

What is a Gentile?

Is the word “Gentile” a negative term? Does it refer to pagans and idolaters? Is it a term that non-Jewish believers should feel comfortable with?

BY TOBY JANICKI

A popular notion in the Messianic movement today teaches that the term “Gentile” always refers to pagans. This presents major identity problems for those of us (myself included) who are Gentile by birth. We wonder ... “If Gentile means pagan, and we are not ethnically Jewish, then what should we call ourselves? Where does that leave us?”

It doesn't help when we discover that there is even an ancient blessing which now also appears in the Jewish siddur: “Blessed are You, O LORD, our God, King of the universe, who did not make me a Gentile.”¹ If Jews are thanking God for not making them Gentiles, why then would Gentiles in Messiah want to be labeled as such?

In this article we will examine the history of the term “Gentile,” in the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, in Second-Temple Judaism, and in the language of the apostles. We will discover that the term has a variety of definitions and applications. It is not the equivalent of the word “pagan,” but, in fact, it was the apostles' term of choice for referring to non-Jews in Messiah.

Holy Goyim

In the Hebrew the word for gentile is *goy* (גוי, pl. *goyim*). Marcus Jastrow's dictionary of rabbinic Hebrew explains that *goy* was used to refer to a

And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation [*goy kadosh*].

“crowd, nation, people, gentile,” and was even a designation for an “idolater.”² However, in Biblical Hebrew—that is, in the Tanach—its primary definition is “nation” or “people.”³ For example, we find it used this way in its first biblical occurrence in Genesis 10:5:

From these the coastland peoples [goyim] spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations [goyim]. (Genesis 10:5)

Later on in Genesis it is used in describing both Abraham’s offspring, “I will make of you a great nation (goy)” (Genesis 12:2); and of Ishmael’s, “I will make him into a great nation (goy)” (Genesis 17:20).⁴ In fact the nation of Israel is called a *goy* in the Torah. One of the strongest examples of this is found in Exodus 19:6:

And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation [goy kadosh]. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.⁵

Here, Israel is literally called a “holy *goy*.” Therefore, in biblical Hebrew, the word “*goy*” is not disparaging or condescending. Even in the rebuke of the prophets, it simply means “nation” or “people.”

Behold, I am bringing against you a nation [goy] from afar, O house of Israel, declares the LORD. It is an enduring nation [goy]; it is an ancient nation [goy], a nation [goy] whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say. (Jeremiah 5:15)

Clements, in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, comments on the use of *goy* at the close of the Biblical period:

In a usage in which Israel could declare itself as a goy, there was clearly no possibil-

ity of the term taking on a completely hostile religious meaning, although development in this direction does begin to emerge.⁶

Transition Period

One of the definitions for *goy* in rabbinic Hebrew is “idolater,” a connotation that began to form during the intertestamental period. Even though *goy* is used in the Torah to describe Israel as a nation, later Jewish books of the Tanach developed a preference for *am* (“nation,” אֵם) and *mishpachah* (“family,” משפחה) over *goy*. One of the contributing factors to this was the fact that after the Babylonian captivity, Israel was no longer a *goy* in the sense of a political or territorial entity. Clements comments again:

The tendency to regard the non-Israelite nations adversely on account of their religion, combined with Israel’s own political misfortunes, lent a distinctive coloring to the term goyim. When this is viewed in conjunction with the preference found in the OT for Israel to describe itself as ‘am, “people,” and a mishpachah, “family,” rather than a goy, in view of the political overtones of the latter term, it is not difficult to see how the ground was prepared for the later Talmudic usage in which goy and goyim took on a specific and adverse meaning.⁷

During the late Second-Temple period, the prohibition on the marriage to the Canaanite nations in Deuteronomy 7:1–4 was reinterpreted to include all Gentile nations.⁸ Justifiably, Jews began to regard themselves as the sole proprietors of monotheism. Therefore, the other nations (*goyim*) were considered idolaters.

