

The Church as the Assembly of God

Biblical references to the Assembly of God Qahal Yahweh

An assembly of God – **qahal Yahweh** – is assembled by God, not by the volition of the ones who are assembled. It is God who calls the assembly for his own purpose. There are 111 named instances in the Old Testament where the word **qahal Yahweh** is used. In 72 of these instances, the assembly is called for religious reasons to do with the covenant between God Yahweh and Israel. The Ark of the Covenant is normally present as are the priests and the political leaders. The nation is called before God.

Louis Bouyer in his book “Liturgical Piety” makes reference to Deiss’s assertion. He makes four points about the Deiss paragraph.

1. The assembly is summoned by God
2. The people hear the Word of God spoken to them.
3. The people respond
4. Sacrifice is offered to ratify the covenant.

In light of Bouyer’s analysis of the elements of a proper assembly, let us look at several Old testament examples so as to see how well his analysis applies.

The Theophany at Sinai as an example of a Qahal Yahweh

In Exodus 3; -18 Yahweh God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and commanded him to become his messenger to the Pharaoh and to Israel. The great story of the escape from slavery, the delivery of God’s people from slavery, and the destruction of the proud Pharaoh at the hands of God are the most commonly cited and best known of all the Old Testament stories. But we must now follow the story out into the desert to Sinai and to the meeting between Yahweh God and his Chosen People. For the Passover narrative is only a prelude to the events at Sinai. The Chosen People are saved from slavery for god’s purpose. They are brought out into the Sinai for a gathering, an assembly which God has willed.

God commands Moses and the people of Israel to go out into the desert and worship him. He demands a gathering of the people of Abraham at Sinai. “*So now please allow us to make a three day journey into the desert and sacrifice to Yahweh our God.*” (Exodus 3; 18) But Moses fails to convince the Pharaoh to release the people so that they may worship their God. He fears that, if they go, they will never return to the slavery which he has imposed on them. But God summons the assembly over the dead body of the Pharaoh. The *qahal Yahweh* takes place at Sinai three months after the escape through the Red Sea.

Exodus 19; 3-8. God summons the nation of Israel to meet him at Sinai. The people are to listen to the word of God who will make them his own special people. They alone will have a covenant with him. This speaking of the Word of God is, in this case, the giving of the Mosaic Law, the Ten Commandments. (Exodus 20; 1-17) The response

of the gathered people is then recorded when the people ask Moses not to allow God to speak directly to them lest they die of fear. “*Speak to us yourself, they said to Moses, and we will obey; but do not let God speak to us, or we shall die.*” (Exodus 20; 19) There is another account of the assembly’s assent in Exodus 24, 3; “*Moses went and told the people all Yahweh’s words and all the laws, and all the people answered with one voice, ‘All the words Yahweh has spoken we will carry out.’*” Later that day the people give their assent to the covenant again, saying “*We shall do everything that Yahweh has said, we shall obey.*” (Exodus 24; 8)

The fourth element identified by Buoyer, the sacrifice as ratification of the covenant, is then arranged to the satisfaction of God, who orders the details of how he wishes sacrifices to be offered. (Exodus 20; 24-26) After the animals are slaughtered and the sacrifices have been offered, Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of the sacrificial animals. (Exodus 24; 8)

For us Catholics, that moment is recalled each time we do an Asperges rite at the beginning of Mass. Blood and water flow from the side of Jesus on the Cross. The Victim- (*Hostia* in Latin) bleeds for the sake of the assembled people. His blood is taken by the sacrificing priest and sprinkled over the people. Baptism is the washing of the people in the Blood of the Lamb. Hence, the remembering – (*anemnesis* in Greek) of that washing in the blood of the Lamb is done with baptismal water. In some artistic renderings of the Crucifixion there is an angel gathering up the blood from the wounds of Christ. This is a way of recalling how the sacrifices of the Old Testament were a type (*typos* in Greek) for the great sacrifice of Calvary. The blood was gathered at Sinai so that the people could be sprinkled with the blood of the Covenant. Therefore the angel is a figurative reminder of the typological link between the two events.

Nehemiah 8 as a Qahal Yahweh

In Nehemiah 8 there is an account of an assembly of all Israel in front of the Water Gate of the Temple. Nehemiah begins the work of rebuilding Jerusalem after the exile. He feels inspired by Yahweh God to assemble all Israel in one place so that the covenant with God can be formally read and the newly returned people can reaffirm their covenant with God. “My God then inspired me to assemble the nobles, the officials and the people for the purpose of taking a census of the families.” (Nehemiah 7; 5) The initiative for the assembly is deliberately said to be God’s, not the king’s. In this way the assembly is truly a *Qahal Yahweh*.

The second condition for a *qahal Yahweh* is that the Word of God be spoken in the hearing of the people. In Nehemiah, this is certainly recorded at length. The whole assembly listen for eight consecutive days as the Law of Moses is read by Ezra the priest. On the first day of this eight-day assembly, “*All the people gathered as one man in front of the Water Gate and asked Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which Yahweh had prescribed for Israel. Accordingly, on the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the Law before the assembly, consisting of men, women and those old*

enough to understand. ... he read from the book from dawn till noon, all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.” (Nehemiah 8; 1-4)

The scribe Ezra reads the Law of Moses to the people and they listen. Then on the last day, the eighth, they hold a solemn assembly. They listen again to the law, then they confess their sins, (Nehemiah 9; 3) and they apply their signature to a document that ratifies the covenant with Yahweh God. (Nehemiah 10; 1) All these actions follow the pattern of an assembly of God.

The fourth element, the animal sacrifice, is missing in Nehemiah. This is presumably because the Temple has not yet been rebuilt. It may also foreshadow a change in Israelite cultic practice.