

Citizenship in the New Testament¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical evolution and complexities of citizenship in the ancient Mediterranean world, with a particular focus on the experiences of migrants and minority groups such as the Jews. It explores the exclusive nature of Greek citizenship, which was limited to free-born males and perpetuated by local elites, and contrasts this with the more expansive but still hierarchical Roman model, where citizenship could be acquired through military service, manumission, or imperial grant. The study analyses the dual and often precarious status of Jewish communities in diaspora cities like Alexandria, highlighting their social and legal marginalisation despite long-term residence. Through case studies—including the failed attempt to Hellenise Jerusalem and the violent pogrom in Alexandria—the paper underscores how citizenship functioned as both a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. The discussion situates these ancient debates within broader theological and philosophical reflections, revealing enduring tensions between identity, belonging, and political rights.

Keywords: (heavenly) Citizenship; Roman Empire; God's kingdom; Judaism; (apostle) Paul; Migration

Introduction

Human history is marked by migrations caused by the unequal distribution of resources, wars, or natural disasters, prompting many people to look elsewhere for a better life when they often have no chance to survive where they find themselves. In Europe today, we are often confronted by dramatic images in the media of the makeshift barges in which many desperate people try to cross the Mediterranean. In this context, we must read the theme of citizenship, understood not only as the sign of an ancient bond with a city or a territory but also as the goal of every migration, as the confirmation of having finally landed at the new home to put down new roots and build a stable life. People also migrated in the time of the Roman Empire as they migrate today. In the time of the apostles, reaching this goal of attaining citizenship was very difficult, just as it is today, and perhaps even more so. What follows is a discussion of the dynamics of the debate

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on citizenship, both inside and outside the Bible, to see how the concept was approached theologically by the first generation of Christians.

The ancient world

When one refers to citizenship (*politeuma* in Greek), in our historical context one reasons in terms of nations, of human assemblies consisting of millions of people united by a common history and culture, in some cases even by a religion, as for example in Islamic countries. The world of the first century was decidedly different: the Mediterranean basin was part of the *Imperium Romanum*, that is, the zone of subjugation to the Romans of the most diverse groups of people, the context in which cities large and small, more or less ancient, in some cases vassal kingdoms, managed their own autonomy. What did it mean, in such a situation, to be “citizens”?

First, it was birth that determined social membership, because people assumed their parents’ status. In the Greek *poleis*, only free men and those higher in social strata as reflected the census were citizens (*polites*). Only they could vote for or be voted in as magistracies, enjoyed full rights, and had access to traditional cultural and religious education. Children were seen as future citizens and were educated accordingly, while women had access to and filled limited spaces, determined by their husband’s status, and normally could not participate in the political life. Other inhabitants of a city (and its surrounding region, the *chora*) enjoyed certain privileges (for example, the right to residence or to practise a trade), but they did not have citizenship.

Ancient philosophy quite often reflects on the concept of *politeuma*, a term that had multiple meanings: individual political acts or affairs; sectors of state administration; state government; state constitution and political community; the right to citizenship; the status of resident aliens (for examples, Jews in Alexandria).² It is above all, Aristotle who delves into the idea of citizenship as a body in which everyone works in unison for the good of the *polis*: the state. In his view, the latter precedes individuals and becomes their living environment. Freedom is realised in the common good, and everybody fully realises their nature as “sociable beings” in the city, itself a religious community. The *polis* also is inconceivable without religion and worship (Kittel et al. 2020:1286, VI 520). The Stoics try to bring individual urban communities out of their individualism and provincialism and by convincing individuals of the need to be citizens of the world (*kosmopolites*). On this basis, they formulated the theory of a universal empire, as realised by Alexander the Great. From their perspective, the cosmos is like a single *polis* governed by divine law (Kittel et al. 2020: 1289, VI 521).

The above reflections, which remain fundamental to contemporary thinking on the subject, should not make one forget that such a state of affairs excluded all women, and a good portion of the male population as well, from full participation in public affairs. Slaves also were disenfranchised, and foreigners were generally tolerated only if they had lived in the region for a long time or if their presence was considered of public benefit – someone could be considered a foreigner in a town or city in which his/her ancestors had been living for two hundred years! And only if the communities of foreigners were sufficiently high in number and homogeneous, could they live according to their ancestral rules and customs (like the Jews in many Hellenistic and Roman cities).

² See the entry “*polis* et al.” in Kittel, et al. 2020.

It was therefore a very stratified and highly conservative society: the concept of citizenship in the Greek world was understood in a decidedly exclusive sense and tended to perpetuate full ownership of the city, over centuries, in the hands of ancient, local families. This also placed certain other limitations on citizens. An Athenian, for example, could legitimately only marry another Athenian. This is one sign of the pride of and care with which people viewed the possession and the retaining of citizenship.

More complex was the case of Roman citizenship. The long history of conquest during the Roman Republic led the Romans to consider a more open conception of citizenship. Perhaps precisely because power was firmly controlled by aristocratic families, Roman citizenship was used as an aggregating element of the imperial structure, especially in the phase of its expansion into Italy. The first people to acquire Roman citizenship outside the *Urbs* (Rome) were precisely the Italic peoples annexed to the empire, and only after the so-called “social war” (91–88 BC) for citizenship between Rome and its Italic allies. After the unification of the peninsula, citizenship remained an option open to foreigners, albeit under rather strict rules.

