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Who are the "Gentiles"?

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Chapter 5

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*The Book of Mormon . . . an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites—Written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile.
(Title Page of the Book of Mormon)*

Most readers of the Bible and the Book of Mormon assume that the term “Gentiles” refers to non-Israelites. While this is sometimes so, the full truth is a bit more complex. A better understanding of how the word is used will enable us to better understand the scriptures, and will clarify the purpose of the Book of Mormon.

ORIGINS

The English word Gentile is related to or derived from the Latin *gens* (whence “genus”) and the Greek *genos* (whence “genealogy,” “genetic,” etc.), both meaning “race, people.” In this respect, it accurately reflects the biblical words which it translates, Old Testament Hebrew *gôy* (plural *gôyîm*) and New Testament Greek *ethnos* (whence “ethnic” and “ethnology”), both meaning “nation, race, people.” It must be noted, however, that these words are not always translated as “Gentile” in the King James version (KJV) of the Bible; most often, they are, in fact, rendered “nation.” Hence, in any discussion of the biblical term “Gentile,” we must refer back to the original Hebrew or Greek text, even when it is rendered “nation.”

It is often asserted that the “Gentiles” are descendants of

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Japheth, son of Noah.¹ It is true that the King James Bible employs the word "Gentiles" in describing Japheth's descendants in Genesis 10:5, where the Hebrew reads *gôyîm*. However, that same Hebrew word is translated as "nations" in the same chapter, when referring to the descendants of Ham (verse 20) and of Shem (verse 31) and of their father Noah (verse 32). It is also used in reference to the Egyptians (Genesis 15:13-14; Exodus 9:24), the Ishmaelites (Genesis 17:20; 22:13, 18), the people of Abimelech (Genesis 20:4), the Moabites (Deuteronomy 29:16, 18), the Amalekites (Numbers 24:20), and especially the Canaanites (Exodus 34:24; Leviticus 18:24, 28; 20:23; Deuteronomy 4:38; 7:1, 17, 22; 8:20; 9:1, 4, 5; 11:23; 12:2, 29, 30; 17:14; 18:9, 14; 19:1; 20:15; 31:3).

Clearly, the word *gôyîm* has wide application, referring to various peoples of the world. In later Judaism, it came to denote non-Jews and, because of this, "Gentiles" has come to be used in Latter-day Saint culture to refer to non-Israelites. However, it never had such a connotation originally, as we shall see. In fact, the term may be applied equally well to Israel, and is often so used in the Bible.

Abraham received the promise that he would become a "great nation (*gôy*)" (Genesis 12:2) and a "father of many nations (*gôyîm*)" (Genesis 17:4-6). Of his wife Sarah, it is written she "shall become nations" (*gôyîm*)" (Genesis 17:16; KJV adds "be a mother of nations," but this is not in the Hebrew original.) It is also written that all nations (*gôyîm*) were to be blessed through (or "in"—same word in Hebrew) Abraham's seed (Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). In one sense, this was fulfilled in the salvation brought through Jesus, himself of the seed of Abraham (see Galatians 3:14-16). However, one must consider that Abraham's seed has mixed with the nations of the world (see Abraham 2:9-11), to be a blessing for them, as we shall discuss below.

¹ See, for example, Edward J. Brandt, "Early Families of the Earth," *Ensign*, March, 1973, 17.

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Isaac, Abraham's son, was also promised that all nations (*gôyim*) of the earth would be blessed in his seed (Genesis 26:4). When his wife Rebekah was pregnant, it was said that there were two nations (*gôyim*) in her womb (Genesis 25:23). These were Esau, father of the Edomites, and his twin brother Jacob, who is Israel.

Jacob was also promised that he would become a great nation (*gôy*) (Genesis 46:3), and this promise was repeated to his descendants, the Israelites (Numbers 14:12; Deuteronomy 9:14; 26:5), who were told to be a "holy nation (*gôy q'ādôš*)" (Exodus 19:6). Though it is said that Israel is not to be "reckoned among the nations (*gôyim*)" (Numbers 23:9), nevertheless, Israel is called a nation (*gôy*) in Exodus 33:13 and Deuteronomy 28:36. Moreover, it is said that Israel was to be a greater nation (*gôy*) than the other nations (*gôyim*) (Deuteronomy 4:6-8).

Jacob was told that a "nation (*gôy*)" and a "company of nations (*q'hal gôyim*)" would come out of him (Genesis 35:11). This has reference to the nation of Judah and the confederacy of the "ten tribes" of Israel which broke away under Jeroboam after the death of Solomon. The ten tribes lived to the north of the land, and a portion of their territory in the extreme north, bordering on Phoenicia and Syria, was called Galilee. In Isaiah 9:1, it is termed "Galilee of the nations (*Galil ha-gôyim*)," in reference to the ten "nations" or tribes that lived in the region. This passage is cited in Matthew 4:15 as Greek *Galilāia tôn ethnôn*, which KJV renders "Galilee of the Gentiles."

