

The Stranger

The Biblical Perspective on Immigration

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All Scripture quotations taken from the New King James Version (NKJV)
For the Hebrew transliterations, only the masculine singular is used regardless of the actual Hebrew number or gender. This paper primarily focuses on immigration in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

The Stranger

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 Orphan, the Widow and the Stranger.

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. 10:17-19)

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

There are four different words in the Hebrew that are all translated as stranger – GER, TOSHAV, ZAR, and NOCRI. The use of these words is explained below. The word for 'citizen' is EZRACH.

GER

The most common Hebrew word for 'stranger' 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.

The GER was to be treated just like a native born Israelite. Several passages affirm this, for example:

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 (GER) be before the LORD. One law and one custom shall be for you and for the stranger (GER) who dwells with you. (Num. 15:15-16, see also v. 17-31)

In Numbers 35:15, the GER had the same access to the cities of refuge as the EZRACH (native Israelite). The GER was also to be given rest on the Sabbath day just like an Israelite (Exodus 23:12, Lev. 16:29). The GER was to observe Yom Kippur (Lev. 16:29). The GER was to keep the same food laws (Lev. 17:10ff). The GER received the same penalty as the EZRACH for giving his children to the false god Molech (Lev. 20:2) and for blasphemy (Lev. 24:16).

The same rules for the Passover (Num. 9:14) and for the Feast of Unleavened bread applied to both the native born (EZRACH) and to the GER:

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 (EZRACH) of the land. (Exodus 12:19)

Later in this passage the requirement of a GER to be circumcised to partake of the Passover is given:

And when a stranger (GER) dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it. One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger (GER) who dwells among you. (Exodus 12:48-49)

In Lev. 22:18ff and Num. 15:14 the GER is seen offering the same type of offerings as a native Israelite.

Actually all of the same laws applied to the GER that applied to the EZRACH:

You shall have the same law for the stranger (GER) and for one from your own country (EZRACH); for I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 24:22)

“Working welfare” was set up to take care of the stranger (GER), the orphan and the widow:

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. (Deut. 24:19-22)

In this passage God sets up a type of “working welfare”. Even though the welfare recipients did not sow the fields or pull weeds, they did have to do the work of reaping in order to eat. See Ruth 2:2ff for an example of this law in action.

Free Welfare: The GER was also to receive “free welfare” i.e. the Tithe that was set aside to support the Levites, the Orphans, the Widows and the Stranger (GER):

...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... (Deut. 26:10-13)

These two passages show that new immigrants were to not only receive a sort of “working welfare”, but also a type of “free welfare”. The “working welfare” was available several times throughout the year as harvest times would arrive. The “free welfare” was only collected every three years. It is unclear to the present author if the 3rd year tithe was distributed continuously or only in the third year. Either way it provided an economic boost for the disadvantaged in society. It should also be noted that the amount of welfare available was directly connected to the prosperity of the whole nation. If the whole nation prospered, the amount of un-gleaned crops and the amount gathered from the tithe (10%) would be large, but if the whole nation suffered, the lower amounts of un-gleaned crops and the lower amount brought in by the 3rd year tithe would automatically result in less available welfare. Additionally, the total amount available from these two welfare systems would be available proportionately to the total number of Levites, orphans, widows and strangers. If the number of welfare recipients went up, their individual benefit automatically went down. There was no fixed benefit amount.¹

The GER was allowed to partake in the the religious holidays of Israel, was protected under the laws of Israel, was convicted under the laws of Israel, and in the Messianic Kingdom is allowed to inherit land in Israel. The GER was also allowed to partake in at least two types of welfare. A GER was an immigrant who was made a full citizen of Israel after being circumcised.

It is possible to be referred to as a GER and not adopt the religious laws of a particular land or people group. For example the Israelites are called GER by God in reference to their living in

¹ One would be inclined to think that during prosperous years it would really pay to be an immigrant on the welfare system. However it is likely that during prosperous years, more immigrants would come to Israel, thus less welfare would be available for each immigrant.

