

The Stranger in God's Land – Foreigner, Stranger, Guest: What Can We Learn from Israel's Attitude Towards Strangers?

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ABSTRACT

This article concentrates on the Hebrew terms used for "stranger" in the OT, especially the three most used terms zar (זר), nochri (נכרי) and ger (גר). The research methodology used is based on a canonical and literary critical approach to the OT. While the term זר is more or less neutral in its meaning, the terms נכרי and גר invoke stronger emotions: the term נכרי (foreigner) denotes a more or less dangerous stranger (due to strange gods and/or strange ways of living), whereas the term גר (guest) is used very positively. The latter is by far the most common word used for "stranger" in the OT. This article looks into the relation between these three words and then asks how a זר could become a גר and avoid being a נכרי. Finally, what we can learn from this for our modern society is explored in the conclusion.¹

Key words: stranger (Hebrew), guest (Hebrew), foreigner (Hebrew), canonical criticism, literary criticism, Germany.

A INTRODUCTION

1 On the Situation in Germany

In Germany we have a population of about 80 million people. 19% (15 million people) have an immigrant background. About half of these are Germans who once migrated to Russia or other East-European countries many generations ago and have now come back to Germany. That leaves another 7,1 million who are foreigners. 35% of them are citizens from other European countries, while the majority of the remaining 65% come from Turkey.

Governmental elections were last held in Germany in September 2013. Thirty four political parties advertised their programmes to attract potential voters *via* TV, Radio, newspapers and election posters located along the main roads of our cities. Amongst these parties there were also a few "very right wing" parties, the biggest of which is the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD). There is a great discussion about whether or not the NPD

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should be banned as an extremist party and therefore forbidden, but this discussion is still ongoing. They advertised themselves with slogans like "Wir statt Überfremdung" (we instead of too many strangers) or "Unser Land in deutscher Hand" (our country in German hands). In this way they played on the fear of many Germans regarding the high number of foreigners in Germany which could eventually lead to a Germany where ethnic Germans might become a minority, especially since Germans tend to have fewer children than most of these foreigners.

Germany in fact has a very problematic history in this respect. During World War II the Nazis ruled Germany exactly with slogans like those now used by the NPD. Especially Jews, Gypsies and also handicapped people were literally driven out of Germany, collected in concentration camps and millions of them were killed. "Germany to the Germans" was the motto of that time. Strangers were often viewed as more or less sub-human. It is shocking to find the same slogans again on our streets today.

During the time of the Nazi government, the so-called "Drittes Reich" of Adolph Hitler, even many theologians followed the Nazi-ideology and sometimes tried to argue theologically in favour of Hitler and his racism. One of them was the famous Gerhard Kittel, editor of the "Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament." In an article entitled "Die Judenfrage" in the year 1933 he tried to argue for depriving Jews of many of their civil rights, making them second class citizens. He argued for a special legislation concerning strangers (so-called "Fremdengesetzgebung"), in which all Jews would be considered as strangers. He thought this to be in line with the legislation concerning strangers in the OT. Kittel wrote: "Das Judentum muß, wie es scheint, von seinen vermeintlichen Gegnern gezwungen werden, sich auf sich selbst zu besinnen."²

What we can see here is that the OT was used to deprive people living in Germany for centuries of their civil rights. Is Kittel right? Does the OT actually view strangers living in Israel as second class citizens? What can we really learn from the OT? These are some of the questions I want to answer in this article.

² "The Jews must, as it seems, be forced by their alleged enemies, to recollect on themselves." Gerhard Kittel, "Die Judenfrage," quoted according to Frank Crüsemann, "Fremdenliebe und Identitätssicherung: Zum Verständnis der 'Fremden'-Gesetze im Alten Testament," *WD* 19 (1987): 11.

2 On the Approach Used in this article

The question of the "stranger" in the OT is a topic which has recently been discussed by Markus Zehnder³ in his very exhaustive and foundational work "Umgang mit Fremden in Israel und Assyrien." However, Zehnder of course has not been the first to discuss this topic. It was first thoroughly researched back in 1896 by Alfred Bertholet.⁴ More recently Lukas M. Muntingh,⁵ Johann Jakob Stamm,⁶ Joseph D. Amusin,⁷ Hans Klein,⁸ Wolfgang Meier,⁹ Manfred Görg,¹⁰ Frank Crüsemann,¹¹ Peter Welten,¹² Christiana van Houten,¹³ Josef Schreiner and Rainer Kampling,¹⁴ Wolfgang Fleckenstein¹⁵ and Christoph

³ Markus Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden in Israel und Assyrien: Ein Beitrag zur Anthropologie des "Fremden" im Licht antiker Quellen* (BWANT NS 8; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005). Compare also Markus Zehnder, "Anstösse aus Dtn 23,2-9 zur Frage nach dem Umgang mit Fremden," *FZPhTh* 52 (2005): 300-314.