Besides via a concession granted by the senate or the emperor, it also was possible to become *civis romanus* by manumission (release) from slavery, because the freedman became a member of the family to which they belonged as a slave and subject to the *pater familias* of that family. Apparently, there were many Jews who became Roman citizens in this way. In some cases, citizenship could literally be bought, as we learn in the episode of the tribune and Paul in Acts 22:27–28. The main way of increasing the number of Roman citizens was by offering it to foreigners who signed up for military service (lasting up to twenty-five years!). At the end of their military conscription, veterans acquired citizenship and a piece of land where they could go to live (or they received a corresponding value in money), perhaps in a colony, that is, in a newly founded city where Roman law was in force.

Being *civis romanus* brought with it several privileges, concerning, for example, the treatment of the accused during a trial. Citizens had recourse to the emperor and could not be tortured; corporal punishments were milder. If sentenced to death, execution was by beheading and not by painful and humiliating methods such as crucifixion. In theory, a Roman citizen could participate in the political life of the *Urbs*, but in fact it was only a portion of those living in or near Rome who availed themselves of this privilege. In addition to giving undoubted prestige, Roman citizenship above all guaranteed a certain amount of protection in a society where the concept of legality was rather haphazard, and in this way, it gave a strong sense of belonging to an international political structure. Citizenship was particularly coveted in a world where the most fortunate were only citizens of some minor, perhaps politically insignificant, urban centre.

An interesting case in this context was that of dual citizenship, often experienced more *de facto* than *de jure*. Jews in the Diaspora often found themselves in this situation. While they tried to fit into the city to which they had emigrated, following some of the local customs and speaking Greek outside their community, as a rule they were considered resident aliens. As the latter, they were allowed to live according to their ancestral rights and customs; in fact, there was no time margin that would have given them access to local citizenship. The very name “Jew” indicates just that. It did not refer to membership of a religion, as is often misunderstood today, but to a geographical origin (Judaea) and, consequently, supposed adherence to a particular way of life dictated by

specific laws. Often, unless local citizens were involved in disputes, even the trials were handled by the community according to its law. One can therefore understand the importance of synagogues, which were first and foremost meeting places for the “political body” of Jews. Consequently, a Jewish family living, for example, in Alexandria for centuries remained a Jewish family and as a rule could not aspire to Alexandrian citizenship.³

Over time, however, a kind of aristocracy also formed within the ethnic Jewish community, aspiring to the privileges of local citizenship, which also allowed access to Hellenic culture, dominant in the Mediterranean. These people, perhaps enormously wealthy, aspired to access the training grounds of the Greek ruling class and its educational and recreational spaces, such as the gymnasia and theatres, living according to Greek customs and no longer according to Jewish ones. It is very likely that some of these families were welcomed into aristocratic circles, if not exactly *de jure*, at least *de facto*, also by virtue of important friendships in the Roman administration. This produced hybrid situations that led to many different outcomes. An interesting case is that of the family of Philo of Alexandria, the well-known Jewish philosopher-exegete of the first century CE. Philo’s brother Alexander was a major figure in Alexandrian Judaism (according to Flavius Josephus (*Ant.* 18:6,3; 19:5,1; 20:5,2) he was Alabarca, that is, the head of the Jewish community according to some, or “head of customs” according to others) (cf. Niehof 2021:52s; Schurer 1998:1068s). A nephew of Philo would abandon Judaism to pursue a career in the Roman military administration (Tiberius Alexander). Philo, for his part, while Hellenised in his culture, remained strongly attached to Judaism and its traditions.

In Jerusalem, in the mid-second century BCE, an interesting incident took place, as reported in the Book of Second Maccabees. When the new high priest Jason (who in 175 had acquired his position from King Antiochus IV of the Kingdom of Syria, of which Judaea was a part) tries to Hellenise Jerusalem, he obtains permission to have its inhabitants enrolled on the lists of the citizens of Antioch, the capital of the kingdom. This was perhaps an attempt by the Greek ruler to use Roman-style citizenship to strengthen his kingdom.

When Seleucus died and Antiochus, who was called Epiphanes, succeeded to the kingdom, Jason the brother of Onias obtained the high priesthood by corruption, 8 promising the king at an interview three hundred sixty talents of silver, and from another source of revenue eighty talents. 9 In addition to this he promised to pay one hundred fifty more if permission were given to establish by his authority a gymnasium and a body of youth for it, and to enrol the people of Jerusalem as citizens of Antioch. 10 When the king assented and Jason came to office, he at once shifted his compatriots over to the Greek way of life. (2 Macc 4:7–8)

Jason’s seemingly unique experiment would fail with the victory of the Maccabees over the Philhellenic party, and the achievement of independence rendered such citizenship

³ Josephus’ assertions that Jews had citizenship in Alexandria is today strongly questioned by scholars or at least downplayed in light of historical events and documents that seem to deny this possibility (cf. Josephus *Ap.* 2:33-44; *Ant.* 12:8; 14:188; 19:281). See especially Barclay 2004:41, 70–81.

useless (although the Hasmonians themselves would later paradoxically give rise to a monarchy with a typically Hellenic character). Therefore, this dual citizenship for the Jews of the Diaspora will remain more a cultural than a political fact (but with strong consequences for their faith as well). One of the main consequences of this situation was that it left numerous communities in a precarious social position in what they considered their home, while maintaining an ideal reference to the Land of Israel and Jerusalem.

