

Gentile, Term

I am a non-Jewish Believer in the Messianic movement, and I am a bit disturbed at how I have encountered various Jewish Believers in my midst use the term “Gentile.” I am not at all trying to be ethnically or culturally Jewish in following Torah, even though I respect my fellow Jewish brothers and sisters, but I get a sense that the term “Gentile” is being used with some negative or pejorative sense. Is it not true that the term “Gentile” can actually mean “pagan”? Can you help me?

If you are a non-Jewish Believer within today’s Messianic movement, and have encountered the term “Gentile” being used in a less-than-neutral sense, then you are not at all alone. Many non-Jews in various Messianic quarters have seen the term “Gentile” used in a disparaging or negative sense. There are some important dynamics of this which need to be considered, regarding the contemporary speech of today’s Messianic Believers, as well as some little known facts from Biblical Studies regarding the Hebrew and Greek terms, often rendered as “Gentile(s),” which sit behind our English translations of the Bible. As it regards the common term “Gentile(s),” today’s broad Messianic community is significantly hampered by a lack of understanding the great importance of employing some degree of **inclusive language** in the terms it employs to speak of people, in general, which goes well beyond non-Jewish people groups.

Goy and Ethnos: “Gentile” or “Nation”?

In order to properly consider the issue surrounding the English term “Gentile,” every Bible reader needs to know the underlying Hebrew and Greek terms appearing in the source text, which are commonly rendered as such. We need to have appropriate definitions of the Hebrew word *goy* (גוי) and Greek word *ethnos* (ἔθνος), and have a good idea of how they were used in their original contexts.

The common Hebrew word that one will encounter, sometimes rendered as “Gentile” in older versions like the KJV, is the term *goy* (גוי). Its plural form, and possibly more common usage that you will encounter is *goyim* (גוים). The *HALOT* lexicon indicates that it relates to “**people**...whole population of a territory; עַם [am] rather stresses the blood relationship,” “**nation**,” “often the **pagan** peoples as opposed to Israel...the ‘**heathen**,’” “**people=persons.**”¹ The *BDB* lexicon states how *goy* means “nation, people,” “spec. of descendants of Abraham,” “definitely of Israel.”²

Witnessed in the Hebrew Tanach, *goy/goyim* has a wide array of uses. In its most neutral sense, *goy/goyim* means nation/nations. This can relate to the masses of Planet Earth, those outside of the bloodlines of Israel, the enemies of Israel, sheer pagans and idolaters, and it can even relate to the people of Israel itself. Regarding the progeny of Abraham, the Patriarch was told by God, “I will make you a great nation [*goy gadol*, גוי גדול], and I will bless you, and make your name great” (Genesis 12:2, NASU). The assembly of the Ancient Israelites gathered at Mount Sinai was told by the Lord, “you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation [*goy qadosh*, קדוש גוי]” (Exodus 19:6, NASU). The term *goyim* can even relate to the tribes of Israel, as Ezekiel 2:3 states, “I send you to the Children of Israel, to the rebellious nations [*el-goyim*, אֱל־גוֹיִם] that have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have defiantly sinned against Me; they and their fathers have defiantly sinned against Me to this very day”

¹ *HALOT*, 1:183.

² *BDB*, 156.

(ATS). Context in a Tanach passage where *goy/goyim* appears, ultimately determines the different contours of what is intended by its usage.

The Greek equivalent term for the Hebrew *goy* (גוי) is **ethnos** (ἔθνος), and is used fairly consistently in the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Tanach to render *goy/goyim*. The *BDAG* lexicon indicates how “(τὰ) ἔθνη [(*ta ethnē* are)] **people groups foreign to a specific people group**” which “corresp. to Heb. גוֹיִם [*goyim*] in LXX; a nationalistic expression.”³ Being concerned with both Biblical and classical usages of *ethnos*, the *LS* lexicon offers us with a variety of definitions, including: “a number of people accustomed to live together, a company, body of men,” “a nation, people,” “the nations, Gentiles, i.e. all but Jews and Christians.”⁴ *TDNT* further observes that *ethnos* can mean “mass,’ ‘multitude,’ ‘host,’ and may be used for a ‘herd’ or ‘swarm’ as well as a human group.”⁵

Unlike how the Hebrew *goy/goyim* is most always rendered in modern versions by the neutral nation/nations, usages of *ethnos* may considerably vary. Among modern versions *ethnos* will be translated as **both** “Gentile(s)” and “nation(s).” And it should not go unnoticed that in the LXX, when Ancient Israel was originally called in the Hebrew to be a *goy qadosh* (שׂוֹרֵי קָדוֹשׁ גוֹי) in Exodus 19:6, in the Greek it reads with *ethnos hagion* (ἔθνος ἅγιον). Just like with *goy/goyim*, context in a New Testament passage will determine what is intended by *ethnos*. Yet unlike *goy/goyim*, which modern versions tend to leave as nation/nations, we have the added complexity of seeing *ethnos* rendered in at least two different ways. This can, with some important passages, likely make reviewing their intended meaning(s) a bit more complicated.