⁴ Alfred Bertholet, *Die Stellung der Israeliten und der Juden zu den Fremden* (Freiburg i. B.: Mohr, 1896).

⁵ Lukas M. Muntingh, "Die begrip 'Ger' in die Ou Testament," *NGTT* 3 (1962): 534-558.

⁶ Johann J. Stamm, "Fremde, Flüchtlinge und ihr Schutz im alten Israel und in seiner Umwelt," in *Der Flüchtling in der Weltgeschichte* (ed. André Mercier; Bern: Peter Lang, 1974), 31-66.

⁷ Joseph D. Amusin, "Die Gerim in der sozialen Legislatur des Alten Testaments," *Klio* 63 (1981): 15-23.

⁸ Hans Klein, "Die Aufnahme Fremder in die Gemeinde des Alten und des Neuen Bundes," *TBei* 12 (1981): 21-34.

⁹ Wolfgang Meier, "'... Fremdlinge, die aus Israel gekommen waren ...': Eine Notiz in 2 Chronik 30,25f aus der Sicht der Ausgrabungen im Jüdischen Viertel der Altstadt von Jerusalem," *BN* 15 (1981): 40-44.

¹⁰ Manfred Görg, "Der 'Fremde' (*gēr*): ein Fremdwort im Alten Testament?" *BN* 25 (1984): 10-13; Manfred Görg, "Fremdsein in und für Israel," *MTZ* 37 (1986): 217-232 and Manfred Görg, "Woher kommt der 'Proselyt'?" *BN* 103 (2000): 9-10.

¹¹ Crüsemann, "Fremdenliebe," 11-24.

¹² Peter Welten, "'... ihr seid ja auch Fremdlinge gewesen in Ägypten' (Ex 22,20): Zur Frage nach dem Fremden im Alten Testament," in *Wie gut sind deine Zelte, Jaakow. . .: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Reinhold Mayer* (ed. Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich and Bertold Klappert; Gerlingen: Bleicher, 1987), 130-138.

¹³ Christiana de Groot van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (JSOTSup 107; Sheffield: Continuum International, 1991) and Christiana de Groot van Houten, "Remember that You Were Alien: A Traditio-Historical Study," in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes* (ed. Eugene Ulrich, et al.; JSOTSup 149; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 224-240.

¹⁴ Josef Schreiner and Rainer Kampling, *Der Nächste, der Fremde, der Feind* (Würzburg: Echter, 2000).

¹⁵ Wolfgang Fleckenstein, "'Einen Fremden sollst Du nicht ausnützen oder ausbeuten.' (Ex 22,20): Alttestamentliche Orientierungshilfen zu einem immer wieder aktuellen Thema," *MTZ* 48 (1997): 1-8.

Bultmann¹⁶ – amongst others – have also taken up the topic and developed further many of its different aspects. However, most of these works have concentrated much upon the Hebrew term נָכַר or have tried to determine the alleged development of the various terms used for "strangers" in the OT. What is missing is an attempt to find a more general view on the topic. Is there a common view on this question throughout the OT?¹⁷ How are the different Hebrew terms used? And what can we learn from this?

Markus Zehnder criticizes that most of the recent discussions on the topic are based on the methodologies of literary criticism.¹⁸ But the extent of the different sources as well as their dating is in no way definitely clear. On the contrary, there seems to be almost no consensus with regards to most of these questions among source critics. In his recent article in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (ZAW) from 1/2013¹⁹ Thomas Römer speaks about

¹⁶ Christoph Bultmann, *Der Fremde im antiken Juda: Eine Untersuchung zum sozialen Typenbegriff >ger< und seinem Bedeutungswandel in der alttestamentlichen Gesetzgebung* (FRLANT 153; Göttingen: V&R, 1992).