The immediate fate of the ten tribes is well known. They were taken captive in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians, who deported large numbers of the Israelites to other parts of their empire. Many years later, the Jews (those of the kingdom of Judah) were exiled to Babylonia, where many remained even after some returned in the days of Ezra. (There were more Jews in Babylonia in Jesus' day than in Palestine.) Further dispersion of Jews took place following the two wars with Rome, ending in A.D. 70 and 135, when Jews

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were forbidden to enter Jerusalem.

Thus, Israel was dispersed to the four corners of the world, mingling with the "nations" of the earth. This, indeed, had been foreseen, and it is interesting to note that the Hebrew word *gôyim*, used in reference to the nations where Israel would be dispersed, is translated "heathen" in the KJV in some of the prophecies concerning the dispersion (see, for example, Leviticus 26:33, 38, 45; Deuteronomy 4:27). Elsewhere, in similar prophecies, the same word is translated "nations" (for example, Deuteronomy 28:65; 30:1). Ezekiel wrote that, in the last days, the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah would be joined and become "one nation" (*gôy*) in the land of Israel (Ezekiel 37:22).

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Brigham Young taught that "Israel is dispersed among all the nations of the earth; the blood of Ephraim is mixed with the blood of all the earth. Abraham's seed is mingled with the rebellious seed through the whole world of mankind" (*Journal of Discourses* 16:75). He also declared that "the Elders who have arisen in this Church and Kingdom are actually of Israel" (*Journal of Discourses* 2:268). On another occasion, he indicated that "Joseph Smith was a pure Ephraimite" (*Journal of Discourses* 2:268).

Patriarchal blessings given today indicate clearly that many members of the restored Church are literal descendants of certain of the tribes of Israel, and particularly of Ephraim and Manasseh, sons of Joseph. This has made the "Mormons" a defined unit of Israel in these last days, as the Jews have been a defined unit because they have held so closely to their culture over the past two millennia.

For Jews, it seems presumptuous for "Mormons" to call themselves "Israelites" for, to the Jew, they are just more "Gentiles." But we have already established the fact that, often, the "Gentiles" are, in the Bible, Israelites. Moreover, there seems to be abundant evidence (see especially Isaiah 2:2-3; 5:26-30; 11:1-12; 66:19-21; Jeremiah 3:7-10; Micah 4:1-2; Zechariah 2:7-12) that

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the “Gentiles” of prophecy are merely Israelites who have lost their identity during their long dispersion among the nations we have commonly termed the “Gentiles.” After all, the Lord made a distinction between those Israelites who would be gathered by fishers (as in a net, meaning as a group, such as the Jews) and those who would be gathered by hunters (in this case through the Church’s proselyting program), in Jeremiah 16:13-16.

In his dedicatory prayer for the Kirtland Temple, D&C 109 (which was given by revelation), Joseph Smith referred to the Latter-day Saints as the “sons of Jacob” in verse 58. Then, in verse 60, he spoke of “us who are identified with the Gentiles.” He prayed for the return of the Jews to their beloved Jerusalem (verses 61-64), then spoke of the Lamanites, also a remnant of Israel (verses 65-66). Finally, he spoke of “all the scattered remnants of Israel” (verse 67), which either sums up the preceding list or is meant to include those not already specifically mentioned, possibly referring to Nephite peoples of the Pacific or the “ten lost tribes.”

THE GENTILES, EPHRAIMITES?

The Preface or Title Page of the Book of Mormon states that the record was “written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile . . . Which is to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers . . . And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ.” Here we have the same tripartite listing we noted in D&C 109: (1) the Lamanites or “remnant of the house of Israel,” (2) the Jews, and (3) the “Gentiles.” Since the Book of Mormon is the record of descendants of Joseph, delivered to other descendants of Joseph in the last days, one might well wonder why its preface does not mention that tribe, when the Jews are singled out. The answer appears to be that the “Gentiles” mentioned in the Title Page are, in fact, descendants of Joseph.

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The Book of Mormon is God's "word to the Gentile, that soon it may go to the Jew, of whom the Lamanites are a remnant" (D&C 19:20-27; see also 20:8-9). The fulness of the Gospel came to Joseph Smith, a "Gentile" who was nevertheless an Ephraimite, and it is to go "from the Gentiles unto the house of Israel" (D&C 14:10; see 86:11). In D&C 42:39, the Lord declared, "I will consecrate the riches of those who embrace my gospel among the Gentiles unto the poor of my people who are of the house of Israel."

