

GENTILE GOD-FEARERS AND JEWISH REJECTION OF THE GOSPEL

BY RICH LUSK

Many texts in the NT become more perspicuous if we keep in mind the possibility – and indeed ubiquity – of Gentile God-fearers in the Old Covenant. After the special covenant with Israel is set up, Gentiles are not altogether excluded from the hope of salvation. Israel's special status in God's economy did not mean she alone could receive salvation, and that if Gentiles wanted to be saved they had to first become Jews. Rather, Israel is set aside as the special priestly people precisely so she can minister salvation to the nations around her. She is distinct, yes, in part, to keep her pure. But she was not to be isolated from the nations altogether. She was to be a light to nations, extending God's grace to them. Even in the Old Covenant, Israel was to have a missional existence (though missional theologians the centripetal vs. the centrifugal nature of this mission). Salvation would come through her since the covenant seed-line had been entrusted to her, the oracles of God had been delivered through her prophets, the sacrificial system and temple were hers, and so on. But these privileges were held on behalf of the nations, not as an end in themselves.

We find Gentiles *who chose to remain Gentiles* trusting in Israel's God all over the OT. There was no reason for a Gentile who worshipped YHWH to submit to circumcision, unless he wanted to take up the priestly mantle himself. Melchizedek, Ishmael, Abimelech, Joseph's Pharaoh, the Egyptian mid-wives, Jethro, Naman the Syrian, Obed-edom, Hiram of Tyre, Uriah the Hittite, the Queen of Sheba, Nebuchadnezzar, Jonah's Ninevites, and so on, all show us that the grace of God was not confined to the boundaries of Israel. In Numbers 15, we find Gentiles are permitted to participate in the sacrificial system. In fact the only OT rite Gentiles were excluded from as Gentiles was Passover. Their inclusion in the scope of God's redemptive grace was manifested in the Feast of Tabernacles, in which 70 bulls were offered during the festival for the 70 nations of the world (cf. Gen. 10). God loved Gentiles *qua* Gentiles in the old covenant era; he already made overtures of love towards non-Jewish peoples.

These Gentile God-fearers are referred to in Ps. 118:2-4, and other places in the Psalter where the nations are called upon to praise God. 1 Chron. 16 calls on Gentiles to join in the worship of YHWH at David's tabernacle. Solomon's prayer of dedication at the temple included Gentiles. Though it is a controversial text, I think it is plausible that those Paul refers to in Rom. 2 who keep the law though they do not have the law are Old Covenant Gentile God-fearers. (Wright follows Cranfield in viewing these law-keepers as New Covenant Gentile Christians, but viewing them as Old Covenant Gentile God-fearers makes better sense of the historical flow of the passage.)

In Rom. 4, Paul says Abraham was initially justified as a Gentile, prior to his circumcision. Paul takes this as a basis for describing the two-fold fatherhood of Abraham. Again, I think these two faith-families existed in the Old Covenant; now in Christ they have been merged into one family (cf. Gal. 3). The Genesis narrative itself

bears this out: After Sarah's death, Abraham remarries and has another, non-Jewish "faith family."

In Acts we find Gentile God-fearers as well, such as the Ethiopian eunuch who had been in Jerusalem to celebrate a liturgical feast and who was reading from Isaiah; and Cornelius, whose devotion to the God of Israel is evident from his life of prayer and service (Acts 8, 10-11). In these cases, the "conversion" narratives we find in Acts aren't about conversion at all. They are about non-Jews entering the blessedness of the new creation. They move from God-fearers to full-fledged members of the new messianic priestly community.

All this is to say that dividing the body up into "haves" and "have-nots" strikes at the heart of the mystery of the gospel. Jews wrongly assumed their "most favored nation" status would be permanent. They believed it would endure into the messianic age. Jews were offended by the gospel, in large measure, precisely because it challenged their unique status. It confronted their pride and their supposed monopoly on God's gifts. In some cases it may have also offended their commitment to some kind of "merit" theology, but the main issue on the table in the NT is the status of the old Israel in light of God's new work among the Gentiles.