Various general theological resources, in their entry for “Gentiles,” have noted some of the translation issues for *goy/goyim* and *ethnos*, that each of us needs to be conscious of when reading an English translation, and considering the source vocabulary:

- *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*: “The Hebrew *gōyim* [גוֹיִם] designates non-Jewish peoples, rendered by the AV as ‘nations’ or ‘heathen,’ by the RV frequently as ‘Gentiles.’ The ‘people,’ ‘am [אֲמ], is usually confined to Israel. The LXX makes a similar distinction between *ethnos* [ἔθνος] and *laos* [λαός]...”⁶
- *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*: “The Heb. *gōy* [גוֹי] is rendered ‘Gentiles’ in the AV in some thirty passages, but much more frequently ‘heathen,’ and still more often ‘nation,’ which is the usual rendering in later versions; but it is commonly used for a non-Israelite people, and thus corresponds to the meaning of ‘Gentiles.’..In the NT Gk. *ethnos* [ἔθνος] is the word corresponding to *gōy* [גוֹי] (usually rendered ‘Gentiles’ by the English versions)...The AV also renders Gk. *Hellēnes* [Ἑλλήνες] ‘Gentiles’ in six passages, but the RSV renders ‘Greeks’ throughout.”⁷

A notable definition of the Greek *ethnos* (ἔθνος) that need not overlook us, in evaluating this term, is provided by *BDAG*: “those who do not belong to groups professing faith in the God of Israel, **the nations, gentiles, unbelievers** (in effect=‘polytheists’).”⁸ This is a lexical definition where substantiation for viewing the nations/Gentiles in the Greek Apostolic Scriptures as “pagans,” would find some support. And indeed, in places like 1 Corinthians 5:1; 10:20, where a version like the NASU has “Gentiles,” the RSV and NIV has “pagans”:

“It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even **among the Gentiles** [*en tois ethnesin*, ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν], that someone has his father’s wife...No, but I say that the things **which the Gentiles sacrifice** [*hoti ha thuousin*, ὅτι ἃ θύουσιν; lit. ‘that what they sacrifice,’ HCSB]⁹, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons” (1 Corinthians 5:1; 10:20, NASU).

³ *BDAG*, 276.

⁴ *LS*, 226.

⁵ K.L. Schmidt, “*ethnos*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abrid. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 201.

⁶ Richard E. Higginson, “Gentiles,” in Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), 235.

⁷ A. van Selms, “Gentile,” in *ISBE*, 2:443.

⁸ *BDAG*, 276.

⁹ Most modern Bibles (RSV, NASU, NRSV, ESV, CJB) follow the textual variant *ha thousin ta ethnē* (ἃ θύουσιν τὰ ἔθνη), which as Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 560 points out, is “considered to be an ancient gloss” in the event that anybody errantly thinks that the sacrifices of the Jerusalem Temple are somehow being referred to (1 Corinthians 10:18).

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"It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even **among pagans**; for a man is living with his father's wife...No, I imply that **what pagans sacrifice** they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons" (1 Corinthians 5:1; 10:20, RSV).

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even **among pagans**: A man has his father's wife... No, but **the sacrifices of pagans** are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons" (1 Corinthians 5:1; 10:20, NIV).¹⁰

One can easily see why versions like the RSV and NIV would choose to render *ethnos* as "pagan(s)" in the verses above (other verses that could be considered include 1 Thessalonians 4:5; 1 Peter 4:3). Yet at the same time, one can see a figure like the Apostle Paul say things in terms of "I am speaking to you who are Gentiles" (Romans 11:13, NASU), "the Gentiles in the flesh" (Ephesians 2:11, NASU), "I, Paul, [am] the prisoner of Messiah Yeshua for the sake of you Gentiles" (Ephesians 3:1, NASU)—all verses that employ the Greek *ethnos*. However, Paul would also instruct non-Jewish Believers, "So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk [CJB: do not live any longer as the pagans live], in the futility of their mind" (Ephesians 4:17, NASU).

The issue regarding the Greek *ethnos* (ἔθνος), ultimately to be realized, is that while varied English translations can be found rendering it as "Gentile(s)," "nation(s)," or even "pagan(s)"—when the various Apostolic letters and documents were composed, they all used a single term. Readers and speakers in the First Century Mediterranean world could figure out, either because of how *ethnos* rendered *goy/goyim* in the Septuagint translation of the Tanach, or how it was used in the marketplace and on the street—what was really intended. In the English-speaking world, with our diverse vocabulary, we have to read the Apostolic Writings with some care. For some reason or another, many English Bibles have chosen to render *ethnos* as **both** "Gentile(s)" and "nation(s)," making somewhat of a value judgment for their readers. (Two notable exceptions to this, where *ethnos* is consistently rendered by the rather neutral nation/nations, are Young's Literal Translation and the Literal Translation of the Holy Bible by Jay P. Green.)

