

EXPOSITION OF EPHESIANS 2–3

JERWS AND GENTILES IN THE BODY OF MESSIAH

We study now one of the most powerful passages in the Scriptures that discusses the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Yeshua, Ephesians chapters 2–3.¹ Here we discuss the unity between the redeemed Jewish Person and redeemed gentile.

INTRODUCTION

A. A MODERN LANGUAGE PROBLEM

1. **Greek** — *ethnos, ethnoi* (ἔθνος, ἔθνοι)
“Non-Israelite Christians, gentiles of Christian congregations composed of more than one nationality and not limited to people of Israel”
2. **Hebrew** — *goi, goyim* (גוי, גוים)
3. A Gentile is a “Goi” – But – Israelites are also Goyim! Exodus 19:6
 - Do not call Jewish people “Jews.”
 - Gentiles: Do not call yourself a “goi!”

B. PAUL’S PERSPECTIVE

1. **In our day. . .**
How do Jewish believers in Yeshua fit into “The Church?”
2. **In 1st Century**
 - How do non-Jewish believers relate to Israel?
 - What do we Jews do with Gentile Believers?
3. **Paul was not beginning** a new religion called “Christianity.”
That would never have crossed his mind!

I. THE GENTILES’ PROBLEMS

Paul explains that, biblically speaking, gentiles have several fundamental problems which they could not overcome by themselves. All of these problems have to do with not being associated with the God of Israel and His covenant community.

A. Gentiles Were “Separate from Messiah.” 2:12

1. The gentiles, just like the Jews, were dead in their trespasses and sins.
2. God has to redeem people from both of these groups before He can bring them together.
3. It also hints at the reality that belief in Messiah is *necessary* for all peoples.

B. Gentiles Were Separate from Citizenship with Israel. 2:12

1. Israel was the on-going stream of God’s Covenant People.
 - a. Those who wanted to be part of God’s covenant people had to come into a meaningful relationship with Israel.
 - b. See Ruth and see Isaiah 56.
2. Being separate from Israel means that gentiles were not part of God’s people.

¹ As we study this, we need to remember that being grafted into Israel does not mean that the gentiles have become Jewish. Jewishness is a term that is both a cultural and a genealogical title reserved only for the physical family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is a matter of physical descent.

3. *A Translation Problem*

- a. Some versions use “commonwealth” in 2:12.
- b. The Greek is “*politeis*” πολιτεις.

The Greek word in question is the word, *politeis* (πολιτεις) from *politeia*, (πολιτεια). A number of the uses of this word, especially in secular literature, point to the fact that “citizenship” is the best translation.²

Furthermore, we need to realize that a commonwealth in the Roman world (if, indeed, there was one) may not necessarily carry the same characteristics as it does today. Therefore, we prefer “citizenship” as a translation of *politeis*.

C. **Gentiles Were Strangers to the Covenants of the Promise. 2:12 16**

1. The covenants of promise are those legally binding agreements that define what it means to be united in a relationship both with God and with His people.
2. At the least this would refer to the Covenant with Abraham.
3. By referring to them in the plural, Paul probably meant all of the covenants which are associated with Israel: Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and Renewed.
4. In reality, all of them were dependent upon the first, the Abrahamic covenant, wherein God gave the promises of blessing to His people. This is hinted at by the Greek saying, “the covenants of the promise.” The first basic covenant between God and Israel was the Abrahamic and the rest of the covenants are outworkings of that one.
5. We read that the gentiles were “strangers” to these covenants. The Greek word for “stranger,” *xenos* (ξενος), is a word that denotes one from a “foreign country.”³
The use of this word, therefore, is quite appropriate. Since they were separate from Israel, they were excluded from those agreements that defined Israel, i.e., the covenants. So, by this definition, they were indeed, foreigners.

D. **Gentiles Were Excluded from a Meaningful Relationship with God. 2:12**

1. The text words it like this: they were a people “having no hope and without God in the world.”
2. This sums up the entire problem they had. Being without the true God means having no hope.

II. SOLUTION TO THE GENTILES’ PROBLEMS 2:13–18

Yeshua is the Answer!

A. **He Brought People Near. 2:13**

1. “Being In Messiah” — Implies a personal relationship.
The word translated “in” could also equally be rendered “by.” It was by means of a personal relationship with Messiah that gentiles are brought near.
2. Bringing one near to God is sacrificial language.
The Greek word “near” (*engus*, εγγυς) is the equivalent of the Hebrew *karov*, קרוב. Sacrifices in Hebrew are *karovim*. They are given by God so that people can come near to Him. Moreover, the mention of the blood of Messiah seals the interpretation.
3. Yeshua brought people near to God and to Israel by His sacrificial death and resurrection.

² H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, 525.

³ ξενος – Arndt and Gingrich, BDAG, 550.

4. *Karovim* can also refer to “family.” Perhaps Paul is hinting at the fact that through Yeshua and being related to Him Jews and gentiles are now *karovim*, family.