Dogs and Swine

Our Master had limited contact with non-Jews himself and shared common rabbinic attitudes towards them. In the *Talmud* there is a specific prohibition on teaching idolaters Torah.⁹

Yeshua seems to have been of a similar persuasion in Matthew 7:6:

Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

Samuel Lachs points out that “pearls” and “what is holy” refers to teachings of Torah,¹⁰ and additionally “dogs” and “swine” appears in rabbinic literature as referring to Samaritans and Gentiles.¹¹ Lachs suggests that the sentiment behind Yeshua’s dogs-and-pigs-saying is the rabbinic prohibition on teaching Torah to Gentiles.¹²

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The Master appears to continue these sentiments in dealing with the Gentile Syrophenician woman:

And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then

Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:22–26)

Once again he compares a Gentile to a dog.¹³ C.S. Lewis takes note of the brash reply to this Gentile woman:

I think to myself that the shocking reply to the Syrophenician woman (it came alright in the end) is to remind all us Gentile Christians—who forget it easily enough or flirt with anti-Semitism—that the Hebrews are spiritually senior to us, that God did entrust the descendants of Abraham with the first revelation of Himself.¹⁴

Gentiles may feel disoriented by passages like these, but the Master’s words must be balanced against the full context of his vision for the Gentile nations.¹⁵

The Mission to the Gentiles

While he was among us, the Master focused his mission specifically on the House of Israel, i.e., the Jewish people.

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles [ethnos, ἔθνος¹⁶] and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matthew 10:5–6)

Remember that the covenants of God were made with Israel and not with the nations. Outside of Israel, Gentiles have no relation to God’s promises and covenants. The book of Hebrews reiterates the exclusive province of the New Covenant by quoting Jeremiah 31:31–32:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house

of Judah ... For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord ... they shall be my people. (Hebrews 8:8–10)

If the nations were going to find a place at the table of God, it would have to be done within the context of the family of Israel. This would come through the Messiah. Even from his birth, Yeshua was promised to be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.”¹⁷ Before leaving his disciples, he revealed his plan to bring the nations to the Father through himself:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Mathew 28:19–20)

Yeshua was calling his Jewish disciples to deliver his teachings to the Gentiles of the world. Additionally, he called upon them to immerse the Gentiles, corresponding to the Jewish practice of *tevilah* (“ritual immersion,” טבילה).¹⁸ Note that in rabbinic law, Gentiles did not receive immersion except upon conversion. There is an interesting discussion in the *Talmud* about what constitutes a full proselyte:

Our Rabbis taught: “If a proselyte was circumcised but had not performed the prescribed ritual ablution, R. Eliezer said, ‘Behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that our forefathers were circumcised and had not performed ritual ablution’. If he performed the prescribed ablution but had not been circumcised, R. Joshua said, ‘Behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that the mothers had performed ritual immersion but had not been circumcised.’” (b. Yevamot 46a)

One of the definitions for *goy* in rabbinic Hebrew is “idolater.”

At the end of the discussion, the Sages ruled that one must have both circumcision and immersion to be considered a true convert. Nevertheless, this passage records an opinion to the effect that one only had to be immersed. (This stands to reason since circumcision only applies to half of the human species.) In light of this discussion, Matthew 28 should be understood to indicate that a Gentile immersed in Messiah attains a status different from that of one outside of Messiah. While not a formal, legal conversion in the halachic sense, the immersion does indicate that some type of conversion has taken place. Immersion always signified a change of status and most often a change from unclean to clean. Jonathan Draper sees the theme of a sort of initiation/inclusion meal for Gentiles who have come to Messiah and have been immersed in the Jewish-Christian writings of the *Didache*.¹⁹ The Gentile immersed in Messiah is purified and has undergone a change of legal status.