¹⁷ It is my basic assumption that the OT indeed has a common view upon that topic. There may be differences in some aspects but I still believe that they can be understood as complementing each other. I therefore do not look at the development of the different terms in the OT, since this opens up the question of dating the texts, which sometimes is highly controversial. What often results is the "re-dating" of those texts which do not seem to fit into one's presuppositions. One example is Bernhard Lang who argues in his article on נָכַר that the term "alien gods" was only used in the time of the exile in the 6th century B.C.E.. He then uses passages from Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges and 1 Samuel to verify his argument. This assumes that these books should be dated during that time or later. But then there are also two passages in texts which do not belong to the so-called deuteronomistic sources, namely Jer 5:19 and Gen 35:2, 4. Lang argues that Jer 5:19 belongs to a section of Jeremiah which was not written by him but added later. Gen 35:2, 4, in his view, belongs to a "dtr überarbeiteten älteren Text." It seems as if there is a principle at work where there is a predefined assumption, and every finding has to be made to fit into that assumption. See B. Lang, "נָכַר", *ThWAT* 5: 461. Other examples of the same principle at work may be found in Reinhard Achenbach, "Der Eintritt der Schutzbürger in den Bund (Dtn 29,10-12): Distinktion und Integration von Fremden im Deuteronomium," in "*Gerechtigkeit und Recht üben*" (*Gen 18,19*): *Studien zur altorientalischen und biblischen Rechtsgeschichte, zur Religionsgeschichte Israels und zur Religionssoziologie* (ed. Reinhard Achenbach; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 240-255, or Rainer Albertz, "Ihr seid Fremdlinge in Ägypten gewesen": *Fremde im Alten Testament*," in *Der Mensch als Hüter seiner Welt: Alttestamentliche Bibelarbeiten zu den Themen des konziliaren Prozesses* (ed. Rainer Albertz; Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 2011), 63-66.

¹⁸ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 12.

¹⁹ Thomas Römer, "Zwischen Urkunden, Fragmenten und Ergänzungen: Zum Stand der Pentateuchforschung," *ZAW* 125/1 (2013): 2-24.

the actual status of Pentateuch research. His article very clearly shows that there is almost no consensus whatsoever in this regard.

The question then is: how can we derive any idea of the historical development of a term if there is no certainty about the historical context and the dating of the texts in question. Zehnder therefore uses a more canonical-oriented approach. He seeks to find the meaning of a term in its canonical setting. He works, as he himself explains,

unter der hypothetischen Voraussetzung einer kanonischen Exegese, nach welcher zum einen die Gesetzestexte den Vorderen und Hinteren Propheten sowie den Schriften vorzuordnen sind und die "historischen" Berichte sich primär auf die dargestellte Zeit und nicht auf eine spätere Gegenwart beziehen.²⁰

Zehnder wants to explore the question of whether or not the different voices in the HB can be understood as a "zwar spannungsreiches, letztlich aber vielleicht doch sinnvolles und kohärentes Ganzes."²¹ In doing so he wants to also answer the question as to why the last redactors of the HB allowed the different voices of the canon to coexist in this way.²²

This is also the approach I want to follow in this paper. I am working under the assumption that we must first see whether or not the different voices of the HB can be understood as a meaningful and coherent whole. Only when this first criterion is not possible should we then go on to discuss the possible reasons for such inconsistencies. As Zehnder puts it, we should only speak of a semantic development of terms, "wo sich die Annahme des Vorliegens einer konstanten Denotation als unhaltbar erweist."²³

One more preliminary remark: I often think that especially we as Western theologians have problems with Biblical texts because of our Western thought-patterns. We are accustomed to textbooks where the entire presentation is straightforward and where point one is followed by point two and then point three. Each point is developed fully and every important detail is included. We try to acknowledge every exception and prevent every possible misunderstanding. Only when this is complete can we move on to the next point. But this is not true of Biblical texts. They were not written as part of a "handbook

²⁰ ". . . with the hypothetical presumption of a canonical exegesis, which means on the one hand that the legal texts are prior to the former and the latter prophets as well as the writings and that also the 'historic' texts are primarily related to the depicted time and not to the present time." See Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 12.

²¹ ". . . although conflictual, perhaps ultimately a meaningful and coherent whole." See Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 13.

²² Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 13.

²³ ". . . where it is impossible to maintain the assumption of the existence of an unchanging meaning." See Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 287.

of faith" or "systematic theology." They are texts written in particular contexts and talking to particular people in particular situations. They are only answering the questions asked in these situations. Therefore Biblical thinking is more cyclical than linear, more situational than generalized. That means that if, for instance, a text is part of the Holiness Code we should not be astonished that it looks at strangers mainly from the viewpoint of holiness and is not so much interested in social or economic questions. We should also not be astonished if one text views a certain situation only from one perspective, while another text views that same situation from a totally different angle and answers other questions. This mainly means that we should not look at what a text does not say, but what it does say. Arguments "e silentio" are in almost any case problematic.

3 On the Terms Used in the Hebrew Bible

The HB uses different terms denoting "strangers."²⁴ There is the more or less neutral term זר (stranger). Beyond this, the OT uses two other words which involve stronger emotions: on the one hand there is נכרי (foreigner) which denotes a somehow dangerous stranger (because of their strange gods and/or strange ways of living), and on the other hand גר (guest) which is viewed much more positively. This latter term is by far the most common word for stranger in the OT.²⁵ The גר has many privileges. They are under God's special protection. The Israelites are commanded to love and care for them because they also were strangers during their time of oppression in Egypt (e.g. Exod 22:20; 23:9; Deut 10:19).²⁶

This essay is interested in the question of how a stranger (זר) could be elevated to a guest (גר) and avoid being a foreigner (נכרי)? Furthermore, what can we learn from this for our modern society? How can we build an atmosphere where strangers want to become guests? What help does the OT provide in answering these questions? However, before delving into the meaning of the various terms for "stranger" in the OT, a few words must first be said with regards to the general framework within which this overall discussion is situated.