The crisis in Alexandria

The conflict over local citizenship for Jews sparked a violent persecution in Alexandria, Egypt, in 38 CE. Philo of Alexandria extensively and dramatically recounts this (cf. *Legatio ad Gaium* and *In Flaccum*). Jews had been present in the city since the time of its founding by Alexander the Great (late 4th century BC). During the reign of the Ptolemies, they had been primarily soldiers, employed both to control the native population and to protect the court from other aristocratic families in times of crisis. Especially with the advent of the Romans, Jewish military were decisive in asserting their control in the region, particularly in 47 BCE, during the civil war between Cleopatra (supported by Julius Caesar) and her brother Ptolemy (supported by much of the Alexandrian aristocracy) (Josephus *Ant.* XIV 123–139). If this, however, gave the Jews some influence on a political level, at the same time it strengthened enmity between them and the local aristocrats that was the cause of the first anti-Jewish pogrom in history.

Taking advantage of the political weakness of Flaccus, the governor at the time, and of the enmity of the Roman emperor Caligula toward the Jews, the Greeks first confined the Jewish population to a single quarter of the city, forcing them to live in miserable conditions. They then attacked them, killing whoever came within their reach and looting where they could. A delegation sent to the emperor, led by Philo, would end in failure; Caligula was enraged by them as he considered them to be a foolish people, incapable of understanding his divine nature. The tense situation continued, and Jewish retaliation was suppressed by the new governor, a former Jew and nephew of Philo. The new emperor, Claudius, ended the conflict by stopping the violence but at the same time disappointing any hope of the Jews to play any political role in the city: if on the one hand he urged the Greeks to respect the rights acquired by the Jews, on the other he told the latter not to meddle in the games organised by the city, *because it belongs to others* (Tcherikover and Fuks 1957:CPJ II, 153). It is clear that, for Claudius, Alexandria was not the home of the local Jews, no matter the size of the community (according to Philo they were more than a million); they remained only guests with the right of residence, forever strangers in the place where they had resided for more than three hundred years.

Unfortunately, this pogrom was not only the result of a situation specific to the Egyptian city. Internationally, at the time of the establishment of the empire under Augustus, the Romans needed the support of the Jews against those Greeks who would not give in to the idea that they had lost political independence, and this was also the case in Egypt (conquered by Octavian in 30 BC after defeating Antony at Actium the previous year). The Jews in the Mediterranean cities were numerous, and they prided themselves on an important and impressive military tradition (Hellenistic armies consisted mostly of mercenaries). However, they were very different, culturally and religiously, from the rulers. Hence, when already under Tiberius the Greeks began to accept Rome's rule, inevitably, given their cultural affinity, they (the Greeks) would

become the Romans' righthand men. Placed on the margins of political games, declassified to the rank of foreigners, the Jews, for their part, had to be subjugated in the course of several wars – from the 38 CE pogrom in Alexandria until 135, the date of the defeat of the third anti-Roman revolt at Bar Kochbah was a succession of clashes and massacres, symbolically culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE. Only after these military defeats did the Jews resign themselves to living in the empire in a subordinate position of non-citizenship. However, some aristocrats, mostly descendants of King Herod, found a different place for themselves, but at a price, often of abandoning their cultural and religious customs. Against this historical background, the attempt of many Jewish intellectuals during the Hellenistic-Roman period to live out dual citizenship is striking. This is particularly so considering it was also a form of defence, sometimes a real vindication, of the Jewish contribution to the society of the time, if not to the empire itself, of which they were sometimes strong defenders, for example in Philo of Alexandria or Josephus Flavius' apologies in defence of Rome.

What follows is a brief discussion of how three authors, to better understand how Jews, in attempts to have their citizenship recognised, viewed their participation in the social context in which they lived. The first is the anonymous composer of the *Letter of Aristeas*, a writing from the second century BC in which the full harmony between Greek and Jewish culture is postulated and represented. The letter recounts events that led to the translation into Greek of the Law of the Jews, the well-known Septuagint, by 72 translators (that is, by six members of each of the Israelite tribes). Alongside the story of how the translation came about, Aristeas also tells of the encounter between the Jewish and Hellenic cultures. He does this in reference first to a conversation between Aristeas and the high priest of the Jerusalem temple and then to an in-depth exchange between the king, his sages, and the translators sent from Jerusalem. The underlying thesis is that the Jews received by divine revelation the *paideia* that the Greeks developed through philosophy, being both possible and desirable for the good of the whole citizenry.

This term (citizenry), strictly speaking, is employed only once in the *Letter* to the Jewish community of Alexandria, but the idea of citizenship as we understand it is well represented in this writing. As such, the Jews, although foreigners in Alexandria and in Hellenistic cities in general, should be considered citizens, because they made a major cultural and social contribution, according to the letter. Interestingly, the discourse here moves on a somewhat different level than today, where it is connected to the issue of individual rights. Ancient Jewish intellectuals, after all, conformed to the elitism of the ruling classes and their defence of and insistence on ancient privileges that limited the enjoyment of full citizenship to only a few. If, therefore, Jews are the bearers of cultural and religious diversity (which the allegorical exegesis of the scriptures nevertheless helped to develop), it is based on affinity with Hellenic cultural values that, on the Jewish side, an own role is claimed in the public sphere.