But where did we get the term "Gentile" from, if *ethnos* best means "nation"? The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* informs us:

Gentile (From Lat. *gentilis*, "member of a people") Term used by Jews for one who is not Jewish by racial origin. In the Old Testament, "the nations" (Heb. *goyim*) is used.¹¹

The English term "Gentile" is actually derived from the Latin word *gentilis*, meaning "family, hereditary; national,"¹² being related to *gens* or "clan; tribe; family; race; nation."¹³ One will find the term *gentilis* and its cognates employed in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible, and it is unavoidable for English at least, how this Latin term has influenced the history of English Bible translation. (And to perhaps make things even more complicated, one will also encounter the Latin term *nationis*, "tribe, race; breed class"¹⁴ in the Vulgate, from which our English "nation" is derived as well.) What this means is that with two terms available for rendering the Hebrew *goy/goyim* and the Greek *ethnos*, there might not be as much consistency witnessed in an English Bible—that may actually be quite necessary where Tanach intertextuality is concerned. One example to be considered would be the quotation of Isaiah 9:1 in Matthew 4:15:

"But there will be no gloom for her that was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, **Galilee of the nations** [*Galil ha'goyim*; גַּלִּיל הַגּוֹיִם; Galilee of the Gentiles, NASU]¹⁵" (Isaiah 9:1, RSV).

¹⁰ The Complete Jewish Bible, follows suit with the RSV and NIV quoted here, using "pagans."

1 Corinthians 12:2 in the NASU, interestingly enough, says "You know that when you were pagans [*ethnē*, ἔθνη], you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led."

¹¹ McKim, 113.

¹² *HarperCollins Latin Concise Dictionary* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1997), 94.

¹³ *Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 60.

¹⁴ *HarperCollins Latin Concise Dictionary*, 138.

¹⁵ "the region of the nations" (ATS).

“[T]HE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, **GALILEE OF THE GENTILES** [*Galilaia tōn ethnōn*, Γαλιλαία τῶν ἔθνῶν]” (Matthew 4:15, NASU).

The best, most neutral rendering seen for both *Galil ha’goyim* and *Galilaia tōn ethnōn*, the latter clause witnessed in both the LXX of Isaiah 9:1 and Matthew 4:15, is “**Galilee of the nations**” (Isaiah 9:1, NETS). What is witnessed in the Vulgate for both Isaiah 9:1 and Matthew 4:15, however, is *Galileae gentium*. While this is not a problem if one were a Roman, Latin-speaking Christian in the early centuries of the faith, it does interject a dynamic for modern English speakers which we need to be aware of—a likely testament to English having mixed Latin and Germanic origins.

And perhaps interestingly enough, with this in mind, the closest, most wide-spoken relative to modern English, actually appears to lack the term “Gentile” in its vocabulary. If one turns to the rather massive *Langenscheidts New College German Dictionary*, the words offered for the English “Gentile” include the noun **Nichtjude** and the adjective **nichtjüdisch**,¹⁶ which are pretty easily discernible to mean **non-Jew** and **non/not-Jewish**. How did a German Bible like the 1993 Elberfelder Bibel render *Galil ha’goyim* and *Galilaia tōn ethnōn*? In Isaiah 9:1 we encounter “den Kreis¹⁷ der Nationen,” and in Matthew 4:15, “Galiläa der Nationen.” One can also do some quick surveying of this German Bible, and will find that where various English Bibles have “Gentile(s),” the term **Nation** [na’tsjo:n]¹⁸ is used instead. So among many examples to be considered, when the Jerusalem Believers conclude, “God has granted **to the Gentiles** [*tois ethnesin*, τοῖς ἔθνεσιν] also the repentance *that leads to life*” (Acts 11:18, NASU), the Elberfelder Bibel has, “Dann hat Gott also **auch den Nationen** die Buße gegeben zum Leben.”

It is at this point where we reach an impasse. What is the best approach to the Hebrew *goy/goyim* and Greek *ethnos*? Is it really Gentile/Gentiles—**or** is it nation/nations? Much of this is undeniably a perspective issue, and how in their most neutral context both of these words mean nation/nations. Seriously consider, what the Apostle Paul communicates to his dear friend Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:17, reflecting back on his life of ministry service to the Lord:

“But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that **all the Gentiles** might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion’s mouth” (NASU).

