



## [Philippians 3:18-21](#)

“Citizenship” in heaven

**Name of the author:** Paul the Apostle

**Date:** 60 CE

**Place:** Rome or Caesarea (from prison)

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** New Testament

**Literary genre:** Letter

**Title of work:** The Letter to the Philippians

**Reference:**

3:18-21

### **Commentary:**

This passage continues to present interpreters with the challenge of how best to render the ????????? of verse 20, often translated as “citizenship,” with the assumption being that Paul is simply wanting to draw a distinction between the behaviour fitting of a member of God’s heavenly ‘city’ and that of a member of an earthly city. The *LSJ* English-Greek Lexicon offers a variety of renderings for *politeuma*, including “corporate body of citizens resident in a foreign city,” “association,” and indeed “citizenship.” In the translation above, I have opted for “association” in order to avoid some of the arguably overly specific suggestions that will be discussed below, which can sometimes detract from the broad point that Paul seems to be making about membership of the Christian community versus that of anything else. Support for the latter translation (“citizenship”) has waned over the years in relation to Philippians 3:20, with a range of alternatives suggested. Essentially, Paul is contrasting the way of life in God’s heavenly kingdom with that of non-Christians who merely focus on earthly matters – the general feeling of the passage seems relatively clear, therefore; the Christian community belongs to something different, and by implication better than, the “enemies” of verses 18 and 19, whose only concerns are for worldly, material things. However, it is worth considering what exactly may lie behind Paul’s use of the term *politeuma*, especially given that the Christians in Philippi lived in a Roman colony with strong ties to Rome. What exactly was Paul imagining, then, when he chose to use this word?

Richard Cassidy (*Paul in Chains*, p. 194-195) emphasises that Philippi was a well-favoured Roman colony housing many veteran soldiers, whose privileges were comparable to those of the inhabitants of Rome itself. This reflected the help that the Philippians’ ancestors had given to Rome’s defence and expansion. In 43 BCE, Philippi, in north-eastern Greece, was one of the places expropriated to reward soldiers who served Octavian and Antony in the civil war with land (see Appian, *Civil Wars* V.2.12). The bond with Rome, therefore, was definitely felt. However, as Peter Oakes points out, over the course of the following two centuries, while Philippi unlike many eastern colonies did not undergo much re-Hellenisation (*From People to Letter*, p. 11-12), its population would still have been mainly Greek non-citizens (see Peter Pilhofer, *Philippi I*, p. 92), with a few Roman citizens. The Christians (to whom Paul writes of course in Greek), were for the most part a community of Greek non-citizens.

Several scholars argue that the heavenly *politeuma* is intended by Paul to contrast with a Jewish *politeuma* in Philippi (see, for instance, Demetrius Williams, *Enemies*, p. 230-231), as part of his strategy to denounce Jewish or Christian-Jewish opponents of the Philippian church. For use of *politeuma* in the context of the Jewish community see, for example, Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XII.108, where Josephus speaks of “the principal men of the *politeuma*,” or 2 Maccabees 12:7, which refers to the Jewish population of Joppa as the *politeuma*. However, as Oakes shows, several of the Jewish *Politeuma* Papyri (for examples, see “Our Citizenship (?) is in Heaven,” p. 8-9) use the term in specifically judicial contexts, often to delineate a small self-governed administrative body based in the centre of town which was responsible for making certain judicial decisions. Translating the term as “citizenship,” therefore, might not be accurate. Oakes sees the language of verse 20 as reflective of the Roman colony setting of Philippi, but the translation “citizenship” as unnecessary in order to draw on the notions of belonging and identity associated with living in a particular place (see “Our Citizenship (?) is in Heaven,” p. 1). Oakes suggests the following rendering of verse 20: “But the *judicial body* to which we look is in heaven.” If one



follows Oakes, then, for the Christians in Philippi, the term *politeuma* would suggest that the Christian community oversees itself and makes decisions based on Christian values, rather than those of Philippi more broadly. In a similar vein, John Reumann (*Philippians*, p. 566) translates as follows: “Our governing civic association exists in the heavens,” arguing that given the house-church audience of Paul’s letter, it is best to understand *politeuma* not as a “political entity” as such, but more like a *collegium* or *thiasos* (see also Richard Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associates*, p. 77-78). For Reumann, an element of “the social world of clubs, guilds, and (religious) associations” is needed to fully understand how the Philippian Christians would have heard Paul’s statement (*Philippians*, p. 576).

Andrew Lincoln’s understanding of Paul’s sentiment as the Christians already being “citizen[s] of the heavenly commonwealth,” whereby the believer is not so much awaiting a future heavenly home but rather living as an inhabitant of it in the present world (*Paradise Now*, p. 101-102) seems to capture well the crux of Paul’s argument. It remains debatable whether Paul had notions of Roman citizenship or small governing political associations in mind when he wrote his letter (not forgetting that he was of course a Roman citizen himself, see Acts 22:22-29), but what seems clear is that *politeuma* for Paul comes with certain behavioural responsibilities, which for the Christians contrast greatly with the lifestyles of their non-Christian peers who merely worship “the belly” and other earthly things (verse 19). The *politeuma* of heaven requires active participation, and as Moisés Silva remarks, however we translate the term, “the idea of citizenlike behaviour is dominant in Paul’s thinking” here (*Philippians*, p. 183). The Christians must understand their identity in relation to their membership of the heavenly kingdom, and just as citizens of Rome or inhabitants of a particular town are bound by certain laws and can claim a particular spatial identity, Christ’s followers ought to act according to Christian values, and in return can enjoy the soteriological benefits promised to God’s people.

Keywords in the original language:

- [????](#)
- [????????????????](#)
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Thematic keywords in English:

- [association](#)
- [citizen](#)
- [citizenship](#)
- [glory](#)
- [heaven](#)
- [transformation](#)

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Published on Judaism and Rome (<http://www.judaism-and-rome.org>)

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**Realized by:**

[Kimberley Fowler](#)



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