Philo of Alexandria offers one an interesting and original view of the concept of citizenship that, in some respects, brings one closer to the New Testament. A proponent of the ascetic way of life, Philo was not very fond of politics, although, when necessary, he did his part, for example by participating in the dangerous delegation to Emperor Caligula after the tragic events of 38 CE. In several passages, Philo shows the reader his suspicion of political life in cities, if not of the cities themselves. Cities were *par excellence* the places where citizenship was exercised, but Philo also regarded them as

chaotic places of moral degradation. In his *De Migratione Abrahami* (158ff.), Philo depicts the politician, that is, according to the interpretation of the Greeks and Romans, the citizen in the full exercise of his prerogatives, as an ambiguous person. The politician is one who tries to place himself somewhere between virtue and the passions, taking advantage of these two spheres but never siding clearly for virtue. The same suspicion shines throughout Philo's work, leading him to a blatant admiration for the Roman empire, that is for him (at least when the emperor is doing his job) a guarantor of peace and stability precisely because the empire is superior to the local aristocracies with their squalid and petty interests that pollute the life of the *polis*.⁴

If the everyday exercise of political life is, at best, an unpleasant necessity for Philo, then for him true citizenship is exercised in the *kosmos*. The goal of his philosophy is, in fact, to show how to become a *kosmopolites*. For example, in his *De Specialibus Legibus* (II 45–48), he defends those who live according to the law of nature as being in constant pursuit of virtue, thus becoming true citizens of the world, a balm for those cities that should accept his teaching. We find a similar discourse in his *De Opificio Mundi*, where, at the very beginning of the text, a definition of “citizen of the world” is proposed. According to the creation account of Genesis:

... the world is in harmony with the law and the law with the world and ... the law-abiding man becomes, by virtue of such observance, a citizen of the world by the mere fact that he conforms his actions to the will of Nature, according to which the whole universe is also governed. (3)

Further on (142), Philo calls Adam the only citizen of the world, the absolute lord of creation, which had been entrusted to him by God, free from all kinds of fear. Adam was also *kosmopolites*, because he obeyed the constitution of his “city”, that is, the law of nature that governs creation and, therefore, he could access the fruit of eternal life. With the creation of the woman, however, this state of bliss and peace is broken, because with her came both desire and pleasure, making the human beings ungodly and turning them away from their original vocation. The serpent is the representation of this, and it is no accident that he first misleads Eve, who represents, allegorically, human sensations.

The sage, then, in striving toward virtue seeks to recover his original condition as a *kosmopolites*, because the world governed by the law of nature is his true homeland. This enables him to be at the same time a citizen who brings his positive contribution to his earthly homeland. Philo “is certainly not unfamiliar with the current political use of the terms, but the defining element is their spiritualizing philosophical transfiguration” (GLNT 1306, VI: 527). His is a *spiritualistic cosmopolitanism*. According to Philo, embodiments of this ideal are the Therapeuts (healers), of whom he speaks in *De Vita Contemplativa*. These were the members (men and women) of a community in which they chose to live in isolation from the world, often gathered in prayer to concentrate on the search for God and God's will. The same reason would also have led the Essenes – another group much admired by the Alexandrian – not to dwell in the city (*Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit* 76). The sobriety of the community meals of the Therapeuts (who were

⁴ See the panegyrics contained in: *Legatio* 2, 8-13; 21, 143-151.

vegetarians) for Philo becomes symbolic of their life choice and is contrasted with the various types of banquets that characterise other pagan groups.

Interestingly, however, the theme of the good of the city remains in the background, especially when contrasting the piety of the healers with what Philo (and Judaism of his time in general) considered the ultimate depravity of the pagans caused by their idolatry, namely their acceptance of homosexual relations. This, they believed, led to the inner corruption of cities, which thus find themselves desolate, without new generations and without persons of worth guiding them (*De Vita Contemplativa* 59–62). On this subject, Philo's tones may reach levels that are gruesome to us, but they reflect the Jewish understanding on the subject at the time, one that also reverberates in the New Testament. For example, when Paul in Romans 1:18–32 wants to portray the moral abyss into which idolatry drags humanity, he relies on the same kind of invective.

The third author one may mention also has been referred earlier, namely Josephus, and particularly his work *Against Apion* (late 1st century CE). In this apologetic writing, he defends the Jews from the accusations circulating against them at the Roman imperial court. The origins of the accusations were mainly the Egyptians of Alexandria. The subjects of Josephus are Apollonius, and especially Apion, a scholar of Homer who was the leader of the delegation of Alexandrians who had opposed the delegation to the emperor led by Philo of Alexandria.

I adopt this line the more readily because Apollonius, unlike Apion, has not grouped his accusations together, but scattered them here and there all over his work, reviling us in one place as atheists and misanthropes, in another reproaching us as cowards, whereas elsewhere, on the contrary, he accuses us of temerity and reckless madness. He adds that we are the most witless of all barbarians, and are consequently the only people who have contributed no useful invention to civilization. (*Ap.* II 148)

What was at stake was demonstrating to the rulers of the world the civic contribution made by the Jewish people. Josephus was not alone in this defence of the Jews as working people. A similar argument, even if expressed in different literary forms, had been made by other Hellenistic Jewish authors such as Artapanus, Demetrius, Eupolemus and others. Only fragments of these works survive, but in them they insisted both on the antiquity of Jewish traditions (and thus on their intrinsic value) and on the historical connection between Jews and other peoples (particularly Babylonians and Egyptians) to whom they brought civilisation. As such, the stories of Abraham, Moses and Joseph are reinterpreted by making them the founders of the Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations.