²⁴ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 279.

²⁵ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 279, 285-287.

²⁶ There is yet another term often used in combination with גר, namely the תושב. But since this term seems to have no special meaning with respect to the question of this article its meaning will not be explored at this time.

B GENERAL FRAMEWORK

1 The Function of Genesis 1-11

If we look at the Bible from a canonical viewpoint, the question of the function of Gen 1-11 immediately comes into focus. When we think about the OT, we think about Israel. But the first eleven chapters of the HB do not speak about Israel. They speak about creation, about human kind as a whole. Israel only comes into view with ch. 12, when the focus shifts to Abraham. That means that Israel is something like a latecomer in history ("Spätankömmling der Geschichte"), as Zehnder puts it.²⁷

What does this say about the self-perception of Israel, especially if we compare it with the other nations around Israel and their self-perception? What does it say about Israel that its Holy Scriptures start with the fact that God created Adam and Eve in his image and therefore humankind as a whole, not Israel's predecessors only? What does it say about Israel that the first covenant between Yahweh and humans is one with the whole of humanity, not one with Israel? All of this makes clear that Israel does not understand itself as the centre of humanity or as the most important nation amongst all others. As a latecomer in history, Israel understands its own identity as directly coming from Yahweh, who picked up this small and almost meaningless people and made it *his* people. Therefore its identity rests in Yahweh, not in its own strength or relevancy. This self-perception has significant relevance for the perception of strangers in Israel!

2 Israel's Own Experience of Being a Stranger

Another very important factor in this context is the fact that Israel itself was a stranger in another land for a long time. Its patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were strangers in Canaan. After this time Jacob and his whole family went down to Egypt and lived as strangers there. Regardless of whether or not you believe this all to be historically true or a later story told to explain the development of the Jewish people, it nevertheless tells much about the self-perception of Israel as a people. Many times in the OT, Israel is reminded not to forget that they themselves were strangers and therefore should not look down on strangers in Israel (e.g. Ex 20:20; 23:9; Lev 19:33).

3 The Political Environment Surrounding Israel

If we now compare all of this with the political environment of Israel it immediately becomes clear that the situation we find in Israel is something very special. Zehnder compares Israel and its attitude towards strangers with that of the

²⁷ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 294.

Assyrian empire. Without going into great depth, a few of Zehnder's findings are here helpful.²⁸

In contrast to Israel, the Assyrians did not define their identity through a common predecessor. Their identity was derived from their king and – through the king – from their gods. More important than a common predecessor therefore is the religiously grounded political and cultural identity. While the Israelites always defined themselves as being children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Assyrians understood themselves as part of the kingdom, guaranteed through the king and his more or less direct contact to the gods.²⁹

It is the king, through whose rule Assyria becomes an ordered world, a so-called *cosmos*, as Zehnder puts it. Since the Mesopotamian gods are perceived to be higher than all other gods, they alone can guarantee an ordered world, and they do so through the Assyrian king and his rule. This means that only the peoples inside the Assyrian empire are really humans in the full sense of the word. All peoples outside of this realm are barbarians, in many ways more comparable to animals than to humans. They need to come under the rule of the Assyrian king in order to really become human. Conquering foreign nations therefore is considered as a benefit for these nations.³⁰

Inside the Assyrian kingdom itself, lines of distinction are not mainly between free peoples and slaves or between native Assyrians and strangers, but rather between the king and the ordinary people, as well as between the household of any given family and all those who belong to that family.³¹ What is interesting for our context is the fact that there is no special legislation whatsoever concerning strangers in Assyrian Law (which is in line with everything we

²⁸ If not otherwise indicated, the following is found in Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 48-65.

²⁹ Jan Assmann, "Zum Konzept der Fremdheit im Alten Ägypten," in *Die Begegnung mit dem Fremden* (ed. Meinhard Schuster; ColR 4; Stuttgart/Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1996), 89-90, shows that in Egypt the main focus of identity and home is the place of the grave. This is the place where the Egyptian finds their identity. The grave should always be where the home of the family is. Therefore it is a sign of wisdom not to leave your home and live somewhere else. "Der Gedanke, daß der Mensch nur in seiner Stadt leben könne, daß das Leben in der Fremde also nicht als Leben im eigentlichen Sinne gelten kann, gehört zu dem eigentümlich 'konstellativen' Personbegriff der Ägypter. Person im vollen Sinne wird man nach ägyptischer Vorstellung nur im Rahmen und nach Maßgabe der sozialen Bindungen, in denen sich das Leben entfaltet. Was die Ägypter als schlimmstes Übel ansehen, sind die Vorstellungen der Isolierung, Einsamkeit, Selbstgenügsamkeit und Unabhängigkeit. In ihrer Sicht sind das Symptome von Tod, Auflösung und Zerstörung." See Assman, "Zum Konzept," 94.

