4], LXE).

“And I will turn the captivity of Juda and the captivity of Israel, and **will build them** [LXX: *oikodomēsō autous*, οἰκοδομήσω αὐτοὺς; MT: *u’benitim, וְיִבְנֶה*], even as before” (Jeremiah 33:7 [40:7], LXE).

When we see these varied usages of *oikodomēsō* (οἰκοδομήσω), they all pertain to either the establishment of the Davidic monarchy, the building up of the Temple of God, or even the end-time restoration of Israel. It also appears in Mark 14:58, in reference to the work of Yeshua: “We heard Him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days **I will build** [*oikodomēsō*] another made without hands” (NASU).

Two notable definitions of the verb *oikodomeō* (οἰκοδομέω), provided by *BDAG*, include “**to construct a building, build**” and “**to help improve ability to function in living responsibly and effectively, strengthen, build up, make more able.**”⁷ *AMG* offers the definition “to rebuild or renew a building decayed or destroyed,”⁸ which is something which surely fits the context of the restoration of God’s people in the eschaton.

With some of these passages in view—notably Jeremiah 31:4 and 33:7—it sits within the semantic range of definitions to render Matthew 16:18 as “**upon this rock I will rebuild My assembly.**” And, the assembly that Yeshua came to build/rebuild was hardly a new *ekklēsia* of chosen, but rather a restored Kingdom of Israel brought to fruition via the Messiah’s work, and certainly enlarged to incorporate the righteous from the nations.

There has not been a huge amount of contemporary discussion among examiners—that I have been able to find, at least—making any substantial connections between passages like Jeremiah 31:4; 33:7; and Matthew 16:18 and *oikodomēsō*. There is one connection, though, that I ran into when conducting the work for my *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic* commentary (2008), seen in Peter T. O’Brien’s commentary (*Pillar*) on Ephesians 4:12,⁹ where he observes,

“According to the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, the restoration of Israel after the judgment of the exile is promised in terms of God building a people for himself (Jer. 24:6; 31:4; 33:7), and he does this by putting his words in the mouths of his prophets (Jer. 1:9-10). Matthew 16:18 (‘I will *build* my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it’) expresses the idea that as the Messiah Jesus is the one who builds or establishes the renewed community of the people of God.”¹⁰

If Matthew 16:18 can be directly associated with various Tanach promises about God restoring, i.e., rebuilding Israel—then what does this do to various Messianic Jewish claims about “the Church” being a separate entity, perhaps related to but ultimately outside of, Israel? **It severely weakens, if not demolishes, bilateral ecclesiology.** The assembly in view, in Matthew 16:18, is none other than an explicit claim from the Messiah *to restore Israel upon the work of Himself*, and subsequently the Apostles. The assembly of Israel He came to rebuild (*oikodomēsō*) surely involves the fulfillment of the many promises of regathering and the end of exile for the Jewish people and the Twelve Tribes at large—but also the expansion of Israel to include the righteous of the nations into an enlarged Kingdom realm.

There is not a big surprise in my mind, why some of the finer details of Matthew 16:18—beyond *ekklēsia* and *qahal* being somehow related—have not really been explored by some of today’s Messianic Jewish teachers and leaders. No different than the Christian teacher who wants to dismiss Matthew 5:17-19, affording a degree of continuity and validity to the Torah of Moses¹¹—so does Matthew 16:18 not affirm the establishment of a new entity of elect, but instead affirms the Messiah’s mission to restore Israel. This is not just an anticipated national restoration of Israel, but as a spiritual entity incorporating far more than just ethnic Jews or Israelites into its polity.

Sadly, there is rhetoric present throughout contemporary Messianic Judaism, where if non-Jewish Believers get to be incorporated into Israel’s Kingdom realm—which has been expanded and enlarged—that one might as

⁷ *BDAG*, 696.

⁸ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 1030.

⁹ “[F]or the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Messiah” (Ephesians 4:12).

¹⁰ Peter T. O’Brien, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp 304-305.

¹¹ Consult the author’s exegesis paper on Matthew 5:17-19, “Has the Law Been Fulfilled?”, appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*.

well be guilty of promoting replacement theology. Yet, interpreters such as myself have not denied the Jewish right to the Holy Land, nor have we denied the promises to the physical descendants of the Patriarchs; **I am not** going to be making *aliyah* to *Eretz Yisrael*. I am simply one who considers himself as a citizen of Israel's Kingdom (Ephesians 2:11-13), a realm whose rule reaches beyond the Holy Land. As a non-Jewish Believer, I am a part of the righteous remnant from humanity that has sought the Lord (Acts 15:15-18; Amos 9:10-11), and I surely get to participate in Israel's restoration and expansion, without expecting to live in territory only specifically promised to Israel's Twelve Tribes.

With the Gospel of Matthew in view for Matthew 16:18-19, Kinzer makes note of the infancy narrative, which includes some of the ancestors of Yeshua (Matthew 1:3, 5-6) and the wise men (Matthew 2:2; cf. Psalm 72:10-11, 15; Isaiah 60:6, 12, 14-16). He actually thinks,

"Matthew's infancy narrative anticipates the future turning of Gentiles to the God of Israel. However, this conversion of the Gentiles is represented also as a turning to the Israel of God. The converted Gentiles do not replace Israel but are joined to her."¹²

While I may think that "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16) pertains to the eschatological, restored and expanded realm of Israel—Kinzer does address how the righteous from the nations will be attached to Israel, and rightly does not consider it to be some sort of replacement, but rather an addition. Of course, while being joined to Israel sounds good on paper, putting this into practice, where all can feel welcome and worship together as one body—has hardly been easy to implement.

¹² Kinzer, 102.