According to Josephus' argument against his enemies, the Jewish people were ennobled by their ancient origins and an illustrious philosophy that existed and developed alongside the Hellenic, at times also preceding the latter. To the accusation that they are rebels, Josephus replied that the Jewish people were peaceful and that their war with Rome was caused by a few troublemakers, animated by foolish hopes, and because of the ineptitude and corruption of a few governors who exasperated the population. In fact, in the Roman Empire, Jews were an asset to make the common "city" better, and the reason for this lay in their loyalty to their ancestral laws.

Josephus tried to show that, contrary to the accusations of the various Apolloniuses and Apions, Judaism contributed and kept on contributing to the common good via the law that God gave to God's people to live in harmony and peace with other human beings, amongst themselves and with the Creator. Israel legitimately was a citizen of the Roman-Hellenistic ecumene because of its contribution to it, in the past (Moses being the first and earliest lawgiver) and in the present (because of its calling to be an exemplary people among others). Was there, then, an "Israelite citizenship"? For Josephus, yes. This citizenship did not hover somewhere in cosmic spaces like that of the Philonian sage, but it made its concrete contribution to this *civitas*, presenting in a form close to the Roman idea of citizenship. However marginalised and unrecognised as fellow citizens by the Greeks, the Jews nevertheless made, and continue to make, according to Josephus, their civilising contributions to humankind.

Here, some clarification may be needed to better understand Josephus' cultural horizon. Using purely Old Testament language for his discussion of the civic value of the Jews, when asked what Israel's constitution is, again in *Against Apion*, Josephus responded in a manner perhaps surprising to one today. He states that it is a theocracy, because it directs all human efforts towards God (see *Ap.* 164–171).

Somehow, what for Philo was the meaning of life for certain ascetic groups, such as the Therapeuts or the Essenes, for Josephus applied to all the people of Israel. The Jew, from this perspective, was a member of a cultic community that lived and functioned in the celebration of God. It follows that the individual was lost in a larger dimension, just as a cell is part of a body:

At these sacrifices prayers for the welfare of the community must take precedence of those for ourselves; for we are born for fellowship, and he who sets its claims above his private interests is especially acceptable to God. (*Ap.* II:196)

In this sense, this perspective of Israelite citizenship was quite different from that of the Greek *polites*. In some respects, it rather resembled the Roman claim to guide humankind, as it is evident, for example, in the words of Virgil in *Aeneid* (Book VI:847–853).⁵ If the Romans had a calling to be the political leaders of mankind, the Jews, according to Josephus, could aspire to be its moral leader. In favour of the validity of his theses, he cited another interesting argument, the spreading of Jewish customs in the Greek Roman world, a fact that underlines the inherent moral strength of the Mosaic law (*Ap.* II, 279–284). If, therefore, the Jews' ambition for political citizenship was usually frustrated, it was sublimated into a calling for the good of the nations, as Josephus argued in his writings, without unfortunately having succeeded in convincing the Greco-Roman ruling classes. Indeed, we know that their reactions were generally hostile to this religion so strange to them, even though the privileges granted in the time of Julius Caesar and

⁵ *Excudent alii spirantia mollius aera, credo equidem, vivos ducent de marmore voltus, orabunt causas melius, caelique meatus describent radio, et surgentia sidera dicent: tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento; hae tibi erunt artes; pacisque imponere morem, parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos.* (Others will cut out the breathing bronzes more softly (truly I believe), they will lead out living faces from the marble and they will plead cases better, and they will map out the movements of the stars with a compass and they will name the rising stars: O you, Roman, remember to rule the peoples with your authority (these will be the arts to you), and to impose the custom of peace, to spare the vanquished ones and to war down the proud ones.)

Augustus remained in force even after the various wars. The Jews dispersed in the Roman Empire, however, were left with that “spiritual citizenship” that created a strong identity and a network of solidarity that could be activated in case of need, such as in the event of war or enslavement.

Citizens or subjects? Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom

Thus far the discourse on citizenship inevitably has been mainly viewed in the context of Hellenistic Judaism, for it was there, among the *poleis*, that the topic found a home. In the land of Israel, on the other hand, the Greco-Roman understanding of the concept was foreign to ordinary people. This is not to say that the values it conveyed were absent; they were simply declined in a different way as it developed in a society dominated by confrontation between tribal institutions and monarchies of various kinds.

In the Old Testament, a “citizen” is simply a person living in an urban centre: the Israelite population had tribal authorities as its first point of reference and was accustomed to a generic subservience to the powerful people of the day (whether Jews or foreigners), who were basically interested in exploiting the land and the population. In the Septuagint, the term *polites* is depoliticised just as it is in the Hebrew text. It thus is the person, not the citizen, that had to *politeuesthai* “to conduct oneself”, “to behave in a certain way” – membership of the Israelite community is marked by personal conduct and not by political commitment (GLNT 1300–1306, VI:525ff).