³⁰ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 91.

³¹ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 180.

know about the other neighbouring countries of Israel).³² Therefore, the regulations we find in the Law texts of Israel are something very special and important. We now want to move on to these regulations.

In doing so, not much attention will be paid to the different Law codes in the OT, although there is no doubt that it is indeed right to discern between Covenant Code, Holiness Code and Deuteronomic Code. Most of the articles and books on the topic of the "stranger" do make these distinctions, and even Zehnder, despite his canonical approach, structures his survey along these different codes, adding the Ten Commandments as a separate Code to these three.³³ My contribution to this topic is to try to read these texts together and ask the question of whether or not they can be understood as adding different angles to one common understanding.

C DIFFERENT TYPES OF STRANGERS

1 The Zar – "Strange and Alien"

The most general term for "strange" or "stranger" is זר. The noun is derived from the verbal root. The verb denotes something which can be used to mark something or somebody as alien or dissociated.³⁴ With only six or seven occurrences (depending on whether or not Job 19:17 is taken into account) it occurs relatively seldom in the OT. It always bears the mark of distance or otherness, but not necessarily in the sense of foreignness. In most of the passages (e.g. Job 19:13; Ps 58:4, 69:9) it is more or less used in a figurative sense³⁵. An interesting verse in this context is Ps 78:30 where we read about the Israelites during their wandering in the wilderness: "But before they turned from what they craved, even while the food was still in their mouths, God's anger rose against them (Ps 78:30f NIV)." A more literal translation would be: "They had not yet distanced themselves from their desire . . ." This verse very clearly shows that the root זור is used to denote something which is some distance from something else. This distance can also be a distance from God as we can see in Ps 58:4, Isa 1:4 and Ez 14:5.

³² Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 312; comp. Gianni Barbiero, „Der Fremde im Bundesbuch und im Heiligkeitgesetz: Zwischen Absonderung und Annahme,“ in *Biehl Texten* (ed. Gianni Barbiero; SBAB 34; Stuttgart: Katholische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), 253; Berhardeth C. C. Bustillo, "Liebt Gott den נכרי?" *BN* 111 (2002): 51; and Stamm, "Fremde," 42.

³³ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 313-315.

³⁴ Lambertus A. Snijders, "זר/זור," *ThWAT* 2:557, remarks that it is this basic meaning of the root which led to the fact that the term is used in medieval Hebrew Grammars to denote "exceptions" from a rule and "irregular forms."

³⁵ John A. Thompson, "זור," *NIDOTTE* 1:1092.

The noun form occurs 70 times in the OT, although there are many textual uncertainties due to the fact that *Resh* and *Dalet* can be very easily confused.³⁶ It is often used for peoples who are relatively accepted where they are, although they bear the mark of not really belonging to the place where they live. Therefore, the aspect of distance is also prominent in the noun. This kind of a "stranger" is not necessarily a foreigner, a person from another country. זר is also used in reference to Israelites living in an area where they do not belong (Deut 25:5; 1 Kings 3:18). In Lev 22:12, it is used of an Israelite who is not a Levite, thus denoting a lay person who does not belong to the sacred sphere and therefore has no right to eat of the sacred contributions.³⁷ We find this meaning also in various other passages (e.g. Ex 29:33; Num 3:10, 38). One could call such a person "unauthorized."³⁸

This kind of strangeness can be relatively neutral, denoting only the distance of something or someone, but it may also become something dangerous such as the strange woman whom one should avoid (Prov 2:16; 5:3,20; 7:5; 22:14), the strange incense and offering which God will not accept (Exod 30:9; Num 17:5) or the strange fire one should not bring to the altar (Lev 10:1; Num 1:51; 3:10, 38).

There are of course many passages where זר is used to describe peoples from foreign countries.³⁹ Often these passages do not contain any value judgment but simply denote someone who does not really belong to where he or she lives. This is true for a lot of passages from the Wisdom literature (e.g. Prov 5:10,17; 6:1; 11:15; 14:10; 20:16; 27:2,13; Job 15:19; 19:15,27; Lam 5:2) and the Prophets (e.g. Isa 1:7; 25:2; 61:5; Jer 2:25; 30:8; 51:2; Hos 7:9; 8:7; Joel 4:17; Ob 1:11). In other passages זר refers to a stranger who is dangerous, sometimes even an enemy (see Isa 25:5; 29:5; Jer 51:51; Ez 7:21; 11:9; 28:7, 10; 30:12; 31:12).⁴⁰ This means that the distance becomes something negative, especially when it is used in reference to foreign gods (Deut 32:16; Ps 44:21; 81:10; Isa 43:12; Jer 3:13; 5:19). In these cases זר is used in the same sense as נכר (see there).

