

What is a Gentile?

The word Gentile is an English translation of the Hebrew word goyim (“people, nations”) and the Greek word ethne (“nations, people groups, people”). The Latin Vulgate translated these words as gentilis, and this word was then carried over into English as “Gentile.” The term refers to a person who is not a Jew.

From the Jewish perspective, Gentiles were often seen as pagans who did not know the true God. During Jesus’ time, many Jews took such pride in their cultural and religious heritage that they considered Gentiles “unclean,” calling them “dogs” and “the uncircumcision.” Gentiles and the half-Gentile Samaritans were viewed as enemies to be shunned (see John 4:9; 18:28; and Acts 10:28).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus alluded to the common association of Gentiles with paganism: “If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (Matthew 5:47, ESV). In another place in the same sermon, Jesus noted, “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7, ESV). In both cases, the NIV simply translates the word in question as “pagans.”

Jesus came to offer salvation to all people, Jew and Gentile. The prophet Isaiah predicted the Messiah’s worldwide ministry, saying He “will bring forth justice to the Gentiles” and would be “a light to the Gentiles” (Isaiah 42:1, 6, NKJV). In Mark 7:26, Jesus helps a Gentile woman who had asked for her daughter’s freedom from a demon.

Interestingly, both Jews and Gentiles are mentioned in the account of Jesus’ death. The Jewish leaders arrested Jesus, but it was a Roman (i.e., a Gentile) who sentenced Him to

death and Romans who carried out the execution (see Jesus' prediction in Luke 18:32). Later, the apostles prayed, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city [Jerusalem] to conspire against your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:27).

As the gospel spread in the early New Testament era, many Gentiles were converted. Acts 11:18 records the reaction of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who "praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'" When the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch heard the good news, "they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48).

When writing to the (mostly Gentile) church in Rome, Paul communicated his goal: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). Paul realized that the coming of Jesus provided the opportunity for salvation to whoever would believe in Christ's name (John 3:16).

Gentiles were long seen as enemies of the Jewish people, yet Christ provided good news for both Jews and non-Jews. Paul praised the Lord's goodness in his letter to the (mostly Gentile) church in Ephesus: "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups [Jew and Gentile] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:12-14).