Egypt (Deut. 10:19). While in Egypt the Israelites obeyed the civil laws of Egypt but not the religious laws. They remained separate and different than the Egyptians while they lived in the land of Goshen. Likewise Moses calls himself a GER in a foreign (NOCRI) land (Ex. 2:22, 18:3) in reference to the time when he lived among the Midianites. In both these cases and in other places, the term GER can refer to someone who is just passing through, or is temporarily living in the land and is not seeking citizenship. Job claims to have taken in the GER so he didn't have to lodge in the street (Job 31:32). It seems the GER is simply a traveler in this case, though it may refer to someone who is just arriving as an immigrant. The language in Jeremiah 14:8 is similar:

O the Hope of Israel, his Savior in time of trouble, Why should You be like a stranger (GER) in the land, and like a traveler who turns aside to tarry for a night? (Jeremiah 14:8)²

However since the Israelites worshipped the one true God, any GER living among them was expected to be a full convert. In essence a GER is someone who attaches and clings to the one true God, regardless of where he finds himself. When the Israelites finally inherited the promised land, the GER had a place to settle. Abraham was a GER and a TOSHAV while living in the promised land (Gen. 23:4).

David and Solomon both used those called "GER" to do the hard labor of building the temple of the LORD (1st Chron 22:2; 2nd Chron. 2:17). This would seem to break the Biblical law which said not to oppress the hired hand or the GER. However, simply using immigrant labor does not equal oppression. Additionally, having the immigrants work on the most important building in the nation would give the immigrants a sense of inclusion and would also tie them closer to their new found worship of YHVH.

For the LORD will have mercy on Jacob, and will still choose Israel, and settle them in their own land. The strangers (GER) will be joined with them, and they will cling to the house of Jacob. (Isaiah 14:1)

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, ZAR or TOSHAV. But a GER had the opportunity to be a full citizen with all the associated rights and responsibilities.

A GER therefore was not merely a "stranger" (as translated by the NKJV), but rather an "immigrant".

God told the Israelites not to oppress immigrants (GER) because they knew what it was like to be an immigrant because of their time in Egypt (Ex. 23:9). Immigrants often feel oppressed

² Job 31:32 the textual variant 'traveler' (ORACH) is supported as the correct reading by Jeremiah 14:8 which has the same parallelism, using the same words GER and ORACH.

because they have language difficulties, because they look different, because they have different cultural habits, because they dress differently. Immigrants are often the topic of racial jokes. God says not to oppress immigrants because His people know what it is like to have all these immigrant problems.

The one significant difference between a GER and an EZRACH (native born) was that only native born Israelites were given a portion of land as a perpetual inheritance. A GER could buy a piece of farm land, but it would go back to the original Israelite family at the year of Jubilee. The GER could also buy a house in the city on a permanent basis. In this sense a GER was very much like a Levite who was not given a portion in Israel, but could only own property in metro areas. Actually the Levite is said to “dwell” (“GAR” the verbal form of GER) within Israel (Deut. 18:6). Thus the GER and his offspring were at a perpetual economic disadvantage and were citizens of a second economic class in ancient Israel.³ This is most likely the reason they are included in the welfare extended to the Levite, the orphan and the widow - others with economic disadvantages. However, in the Messianic kingdom, the GER is to be given a land inheritance just like the native born.⁴

Ezekiel 47:21-23 has the GER given a portion in the land among whatever tribe they dwell. The land is divided by lot to both the stranger (GER) and the native born. This passage refers to the future messianic time and is therefore significant because it contrasts with the typical situation in Israel wherein the GER would have no inheritance in the land, even after full conversion.

Only one verse seems to allow differential treatment of the GER compared to a native born:

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. (Deut. 14:21)

This verse seems to be the only case that allows treatment of a GER as though he were not a native born. However this verse directly contradicts Lev. 17:15:

And every person who eats what died naturally or what was torn by beasts, whether he is a native of your own country or a stranger (GER), he shall both wash his clothes and

³ As discussed above, even King Solomon and King David made a distinction between genetic Israelites and the GER when they put them to work in temple construction. See also the article by John R. Spencer “Sojourner” which briefly discusses the use of GER in the Mesha Inscription (from ancient Moab) where the term seems to indicate a group living in Israel that were not the regular Israelites but were part of Israel.

