

Commonwealth of Israel

In examining some Messianic Jewish teaching materials, they explained to me that the Commonwealth of Israel is made up of both the Jewish people and the Church, sort of like the British Commonwealth. They have actually said that as a non-Jewish Believer, I am really not a part of Israel, only the Commonwealth. Does this viewpoint have any legitimacy?

“[R]emember that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12, NASU).

In Ephesians 2:12 Paul uses ancient political terms to describe what his largely non-Jewish audience had been separated from. Prior to their faith in the Messiah, they were removed from *tēs politeias tou Israēl* (τῆς πολιτείας τοῦ Ἰσραήλ). The key term here is *politeia* (πολιτεία), “**the right to be a member of a sociopolitical entity, citizenship**” (BDAG).¹ Yet, now having access to this citizenship, they have to start considering another part of *politeia*: “**behavior in accordance with standards expected of a respectable citizen, way of life, conduct**” (BDAG),² something which surely dominates Ephesians chs. 4-6 (and has a definite Torah background). As David H. Stern remarks, “it implies an obligation to observe a godly life that has its origin in God’s relationship with the Jewish people. More than that, it implies an obligation to relate as family to the Jewish community to whom their faith has joined them...”³ He considers Ephesians 2:12 to relate to the inclusion of individuals like Ruth (Ruth 1:16) among Israel, and that it requires non-Jewish Believers “being involved with the Jewish people, both Messianic and non-Messianic.”⁴ It would imply that non-Jewish Believers should have a relationship not only with their fellow Jewish brothers and sisters who have acknowledged the Messiah, but that they should take a keen interest in the well being of those Jews who have not yet acknowledged the Lord Yeshua.

Stern is absolutely right to say that non-Jewish Believers “who regard Jewish Christians as the strangers and themselves as the rightful possessors and those who accept Jewish believers but reject nonbelieving Jews, are not submitting to the message of these verses.”⁵ Non-Jewish Believers, as made clear by Paul’s words, had no hope and were without God in the world *without Israel*. As the origin of their salvation is Israel, when bad things happen to the Jewish people, bad things happen to all of those who believe in Israel’s Messiah. When good things happen to the Jewish people, non-Jewish Believers should rejoice with their Jewish brothers and sisters. Non-Jewish Believers are called to befriend the Jewish people and be grateful to them, not only because of the spiritual heritage they have in the Synagogue, but also for the great contributions the Jewish people have made to the world.

Stern is proper to emphasize that non-Jewish Believers should not regard the Jewish people as alien or strange. But what happens when Jewish Believers treat non-Jewish Believers, *who desire to grasp hold of their responsibilities as members of Israel’s Commonwealth*, as strange or second class? This is a great dilemma, and one that has arisen in the past decade or so because of the significant growth of the Messianic movement among evangelical Christians. Taking hold of their Hebraic and Jewish Roots, non-Jewish Believers have often been treated with extreme suspicion, if not hostility at times, by some Messianic Jews. Is this appropriate? While non-

¹ BDAG, 845.

² Ibid.

³ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 582.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Jewish Believers are to surely respect and support the Jewish people, what if Jewish people *who know Messiah Yeshua* (and presumably have been transformed by His love) do not treat them with such respect in return? Why at times do Messianic Jews not recognize them as a part of or even related to the “community of Israel” (Ephesians 2:12, NEB)?

While the spiritual roots of why some Messianic Jews might not recognize non-Jewish Believers in their midst as their equals is a complicated, and rather difficult subject to diagnose—the theological roots are quite easy to diagnose. There is often a large misunderstanding and application of the term *politeia* (πολιτεία), as employed here in Ephesians 2:12. Throughout various Messianic Jewish theological materials, it is taught that the Commonwealth of Israel is actually to be viewed as something similar to today’s British Commonwealth of Nations, a Commonwealth of Israel made up of two sub-groups: the ethnic Jewish people and the Church.⁶ Messianic Jewish scholar David Rudolph claims that *politeia* “in the first-century Greco-Roman context could mean a community of nations or ethnic groups sharing a common allegiance to a monarch.” He considers the Commonwealth of Israel to be a broad federation or confederation made up of two groups: Israel and “the Church,” and that “commonwealth” is an ideal rendering of *politeia*, being “a relatively simple way of describing the relationship between the Church and Israel.”⁷