Peter’s Vision

The transformation and purification of the Gentile believer in Messiah is illustrated in the story of Peter’s vision in Acts 10. An issue for Jew-Gentile relations in the days of the apostles was the uncleanness of Gentile dwellings. According to rabbinic halachah it was forbidden to enter, let alone eat, in a Gentile’s house.²⁰ Though the full reason for and history of this prohibition is a bit obscure, it probably related to ritual impurity, idolatry, food issues, and a general fear that Jewish people would be led astray if they fellowshiped in Gentile houses. Following his trip to Cornelius’ house,

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Peter proclaims to his Jewish brothers:

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:15–18)

You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean ... Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:28, 34–35)

We know that Peter both oversaw the immersion of Cornelius and the other Gentiles present (Acts 10:48) and that he ate with them (Acts 11:2–3). As a God-fearer and a believer in Messiah, Cornelius was no longer considered an idolater and unclean. He was to be received into full fellowship with the believing Jewish community.²¹ As a Gentile, he had made repentance and turned to the God of Israel and his only son Yeshua, and he was now purified.

Peter’s experience with Cornelius is retold throughout the book of Acts. The anecdote serves as a *ma’aseh* (מעשה), i.e., a ruling on halachah based on the occurrence of an actual event, that permits entering the houses of and eating with the uncircumcised believers in Yeshua.²² Peter was the Master’s chief disciple and therefore his behavior carried enormous weight for the believers in Jerusalem.²³ If he did something, his reputation was so strong that it could be considered as permitted. Peter then takes his *ma’aseh* of the cleansing of Gentiles in Messiah to the Jerusalem Council, and a subsequent ruling is passed by James.²⁴

Still Gentiles?

Gentiles have full access to God and his covenants through Yeshua without the need of formal conversion. In a sense, through Messiah, God has redeemed the term “Gentile.” But should they still be called Gentiles?

The Greek word commonly translated as “Gentiles” in the Gospels and Epistles is the word *ethnos* (ἔθνος). In the Septuagint, *ethnos* is used to translate both *am* (“nation”) and *goy* (“gentile”).²⁵ It is up to the translator to decide which word the context best dictates, and this article has followed the standards of the ESV.

Ethnos has a semantic value equivalent to the English word “ethnicity.” Therefore, when reading “Gentile,” in the Apostolic Writings it should be seen as a synonym for “ethnicity.”

Karl Schmidt points out that throughout the Apostolic Writings we do find the term Gentile used both in the sense of “pagan” but also as a designation for those who were non-Jewish, i.e., distinct from native-born Israel in Messiah.²⁶ For example, the apostles at times used the term Gentile as an equivalent for heathen:

Not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God. (1 Thessalonians 4:5)

The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensu-

ality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. (1 Peter 4:3)²⁷

Yet Paul also uses the term to designate non-Jews who have come to know Messiah:

To the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria. (Acts 15:23)

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Ephesians 3:6)

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles. (Ephesians 3:1)²⁸

In apostolic vernacular, Gentiles are still called Gentiles even after coming to Messiah, yet at the same time the connotation of “pagan” is sometimes retained in the context. This creates a difficult dichotomy in definition, but it is one with which the apostles were comfortable operating. The bigger issue, for Paul at least, was the spiritual state of the individual:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11–12)

Here Paul describes the technical process of conversion (i.e., circumcision and immersion) in spiritual terms. This conversion is not accomplished by hands but by faith in God. Commenting on Paul’s words in Ephesians 2:19 that Gentiles in Messiah are “no longer strangers and aliens,” Rabbi Lichtenstein states, “For now they were complete proselytes

through faith in the righteous Messiah.”²⁹ Paul continues on this theme of spiritual conversion in Romans:

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. (Romans 2:28–29)

In Yeshua, we all become “Jewish” in the spiritual sense of the word, but this in no way makes Gentile believers Jewish in the flesh, i.e., physically. Nor does it diminish the legal and practical distinctions between a legally Jewish person and a Gentile believer. For example, in Romans chapter three Paul emphasizes the uniqueness of the Jewish people:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. (Romans 3:1–2)

But he ends the chapter by constructing a short midrash on the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).³⁰ He writes:

Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one. (Romans 3:29)

In other words if God is truly one then he is the God of all: both Jews and Gentiles. To eliminate that distinction is to trample on the central creed of Judaism and to do that is to limit God.