⁴ Though Ezekiel 47:21-23 refers to the future messianic kingdom, this was not without precedent in ancient Israel. The Gibeonites kept their land after making a covenant with Israel (Joshua 9:16-18). Additionally there were not enough Israelites in Joshua's time to inherit all of the land. It is possible that the non-Israelites who came up out of Egypt with Israel at the Exodus simply inherited whatever land they ended up living on after Israel conquered Canaan.

bathe in water, and be unclean until evening. Then he shall be clean.” (See all of Lev. 17:10-16, which equates the GER and the native born).

It is possible that there is a copyist error in the Deut. 14:21 passage⁵ or that GER is simply used in a different sense in this particular passage.⁶ Elsewhere Deuteronomy calls for the GER to follow “all the words of this law” just like all the Israelites (Deut. 31:12).

TOSHAV

The TOSHAV was more than a passing foreigner, more than a visitor for a week. A TOSHAV was someone who came to stay in a land that was not their own for an extended period of time, with the intention of returning to their own land later. In today’s terms, this is someone on a work or study visa and not just a tourist visa. This can be seen in the TOSHAV who is staying at a Priest’s house:

No outsider (ZAR) shall eat the holy offering; one who dwells (TOSHAV) with the priest, or a hired servant, shall not eat the holy thing. But if the priest buys a person with his money, he may eat it; and one who is born in his house may eat his food. If the priest's daughter is married to an outsider (ZAR), she may not eat of the holy offerings. (Leviticus 22:10-12)

In these verses the TOSHAV, like all non-family members of the priest, is disallowed to eat holy offerings to the LORD. The TOSHAV may have been staying with the Priest for study purposes or he may have simply been a visitor to town to whom the priest was showing hospitality . Note that slaves who were owned by priests were considered part of the priest’s family for the purposes here. A priest’s daughter who is married to a non-priest was not allowed to eat the holy things because she had become one-flesh with with a non-priest.

The TOSHAV was given some of the rights of an Israelite, but not all of them. For example a TOSHAV was allowed to use the cities of refuge along with the Israelite and the GER:

These six cities shall be for refuge for the children of Israel, for the stranger (GER), and for the sojourner (TOSHAV) among them, that anyone who kills a person accidentally may flee there. (Numbers 35:15)

⁵ I suggest that ZAR may be the correct reading. There is only one letter difference between GER and ZAR since Biblical Hebrew had no vowels. i.e. ZR changed to GR. If the issue here is orthographic, it was probably a late change (early 2nd temple period - 536BC - c. 250BC) when Hebrew began to be written with Aramaic letters since during this period the letters Z and G were written in a more similar fashion. Earlier Hebrew was written with Canaanite letters and the Z and G were significantly different during this earlier period. If this is indeed a scribal error, I would place the upper date limit around 250BC for the LXX seems to lend some support to the reading “GER”.

⁶ As Prof. Ed Greenstein once pointed out: Linguistics is not Math. i.e. Language is not required to follow an exact set of rules, rather the meaning is understood from the broader context. Here the term GER may simply be used differently than everywhere else.

However a TOSHAV was not in covenant with God as evidenced by the lack of circumcision and was therefore not allowed to partake in the Passover:

And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "This is the ordinance of the Passover: No foreigner (NOCRI) shall eat it. But every man's servant who is bought for money, when you have circumcised him, then he may eat it. A sojourner (TOSHAV) and a hired servant shall not eat it. In one house it shall be eaten; you shall not carry any of the flesh outside the house, nor shall you break one of its bones. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. And when a stranger (GER) dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native (EZRACH) of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it. (Exodus 12:43-48)

The TOSHAV was required to observe the Sabbath year of rest just like the rest of the residents of Israel. (Lev. 25:6) The Sabbath year was the 7th year when no farm land was sown and the vineyards were not pruned. People only ate whatever grew up by itself. In other words, the TOSHAV was not allowed to sow in the Sabbath year and thus fell under the law of the land, just like all other residents.

The GER and TOSHAV were both to be helped in time of need as indicated by the treatment of a poor native born Israelite who was to be treated at least as well as these two groups:

If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger (GER) or a sojourner (TOSHAV), that he may live with you. (Leviticus 25:35)

The TOSHAV could be bought as a permanent slave, whereas the GER and Israelite could only fall into indentured servitude for a limited period of time.