We can therefore conclude that זר is used in a very broad sense. It can denote Israelites living in an area where they do not belong, layman as opposed to Levites and Priests, foreigners from other countries (with or without a nega-

³⁶ Compare Snijders, *ThWAT* 2:557.

³⁷ Snijders, *ThWAT* 2:561.

³⁸ Compare Ludwig H. Koehler, Walter Baumgartner and Johann J. Stamm, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (Leiden: Brill, [1967-1995] 2004), 268; August H. Konkel, "זר", *NIDOTTE* 1:1142.

³⁹ Wilhelm Gesenius, ed., *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament: bearb. u. hg. von Herbert Donner* (18th ed.; Berlin: Springer, 1995), 2: 310.

⁴⁰ Compare Snijders, *ThWAT* 2:559.

tive overtone) and even dangerous peoples and foreign gods. But there is always a common undertone. As Snijders puts it: the emphasis is always on the distance.⁴¹

2 The Nochri – “Strange and Possibly Dangerous”

Another term used for “strange” or “stranger” is found in the root נכר and its two noun forms נכר and נכרי. This strangeness usually denotes something more dangerous, something which should be excluded from Israel’s society whenever possible.⁴²

While the verb נכר is only used in a few passages in the OT,⁴³ the noun נכר is used 35 times, and the noun נכרי 45 times. Since it is debatable if there is only one common root – נכר – or two different roots, I will not go into the meaning of the verb in depth here. What is clear is that the verbal root definitely has a somewhat negative overtone. This is clear in passages like Deut 32:27 or Job 21:29, where it has the meaning of denying or rejecting. In Jer 19:4, God complains that his people have turned away from him and made Jerusalem “strange” to him by offering sacrifices to other gods. In Gen 42:7, 1Kings 14:5 and Prov 26:24 it means “to disguise as strange.” נכר is, therefore, used to denote something which is strange and always carries with it a negative overtone.

The same is true for the nouns. נכר is always used for something which is alien to Israel or the Israelites. Therefore, Koehler & Baumgartner⁴⁴ suggest “Ausländer” (foreigner) or “ausländisch” (foreign) as an appropriate translation. In some passages, it is more or less neutral (Gen 17:12, 27; Ps 137:4). It can even be a sign of God’s blessing, when “strangers” accept the rule of King David (2 Sam 22:45-46). But in most cases it denotes something which is so strange and different that it can become a danger for Israel (Ps 18:45-46; 144:7, 11). This is especially true for the gods of the strangers, which are often indicated as נכר (see Gen 35:2, 4; Dtn 31:16; 32:12; Josh 24:20, 23; Jdg 10:16; 1 Sam 7:3; 2 Chr 33:15; Jer 5:19; 8:19; Mal 2:11; also in Ps 81:10 together with זר).

⁴¹ Snijders, *ThWAT* 2:564.

⁴² Konkel, “נִכְרִי”, *NIDOTTE* 5:109.

⁴³ There are 8 occurrences in the OT if we assume two different roots נכר. Compare Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (reprint of 17th ed.; Berlin: Springer, [1915], 1962): 505. Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches* (18th ed.) 4: 818-819 only speaks of one common root with 48 occurrences. Cf. also Terence E. Fretheim, “נכר”, *NIDOTTE* 3:108. Bernhard Lang, *ThWAT* 5:455, convincingly argues for two different roots.

⁴⁴ Koehler, Baumgartner and Stamm, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches*, 661-662.

A stranger (נכר) was not allowed to take part in the feast of Passover (Ex 12:43) and in fact Israelites should not even buy from them animals for sacrifice (Lev 22:25). This means that there had to be a distance between an Israelite and a stranger (נכר) when it came to the Yahweh-cult. Ezekiel therefore complains that Israel let "strangers" come into the temple and in doing so desecrated it (Ez 44:7, 9). Hence there had to be a sharp distinction between Israelites and everything "strange" after the exile (Neh 9:2; 13:30).⁴⁵ Only in the eschatological future would this barrier between Israel and the stranger (נכר) be broken down and the stranger would come to know Yahweh (Isa 56:3, 6; 60:10; 61:5).