That Paul had a unique calling to the world at large is easily understood (cf. Acts 9:15; Romans 11:13). But is “all the Gentiles” the best rendering for *panta ta ethnē* (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη)? In the view of some Pastoral Epistles commentators “**all the nations**” is what is to be missionally understood here, which does *not only* include the world at large. The view of William D. Mounce, who is most well known for authoring various collegiate level Greek textbooks, is that when *ethnē* is rendered as “nations” here, then “the phrase ‘all the nations/Gentiles’ can mean ‘all groups of people,’ Jew and Gentile alike.”¹⁹ From this viewpoint then, *panta ta ethnē* is akin to “to those who had never heard” (The Message) the gospel message. We need to remember that even though Paul had a definite calling and skillset as a Jewish Believer that would help to bring the nations into the Commonwealth of Israel (cf. Ephesians 2:11-12), Paul never stopped believing that his own Jewish people needed salvation nor did he ever stop declaring Yeshua to them (cf. Romans 11:13-14). It would seem appropriate for us to view *panta ta ethnē* in 2 Timothy 4:17 as meaning *everyone* who needed to hear, **all nations** upon Planet Earth *including* Paul’s own Jewish people. Philip H. Towner appropriately summarizes,

“[T]he phrase ‘all the Gentiles/nations,’ which certainly need not exclude the Jewish people, is a theologically loaded term in Pauline thought (Rom 15:11; 16:26; Gal 3:28). It sums up the universal scope of the salvation plan of God, from the Abrahamic promise and institution of the covenant to its full unveiling in the Psalms and prophets, from which Paul clearly took his cue (Romans 9-11; 15:9-13; Gal 1:15-16).”²⁰

¹⁶ *Langenscheidts New College German Dictionary, German-English* (Berlin and Munich: Langenscheidt KG, 1995), 275.

¹⁷ The term *Kreis* should be understood here as “adm. district” (Ibid., 372), which is certainly allowable as the Hebrew *galil* (גליל) can mean “cylinder, rod, circuit, district” (*BDB*, 165).

¹⁸ *Langenscheidts New College German Dictionary*, 441.

¹⁹ William D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles*, Vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 597.

In Ibid. his further conclusion is, “By proclaiming the gospel to all the authorities in Rome, Paul has now preached to all groups and all types of Gentiles and therefore has fulfilled his ministry.”

²⁰ Philip H. Towner, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 643.

The blessing of Abraham and the sacrifice of Yeshua, remitting the curse of the Law, are for “all nations” (Galatians 3:8, 14), which necessarily includes the Jewish people as well as the world at large.

Surely with what we witness in Yeshua’s Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, the common rendering of “nations” is understood to convey a significant, worldwide effect:

“And Yeshua came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of **all the nations** [*panta ta ethnē*, πάντα τὰ ἔθνη], baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (NASU).

We may never be able to know why more English Bibles than not have chosen to render the Greek *ethnos* as both “Gentile(s)” and “nation(s),” and not just “nation(s).” But what we can know is that rendering this single Greek term, in two different ways, has created some confusion—if not some significant confusion in some quarters. **The most significant confusion caused by the term “Gentile” is that it can underplay the universal availability of God’s salvation for all of humankind.** In Isaiah 49:6, Yeshua the Messiah has come not only to restore the tribes of Israel, but also to be the *or goyim* (אֹרֹת גּוֹיִם) or *phōs ethnōn* (φῶς ἐθνῶν), “a light of the nations.” For consistency’s sake, English Bible readers need to train their minds to recognize that “Gentile(s)” *really means* “nation(s)”—and today’s Messianic teachers and leaders need to be a little more sensitive to this fact as well.

“Gentile” Can be an Offensive Term for Some

While among many Christians today, and in many theological works, the term “Gentile” is simply employed as a term to refer to a person who is not Jewish, meaning “one of the nations,” it is obvious in Scripture that the Greek *ethnos* can be used in various pejorative contexts. Yeshua’s direction regarding the reproof of someone who sins, includes the admonition, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the [assembly]; and if he refuses to listen even to the [assembly], let him be to you **as a Gentile** and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17, NASU). The clause *ho ethnikos kai ho telōnēs* (ὁ ἐθνικός καὶ ὁ τελώνης), is rendered into the 1991 UBSHNT as *k’goy v’k’mokeis* (כְּגוֹי וְכַמְּוֵךְ). That both *ethnos* and *goy* can mean “a pagan” (CJB) here, does not go unnoticed.²¹