Moreover you may buy the children of the strangers (TOSHAV) who dwell among you, and their families who are with you, which they beget in your land; and they shall become your property. And you may take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them as a possession; they shall be your permanent slaves. But regarding your brethren, the children of Israel, you shall not rule over one another with rigor. (Leviticus 25:45-46)

The TOSHAV or GER, just like the EZRACH (native Israelite), could acquire servants who were native Israelite, but in all cases, native Israelites could not become permanent slaves. Native Israelites could be redeemed at any time and would always go free in the year of Jubilee.⁷

⁷ In Exodus 21:2 the Native Israelite could only be held for 6 years. The term Jubilee in Lev. 25:50ff may not be referring to the 50th year but to the 7th year. However a better solution would be that a Hebrew slave could only serve a maximum of 6 years or until the year of Jubilee - whichever comes first. Thus a Hebrew slave who was acquired 4 years before the year of Jubilee would only serve for 4 years and therefore would have a lower redemption price since his total servitude had the value of 4 years of work instead of 6 years.

The most interesting TOSHAV is Elijah! Elijah is called ‘Elijah the Tishbi’. ‘Tishbi’ is an adjective from the noun TOSHAV.

And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants (TOSHAV) of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word." (1 Kings 17:1)

It would be natural to think that Elijah is called a ‘Toshav’ because he was a traveling prophet who seemed to wander. This use of ‘toshav’ is used of God’s people at 1st Chron 29:15 and Ps. 39:12 in that the patriarchs were dwellers in a land not their own (Egypt) and wandered from place to place within the promised land. However Elijah is one ‘toshav’ among the other ‘toshavs’ who were living in Gilead. This leaves two options: Either these ‘sojourners’ in Gilead had come from another part of Israel or they were not of Israeli descent at all. The second option would mean that Elijah was not genetically an Israelite and not even a GER! This mysterious prophet has no genealogy in the Bible⁸, and never dies but is taken to heaven by a whirlwind (2nd Kings 2:11). He is prophesied to return to earth as a forerunner to Jesus’ own return (Malachi 4:5, Matt. 17:11-12). However he is clearly human as pointed out by Jesus’s half brother (James 5:17).⁹

ZAR

The ZAR is someone or something that is outside of the group. Whether person or thing, it is not within the accepted parameters. Korah and his followers offered ‘strange’ (ZAR) fire. Job was a ZAR to his own household because of his afflictions. A ‘strange’ (ZAR) wife is one that is not your own but is someone else’s wife and therefore an adulteress (Prov. 2:16; 5:3).

The term ZAR is often tied in parallelism to the term NOCRI. Even in the NT, Paul uses these two terms in parallel to say that Gentiles who were once “aliens” to the nation of Israel and “strangers” to the covenants of God are brought near by faith in the Messiah. (Ephesians 2:11-12) Paul was a Hebrew speaker and fluent in Biblical Hebrew. He clearly had the terms ZAR and NOCRI in mind here even though he wrote this passage in Greek.

ZAR does not always mean something or someone that is evil, but rather simply outside of the parameters. A regular Israelite was ZAR to the priesthood which only came from the line of Aaron. If a person is not part of a household they are ZAR to the household. If a person is not part of a tribe, they are ZAR to the tribe.

Let another man (ZAR) praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger (NOCRI), and not your own lips. (Proverbs 27:2)

ZAR and NOCRI are used in parallelism in this proverb but not to indicate any evil in either person. The context determines if these words refer to something or someone evil. Though NOCRI especially will often refer to a pagan.

⁸ Probably not the Elijah of the genealogy of Benjamin in 1st Chron. 8:27 since Gilead was North-East of the tribe of Benjamin and across the Jordan. Nor was this the same Elijah as the man in Ezra 10:21 who lived hundreds of years later.

⁹ No extraterrestrials here!

NOCRI

The word NOCRI is an adjective but is often used as a noun.

The NOCRI was a true foreigner to Israel. Often considered to be an enemy of Israel, but in all cases, someone who was not in covenant with the LORD God but rather worshipped foreign gods.

