

A Study into the Meaning of the Word “Gentile” as Used in the Bible

by Curtis Clair Ewing

A few years ago the writer was in the home of a friend, and as I looked over her books I saw that she had one of these large dictionaries that are usually found only in public libraries. I said to her, “May I use your dictionary?” I knew that she had always been interested in the correct use of words, so I thought that this would be a good way to start a conversation regarding our identity with Israel. I turned the pages to find the word “gentile.” Immediately the lady asked, “What is the word you are looking for?” I replied, “I am looking up the word ‘gentile’.” Then she wanted to know what the dictionary had to say. I gave her to understand that if the dictionary was correct she couldn’t possibly be a gentile, which she had always claimed to be. Then I read her this definition. “A gentile is a pagan or a heathen or some one who is not a Jew or a Christian.” “Now,” I said, “since you are a Christian, you cannot possibly be a gentile.” She was rather startled at what I told her. Then I went into the meaning of that same word as used in the Bible, and you may be assured that before I was through she had many of her long-established ideas upset.

A great deal of confusion and misunderstanding has been caused by the use of the word “gentile” in the English translation of the Bible. Let us take up a brief study of it. It should always be remembered that foreign languages often lose the strength of their meaning through translation. Then it should also be remembered that some words have many meanings.

Take the word *man* as an illustration. Generically speaking, it means *mankind* generally, both men and women. But if it is used in the same sentence with the word *woman*, it means the *male* of the species. If it is used in the same sentence with the word *boy* it means the *mature* of the species. Thus the word *man* has three meanings, the meaning of the word being determined by its use in the context.

The word *gentile* is a translation of the Hebrew word *goi* (singular) and *goyim* (plural) and the Greek word *ethnos* (singular) and *ethne* (plural). Using the word *gentile* to translate these words is often misleading because it is a misapplication of the Hebrew and Greek words as used in the Bible. The modern use of the word has come to mean *non-Jew* or *non-Israel*, but that meaning cannot be maintained in the face of the evidence I will present in this study.

The Hebrew word *goi* is a collective noun meaning *nation* or sometimes a collective body of people. But it has been translated into English many different ways. The word occurs 557 times in the Old Testament. The Authorized Version of the Bible translates it *gentile* 30 times; *heathen* 142 times; *nation* 373 times; *people* 11 times; *another* once. But the American Standard Revised Version cuts the occurrence of *gentile* from 30 to 9 times, and then shows in the footnotes of 5 of those 9 times that the word *nations* should have been used.

Of course the word *nation* is not always an exact equivalent term because there is too much of a political significance attached to it. But it is much better than the word *gentile* and some of our best translators prefer the word *nations*. This is also shown by the way the Revised Version eliminates the word *gentiles*.

The same thing is true of the Greek word *ethnos*. It occurs 164 times in the New Testament. In the Authorized Version it is translated *gentiles* 93 times; *heathen* 5 times; *nation or nations* 64 times; and *people* twice. In the American Standard Revised Version it is *gentiles* 96 times in the altogether. But in the footnotes it is corrected 15 times to read *nations*, making the final count 88. So not only the Hebrew word *goi* but also the Greek word *ethnos* has been translated to read *nations* more than any other word.

Though the word *gentiles* and the word *heathen* are used many times in the Bible. We must face the facts that there are no Hebrew or Greek words that would demand this translation. If the reader will consult a good dictionary, he will find that the word *gentile* is derived from the Latin word *gentilis* and properly understood means *non-something*. As used by a Jew or an Israelite it would mean *non-Jew* or *non-Israelite*. But they are not the only people who have a right to use the word.

For instance, suppose a Buddhist priest spoke Latin and he wanted to refer to the nations that were not Buddhist, he would call them *gentilis*. In Hebrew and Greek, there is no exact equivalent to the Latin word *gentilis* or the English word *gentile*. Nevertheless, if this same priest spoke Hebrew and Greek along with his Latin and wanted to refer to the nations that were not Buddhist, he would call them *goyim* if speaking Hebrew and *ethne* if speaking Greek, and each time he would naturally include the Jewish and Israel people. Likewise a Moslem priest could use the three languages and refer to the Jews and Israel as *gentilis*, *goyim* and *ethne*.

One important thing to always keep in mind is that *goi* and *ethnos* are collective nouns and cannot properly be translated to mean an individual person. They always refer to a group. There is no such thing as A GENTILE; it is always plural. *Gentiles* in its plural sense may at times be used to translate *goi* and *ethnos* but its use gives an added thought not intended in the original word which cannot in every case be justified.