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One might argue, on the basis of Zenos' allegory of the tame and wild olive trees (Jacob 5-6; see also 1 Nephi 10), that the "Gentiles" who join the Church are "grafted in" to the tree of Israel and become Israelites by adoption. While this is certainly true to some extent, it seems that many become Israelites because their ancestors intermarried with Israelites, just as Ephraim has been termed a "Gentile" because of intermarriage with other peoples.

In explaining the olive tree allegory, Nephi spoke of the "fulness of the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 15:13; see also 3 Nephi 16:4). This seems to relate to the "times of the Gentiles" encountered elsewhere in prophecies concerning the last days and mentioned below. To understand the term, we return to Genesis 48:19, where Jacob blessed Joseph's son Ephraim to become a "multitude of nations." The Hebrew text reads *m'lo' ha-goyim*, which literally means "fulness of the nations." This is an exact equivalent to the Book of Mormon term "fulness of the Gentiles." It has specific reference to Ephraim and his special blessing in preparing the restoration of the kingdom of Israel.

In D&C 45, Jesus, referring to statements he had made 1800 years previous to his Jewish disciples, spoke of "the restoration of the scattered Israel" who "shall be gathered again; but they shall remain until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (see also D&C:9, 17, 24-25, 28-30). The "times of the Gentiles" refers to that time during which the gospel is to be preached to the "Gen-

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tiles” or non-Jewish Israel (that is, those Israelites whose ancestry must be determined by patriarchal blessings), specifically Ephraim. This is to be followed by the preaching of the Gospel to Judah or the Jews (D&C 18:6, 26-27; 88:84; 90:9; 107:6, 33-35, 97).

In another revelation, the Lord addressed the “people of my church,” commanding them, “Send forth the elders of my church unto the nations which are afar off; unto the islands of the sea; send forth unto foreign lands; call upon all nations, first upon the Gentiles, and then upon the Jews . . . Let them, therefore, which are among the Gentiles flee unto Zion. And let them who be of Judah flee unto Jerusalem” (D&C 133:1, 8, 12-13).

Jesus made it clear that he was sent only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). In 3 Nephi 15-16, he indicated that this meant (1) the Jews, (2) the descendants of Joseph (the Nephites and Lamanites) and (3) the other tribes of Israel. In addition, he appeared to Joseph Smith in these last days, showing again that the latter was an Israelite (to whom also the keys of the “gathering of Israel” were committed - D&C 110:11). When Jesus first commissioned his disciples, he sent them also to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” and forbade them to visit the “Gentiles” and the Samaritans (Matthew 28:19), though the latter group were partly Israelite, being a mixture of peoples, as the “Gentiles” were also a mixture. On the day of ascension, however, Jesus told his disciples to go into all the world and to make disciples of “every nation” (Matthew 28:19), here using the same word translated “Gentiles” in Matthew 10:5.

Whereas in our day the Gospel is first for the Gentiles, then for the Jews, following Jesus’ instructions, the opposite was true in the days of the early apostles (Romans 2:9-14). Paul followed this practice, going first to the Jewish synagogues wherever he traveled and turning to the Gentiles only after being rejected by the Jews (see Acts 13:14-16, 42, 46-50; 18:4-8;²

² Acts 18:4 uses “Greeks” rather than “nations” in the original.

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28:23-29). Paul noted that he was sent to the "Gentiles" (Acts 9:15; Romans 11:13; 1 Timothy 2:7), but this may merely mean the "nations" in general.

We know that it was prophesied that the Gospel would be taken from the Jews and given to another "nation" (Matthew 21:42-43; Romans 9:30-33). Some have maintained that this meant it would go to the non-Israelites of Christ's time. But it may mean the Ephraimites, through Joseph Smith. As long as the Church still existed and was recognized by the Lord in the early days after Christ's ministry, it was directed through Jewish apostles, never the Greek proselytes. It was not until Joseph Smith's time (he being ordained to the priesthood by three Jewish apostles, Peter, James, and John) that the Church was "given to another nation."

CONCLUSION

The view that the Gospel cannot be taught to the Jews until it has been presented to all the other peoples of the earth may be incorrect, since the "Gentiles" to whom the Gospel is to go are those of Israel, particularly of Ephraim, the "fulness of the Gentiles." The specific responsibility given to the twelve apostles of our day is to seek out those of Israel (D&C 18:26-27; 107:33-35).

The order in which the Gospel is to be preached is given in D&C 90:9-10 as "unto the Gentiles first, and then, behold, and lo, they shall turn unto the Jews. And then cometh the day when the arm of the Lord shall be revealed in power in convincing the nations, the heathen nations, the house of Joseph, of the gospel of their salvation." It would appear that the teaching of the Gospel in these last days would then be (1) to the descendants of Ephraim (the "Gentiles"), (2) to the Jews, and (3) to the heathens, including the "house of Joseph," perhaps meaning the Lamanites. Again, these are the same groupings named in the Title Page of the Book of Mormon.