Of course, as we have tried to emphasize above, there are not only many neutral usages of the terms *goy/goyim* and *ethnos* witnessed in the Bible, but these same terms are used to describe Israel. Context and usage alone, in the various verses on a case-by-case basis, determines what is to be intended. But to act like the terms *goy/goyim* and *ethnos* can never be viewed from the perspective of “pagan,” and that this does not in any way carry over into the English term “Gentile,” would be dishonest. *ISBE*, for example, indicates how “The general tendency...was one of increasing hostility toward the Gentiles. They and their countries were considered unclean.”²² *EJ* further notes how from a Jewish perspective in much of the Bible, “the low moral, social, and ethical standards of the surrounding gentiles were continuously emphasized, and social contact with them was regarded as being a pernicious social and moral influence. As a result, during this period the world was regarded as divided, insofar as peoples were concerned, into the Jewish people and the ‘nations of the world,’ and insofar as individuals were concerned, into ‘the Jew’ and the idolater.”²³

Whether *goy/goyim* or *ethnos* carry with it the intention of “...of the nations” or “pagan” in the Bible, can only be determined in the places where it is used. And, we should think that “nation(s)” is a far better, uniform rendering for these terms, leaving its exact meaning up to the reader to decide. It is, however, to be noted that in Rabbinical literature, one will encounter the Hebrew term *goy* (גּוֹי) used to mean “gentile, idolator” (*Jastrow*).²⁴ An example provided by *Jastrow* to be considered is *t.Avodah Zarah* 3:4:

“A gentile woman should not be called upon to cut out the foetus in the womb of an Israelite girl. And she should not give her a cup of bitters to drink, for they are suspect as to the taking of life. And an Israelite should not be alone with a gentile either in a bathhouse or in a urinal. [When] an Israelite goes along with a gentile, he puts

²¹ Matthew 6:32 could also be considered: “For the Gentiles [*ta ethnē*, τὰ ἔθνη] eagerly seek all these things...” This is also rendered with “pagans” (NIV/CJB) and “idolaters” (HCSB) elsewhere.

²² A. van Selms, “Gentile,” in *ISBE*, 2:444.

²³ Editorial Staff, “Gentile,” in *EJ*.

²⁴ Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004), 220.

him at his right hand, and he does not put him at his left hand. R. Ishmael son of R. Yoḥanan b. Beroqah says, '[He goes along] with a sword in his right hand, with a staff in his left hand.' [If] there are two going up on an ascent or going down on a ramp, the Israelite goes up ahead, and the gentile behind."²⁵

Some of the viewpoints here are obviously historically conditioned, and are the result of a longstanding distrust on the part of the Jewish community toward outsiders. But, the point is taken that the *goyim* (גוים) are to be kept at a distance.

More present in Judaism today is the line of an ancient prayer, which is customarily recited as a part of the morning *Shacharit* blessings, when the observant declare, "Blessed are You, HASHEM, our God, King of the universe, for not having made me a gentile," *asani goy* (עשני גוי).²⁶ When non-Jewish Believers in today's Messianic movement get wind of some Messianic Jews in the congregation they are attending, possibly saying this sort of thing before God every morning²⁷—and perhaps including some of their main leaders—they do get a little upset. **Some of them even get livid.** The Conservative Jewish *Siddur Sim Shalom* has thankfully changed much of this, only including the declaration "Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, making me a Jew" (although the Hebrew is actually *Yisrael*, ישראל) and "making me free."²⁸ For reciting traditional prayers from the Jewish community, I do think that many of us can certainly understand the value of what *Sim Shalom* offers, and that we can appreciate how it has removed the rather negative remarks about not being made a Gentile. Thanking God for being a Jew or an Israelite is one thing (that I personally do not have a problem with); thanking God for not being Nationality XYZ is something else.

So what does the non-Jewish person in a Messianic Jewish congregation, who finds out about the ancient prayer of "for not having made me a gentile"—and who is understandably a bit offended—then do about it? The first thing, that tends to happen, is that when the term "Gentile" tends to be spoken in various teachings or announcements or just common speech, the individual feels that he or she is likely being called some kind of a "pagan," "heathen," "idolator," or something worse. Secondly, if various Messianic Jews have not been careful with how they have employed the term "Gentile," at least also incorporating valid alternatives like "nations" or "peoples," then some significant resentment can build up (rather quickly). Thirdly, and what can frequently happen, is that the non-Jewish Messianic who has taken considerable offense at being called a "Gentile," will build a kind of personal credo around Ephesians 2:11, where the Apostle Paul says:

"Therefore remember **that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh**, who are called 'Uncircumcision' by the so-called 'Circumcision,' which is performed in the flesh by human hands—" (NASU)

It is from a verse like this where many non-Jewish Messianic Believers will claim that they are **former Gentiles**. It is absolutely true that for any non-Believer to come to saving faith in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ), that he or she is no longer a kind of pagan, heathen, idolater, insolent rebel, or even atheist against the Creator. Yet Paul's words to those in Asia Minor are specific in that he speaks of those here as *ta ethnē en sarki* (τὰ ἔθνη ἐν σαρκί), "the nations in the flesh" (YLT) or "you who are Gentiles by birth" (NIV). When people come to faith in Yeshua, even though they may be saved and spiritually regenerated, their DNA does not change. He identifies these people as being of the nations, in the flesh. The former status that Paul is obviously more concerned about, **and so should any of us for that matter**, is detailed in Ephesians 2:11-12 together:

"Therefore remember that formerly...you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (NASU).

