

Who were “the Jews” and “the Gentiles” of Scripture?

Generalizations Lead to Polarization Part 3

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As we continue in our search to better understand the terms “Jews” and “Gentiles”, we turn our attention today to “Gentiles.” This English word is used for several underlying Hebrew and Greek words, which give a different picture than just the one concept.

The current usage of the term refers to those who are not of Jewish heritage or practice. It was not always so. The use of the word “Gentile” for these various words dates back to about the 14th Century, being seen in the English dictionary first around 1513. As you may recall, many of our current Scripture translations date back to this time period. The most basic initial meaning “to be a nation or a tribe” had no bias or cultural baggage.

As you may recall, understanding of Hebrew words includes researching their various connections and root words, in effect, layering and building up understanding of a term. “Ger” and “Goy” are two such related words, which are often translated as Gentiles or nations. “Ger”, Strong’s #1481, as used in Genesis 12: 10 where Abram is referred to as one who journeyed there from Egypt and “dwelt there as a client,” which is the first use of this word. According to Vines Expository Dictionary a “client was not simply a foreigner or a stranger. He was a permanent resident, once a citizen of another land, who had moved into his new residence.”¹

According to Benner, the word “goy” has it’s pictographic history of being the letters “gam,” “vav” and “yad”, which refer to the foot, a tent peg and a hand. In it’s ancient meaning it referred to a nation; “the people of a nation as the back or the body.” As I understand this, the central concept of a tent peg represents security and strength, in this case attributed to the body as represented by hands and feet. It is translated in the KJV as people, heathen, nation, gentiles.”²

¹ Vines Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words; Vine, W. E.; Nelson Publishing, 1996, page 262.

² Ancient Hebrew Lexicon of the Bible; Benner, Jeff A.; Virtual Bookworm Publishing, 2005.

So Abram was a “ger” and Israel was originally considered “ger.” Over time, as the Israelite people began to comprehend their covenant status with YHWH, their calling to be set apart or holy, different from other nations, it began to be important to distinguish between them and outsiders. The concepts of clean and unclean became more important to them.

When referring to a specific group of people, “am” is often used however, “goy” or “goyim” the plural form, was often used to refer to many nations surrounding Israel.

Strong’s #1471 confirms this back ground as the word “goy” which is said to refer to “ a foreign nation; hence a Gentile; also figuratively, a troop of animals or a flight of locusts. Gentile, heathen, nation, people.” There is a connection with root words #1465 and #1460, meaning the back or by extension, the person or body; and the back or by analogy, the middle. This word in turn has a relationship with #1342 and #13454 meaning the hollow or curve of the back. This word group is also connected with the concepts of a body, carcass, corpse or dead body per the TWOT.³

If you have ever heard the expression that something was “built on the back of” the people or a group of people, usually minorities or those considered without political power, it may make more sense where this came from. It would certainly describe the Hebrew nation under the Pharaoh in Egypt who no longer remembered Joseph and enslaved them, building many monuments through their backbreaking labor.

In Deuteronomy 4: 6-7, “Moses speaks of the Israelite nation as a political, ethnic body (goy) which is a wise and understanding people. (am), existing as, and recognized by other nations as a specific national identity.”...Once the descendants of Abraham had become a distinct, recognized, political, and ethnic group of people who were in a specific covenant relationship with Yahweh, the term goy and goyim increasingly takes the meaning of “gentiles” or “heathen” in reference to the non-covenant, non-believing peoples considered as national groups.”⁴ This is about the time that the term “goy” or “goyim” took on a derogatory note, though it should not be so, as the nation of Israel still has the calling to be a blessing and take the Good News to the Jew first and then to...the nations!!!

By the First Century, as noted in Matthew 18: 17, we can see Yeshua/Jesus combining terms that are translated in various ways: heathen and publican (KJV), or gentile and tax collector (NIV) and the Greek Interlinear, which says gentile and tax collector.

³ Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT); Harris, Archer, Waldtke; Moody Publishers, 1980, page 154.

⁴ TWOT, page 153.

Moving into the Greek, we see the term “ethnos” Strong’s # 1484, as the term chosen to mean “a multitude or company”, then, a “multitude of people of the same nature or genus, a nation, people.” According to Vines, it is used of the Jews in Luke 7:5, 23: 2; John 11: 48, 50-52; and in the plural form for other nations in Matthew 4: 14; Roman’s 3: 29, 11:11, 15: 10, and Galatians 2: 8. Vines further notes that it is used of gentile converts occasionally as well. The words “hellen”, “ethnikos” and “laos” were used interchangeably for various categories of people groups or Gentiles.⁵

The whole picture gets even more interesting when you consider the terms “circumcision” and ‘uncircumcision ’ (Strong’s #4061) The Greek underlying these terms is “peritome” and “aperitome” but there is an additional category of “acrobustia” (Strong’s # 203) We need to understand that the term “circumcision” carried a lot of meaning in Judaism. To be of “the circumcised” generally referred to one’s Jewishness, meaning that not only was there physical circumcision, but also agreement to the observance of Torah. To be “uncircumcised” was a shorthand expression you might say, for one who wasn’t adhering to God’s ways; or one called pagan or heathen, or “gentiles.” The additional term, “acrobustia” carries the connotation of one who may be physically circumcised yet has a metaphorical sense that this is one in whom the corruption of the carnal flesh yet has power.⁶

There are two other important terms to understand:

ger tzadik: which means one who was born again, who walked in Torah (observes commandments of Yah) and had converted to Judaism with circumcision

ger toshav; which means a stranger or settler at the gate who is not circumcised yet walks in Torah.

So a gentile could now be one who is a proselyte or a convert to Judaism (*ger tzadik*), one who is circumcised (*peritome*), a God Fearer (*ger toshav*), a pagan, one is circumcised but not observing Torah and one who is just not circumcised (*aperitome*). All of these terms have been translated at various times as “Gentile” or nations, or people groups.

The term “acrobustia” is used of Cornelius in Acts 11 3 and is usually translated as Gentile, though he could be almost any of the above categories.

There is much more to learn in this study but hopefully this is enough to pique interest! It is not so simple to categorize either “the Gentiles” or “the Jews” as we have thought. Perhaps we can use the understanding to find our commonalities and universal need for our Messiah, Yeshua of Nazareth.

⁵ Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, pp 262-263

⁶ Vines, page 102.