While there was no concept of citizenship like the Greek one, it was nevertheless present in the idea of belonging to a social body in which one was not merely a subject. Indeed, in Israel the “law” of the rulers had to deal with the ancient customary laws of the tribe, to which, in the first place, each person claimed to belong. The masters of the law, the jurists, were the custodians of the legal traditions of the people and were also their legitimate interpreters. When questioned about their “citizenship”, the inhabitants of Galilee or Judea would first indicate his or her familial and tribal affiliation, then membership in the people of Israel, sanctioned by adherence to specific rules of life (albeit interpreted in a variety of ways) and to a strongly identity-based collective narrative.

But not only that. For someone like Jesus of Nazareth, for example, coming from the countryside of Galilee, the Greek idea of citizenship was not familiar, and what we have just said about belonging to Israel applies. Alongside this “earthly level”, however, there was another level, belonging to the Kingdom of God, interpreted according to an eschatological dimension. If this was a future event, however imminent, it at the same time enveloped the existence of the individual and the people, giving it a special meaning and dignity. In everyday life, then, the Jew was a member of the chosen people and a son or daughter of Israel. It was precisely the denial of this status by the ruling political authorities that invoked God’s vengeance. From the perspective of Jesus and many other Jews of his time, therefore, the Kingdom comes precisely to restore this ancestral right and to save “the daughters and sons of God”, a category that claims the redemption of an oppressed people who long for freedom. The Gospel of Matthew helps to bring this issue into focus when it tells that:

When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?” He said, “Yes, he does”. And

when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?” When Peter said, “From others”, Jesus said to him, “Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.” (Matt 17:24-27)

The didrachm (temple) tax was paid annually at the temple in Jerusalem by every adult Jewish man. It was normal to pay it; indeed, especially in the diaspora, it was felt to be an important sign of national identity. Jesus takes the occasion of this payment to make people reflect on the status of the individual Jew, who in his view is a daughter or son of the Kingdom, thus not subject to this kind of tax. But Jesus does not want to create a scandal because of this, risking a conflict with the authorities, and consequently asks Peter to pay, procuring the money in a miraculous way. This episode recalls in some respects the better-known episode of “giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Mark 12:13–17 and its synoptic parallels). In this other account, Jesus is provoked by the Pharisees, who wished to cause trouble for him by having him associated with the Zealots. The Zealots strongly emphasised preaching the Kingdom of God, but from a violent, revolutionary perspective. Jesus responds to his interlocutors by deferring to what belongs to God: the whole human being. Hence, even when one is detached from material goods, a typical call in Jesus’ preaching, one must give back to Caesar what belongs to him. Was not Caesar’s image on the coin to be given as tax? It therefore must be paid to Caesar, even if it was more important to emphasise that everything else, that is, the whole human being, must be given back to God. Jesus does not place Caesar on the same level as God. Everything is subject to God, by implication, even the emperor himself. In the discourse on citizenship, this emphasises that the human existential horizon is first and foremost the heavenly one, and the “constitution” according to which one must live is the divine will, which the Christians summed up in the commandment to love one’s neighbour.

These two examples show the typical horizon of the preaching of Jesus and his followers, namely the Kingdom of God. If the coming of the Kingdom is imminent and if the regenerative action of creation and the correction of the injustices of this world are deferred to God, the believer has a higher point of reference and the scale of every earthly issue is revised, even that of evil and suffering. Thus, it is not just a problem of different political formation between Palestinian Judaism and the Hellenistic-Roman world. For an apocalyptic revival movement, such as Jesus’, it was precisely a question of the scale of values with which to read the present. For this reason, even when Christianity expanded into the Roman Empire and had to confront Greek political categories now acquired by Diaspora Judaism, but also adapted to its own situation, these would be reread from an eschatological perspective.

Citizens of heaven

In Paul’s letters, the preaching of Jesus meets with the Judeo-Hellenistic background of the apostle from Tarsus. Although related themes are used several times, Paul uses the term *politeuma* only in his letter to the Philippians, stressing that: “Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (3:20).

The context of this passage is highly polemical. Paul warns the believers in Philippi about some of his opponents, probably members of the faction demanding the observance of the Mosaic Law by converts from the pagan world. The words we are interested in come at the end of a rather violent invective as well, with a comparison between those who “think only of earthly things” and believers in Christ, who have their citizenship in heaven. Here the term *politeuma* takes on a rather broad meaning and can consequently be read from several points of view.

1) As an existential reference point: The justified believers have God and God’s Kingdom, the new creation in Christ promised at the end of time, and by faith know that they belong to it. This gives hope in this life as well, but in the preaching of Jesus and Paul, it is not so much a matter of being subjects, but rather God’s children, as it is stated in another well-known Pauline passage: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom 8:15).

2) There is also an ethical nuance. Paul’s preaching stresses that love for God and for one’s neighbour is the ethical dimension of the Kingdom, and this relativises all other affiliations.

3) The horizon of this citizenship is eschatological, in the Pauline sense of “already and not yet”. In Christ we are justified, but it is only by faith that we can see the new existential dimension that has yet to be fully realised. The fact that the believers know by faith that they have citizenship in heaven radically changes their life in the present – even in the interim contradictions of our time, where we are still surrounded by sin and death, we can live according to our authentic identity.

“Obey the authorities – but first of all God!”