A status of being removed from Israel's Messiah, Israel's polity, Israel's covenants, and being without the hope and knowledge of the Creator God—is what is really considered to be the former status for the non-Jewish Believers addressed in Ephesians. This is one which has been fully reversed. The non-Jewish Believers in Asia

²⁵ Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew With a New Introduction*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 2:1269.

²⁶ Nossou Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Nusach Ashkenaz* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1984), pp 18-19.

²⁷ In complete fairness, it must be stressed that another edition of this same prayer, does not use the Hebrew term *goy*. This is seen in Joseph H. Hertz, ed., *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, revised (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1960), 18:

"Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a **heathen** [*asani nakri*, עשני נכרי]."

The Hebrew *nakri* (נכרי) largely means, "foreign, alien" (*BDB*, 648).

²⁸ Jules Harlow, ed., *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2007), 65.

Minor now know Israel's Messiah, they are a part of Israel's polity, they now benefit from Israel's covenants, and they are truly known by the Creator God.²⁹

The term "Gentile," *goy* (גוי), need not always have a negative meaning, but in various places in Jewish theology and commentary it will. The *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* observes how *goyim* is the "generic Israelite expression for all of humanity except Israel. Most often this common biblical expression has a pejorative connotation that parallels the Greek use of 'barbarians.' By virtue of its covenantal relationship to YHWH and its observance of the Torah, Israel is contrasted with the rest of humanity, which stands outside the scope of God's covenantal love."³⁰ This same entry is actually pretty even-handed, though, in further commenting, "While Gentiles are often pictured as sexually uninhibited and untrustworthy, they are also described as righteous and the progenitors of rabbis and even kings of Israel."³¹

But what meaning of *goyim* are we more likely to find for non-Jewish people, used in today's Judaism and even Messianic Judaism? Does it mean "pagan" or just a "non-Jew"?

When non-Jewish Believers in today's Messianic world know some of the theological background behind the term "Gentile," it often does not make them very happy when it is used to define them. Knowing that the term *goyim* can frequently mean "pagan," in many respects, can be offensive to more than a few. What is to be done about this?

When non-believing members of the Jewish community today, refer to those outside the Synagogue as "Gentiles" or "*goyim*," is it in the most positive of ways? When my mother grew up in Annapolis, Maryland with its sizeable Jewish population, she certainly witnessed the terms "*goy*" and "Gentile" used in some rather negative ways by her friends' parents. (And with my two grandparents being from the Deep South, she also heard some other negative terms used to describe African Americans, and other minority groups.) When she has been in some Messianic Jewish congregations, and heard the congregational leader or speaker refer to the non-Jews in the audience as "*goyim*," she has had difficulty separating it from her youth experience among her Jewish friends.

Non-Jewish Believers being referred to as "Gentiles" in the Messianic Jewish movement, or even some sectors of the independent Messianic world, can at times be suspect. I do know for certain that many Messianic Jews do not intend any offense when they use the term "Gentile," and I also know that they want all people to be welcome in their assemblies. The easiest way to deflate some of this potential unwelcomeness is to simply employ a number of valid alternatives like "**nations**" or "**peoples.**" The neutral term "**non-Jew**" would also be appropriate to use.

Should we really use the term "Gentile"?

What are other terms we need to be careful of?

No one in today's Messianic community should ever "freak out" when they hear the term "Gentile" used, because it is going to be heard at the very least from various English Bible translations and various theological resources. There can probably be, however, some better ways to communicate that are more sensitive to a group's needs. If a Messianic congregational leader knows that there is a group of non-Jewish Believers in the assembly who might be offended if the term "Gentile" is used, then it might be incumbent to employ some worthwhile and valid alternatives like "nation(s)" or "people(s)" to offset a potential problem.

Many non-Jewish Messianics are asked to be sensitive to Jewish concerns with their usage of terms like "cross," given the reality of many heinous acts of anti-Semitism committed in history involving the cross. While we may never totally stop using terms like "cross" or "crucified," it is fair and advisable to employ valid alternatives like "tree" and "executed."³² Is it too much, given some of the post-Second Temple usage of terms like "*goy*" and "*goyim*" and possible negative aspects surrounding the term "Gentile" in current Jewish culture, that some alternatives likewise be used? I have a feeling that in the case of many people in the Messianic movement, especially in much of Messianic Judaism, that for the considerable time being we may be dealing **with a one-way street** on this issue. Consider some of the thoughts offered by Toby Janicki in his article "What is a Gentile?":

²⁹ For a further discussion, consult the author's commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*.

