



2020 VISION

MISSION IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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YET MORE FOREIGNERS

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Biblical perspectives to inform our response? Much to consider in the Old Testament, which might be seen as the first contextual attempt to live in obedience to God.

Israel's migrant origins

Abraham, the father of all who have faith (Gal 3:7), was a migrant.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran. The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. (Gen 11:31-12:1)

Jacob is called a "wandering Aramean", with family links in Harramn (Paddan Aram). Both wives (Leah and Rachel) were from that area and were cousins on his mother's side (Gen 28:1-5; 29:1-30).

When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, take some of the first fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. (Deut 26:1-5)

Israel was a hybrid, multi-ethnic group, not all of whom could claim direct descent from Jacob and his sons. The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Sukkoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. Many other people went up with them, and also large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds. (Ex 12:37-38)

The Levitical Code enjoined remembrance of Israel's origins, and directly related this to their own treatment of foreigners.

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:33-34; see also Lev 23:33-34,42-43)

Israel's treatment of foreigners in the Torah and in practice

There appear to have been different types of foreigner, with different words to describe them.

- Foreigner (nokri; LXX *allogenēs* = those originating from elsewhere)
- Foreigner residing among you (ger; LXX *prosēlutos*, cf 'proselyte')

"The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "These are the regulations for the Passover meal. No foreigner (nokri) may eat it. Any slave you have bought may eat it after you have circumcised him, but a temporary resident (toshav) or a hired worker may not eat it. It must be eaten inside the house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones. The whole community of Israel must celebrate it. A foreigner residing among you (ger) who wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat it. The same law applies both to the native-born and to the foreigner residing among you. (Ex 12:43-49)

These distinctions were clarified and enhanced on national and historical grounds. No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, not even in the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you. However, the LORD your God would not listen to Balaam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loves you. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live.

Do not despise an Edomite, for the Edomites are related to you. Do not despise an Egyptian, because you resided as foreigners in their country. The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD. (Deut 23:3-8)

Gerim (*prosēlutos*). Integrated into Israel, including circumcision as commitment to the covenant but, given their origins, they were included by the Torah among the economically vulnerable.

Included in Israel's worship (see Ex 12:48 above)

Equal rights to justice - Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge
(Deut 24:17)

Same expectations regarding conduct and behaviour - One and the same law applies to everyone who sins unintentionally, whether a native-born Israelite or a foreigner residing

among you. But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the LORD and must be cut off from the people of Israel (Num 15:29-30)

Protected from economic exploitation - Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns (Ex 20:9-10)

How were the gerim actually treated?

Their treatment as a reason for exile - 6 See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood. 7 In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the foreigner and mistreated the fatherless and the widow 29 The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the foreigner, denying them justice (Ezek 22:6-7,29; see also Jer 7:4-7)

Not much improvement after the return from exile - And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: "This is what the LORD Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other'" (Zech 7:8-10)

"So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty. (Mal 3:5)

Nokrim (allogenēs). Loyalties lay elsewhere, not integrated into Israelite community.

Could not participate in Israel's worship (see Ex 12:43 above)

Could be charged interest on loans - You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a fellow Israelite, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess. (Deut 23:20)

Loans not cancelled in Sabbath years - Every creditor shall cancel any loan they have made to a fellow Israelite. They shall not require payment from anyone among their own people, because the LORD's time for cancelling debts has been proclaimed. You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your fellow Israelite owes you. (Deut 15:2-3)

But the gerim/nokrim distinction was not always clear-cut - As for the foreigner (nokri) who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name - for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm - when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner (nokri) asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name. (1 Ki 8:41-43)

Nuances in the book of Ruth (a Moabite, cf Deut 23:3-8 above)

Her first husband was an economic migrant - In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. (1:1-5)

A degree of cultural integration. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me". (1:15-17)

That was not wholly successful. The overseer replied, "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, "Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me - a foreigner?" (2:6,10) until she married Boaz - Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!" Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." (4:9-12)

Old Testament laws and narratives are not binding upon Christians, still less upon the modern nation state, but they do illustrate something of the character of God. There seems to have been a concern for social cohesion and the integration (even assimilation?) of the foreigner, but also for social protection of the vulnerable. Not much indication of multiculturalism in its modern forms.

What about the New Testament?

It is more challenging to find direct parallels in the New Testament. Jesus' ministry was a short three years, and the letters to the early church address the concerns of new small communities adrift on a sea of empire, not matters of national governance.

Jesus' early life experience included being an 'asylum seeker' in Egypt, when his parents fled Bethlehem to escape Herod's murderous paranoid rage. In the parable of the sheep and

the goats (Matt 25:31-46), we are enjoined to welcome the stranger (Gk xenos; from which we get our word xenophobia, and from which we can draw clear inferences).

Philippi was a Roman colony near Thessalonica, populated by retired ex-legionaries who provided an army reserve on the frontier. Few Jewish people lived there, so there was no synagogue for Paul to preach in, his usual practice (Acts 16:11-15). There are few allusions to the Old Testament in Paul's letter to the Philippians, and no direct quotations, since it would be unknown to them and therefore meaningless. The language of the city was Latin, not Greek, and it was proud of its Roman identity (Acts 16:20-21). Paul used his own Roman citizenship to good effect, twice being released from imprisonment (Acts 16:35-29; 22:22-29). To these new, Roman, Christians, Paul writes:

As citizens of heaven, live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (Php 1:27)

Our citizenship is in heaven (Php 3:20)

The power of Paul's injunction is apparent. Loyal citizens who have been rewarded well for their service to Rome, he twice reminds them not to be too tightly bound by national and local loyalties. Just as Lev 19:33-34 reminded Israel of their origins and therefore of their treatment of foreigners, this seems to be foundational to a Christian response to contemporary issues of migration. (see also Heb 11:13-16 and 1 Pet 1:17; 2:11)

This was expressed with deep clarity by Mathētēs ("A Disciple"), writer of the early second-century AD Epistle to Diognetus:

"(Christians) live in their own countries, but they do so as those who are just passing through. As citizens they participate in everything with others, yet they endure everything as if they were foreigners. Every foreign land is like their homeland to them, and every land of their birth is like a land of strangers".

(Epistle to Diognetus, 5)