Joseph “acted as a stranger (NOCRI)” to his brothers (Gen. 42:7). In doing so, Joseph acted as an adversary, spoke a foreign language and pretended to practice divination (Gen. 44:15).

The NOCRI seems to be banned from providing sacrifices (Lev. 22:25) whereas the GER was expected to offer sacrifices (Lev. 22:18).

"Speak to Aaron and his sons, and to all the children of Israel, and say to them: 'Whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers (GER) in Israel, who offers his sacrifice for any of his vows or for any of his freewill offerings, which they offer to the LORD as a burnt offering-- ... Nor from a foreigner's (NOCRI) hand shall you offer any of these as the bread of your God, because their corruption is in them, and defects are in them. They shall not be accepted on your behalf. "' (Leviticus 22:12, 25)¹⁰

King Solomon was criticized for taking foreign (NOCRI) wives because they led his heart away from the LORD God and he ended up building shrines to the gods of these foreign women (1 Kings 11:1ff).

King Solomon's sin was repeated by the Israelite exiles returning from Babylon:

Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have transgressed and have taken pagan (NOCRI) wives, adding to the guilt of Israel. Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan (NOCRI) wives." (Ezra 10:10-11)

The book of Nehemiah also records the problem of intermarriage with NOCRI:

In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the

¹⁰ The context of these verses is about not offering animals with defects. There are two ways to understand v. 25. The first and most logical is that foreigners (NOCRI) were not to make offerings. The second way to understand this verse is that animals with defects were not to be accepted even if they come from a foreigner. Num. 15:14 may indicate that the second interpretation is correct, though probably it is referring to the GER and anyone else living with the Israelites, but not those of pagan nations surrounding them. The first interpretation is supported by Isaiah 56:6-7 which shows that normally sacrifices are not accepted from unrepentant NOCRI.

language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people. So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan (NOCRI) women caused even him to sin. Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan (NOCRI) women?" (Nehemiah 13:23-27)

Proverbs warns against immoral pagan women:

To deliver you from the immoral (ZAR) woman, from the seductress (NOCRI) who flatters with her words, who forsakes the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of her God. For her house leads down to death, and her paths to the dead; none who go to her return, nor do they regain the paths of life. (Proverbs 2:16-19)

Proverbs also warns against unsecured debts of foreigners:

Take a man's garment when he has given surety for a stranger (ZAR), and hold him in pledge when he gives surety for foreigners (NOCRI). (Proverbs 20:16 - RSV¹¹)

A NOCRI was not allowed to be king or ruler of Israel - Deut. 17:15. A NOCRI was forbidden the Passover (Exodus 12:43) as was a TOSHAV (Exodus 12:45). A NOCRI did not enjoy the cancelling of debts in the 7th year (Deut. 15:3). A NOCRI could be charged interest (Deut. 23:20) whereas a native Israelite could not be charged interest and apparently neither could a GER be charged interest (Lev. 25:35). A NOCRI could also be taken as a permanent slave and be forcefully circumcised (Gen. 14:12).

The NOCRI was uncircumcised in heart and in flesh (Ezekiel 44:7,9). This passage implies that Israelites who were not circumcised in both their flesh *and* their heart were considered to be NOCRI.

The NOCRI was a true enemy and threat to Israel as a nation and to Israelites as individuals. The NOCRI worshipped false gods, led Israelites to worship false gods, led Israelites into sexual immorality, refused to learn the language and customs of Israel and was rejected from the covenant with the one true God.

¹¹ The NKJV mistranslates the plural masculine word "foreigners" for the singular feminine "seductress". The KJV is no better. The Revised Standard version is correct here.

The Convert

NOCRI were encouraged to convert to follow the LORD God of Israel. Famous converts include Rahab the Harlot and Ruth from Moab. Ruth humbly refers to herself as a NOCRI (Ruth 2:10).