There are many parallels between נכר and its companion noun נכרי. It may equally be used to denote something strange without further connotations (Gen 31:15; Prov 27:2; Job 19:15). In Ps 69:9, David complains that he became a stranger to his brothers. This very clearly shows a special attribute of נכרי. It denotes, as Lang⁴⁶ puts it, a relationship, so that in every analyses this relation has to be made clear. This can be seen also in other passages, for example Ex 2:22 and 18:3, where we read that Moses had to flee to a country that was "strange" to him or Jdg 19:12, where a Levite did not want to sleep in a strange town which did not belong to Israel. The same usage is seen in 2 Sam 15:19, where Ittai, who does not belong to Israel, is called a stranger.

In many passages, the stranger (נכרי) definitely means a foreigner who is outside of the cultic and social community of Israel, and therefore potentially dangerous. There had to be clear distinctions between an Israelite and a stranger (נכרי). The following gives some examples for this. There is no special order here, they just serve to give a feeling for the various connotations the term נכרי had in Biblical times. So it was, for example, not permissible to sell an Israelite woman as a slave to such a stranger (Ex 21:8). A stranger was allowed to buy and eat carrion (animals found dead), which was forbidden for Israelites (Deut 14:21). The stranger did not fall under the regulations of the jubilee (Deut 15:3) and the Israelites were allowed to take interest from them, something not permissible with their fellow Israelites (Deut 23:21). It was considered unwise to lend money to a stranger (Prov 20:16; 27:13). And it was expressly forbidden to make a נכרי king of Israel (Deut 17:15). It was viewed as a sign of God's judgment if a stranger would come into possession of the heritage of an Israelite (Prov 5:10; Ecc 6:2) and Obadiah announces that strangers are going to lead the people of Israel into captivity (Obad 1:11).

⁴⁵ Ehud Ben Zvi, "Inclusion In and Exclusion from Israel as Conveyed by the Use of the Term 'Israel' in Post-Monarchic Biblical Texts," in *The Pitcher is Broken* (ed. Stephen W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy; JSOTSup 109; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 95-149, argues that in all postexilic texts the term "Israel" only refers to the returned exiles, but this seems to be an overstatement.

⁴⁶ Lang, *ThWAT* 5:456.

Isaiah calls it a judgement of God that strangers will overflow the country of Israel (Isa 2:6). There will even be a time when the doings of God himself will be "strange" for Israel (Isa 28:21⁴⁷).

On the other hand, it will be a sign of God's mercy and the coming Messianic Age, that even the נכרים from countries far away will come to Yahweh and call unto him (1 Kgs 8:41-42; 2 Chr 6:32-33; see the term נכר above). This is especially remarkable since the stranger (נכרי) is not allowed to take part in the cultic ceremonies of Israel during the time of the OT. The temple in Israel had a special area outside the proper temple area which was called the "fore-court of the heathen." Between this court and the proper temple area there was a sign warning any ἀλλογενής not to come into this area under penalty of death. The Greek term ἀλλογενής is the usual term used in the LXX as the translation for the Hebrew term נכרי.⁴⁸

There is quite a discussion on the question of the "strange woman" in Proverbs 2:16; 5:20; 6:24; 7:5; 23:27. It seems that the main focus in these passages is not on the foreignness of such a woman, but in the fact that she is outside the community and therefore dangerous, as Lang⁴⁹ puts it. But can it really be that in almost every other passage נכרי is strongly connected with "foreignness," but not here?⁵⁰ This debate cannot be satisfactorily answered here, but it should be clear that the term נכרי bears the connotation of something dangerous, whether the "strange woman" is a foreigner or not.

Nevertheless the "strange woman" in the sense of foreign women does have a special relevance in Israelite history. This theme may allude to the many strange women Solomon married who led him to serve their strange gods when he became old (1 Kgs 11:8), thus leading to the great separation of the Northern Kingdom from Judah in the south. One could rightly say that this was the starting point of the moral and spiritual breakdown of Israel, resulting finally in Exile for both kingdoms. It is therefore of no great wonder that we find in Ezra and Nehemiah a very definite and strong rejection of intermarriage. Nehemiah expressly links his rejection of such doing with Solomon's many foreign wives

⁴⁷ In this passage the term נכרי stands beside the term זר. God's action in his judgment here is viewed as something which seems to be an action which Israel would usually only attribute to people living far away from them.

⁴⁸ Lang, *ThWAT* 5:460.

⁴⁹ Lang, *ThWAT* 5:459.

