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How can we describe the relationship between the Church and Israel? One model I have found helpful is to think of the Church as “Israel’s commonwealth.”

In Ephesians 2:12, Paul describes Gentiles who do not follow Yeshua as “aliens from the *politeia* of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise.” By contrast, Yeshua-believing Gentiles are “no longer strangers and aliens” but “citizens with the saints” (Eph 2:19).



Reading the two verses together, it appears that Paul viewed Gentiles who followed Yeshua as citizens of the “*politeia* of Israel.”

But what exactly is meant by the Greek word *politeia* in this context? Given the LXX (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) language and imagery in Ephesians 2, it is reasonable to assume that Paul has a biblical concept in mind. The term *politeia* modifies “Israel.” Gentiles outside the *politeia* are “aliens” and “strangers to the covenants of promise,” without “God” and “far off” (a possible allusion to LXX Isa 57:19). Gentiles inside the *politeia* are “fellow citizens with the saints.” Against this backdrop, the expression “*politeia* of Israel” could be translated “citizenship of Israel” (NET), “community of Israel” (REB), “national

life of Israel” (CJB), or “commonwealth of Israel” (ESV, NRSV).

It is notable that the ESV and NRSV translate *politeia* as “commonwealth,” which in the first-century Greco-Roman context could mean a community of nations or ethnic groups sharing a common allegiance to a monarch. This sense of the term “commonwealth” fits the Ephesians 2 context well in my opinion since Gentiles are “fellow citizens” (*sum-polites*) with Jews in the *politeia* of Israel (Eph 2:12, 19).<sup>1</sup> The *sum-* prefix emphasizes the historical context that Gentiles (i.e. members of nations and ethnic groups other than Israel) have joined themselves to a pre-existing Jewish theocratic entity, the nation of Israel, *without becoming Jews* (cf. Eph 3:6). Paul may be underscoring in Ephesians 2:12 this Jew-Gentile differentiation by using the nuanced term “*politeia* of Israel” instead of the name “Israel,” a term that he (and the rest of the Jewish world!) reserved for the Jewish people (cf. Rom 9-11; 1 Cor 10:18; 2 Cor 3:7, 13; Phil 3:5). Stated differently, the term “*politeia* of Israel” may refer to a multinational expansion of Israel proper that has emerged in the form of the Church.<sup>2</sup> If this is the case, “commonwealth of Israel” is a particularly appropriate translation of “*politeia* of Israel” in Ephesians 2:12 and a relatively simple way of describing the relationship between the Church and Israel.

1 This is the “one . . . out of two” mentioned in Ephesians 2:14-15. Markus Barth rightly calls into question the NRSV translation of Ephesians 2:15 (“one new humanity in place of the two”): “The new man is ‘one . . . out of the two’ . . . the new creation is not an annihilation or replacement of the first creation but the glorification of God’s work . . . this man consists of two, that is, of Jews and Gentiles . . . Their historic distinction remains true and recognized even within their communion” (Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1-3* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1974], 309-10). Israel and the nations—the corporate representation of Jew and Gentile—become “one” (a composite unity) as husband and wife are “one” (Eph 5:31; Gen 2:24).

2 Viewed in this way, the “commonwealth of Israel” (the Church) may be the unfolding of God’s promise to Israel in Genesis 35:11, “A nation and a company of nations shall come from you.”



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