While the English term “commonwealth” may allow at times for one thinking of the people of God as akin to a British Commonwealth of Nations,⁸ with multiple independent states, the Greek term *politeia* in its classical usage does not easily allow for this. The *Liddell-Scott* lexicon, chiefly interested in classical Greek, defines *politeia* with:

- *the condition and rights of a citizen, citizenship*
- *the life of a citizen, civic life*
- *as a concrete, the body of citizens*
- *the life and business of a statesman, government, administration*
- *civil polity, the condition or constitution of a state*
- *a republic, commonwealth*⁹

While these definitions surely do allow for an internally diverse community of people who should contribute to the well being of all, they do not lend support for a collection of multiple, largely autonomous and independent communities which make up a broad “commonwealth.” Consider the following examples from ancient classical and Jewish sources, which employ the term *politeia*. You will not see a single monarch ruling over a collection of separated, independent states implied:

ΠΟΛΙΤΕΙΑ POLITEIA IN ANCIENT USAGE	
EPHESIANS 2:12	CLASSICAL REFERENCES¹⁰
<p><i>remember that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (NASU)</i></p>	<p>He was one of the souls who had come from heaven, having lived his previous life in a well-governed state [<i>en tetagmenē politeia, ἐν τεταγμένῃ πολιτείᾳ</i>], but having owed his goodness to habit and custom and not to philosophy... (Plato <i>Republic</i> 10.619c).¹¹</p> <p>A constitution [or <i>politeia</i>] may be defined as ‘the organization of a city [or <i>polis</i>], in respect of its offices generally, but especially in respect of that particular office which is sovereign in all issues’.</p>

⁶ Daniel C. Juster, *Growing to Maturity* (Denver: The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations Press, 1987), pp 221-222; David H. Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 57; cf. Daniel C. Juster, *Jewish Roots* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1995), 35.

⁷ David Rudolph, “Mashiach” *Verge* Vol. 2, Iss. 2, February 2010:2.

⁸ The first definition of “commonwealth” in *Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Cleveland: Wiley Publishing, Inc, 2002) is, however, “the people of a nation or state” (p 123), implying a single body politic.

⁹ *LS*, 654.

¹⁰ The Greek source text for these works has been accessed via the Perseus Collection <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>>.

¹¹ Plato: *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 366.

	<p>The civic body is everywhere the sovereign of the city; in fact the civic body is the constitution itself [to politeuma tēs poleōs, politeuma d' estin hē politeia, τὸ πολίτευμα τῆς πόλεως, πολίτευμα δ' ἐστὶν ἡ πολιτεία] (Aristotle <i>Politics</i> 3.1278b).¹²</p> <p>The term 'constitution' [<i>politeia</i>] signifies the same thing as the term 'civic body' [<i>politeuma</i>]. The civic body in every city [<i>polis</i>] is sovereign [<i>to kurion</i>]... (Aristotle <i>Politics</i> 3.1279a).¹³</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">JEWISH REFERENCES</p> <p>And to set before their eyes the injury that they had unjustly done to the holy place, and the cruel handling of the city, whereof they made a mockery, and also the taking away of the government of their forefathers [<i>tēs progonikēs politeias</i>, τῆς προγονικῆς πολιτείας] (2 Maccabees 8:17, KJV).</p> <p>Among other things, we made known to all our amnesty toward their compatriots here, both because of their alliance with us and the myriad affairs liberally entrusted to them from the beginning; and we ventured to make a change, by deciding both to deem them worthy of Alexandrian citizenship [<i>politeia</i>] and to make them participants in our regular religious rites...[T]hey not only spurn the priceless citizenship [<i>politeia</i>], but also both by speech and by silence they abominate those few among them who are sincerely disposed toward us; in every situation, in accordance with their infamous way of life, they secretly suspect that we may soon alter our policy (3 Maccabees 3:21, 23).</p> <p>The Jews also obtained honours from the kings of Asia when they became their auxiliaries; for Seleucus Nicator made them citizens [<i>politeia</i>] in those cities which he built in Asia, and in the Lower Syria, and in the metropolis itself, Antioch; and gave them privileges equal to those of the Macedonians and Greeks, who were the inhabitants, insomuch that these privileges continue to this very day (<i>Antiquities of the Jews</i> 12.119).¹⁴</p>