B. He is Our Peace. 2:14

Yeshua made Jewish believers and gentile believers into one people. We now have peace; the war is over! (More later on this!)

C. He Eliminated Barriers. 2:14–15

1. ***“The Law of Commandments” 2:15***

- a. By far, the most common understanding of these words is that they are a reference to the written Torah of Moshe.
- b. First, this would contradict Yeshua’s own statement in Matthew 5:17 that He did not abolish the Torah.
- c. Second, this interpretation would contradict what we know of the person who penned these words, Paul of Tarsus. He would never have suggested that Yeshua did away with the Torah by His death. The mere fact that he lived the Torah (See Acts 21:17–26) refutes asserting that Paul spoke or taught against the Torah.
- d. Finally, we should note, “the written Torah never demanded a wall between Jew and Gentile.”⁴

Tim Hegg notes that the Torah “gives very clear instructions against erecting barriers to separate Israel from the nations.”⁵ Indeed, both the Israelites⁶ and the foreigners were to share participation in matters of Torah and life. Look at the following examples of how the Israelites and the foreigners among them were to live together. This is just a partial list of the [possible passages.

Numbers 15:14–16 | Common Torah instructions in general

Exodus 12:19 Numbers 9:14 | Celebrating holy days the same way)

Leviticus 17:8–13 | The same instructions about bringing offerings)

Leviticus 18:26 | Living the same way

Joshua 8:33–35 | Both heard the same Torah at the covenant renewal ceremony with Joshua.

2. ***Rabbinic Oral Torah***

It seems that the best way to understand these words is to interpret them to mean the rabbinic oral tradition, not the written teachings of Moshe.

- a. Tim Hegg provides important linguistic and literary evidence to suggest that “the dividing wall which was abolished by [Messiah] was none other than those rabbinic laws [*italics ours*] which had enforced a separation between Jew and Gentile in opposition to the written Torah.”
- b. The practical outworking of the rabbinic laws of purity raised a strong wall of separation between the observant Jew and the non-Jew.

⁴ Hegg, “What Does *πληρωσαι* Mean”, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.* A good portion of Hegg’s rabbinic sources is found in the Mishnah (Pesachim 8:8; Sheklim 8:1; Oholot 18:7, 9; Shabbat 9:1; and Avodah Zerah 3:6).

- c. According to oral Torah mere contact with non-Jews could render a person unclean, as well as contact with the residence of a non-Jew or with land outside the Land of Israel. Clearly the oral Torah of the 1st Century functioned to separate Jew and Gentile in a dramatic way.⁷
- d. Therefore, we understand that it was the application of the oral Torah as it was understood in the 1st century by many Jewish religious teachers that was a chief expression of the growing enmity that existed between Jews and gentiles.

Hence, the phrase “the law of commandments” is a reference not to biblical instruction, but rather to Jewish or rabbinic religious law and application of the Bible.

3. “*The Physical Barrier*”⁸ 2:14

- a. There is a second, more popular, understanding of this passage in Ephesians. This suggestion sees the words, “the barrier of the dividing wall” in 2:14, as a reference to the barrier wall that was erected in the Temple courtyard during the Second Temple Period.

- b. One commentary says that this is

the four-foot wall that marked the outer court of the Israelite temple....⁹ Gentiles were allowed in the outer court but were forbidden from the inner court — on pain of death. As signs within the temple warned, “No foreigner is to enter within the balustrade and forecourt around the sacred precinct. Whoever is caught will himself be responsible for (his) consequent death.”¹⁰

The penalty of death for any gentile who breached the perimeter marked by this temple wall made it truly a point of hostility, as Paul describes it. Thus, while gentiles were able to enjoy the blessing of the temple to a degree, their non-Jewish status preventing them from taking full advantage of this central element of Jewish worship. It was not their temple.¹¹

- c. Even though the barrier might not be what Paul was talking about, it serves as a good illustration of the deep-seated hatred between Jews and gentiles in the late 2nd Temple Period.

Over time, the barrier became symbolic of an attitude of hatred and enmity that grew between Jews and gentiles. The rules and regulations that governed the use of this wall — including the death penalty for any gentile who trespassed beyond it — were inventions of a late Second Temple Period rabbinic mind-set that was (for the most part) filled with enmity against gentiles as a whole.

4. *The Main Barrier — Hatred* 2:15

⁷ Hegg, *op. cit.* 18.

⁸ Many of these thoughts on the middle wall of partition were gleaned from a personal interview with Dr. John Fischer on 15 May 1997 in Jerusalem, as well as from Tim Hegg’s unpublished paper delivered at a session of the Evangelical Theological Society.

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.11.5 §§417–418; Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.5.2 §§193–194.

¹⁰ Bock, 77; Hannah Cotton, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, vol. 1: *Jerusalem*, no. 2.

¹¹ Constantine R. Campbell, *The Letter to the Ephesians (The Pillar New Testament Commentary)*, 113.