If our citizenship is in heaven, to whom must we render obedience here on earth? What is the believer’s relation to the state? It is not possible to answer this question in a way that one can directly apply to our contexts today, because Christians lived in an eschatological tension that led them, as we have just seen, to live their life and mission from a very particular perspective that is no longer ours. Unfortunately, however, in the history of Christianity, this difference in context has too often not been taken into account, and some texts in particular have been completely misrepresented and exploited. Among these the most famous is Rom 13:1–7:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore, one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

These words have led many Christians to justify and accept oppressive regimes, as happened, for example, with Nazism in Germany. But does Paul really call for obedience to any political regime because it is legitimised by God? No. The apostle himself in his first letter to the Corinthians explains that he considers the Roman Empire itself as being under God's judgment, being destined to disappear with the coming of the Kingdom:

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 1Cor 2:6–8)

The rulers of the time do not have the wisdom of God, otherwise they would not have crucified Jesus, and those who executed him were the Romans. They are the very ones about to be destroyed by God (a divine passive is used here). This vision does not differ much from that of John's Revelation, in which the oppressive and unjust powers of this world (Rome in the first place) must pay for their ungodliness. We see this, for example, in the visions of the beast rising from the sea or the great harlot (Rev 13 and 17). This reading of the present in light of the *eschaton*, however, in Paul's theology does not rule out his words in Rom 13:1–7, where, in fact, the apostle does not offer a theory of the state, but rather, similar to how Jesus had done in the famous saying of "render unto Caesar" (recalled in Rom 13:7), he anchors his thoughts in the present situation of a world and an age about to end at the hands of God. As with most Jews of his time, for Paul the world is governed according to God's will, but by human beings, and not by Godself. And, insofar as it is human, the government is fallacious, subservient to sin and thus, in apocalyptic perspective, also subservient to Evil (as John's Revelation also points out) and destined to final destruction.

This does not prevent that, in the meantime, political power is still to be understood as a *diakonia*, a service towards the common good. In this sense, when faithful to its calling, the state fulfils the function intended by God, and obedience and faithfulness are owed to it. If this was the general discourse behind the apostle's words, one must not forget that the context of the community addressed in this letter necessitated even greater prudence, since they lived in the capital of the empire. It is, therefore, in this world that the believers lived out their heavenly citizenship: they are dutiful citizen, subject to the earthly authorities, of course, but there is a limit to this. When they are forced to choose between God and obedience to human beings, at that point one can only obey the Lord, as Peter and John recall in a well-known episode in the book of Acts (4:18–20).

In John's gospel, the situation of "dual citizenship" (earthly and heavenly) is expressed in spiritual terms in a very effective formula: Christians are not from the world, but are in the world (John 17:11,16). They have a heavenly origin but live in an often foreign and hostile context in which they must bear witness. The context of this saying is the so called "priestly prayer", where Jesus prays for the disciples he is about to leave, that they may remain united with one another even after his departure, precisely because they are united by a common origin and calling. With these words Jesus quite effectively represents what for John is the believer's "citizenship in heaven", accentuating its elective character, for those who come to faith do so because their existential roots are

already in God. It is the mystery of the concept of election that points back to the original decision of the Creator, namely the ultimate reason for the faith of some and the unbelief of others. Believers in Christ are thus heavenly beings, turned first to God, to whom they owe obedience and from whom they draw inspiration for their existence.

Jesus himself in the fourth gospel reiterates the distance that separates the Kingdom from earthly reality: “My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight lest I should be delivered to the Jews; but my kingdom is not from here”, he tells Pilate during his trial (John 18:36). Believers, unlike Zealots, are not called to establish the Kingdom of God in the world, but in it they experience a dimension of “dual residence”. The image of dual citizenship, which we have used in other cases, in John turns out to be rather ambiguous and imprecise because, if citizenship indicates the set of reference values, with the world, one cannot have anything to do with it, since it is corrupt and an enemy of God. In the world we live as strangers, yet with a very specific calling, that of bearing witness to a word of life and hope even for a seemingly lost reality. Our heavenly citizenship, also in John, indelibly marks the meaning of our living in the world, but in a decidedly exclusive way.

Inclusive citizenship

We saw above that in antiquity only a few men could claim the status of citizen, while Middle Jewish theological reflection clearly affirmed an Israelite “citizenship” prerogative of all daughters and sons of Israel (even with different interpretations, still more or less restrictive). Christianity deepens this discourse in Jesus’ words of welcome into the number of God’s children. There are numerous examples of how Jesus in his life literally went out to seek the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and the idea also returns in the New Testament letters.

If in his preaching Jesus addressed the Jews in the land of Israel (Matt 10:6; 15:24), the next step taken by the movement he initiated would be the inclusion of all nations in the people of Israel, as is reiterated in the letter to the Ephesians (2:11–13):⁶

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”, a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands, remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

These are strong and innovative words, that in their time were a cause of debate and division within the movement. In fact, the conditions of this universal perspective was the reason for the main conflict within the nascent church: should pagans who convert observe the law of Moses or is it not necessary? In particular, the issue of circumcision, considered by many Jews then to be the fundamental and indispensable sign of belonging

⁶ Note, in contrast, the ethnic exclusivism of the visions of the heavenly Jerusalem that we find in some Middle Judaic apocalypses: 4 Esd 8:52; 10:27.54-59; Ps Sol 17:30, 27, 28; Jub 50:5 which echo Isa 52:1 (“Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion! Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you no more”).