Another important word found in the Hebrew text, which needs only passing notice is the Hebrew word *am* and is found many times in the Old Testament text. It is translated *nation* but 17 times. It is usually translated *people*, for it occurs that way 1,835 times in our English text. Occasionally it is qualified by the phrase, "every people," but when it is rendered "the people" it usually means Israel. But this is not the word that has been the source of misunderstanding. Translations of the Hebrew word *goi* and the Greek word *ethnos* have caused the trouble. The Hebrew word *goi* and the Greek word *ethnos* in their singular and plural forms

1. *In referring to the Israel and Jewish people*, let us note the verses which follow below found in the Old Testament and New Testament which refer either to Israel or the Jews as a nation and use the Hebrew word *goi* and the Greek word *ethnos*. To demonstrate the absurdity of always translating the word *goi* or *ethnos* as *gentile* we suggest that you read the following verses substituting the word *gentile* or *heathen*, for *nation* or *nations*:

Gen. 12:2— “I will make of thee a great nation.” (“a great gentile”???)

Gen. 17:4,5— “. . .thou [Abraham] shalt be a father of many nations.” (“father of many gentiles”?)

Gen. 20:4— “Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?” (Substitute *heathen* here.)

Gen. 25 :23— “Two nations are in thy womb.” (Try the word *heathen* or *gentile* in this verse.)

Gen. 35:11— “. . .a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee”

Gen. 48:19— “. . .his [Ephraim’s] seed shall become a multitude of nations.”

Isa. 1:4— “Ah, sinful nation [referring to the people of Judah], a people laden with iniquity.”

Isa. 10:6— “Send him against an hypocritical nation.” Jer. 31 :36— “Israel... shall cease from being a nation before me.” (Try *gentile*!)

Luke 7:5— “He loveth our nation and hath built us a synagogue.”

John 11:48— “. . .and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.”

John 11:50— “. . .that one man should die for the people and that the whole nation perish not.”

Acts 24 :2— “. . .very worthy deeds are done unto this nation by thy providence.”

Acts 24:17— [Paul speaking:] “I came to bring alms to my nation, and offerings.”

From the foregoing verses and many others that could be given, it can easily be seen that the Hebrew word *goi* and the Greek word *ethnos* do not always refer to non-Israel people.

2. Now let us read a few verses where the same words are used and, as can be seen, *refer very definitely to non-Israel people*.

Gen. 14:9— “With Chedorlaomer the king of Elam, and with Tidal king of nations.”

Gen. 21:13— “And also the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation.”

Gen. 21:18— [Speaking of Ishmael, God says:] “. . .for I will make of him a great nation.”

Ex. 9:21”... There was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.”

Ex. 34:24: “. . .for I will cast out the nations before thee.”

Isa. 37:12— “Have the gods of the nations delivered them which my fathers have destroyed...?”

Matt. 10:5— “. . .Go not into the way of the gentiles...”

Matt. 21 :7— “. . .For nation shall rise against nation...”

Luke 21:24— “They shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations...”

Acts 7:7— “And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God.”

Acts 8:9— “But there was a certain man called Simon which before time in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the *people* of Samaria.”

In the above verses, three words have been used to translate the same Greek word (*ethnos*), and they are *nations*, *gentiles* and *people*.

3. Now we come to the third way in which the words have been used, and that is to describe all nations, which of course always includes Israel and non-Israel nations.

Gen. 22:18— “And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”

Gen. 25:23— “Two nations are in thy womb...”

1 Chron. 16:23, 24— “Declare his glory among the *heathen*... his marvelous works among all *nations*.”

Psa. 9:19, 20— “...let me *heathen* be judged in thy sight. Put them in fear, oh Lord; that the *nations* may know themselves to be but men.”

Notice the last two verses have used the two words *heathen* and *nations* to translate the same Hebrew word (*goyim*) in one passage.

Matt. 24:9,14— “...and ye shall be hated of all *nations* for my name’s sake.”... “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations...”

Matt. 28:19— “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations...”

Acts 10:35— “But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”

Attention should also be called to another Greek word erroneously translated *gentiles*. The word is *hellen* and means *Greeks*. It is used 27 times in the New Testament. In places in the Authorized Version it is erroneously translated *gentiles*. This has been corrected in the Revised Version and nearly all subsequent translations. For example, the Authorized Version translates John 7 :35 to read: “Will he go unto the dispersed among the Gentiles, and teach the Gentiles?” Nearly all revised versions translate this to read: “Will he go unto the dispersed among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?”

Take as another example 1 Corinthians 10:32, “Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.” Now the writer has read several articles by wellknown Bible teachers who reject the Israel identity of the Anglo-Saxon people because they say that this verse gives the only classes that God now recognizes. In other words, they claim on the authority of this verse that the human race is divided into Jews, Gentiles and the church of God.

That is a good example of how anything can be proved by taking a verse out of its context. The context shows that Paul was admonishing people to be conscientious in their walk so as not to offend a weak brother. The division made in the text is only incidental to the point he was trying to make. And then too, the text does not say that there are *only* three classes of people. What it does say is, “*Give none offence*, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.”