At the dedication of the LORD's temple in Jerusalem, King Solomon prayed that God would help the NOCRI who came and sought the LORD God:

"Moreover, concerning a foreigner (NOCRI), who is not of Your people Israel, but has come from a far country for Your name's sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your strong hand and Your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this temple, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner (NOCRI) calls to You, that all peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this temple which I have built is called by Your name." (1 Kings 8:41-43. Parallel passage: 2 Chron. 6:32ff)

We see this type of convert in the Philistine Ittai and his 600 men who were exiles from Gath in Israel:

Then all his (David's) servants passed before him; and all the Cherethites, all the Pelethites, and all the Gittites, six hundred men who had followed him from Gath, passed before the king. Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, "Why are you also going with us? Return and remain with the king. For you are a foreigner (NOCRI) and also an exile from your own place. In fact, you came only yesterday. Should I make you wander up and down with us today, since I go I know not where? Return, and take your brethren back. Mercy and truth be with you." But Ittai answered the king and said, "As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be." So David said to Ittai, "Go, and cross over." Then Ittai the Gittite and all his men and all the little ones who were with him crossed over. (2 Samuel 15:18-22)

Ittai was a true convert - he was an exile from his home who had converted from the gods of the Philistines to follow the LORD and became loyal to Israel and to King David, even to the point of following David into exile.

The discipline of Israel by God was to be a sign to foreigners (NOCRI) of what happens when a people forsake the true God (Deut. 29:22ff)

In the New Testament, Jesus additionally showed us that we were to behave towards NOCRI with kindness and the turning of the other cheek, that they might be converted. We are to love our enemies, those outside of covenant with God. 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 NOCRI¹²

¹² The Greek word is Xenos - from whence we get Xenophobia - "fear of the the foreigner"

Conversion of the NOCRI is reinforced in Isaiah 56:6-7:

*“Also the sons of the foreigner (NOCRI) who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants - everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath and holds fast MY covenant - even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in MY house of Prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.”*¹³

The Church at Corinth asked Paul if the believers should divorce their NOCRI spouses in accordance with the instruction in Ezra 10:3-19 (1st Corinthians 7:12ff). Paul’s answer was that he didn’t have a commandment from God overturning what was written in Ezra, but he did have the personal advice that they should try to convert their pagan spouses rather than divorce them. The implication of the whole passage is of course that believers were not to choose to marry unbelievers, otherwise the question of divorcing unbelievers would not even have arisen.¹⁴

Summary of the Hebrew 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 own religion and laws. A pagan.

GER is contrasted perfectly with the other ZAR and NOCRI by Job:

Those who dwell (GER) in my house, and my maidservants, Count me as a stranger (ZAR); I am an alien (NOCRI) in their sight. (Job 19:15)

In this passage a GER is part of the household, but the ZAR and NOCRI have nothing to do with the household.

¹³ Jesus quoted the last part of this verse when casting out the money changers and animal sellers. He was not only angry because of their corruption, but because they were ruining the testimony of the temple worship in the eyes of the NOCRI. The very people that Solomon had prayed would be converted because of the temple.

¹⁴ Deut. 20:14, 21:11ff did allow Israeli men to take women from nations they conquered who were far from the land of Israel. However these were not “free” wives but rather “slave” wives (Deut. 21:14). i.e. concubines. These women were either virgins or as a result of the war, widows since the conquered men were all to be killed (Deut. 20:13).

Translating the Hebrew Terms:

There are several possible English words to translate the four Hebrew words which refer to non-native born Israelites: Stranger, Immigrant, Migrant, Alien, Foreigner, Convert, Sojourner, Dweller, Pagan, Illegal-Immigrant, Resident Alien, Gentile, Proselyte.

In the OT, the NKJV improperly uses the word “Alien” to translate the word “GER” since a GER was a true immigrant who became a citizen. Later in the NT, the NKJV uses the terms “aliens” and “strangers” to refer to those who had no part in Israel:

*“Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh--who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands - that at that time you were without Christ, being **aliens** from the commonwealth of Israel and **strangers** from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”*
(Ephesians 2:11-12)

Here is how the four Hebrew terms should be translated:

GER - “immigrant” or “proselyte”

TOSHAV - “sojourner” or “resident alien” or “migrant”

ZAR - “stranger” or “outsider”

NOCRI - “alien” or “foreigner” or “pagan”

Summary:

Immigrants (GER) were listed along with Levites, orphans and widows as the members of society to whom God gave special attention and care. Immigrants (GER) were allowed full citizenship rights along with the Israelites, so long as they joined themselves to the LORD God of Israel, and committed themselves to keep His commandments. 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. However, like the Levites and the Patriarchs, the GER had no farm land inheritance.