Conclusion

It is an expression of God’s love of humanity for him to extend salvation to those outside Israel and draw them in. Those of us from the nations should be proud to be Gentile. After all, this is who God has made us. The gathering of

the nations is a fulfillment of Messiah's death on the cross, and salvation can now be brought to anyone who will turn to him.

The word "Gentile" is not a negative term, nor does it refer to idolaters in any essential way. Although it has had various implications in different contexts, its primary meaning is that of "one from the nations." This is the designation that the apostles used to distinguish non-Jewish believers from Jewish believers. If it was good enough for them, it should be good enough for us. However, we should always bear in mind that a Gentile in Messiah is not the same legally or spiritually as one outside of Messiah. Gentiles in Messiah have been purified and brought into the "commonwealth of Israel" (Ephesians 2:12).

In the forthcoming Vine of David Siddur, we have added an alternate blessing for Gentile believers to recite in place of the standard "who has not made me a Gentile" blessing: "Blessed are You, O LORD, our God, King of the universe, who has given even to Gentiles the repentance to life." This blessing is based on the one uttered by the apostles in Jerusalem after Peter reiterated to them the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles. In Acts 11:18 it says that upon hearing the news they "they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'" "They glorified God" is a term often used in the Apostolic Writings for pronouncing a blessing. Gentiles can recite this blessing with pride and assurance that they, like their Jewish brethren, have been made according to the Father's Divine will.³¹

Those of us from the nations should be proud of who God created us to be. We have an important opportunity to be a light for HaShem and his kingdom. Together with our Jewish brothers and sisters in Messiah, we can work towards establishing Messiah's kingdom and the rule of Torah, while at the same time accepting our own unique role. 

Endnotes

- 1 y.*Brachot* 9:2; b.*Menachot* 43b (note some manuscripts have "who has made me an Israelite" instead); t.*Brachot* 6:18. It is probable that it was recited in some form in the first century.
- 2 Marcus Jastrow, "גו," *Dictionary of Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi, Midrashic Literature and Targumim* 1:220.
- 3 F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, "גו," *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* 156–157.
- 4 Cf. Esau in Genesis 21:18 and Jacob in Genesis 46:30.
- 5 Peter echoes this exact (Israel-specific) language for the Gentile believers in 1 Peter 2:9.
- 6 Clements, "גו," *TDOT* 2:426–433.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 432.
- 8 b.*Avodah Zarah* 36b. See Theodore Friedman, "Gentile," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2nd Edition) 7:485–487.
- 9 E.g., b.*Chagigah* 13a.; *Song of Songs Rabbah* 2:17; *Exodus Rabbah* 47:1. The prohibition was generally seen as referring to the Oral Law.
- 10 Samuel T. Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1987), 138–140. E.g., *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:8; b.*Chagigah* 3a.
- 11 *Genesis Rabbah* 81:13, 55:1; *Leviticus Rabbah* 13:5; Philo of Alexandria calls some antagonists of Israel dogs (*Every Good Man is Free* 90). Note also that wicked of Israel are referred to as dogs as well in *Midrash Tehillim* 4 and the church father Ignatius refers to heretics as "ravenous dogs" (*Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* 7:1). Therefore the term is not a racist one but rather a way to refer to the wicked and idolatrous. Cf. Philippians 3:2 and the discussion of Mark Nanos in "Paul's Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles 'Dogs' (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging and Exegetical Dog?" n. p. [cited June 08, 2009]. Online: <http://www.marknanos.com/Phil3Dogs-Reverse-1-17-08.pdf>.
- 12 Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament*, 138–140.
- 13 Lachs cites a midrash that "compares the righteous to the guests at a wedding banquet invited to the king's table, and the wicked heathen to the dogs who obtain the crumbs that fall there from." *Ibid.*, 249.
- 14 Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, *The Quotable Lewis* (Carol stream, IL: Tyndale Publishing House, 1990), 348.
- 15 There are a few other passages in Matthew where it appears that Yeshua speaks disparagingly of non-Jews as well; such as in 5:47, where he states that "if you greet only your brothers, what more