Now if this text were given to show a division of humanity, then it leaves the vast majority of the race out entirely, because the word that is translated *gentiles* is a palpable mistranslation of *hellen*, and should be translated *Greeks*. So, if, as these men have claimed, this verse proves there are only three classes of people in the world which God now recognizes, then they are the Jews, the Greeks and the Christians. Everybody else is left out.

By using the same method of reasoning we could quote Galatians 3:28 and prove that God does not recognize any distinction in the human race; then we could go to the other extreme and quote Colossians 3:11 to prove that God recognizes eight divisions of mankind. In both

cases we would be taking the verses out of their context just as these men have done. But all of the confusion over this text would have been avoided if the word *Greeks* had been used instead of *gentiles*. Paul was writing to the Corinthians. Corinth was in Greece. They had three classes of people there — Jew, Greek and Christian. Had Paul been writing offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Romans, nor to the church of God.”

Beside these two examples, there are four other places where *hellen* has been translated *gentiles* where it should have been translated *Greeks*. These are found in Romans 2:9, 10; 3:9; and 1 Corinthians 12:13. While on this subject, a few words should be said about the way the word *gentiles* has been used in the epistle to the Romans, one of the important books in the New Testament. And on this matter I will borrow some thoughts from the late Dr. William. Pascoe Goard.

In Dr. Goard’s book, *Epistle to the Romans*, he has given some illuminating comments on how the word *ethne* refers to the ten-tribed Israel. These are found in the fourth and fifth chapters of his book. He shows very clearly that chapters 9, 10 and 11 of Romans refer to ten-tribed Israel. In these chapters the Apostle Paul quotes quite freely from Hosea, Isaiah and Elijah, and as Dr. Goard shows, all these quotations refer to facts in the history of ten-tribed Israel, and not in the history of Judah nor in the history of any other nation. Thus when the word *gentiles* (Greek word *ethne*) is used in these three chapters it definitely is ten-tribed Israel. It is not a contrast between Israel and non-Israel people. It is a contrast between Israel in 975 B.C. and Israel known as “the nations” in A.D. 60.

Do not let the word *gentiles* mislead you. The Greek word is *ethne* and means *nations*. The Apostle Paul in this Israel section of his epistle is merely contrasting Israel’s former state when she was known as Israel with her state in his day when she was known as the *nations*. To use the popularized meaning of the word, they had become *gentilized* in the sense that they were not known as Israel. Israel was one nation God had called out from among the other nations; now she was just like the other nations.

She had lost her identity so much that the Apostle Paul said that blindness was to stay on Israel until the “fullness of the gentiles” (nations) be come in. (Romans 11:25.) *This fullness of the gentiles* should be translated *fullness of nations*. It is a direct reference to Genesis 48:19 where it is stated that Ephraim was to become a “multitude of nations” in the last days. This is confirmed by the fact that both Dr. Delitzsch’s translation of the New Testament into Hebrew— sold by the British and Foreign Bible Society—and Ginsburg-Salkinson’s New Testament, published by the very same Hebrew words—*me lo ha-goyim*—in Romans 11:25, that we find in Genesis 48:19 in the Hebrew Old Testament, and in this verse *only*.

We use the expression “multitude of nations” because it is given as the correct reading in most Bibles in preference to *fullness of nations*. In other words, Israel was to be blind to her identity until the tribe of Ephraim became a multitude of nations. That time has arrived now and that is the reason our identity as Israel is becoming known. As Isaiah 25:7 reads, “He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.” That veil is being lifted now and our real identity and the identity of other nations is becoming known.

Some scholars, in translating Genesis 48:19, where the Hebrew is *me lo ha goyim*, render it a *company of gentile nations*. The writer is convinced that a *company* or *multitude of nations* is the better translation. However, there is nothing wrong with the translation if the right meaning is attached to the word *gentile*. That is, Israel would become so much like other nations that they would not be recognized as Israel. That, of course, is a different meaning given to the word than is meant in the original text.

To summarize: the word *gentile* is derived from the Latin word *gentilis* and is only one of several words that are used to translate the Hebrew word *goi* and the Greek word *ethnos* into English. The best word to use is *nations*. It would have been better if the word *gentile* had never appeared in the English text. Neither *goi* nor *ethnos* necessarily mean non-Israel, as has been shown above.

SKM Editor's Note: Despite the several references in this tract where bible versions other than the King James Authorized Version have a better translation, we do not recommend these other versions as one's primary bible. More modern versions may occasionally have better translations of particular words, but the primary drawback of most all modern versions is that they are derived from different Greek manuscripts (in the New Testament) than was the KJV—manuscripts which were corrupted in the early centuries A.D.

For further information on this topic, see [Which Bible? Which Version?](#)