

The Stranger

The Biblical Perspective on Immigration

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God's concern for the weaker members of society is evident throughout the Bible in His constant reference to Israel and other nation's treatment of the Stranger, Widow and Orphan.

Deut. 10:17-19 *"For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, (Hebrew = 'GER') giving him food and clothing. Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Deut. 27:19 *"Cursed is the one who perverts the justice due the stranger (GER), the fatherless, and widow. And all the people shall say 'Amen!'"*

There are four different words in the Hebrew that are all translated as stranger – GER, TOSHAV, ZAR, NOCRI.

The most common is the word (GER), which typically refers to a foreigner who has decided to move to Israel and to join the nation – essentially an immigrant like Ruth. Such a stranger was given the same rights as the native born and the same obligations. See Num. 15:29-30, 19:10, Lev. 24:16, Deut. 31:12, etc.

Num 15:15 *"One ordinance shall be for you of the assembly and for the stranger (GER) who dwells with you, an ordinance forever throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the stranger be before the LORD. One law and one custom shall be for you and for the stranger who dwells with you."* see also v.30

Exodus 12:19 *"For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, since whoever eats what is leavened, that same person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a stranger (GER) or a native of the land."*

Notice in this passage that the stranger (GER) is considered to be part of the congregation of Israel even though he is not native born. The stranger is also subjected to the same rules about Passover. cf Num. 9:14.

When the bible speaks of forbidding a stranger to partake of Israel's holidays or in any way denying them the normal rights due to the native born, the word for Stranger is (Nocri) or (Zar). A NOCRI was not allowed to be king or ruler of Israel - Deut. 17:15. A NOCRI could be charged interest - Deut.23:20, whereas a GER apparently could not be charged interest – Lev 25:35. A NOCRI was forbidden the Passover as is a TOSHAV, but a GER was allowed to eat it but he had to be circumcised like the native born Israeli. Exodus 12:43ff. However, the TOSHAV was allowed to use the cities of refuge – Num. 35:15.

In Today's terms, we have the following rough equivalents of the Hebrew words:

GER – someone who chooses to immigrate and be part of the native people. (LXX – Proselyte)
TOSHAV – a temporary dweller, a migrant. The root means to “sit”
ZAR – simply means stranger, not part of a larger context.
NOCRI – a true foreigner who does not wish to be part of the native people, nor to keep their laws.

Special welfare was set up to take care of the stranger, the orphan and the widow:

Deut. 24:19-22 *“When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger (GER), the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the stranger (GER), the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it shall be for the stranger (GER), the fatherless, and the widow. And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this thing.”*

See Ruth 2:2ff for an example of this in action.

Deut. 26:9ff *“He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, “a land flowing with milk and honey”; and now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land which you, O LORD, have given me.’ “Then you shall set it before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God. So you shall rejoice in every good thing which the LORD your God has given to you and your house, you and the Levite and the stranger (GER) who is among you. When you have finished laying aside all the tithe of your increase in the third year – the year of tithing – and have given it to the Levite, the stranger (GER), the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your gates and be filled, then you shall say before the LORD your God: ‘I have removed the holy tithe from my house, and also have given them to the Levite, the stranger (GER), the fatherless, and the widow, according to all Your commandments which You have commanded me; I have not transgressed Your commandments, nor have I forgotten them...”*

Notice that the GER here actually was to receive of the Tithe that also went to the Levites, the Orphans and the Widows.

Ezekiel 47:21-23 has the stranger given a portion in the land among whatever tribe they dwell. The land is divided by lot to both the stranger and the native born.

Matt. 25:35ff - as you did unto the stranger, you did unto Jesus! The Greek word in this passage is the one the LXX used to translate the Hebrew word NOCRI!!

For further consideration:

1. Problem passage:

Deut. 14:21 *“You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you may give it to the alien (GER) who is within your gates, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner; (Nocri) for you are a holy people to the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”*

Compare: Lev. 17:10-16.

2. Of the possible English words to translate the four Hebrew words, which might give the best understanding to the reader. (Stranger, Immigrant, Migrant, Alien, Foreigner, Convert, Sojourner, Dweller, Illegal-Immigrant, Resident Alien, Gentile, Client, Proselyte, etc...)

Summary:

Aliens were listed along with orphans and widows as the members of society to whom God gave special attention and care. Aliens were allowed full citizenship rights along with the Israelites, so long as they joined themselves to the LORD God of Israel. Beyond this they were even given at least two types of welfare - the right to glean some of what others planted and the right to partake in the Tithe that was set apart for Levites, orphans and widows.