³⁰ "Gentiles," in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, pp 247-248.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 248.

³² Consult the FAQ, "Crucifixion."

“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.”³³

The Biblical terms that are actually used to describe the nations are *goy/goyim* and *ethnos*—**nation(s)**. While context determines whether people in general, or some kind of pagan idolaters are intended, it is disingenuous of anyone in either Messianic Judaism or the broader Messianic world to fail to recognize that in the Twenty-First Century, the English term “Gentile” can offend some non-Jewish Believers. It is also disingenuous to think that in some modern Jewish cultural contexts, when the *goyim* or Gentiles are referred to, it is speaking of non-Jews in a totally neutral way.

But let us consider for a moment some more of the shortcomings found in the broad Messianic world as it concerns the terms used to describe people in general. A fair majority of today’s Messianic community balks at using any degree of inclusive language, dismissing it as being the product of so-called “political correctness”—even though it is adhered to in part by many conservative evangelical Christians, and is actually reflected in much of David Stern’s Complete Jewish Bible (1998), as well as in the new Tree of Life Bible—The New Covenant (2011).³⁴ *What is the inclusive language debate?* A big part of it is recognizing that there are some specific terms in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures where a masculine-centric rendering is less-than-accurate, especially given some of the changing dynamics of modern English speech. The major terms to be aware of include:

- The generic *adam* (אָדָם) and *anthrōpos* (ἄνθρωπος), can be better rendered with **“humanity”** or **“humankind,”** rather than “man” or “mankind”; or in the case of individuals, **“human being(s),” “mortal(s),”** or **“person(s).”**
- The specific *ish* (אִישׁ) and *anēr* (ἀνὴρ), relates to a person who is a **man** or of the **male** gender, and can sometimes refer to a **husband**.
- The specific *ishah* (אִשָּׁה) and *gunē* (γυνή), relates to a person who is a **woman** or of the **female** gender, and can sometimes refer to a **wife**.

Obviously, some renderings of these Hebrew and Greek terms are largely dependent on their usage in a passage. But in general when people at large are described, it is probably safe to say that calling them “men” has become more than a bit out of place in normal, everyday English language across the world. So even if a Bible version might use “men” when “people” is intended, such as where Yeshua calls His disciples to be “fishers of men³⁵” (Mark 1:17; cf. Matthew 4:19), we need to be geared toward speaking on these sorts of passages relating to “fish for people” (NRSV/NLT/TNIV). A key passage where an inclusive language rendering will convey a far better and clearer understanding for Messianics, is where Ephesians 2:15 speaks of *kainon anthrōpon* (καὶνὸν ἄνθρωπον), the **“one new humanity”** (NRSV/CJB), as opposed to “one new man.” Obviously, what the Father has brought about via the magnanimous work of His Son is to influence far more than just those of the male gender.

Once again, reality being what it is, not enough of today’s Messianic teachers and leaders may be sensitive to employing a little bit of inclusive language in their speech. *In fact, more than a few Messianic leaders are probably some of the greatest offenders when it comes to not using any degree of inclusive language.* I want you to know that I myself do not get upset when I see terms like “man” or “mankind” used to refer to the human race, because I do use them from time to time. Yet we do need to recognize the various limitations present in modern English speech, by only using terms like “man,” “men,” or “mankind.”

In the Twenty-First Century, we have more than a few Messianic voices who are still quite prone to using “men,” when in normal speech “people” is far more natural and preferable. Does it at all offend you when a Messianic speaker says—regardless of which slice of the broad Messianic movement in which the statement is made—something like, “God is raising up men in this hour” and the audience is clearly mixed? Why would we not hear something more like, “God is raising up men *and women* in this hour” **or** “God is raising up *people* in this hour”? How would you feel if you were a woman and you heard terms like men, mankind, and brothers **exclusively** used? Speaking for myself, I know that I am offended when I only hear male-specific terms used, and I am a male!

³³ Toby Janicki, “What is a Gentile?” *Messiah Journal* Issue 101, Summer 2009/5770:44.

³⁴ Other Bible versions that employ a principle of inclusive language, to one degree or another, include: the New Revised Standard Version (1989), the Revised English Bible (1989), and the Today’s New International Version (2005).

³⁵ Grk. *alieis anthrōpon* (ἀλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων).

Obviously, if some of today's Messianic Believers cannot compute the fact that using male-centric terms exclusively might cause some discord—would they even be able to see that using a term like “Gentile” exclusively, might also create some angst?