- are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” or “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do” (6:7). It should be noted though that in both those passages as well as in 18:17, the Greek word is *ethnikoi* (εθνικοί), whereas elsewhere when Matthew speaks of Gentiles he uses *ethnos* (εθνος) such as in 10:5. The word *ethnikoi* only appears in these three Matthean passages and Galatians 2:14 and 3 John 7. Lachs writes, “It is likewise significant that Jerome, when translating the Matthean passages where *ethnikoi* appears, renders it by *ethnici*, while in Galatians 2:14 and 3 John 7, he translates it by *gentibus*. Presumably Jerome realized that *ethnikoi* was not employed by Matthew as a general term for the non-Jew, rather it designated a specific group within the Jewish people.” He also points out that the Roman emperor Justinian uses *ethnikoi* to refer to the “provincials.” Therefore he speculates that the term refers in Matthew to the rabbinic term *am ha'aretz* (“people of the land,” עַם הָאָרֶץ), i.e., the Jewish population who were generally ignorant of the Torah. He further explains that “brothers” (αδελφοί) in Matthew 5:47 would correspond to the Hebrew *chaver* (“associate, colleague,” חֵבֵר) which is the antithesis to the *am ha'aretz* in the rabbinic world. See Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament*, 109–110 and Lachs, “Studies in the Semitic Background to the Gospel of Matthew,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 67 (1977): 195–217.
- 16 The Greek word *ethnos* is variously used in the Septuagint to translate both *am* and *goy*. It is therefore up to the translator to decide if the passage fits the context of Gentile or nation. Throughout this article we have rendered it according to the ESV.
- 17 Luke 2:25–32.
- 18 William Sanford LaSor, “Discovering What Jewish Miqva’ot Can Tell Us About Christian Baptism,” *Biblical Archeological Review* 13:1(1987): 52–59.
- 19 *Didache* 9–10. See Jonathan Draper, “The Holy Vine of David Made Known to the Gentiles through God’s Servant Jesus: ‘Christian-Judaism’ in the *Didache*,” *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 257–283.
- 20 m. *Oholot* 18:7. Cf. Luke 7:6–7. The Gentile centurion probably assumed that the Master, as a Torah-observant Jewish sage, would not enter into a Gentile’s house.
- 21 There is a church tradition Peter did not eat with Gentiles unless they repented and were immersed (*Clementine Homilies* 13:4).
- 22 *Ma’aseh* translates as “it once happened,” see m. *Berachot* 1:1, 2:5; m. *Sukkah* 2:5; b. *Yevamot* 46b; Menachem Elon, “*Ma’aseh*,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2nd Edition) 13:308–312; and Joseph Shulam and Hilliary LeCornu, *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Acts* (Jerusalem, Israel: Academ, 2003), 609, 829–830.
- 23 The Master indicates this when he gives Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:17–19) and then appears to him first after his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:4).
- 24 Acts 15.
- 25 G. Abbott-Smith, “εθνος,” *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* 129–130.
- 26 Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “εθνος, εθνικός,” *TDNT* 2:369–372.
- 27 See also 1 Corinthians 5:1, 12:2; 1 Peter 2:12; 1 John 3:7; and throughout Revelation.
- 28 See also Acts 15:23; Romans 16:4.
- 29 Yechiel Tzvi Lichtenstein, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (trans. Robert Morris; Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, forthcoming) on Acts 15:7
- 30 Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 179–192.
- 31 Although the blessing “who has not made me a Gentile” seems to imply a low opinion of those from the nations, this blessing should not be understood as denigrating or condescending. As with the blessing “who has not made me a woman,” the intent is to praise God for the obligation to perform the commandments—something traditional Judaism does not view as incumbent upon non-Jews and only partially incumbent on women.

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