to Israel, became a bone of contention. One finds echoes of this particularly in the letter to the Galatians, where Paul clashes with some missionaries who demand circumcision of Gentile converts, a demand that he bluntly rejects on the basis of his theology of grace. An attempt to resolve the issue is witnessed in Acts 15, the so-called “Jerusalem council”: if the observance of the Law of Moses is not required, converts are nevertheless expected to observe five rules that will become part, in later centuries, of what are called the Noahide Laws (which in rabbinic Judaism determine what is required by God of Gentiles in order to be considered righteous in God’s eyes):

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:28)

But not only that. Some of Paul’s words express an even more open concept of heavenly citizenship, marking a step forward from the mind-set of the time; the best known are found in a passage from Galatians:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:26–29)

In Christ, through baptism, people receive the inheritance of Israel, redefined not on an ethnic basis (as we saw in the Ephesians passage) nor on the basis of observance of the Mosaic Law, as the “Judaizers” who opposed Paul wanted, but by virtue of faith. These are very significant words, spoken in the context of the Roman Empire, where all persons by birth had well-defined social roles (man, woman, slave, free, citizen, foreigner...) that could hardly be changed in the course of their lives. These words show an understanding of an alternative existence in the present day, in the concreteness of everyday life. This also helps one understand how Christianity was able to intercept the discontent especially of the humblest and most marginalised people and how it gave them a voice. Unfortunately, the need to confront a hostile environment over time led to the dilution of the revolutionary character of words such as those we have seen. The latter is clear, for example, in the development of the “household codes” (Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9; 1 Pet 2:18–3:13). These codes represent a deepening patriarchal entrenchment in early Christianity, or at least parts of it. Indeed, if in Paul’s letters one finds a certain realisation of this “heavenly citizenship” in the life of the communities (e.g., as seen in women’s prophesying in 1 Cor 11:5, in community leadership, such as in the case of Phoebe, a deaconess of the church in Cenchreae in Rom 16:1, and even apostles like Junia in Rom. 16:7), in the pastoral letters (1–2 Timothy and Titus) women reverted to a subordinate role (they are saved by bearing children in 1 Tim 2:15 and have no right to teach in 1 Tim 2:11–12). Yet, the fact that certain words have become part of Scripture remains theologically crucial even today in working out a liberated, universal and welcoming understanding of citizenship.

“The heavenly Jerusalem...”

All the aforementioned ideas, while they certainly have an effect in the present life, are definitely oriented toward the end of time, which at least Paul’s generation believed was imminent. In John’s Revelation, one finds an imaginative depiction of this expectation in the figure of the heavenly Jerusalem, descending from heaven, prepared as a bride (Rev 21:1–4). In the description that follows in the rest of the chapter, it is striking how it fulfils in itself Israel’s calling, that of being a pure people who will be, as in Abraham’s calling, a beacon to the nations. “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. [...] But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev 21:24, 27).

One of the fascinating aspects of this vision is that on the one hand the first heaven and the first earth are gone, on the other hand it seems that the heavenly Jerusalem does not immediately overlap with the present time but accompanies it toward the renewal of creation (in 21:24, the kings and peoples are still present). After the judgment, the world does not immediately end to begin something essentially new, but it is the original creation that is renewed, and in it, human beings live according to their calling. This suggests, however, that even now, in faith, the heavenly Jerusalem is already present among us as the light of the nations. The heavenly citizenship of believers in these verses takes a visible form, showing the place where it can be exercised openly and freely.

Conclusions

From the texts we have presented in this article, it is clear that the New Testament continues its reflection on the theme of citizenship along the lines of Middle Judaism. Dispersed in the Roman Empire and often unable to have a homeland of their own (other than the ideal one of Jerusalem), Jews reflected on the meaning of their being strangers in the cities in which they lived, perhaps for centuries, emphasising how their “Israelite citizenship”, with its values, made a positive contribution to the whole city.

Jesus’ disciples re-read this discourse from an eschatological perspective, deepening the meaning of their heavenly citizenship. The present is no longer only the place to live and to contribute as “citizens”, but above all a place of preaching the gospel of the Kingdom (in words and deeds). It is especially emphasised that believers are sons and daughters of God, thus creating a communion that transcends human divisions and makes all people truly equal. Given the peculiar experience of the Christian community, marked in several cases also by charismatic fervour, the tones are accentuated with respect to Middle Jewish reflection both in the direction of estrangement from the surrounding world and with respect to heavenly citizenship.

A fine literary example that allows one to highlight this feature is found in a text perhaps from the second century, the *Letter to Diognetus*, specifically in the following well-known passage from it:

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric way of life. This teaching of theirs has not been discovered by the thought and reflection of ingenious people, nor do they promote any human doctrine, as some do. But while they live in both Greek

and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship. They live in their own countries, but only as nonresidents; they participate in everything as citizens and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws; indeed, in their private lives they transcend the laws. They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted. (in *Diognetus* V:1–11, In Holmes 2006:295–296)

Witnessing to the gospel in a world whose values they no longer fully shared (or perhaps came to reject entirely), with their minds now turned to their heavenly citizenship, since the end of the first century, Christians had to come to terms with a present that stretched out over time more than expected. The apostolic writings, however, offer the elements to address constructive reflection even today, when the very topic of citizenship, especially earthly citizenship, remains decidedly controversial. In a perhaps unexpected way, the desire of the Jews of so many centuries ago to be recognised as citizens, in the New Testament found an answer that can inspire our contribution to the contemporary political debate as well.

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