The issue of the terms we use affects our historical readings of the Scriptures. How many of today's Messianic Jews, even among those who are well-educated Bible teachers (with significant degrees), will say things along the lines of, “when God brought the Jewish people out of Egypt...”? Now it is certainly true that God brought the ancestors of today's Jewish people out of Egypt, but it is largely and historically incorrect to use the term “Jew” or *Yehudi* (יהודי) to describe anyone prior to the dispersion of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. As the entry for “Jew” in *IDB* directs us,

“In the OT, יהודי (‘Jew’) is not used for members of the old tribe of Judah or even to distinguish persons of the Southern Kingdom from those of the Northern Kingdom...It is scarcely used until the kingdom of Judah had survived N Israel (II Kings 25:25; Jer. 38:19; 52:28-30). In postexilic times ‘Jew’ refers to a subject of the Babylonian or Persian province of Judah or of the Maccabean state (Esth. 9:15-19; Neh. 4:1-H 3:33; Zech. 8:23; I Macc. 8:20; Jos. Antiq. XI.v.7).”³⁶

There is, of course, nothing wrong with using terms such as “Jew” or “Jewish,” provided that we are able to recognize when in Biblical history that *Yehudi* started being legitimately used, in association with the Southern Kingdom. The point to be taken is **not** that “Jew” is a bad term to use; rather, “strictly speaking, it is anachronistic to use the term with reference to the Hebrews or Israelites of an earlier period” (*ISBE*).³⁷ Yet many of today's Messianic Jews were raised in an environment where the Ancient Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, to those who made up the populations of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, to those who returned from Babylon—were **all** “Jews.”³⁸ Specificity in terms of Biblical history, for such people, is not only something that is overlooked, but it is actually reinforced in some Jewish teaching materials. The Orthodox Jewish *ArtScroll Tanach*, for example, renders Exodus 21:2 with, “If you buy a Jewish bondsman...,” when the source text clearly has *Ivri* (עִבְרִי) or “Hebrew.” Its chart detailing the rulers, of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, is actually labeled to be “The Jewish Monarchy.”³⁹ Even Stern's Jewish New Testament/Complete Jewish Bible may be said to have made a faux pax when labeling the Epistle to the Hebrews as “Messianic Jews,” when modern Hebrew New Testaments tend to have *Ivrim* (עִבְרִים), Hebrew for “Hebrews,” instead (for the Greek title ΠΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ, *Pros Hebraious*).⁴⁰

Not paying attention to specific details in Biblical history, has enabled many throughout the Messianic world to say things along the lines of, “When Paul writes to the Gentiles in Letter XYZ...” While it may be true that there was a large, non-Jewish readership for many of Paul's epistles, almost all of the Pauline letters are titled by a geographic-specific audience—in addition to having Jewish readers as well. Why would any of us ever speak in terms of Paul writing *the Gentiles*, when what we should be more tuned into is Paul writing the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Philippians, the Colossians, the Thessalonians, etc.?⁴¹ Cultural and historical circumstances in places such as Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, and Colossae in the ancient Mediterranean world might factor into us understanding some difficult verses, and some of the location-specific issues ancient groups of Messiah followers faced.

³⁶ J.A. Sanders, “Jew,” in *IDB*, 2:897.

³⁷ W.W. Gasque, “Jew,” in *ISBE*, 2:1056.

³⁸ In the annotation for John 4:22-24, appearing in Daniel Gruber, trans., *The Messianic Writings* (Hanover, NH: Elijah Publishing, 2011), 148, it is actually stated, “After the Babylonians exiled the Jewish inhabitants of Shomron [Samaria], they brought other captive people to live there. (2K 17:22-41).”

This statement is not at all true to history, and even the text of 2 Kings 17:22-41 itself, as it details the exile of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians, not the Babylonians. Yet, these kinds of remarks litter the Messianic Jewish spectrum, and often go unnoticed by even those leaders who have weighty post-graduate degrees.

³⁹ Nossou Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *ArtScroll Tanach* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1996), 2026.

In contrast, *JPS Guide: The Jewish Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 188 correctly refers to “The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah.”

⁴⁰ The Phillips New Testament has also incorrectly labeled the Epistle to the Hebrews as “The Letter to Jewish Christians.”

⁴¹ You do probably need to be aware of the textual issues in Ephesians 1:1, and how “in Ephesus” (*en Ephesō*, ἐν Ἐφέσῳ) does not appear in the oldest manuscripts (cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 601). In all likelihood the Epistle of Ephesians was originally a circular letter written by the Apostle Paul to assemblies within Asia Minor, eventually making its way to Ephesus. The RSV notably rendered Ephesians 1:1 with: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus.”

Specific Pauline letters that actually concern the Believers in Ephesus, are actually the Epistles of 1&2 Timothy, as Timothy served as Paul's duly-appointed superintendent to Ephesus and the surrounding region. For more information, consult the entries for the Epistles of 1&2 Timothy in the author's workbook *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.