The classical Greek meaning of *politeia* (which I was certainly taught at the University of Oklahoma as a political science undergraduate), also witnessed in ancient Jewish works, does not imply a kind of citizenship where a single monarch rules over a collection of separate states, but rather speaks of either a single government or a way of conduct within a society (sometimes within the context of a city). Of critical importance to us are those notable places where *politeia*, and a related term like *politeuma* (πολίτευμα),¹⁵ appear in the Apostolic Scriptures, designating citizenship:

¹² Aristotle: *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁴ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 315.

¹⁵ Meaning, "the business of government, an act of administration" (*LS*, 654).

“The commander answered, ‘I acquired this citizenship [*politeia*] with a large sum of money.’ And Paul said, ‘But I was actually born a citizen’” (Acts 22:28, NASU).

“For our citizenship [*politeuma*; ‘commonwealth,’ RSV] is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Yeshua the Messiah” (Philippians 3:20).

Anyone who would try to equate the Greek term *politeia* with a kind of multiple nation-state commonwealth in mind, does not have strong support either from classical usage or Biblical usage of the term.

What Paul describes as Believers possessing *politeuma* in Heaven, should not escape our notice. No one would honestly argue, for example, that born again Believers have different kinds of “citizenship” within the Kingdom of Heaven; it is all the same citizenship. Some might represent themselves as citizens of God’s Kingdom better than others, and some Believers do not always take advantage of all the spiritual benefits of being citizens of God’s Kingdom—but all who profess Yeshua are still citizens of the same Divine state. The difficult concept that many Believers have to recognize is that God’s Kingdom *happens to be Israel*. Today’s Messianic Jews need to understand that while they are honored and respected members of this Israel to be sure (cf. John 4:22; Romans 3:1-2; 11:29), *they are not at all the only members*. The Commonwealth of Israel is to be viewed as a single state ruled by the King Messiah, but one which is internally diverse in terms of its ethnic makeup. The non-Jewish Believers were at one time “strangers to the covenants of promise” plural, *tōn diathēkōn tēs epangelias* (τῶν διαθηκῶν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας), and having been integrated into the community of Israel are to look at Israel’s story as their own story (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1).

It is sad to say, but many of today’s Messianic Jews have forgotten the citizenship responsibility placed on Ancient Israel for it to be a kingdom of priests and a light to the nations (Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), with the imperative *ki-li kol-ha’eretz* (כִּי־לִי כֹל־הָאֶרֶץ), “because for Me (is) all the Earth” (Exodus 19:5; my translation). Notably, a part of having citizenship in Israel—whether native born or not—is being a conduit of God’s light to others. What kind of a testimony would (or will) it be if non-Jewish Messianic Believers are those who fulfill this calling better than a number of today’s Messianic Jews? Is today’s Messianic community due for a major shaking in the future, as our Heavenly Father looks for willing vessels able to accomplish His mandate for Israel? If today’s Messianic Judaism, or parts of it at least, continue on a path toward wanting the Commonwealth of Israel to be defined in terms other than being a single yet internally diverse people of God, how much will it really achieve for Him? It may achieve some things, *but surely not as many as it could*.

Often together, the related terms “πολιτεία [*politeia*] and πολίτευμα [*politeuma*] are said to have the same force” (Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians*, Vol. 42 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990], 137).