With regards to immigration/citizenship status there were 5 levels:

1. EZRACH - a natural born citizen. A genetic descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. An Israelite.
2. GER - an immigrant who is granted citizenship after entering into covenant with God through circumcision and faith.
3. TOSHAV - a migrant worker or long term visitor. Someone on a work or student visa.
4. ZAR - an outsider, not part of the house of Israel. Not a convert.

5. NOCRI - a Pagan, a Foreigner, especially those of the nations around Israel who worship false gods and don't speak the language of Israel.

Additionally there is the term ORACH which simply means traveler.

The goal of the Gospel for all of these is that all would come to faith in the one true God, being drawn to Him by the light they see in His followers and by His answering their prayers after they call upon Him.

Application for America:

If America was to follow the example in the Bible, we would allow citizenship for any immigrant who learns our language, follows our laws and worships the God of the Bible. America would provide such an immigrant with full citizenship rights and offer them the same welfare that is also given to other disadvantaged members of society. America would allow other types of foreigners to visit in hopes that they would be attracted to the truth they see practiced in our nation. However a foreigner who wanted to keep their foreign gods, foreign religion, foreign language, foreign citizenship or foreign laws would not be allowed to become a citizen or even marry a citizen. No immigrant would be allowed to become a leader. Only native born Americans would be allowed leadership.

“Illegal Immigration”

The idea that simply coming to America without permission makes one a law breaker, is inconsistent with the scriptures and history. For example the British government made immigration to the promised land illegal for Jews fleeing holocaust Europe. Obviously any government law that contradicts scripture should be overturned.

If we are to follow the example found in the Bible, we should have open borders to any immigrant who wants to come and join our way of life. We would also provide tourist visas to anyone who wants to come visit to learn our way of life. However those who come here in order to follow a non-biblical path, such as committing crimes, or introducing new religions would be rejected.

Criminal Aliens

If we follow the example of the Bible regarding foreigners who come here to commit crimes, we would punish them as criminals, up to and including the death penalty.

Deportation for criminals should not be an option. Deportation is a revolving door and also sets up two standards of punishment: one for the alien and one for the native born. This is wrong according to the scriptures. According to the Scriptures, there should be one law for everyone, at least as regards crimes. Imprisoning such criminals is too expensive and is also unbiblical.

Israel was never commanded to imprison anyone. Only foreign pagan (NOCRI) cultures used prisons. For example, Joseph was imprisoned by the Egyptians and John the Baptist by the Romans. Punishment in the Bible included the death penalty, whipping, fines, and enslavement, but not imprisonment.

Application for Christians:

Followers of Jesus can do the following things to support a Biblical view of immigration:

1. Never mock or belittle a newcomer. Always be kind to them.
2. Never tell racial jokes. Don't think of yourself as better than others.
3. Help new immigrants learn English so they will integrate better.
4. Help new immigrants get established in jobs and housing.
5. Teach the Bible to new immigrants, tourists, overseas students and other visitors.
6. Invite a new immigrant and their family over for dinner.
7. Offer tutoring to visiting students. Teach them English through the Bible.
8. House an immigrant.

The LORD watches over the strangers (GER); He relieves the fatherless and widow; But the way of the wicked He turns upside down. (Psalm 146:9)

And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against sorcerers, against adulterers, against perjurers, against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, and against those who turn away an alien (GER)—Because they do not fear Me," Says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:5)

Do not forget to entertain strangers¹⁵, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. (Hebrews 13:2)

For further study:

3rd John 5 - showing hospitality to brothers and strangers.

1st Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:8 - Elders/overseers must be in the habit of hospitality.

1st Timothy 5:10 - Christian widows must be known to have lodged strangers.

Matthew 25:35 "...I was a stranger and you took Me in."

Hebrews 11:13 "...they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

Phillipians 3:20 "For our citizenship is in Heaven..."

¹⁵ "entertain strangers" GK = philoxenia. From the Greek root words for "love" and "stranger". This word is the opposite of Xenophobia ("fear of strangers"). This word is also used at Romans 12:13 where it is translated as "hospitality".

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