⁵⁰ Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Social Context of the 'Outsider Woman' in Proverbs 1-9," *Bib* 72 (1991): 457-473, argues that the Outsider Woman in Proverbs has to be seen in line with the strange women of Solomon. She "presents the greatest obstacle to the acquisition of wisdom by virtue of her association with non-Yahwistic cults" (457). Compare also Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, *The 'Foreignness' of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9: A Study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008): 81-102.

and his subsequent idolatry (Neh 13:26-27). Ezra also condemned this kind of intermarriage and even forced the people to send their foreign women and children away (Ezra 10:2, 10, 11, 14, 17, 18, 44). This is not the place to discuss the important question of whether or not Ezra (and to a lesser extent also Nehemiah) tightened the regulations of the Law (where intermarriage is only forbidden with Canaanites and we do not find any stipulation which required the Israelites to send their foreign wives away), thus starting what later became the so-called "fence around the Law," or if it is actually an appropriate application of the Law in a new situation. It is, however, clear that these regulations cannot be taken as the "usual" view of Israel towards strangers in the OT, but must be understood as regulations in a very special situation.⁵¹

We have now looked at two terms for the "stranger." The one, זר, is more or less neutral. Its emphasis is on the distance someone or something has in relation to the context in question. It is equally possible to use this term for Israelites or foreigners. The other term, נכר/נכר, is almost exclusively used for foreigners. Its connotation is on the dangerousness of the stranger, especially in cultic and religious contexts. I have taken significant time to look into these terms since most articles and books more or less concentrate on the third term, the גר. I will therefore only outline what can be said about the גר and concentrate on the relationship between it and the two previous terms and what we possibly might learn from this for our situation today.

3 The Ger – "Stranger and Guest"

The term גר is by far the most common word for "stranger" in the OT. We find the verb גור 84 times and the noun גר 92 times in the Biblical texts.⁵² We also find the term מגור (a participial form), denoting the stay in a foreign place (9 times, if Job 18:19 is to be understood in that same sense).⁵³ There is quite a discussion on the relationship between the verb and the noun. Some do not believe in a common root, but try to derive the verb from another (mostly

⁵¹ Something similar can be said about the command of God to extinguish all the Canaanites from the land when Israel was led into it. This does not reflect the overall attitude of the OT towards foreigners but has its meaning only in this very special situation where God uses his people to punish the sins of the Canaanites (as announced in Gen 15:16).

⁵² Compare Dieter Kellermann, "גור", *ThWAT* 1:983. There is also the *hapax legomenon* גרות in Jer 41:17, usually translated with "lodging place." Compare Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches* (repr. 17th ed.), 148. Kellermann, *ThWAT* 1:985, holds the view that this term denotes a fiefdom which was once given to the Gileadite Kimham. This name was then used to mark this place in later times. If this is true, it would be one of the very seldom cases where a stranger in Israel owns a piece of land and is able to hand it down to his children.

⁵³ Compare Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches* (repr. 17th ed.), 397; Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches* (18th ed.), 627.

Egyptian⁵⁴) root. This is not the place to discuss this question, but Zehnder⁵⁵ is probably right when he concludes, together with most exegetes, that the noun גר is to be derived from the verb גור and in most cases denotes a person with a foreign ethnic origin. This person is usually viewed as someone who is dependent on "einem vollbürtigen Israeliten oder einer übergeordneten Gemeinschaft."⁵⁶

The verb גור denotes a person (or a group of people), who leaves his or her home, mostly for political or economic reasons, to stay and live in a foreign country or area, to which he or she does not belong. They are not full citizens, but are nevertheless so integrated into the surrounding that they have political and religious status, which grants them certain rights and protection. In this sense, the word is often used in reference to the patriarchs Abraham (Gen 12:10; 20:1; 21:23, 34 and 35:27), Isaac (Gen 26:3; 35:27) and Jacob (Gen 32:5; 47:4; Ps 105:23). The patriarchs lived as strangers in Canaan (Deut 26 5; 1 Chr 16:19), Jacob and his descendants in Egypt (Exod 6:4; Isa 52:4). In this and other instances, the verb גור is used for Israelites. We do not find passages with the noun גר in respect to Israelites living outside of Israel. Maybe the reason for this is that the noun denotes a certain status and there was no such status as a stranger (גר) outside of Israel.⁵⁷ This coincides with the fact that there is no legislation concerning strangers outside of Israel, as already remarked.

This might also be the reason why we find a few passages where the verb גור is used for Israelites living in a different tribe of Israel (Judg 19:16; 2 Sam 4:3; 2 Chr 15:9) and even for some Judean refugees who returned from Babylon to their own country Judah (Jer 43:5). Since the verb denotes a special activity and not a special status (as the noun) it could be used in a somewhat broader sense.

In 25 passages (e.g. Lev 17:8, 10, 12, 13; Num 15:14-16, 26, 29), the verb is used parallel to the noun (often together with the noun) for foreigners living in Israel. In these cases, there is no difference between the verb and the noun.

⁵⁴ E.g. Barbara Greger, "Beobachtungen zum Begriff גר", *BTB* 63 (1992): 31-33.

⁵⁵ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 279.

⁵⁶ ". . . an Israelite with full citizenship or on some kind of superior fellowship," Zehnder *Umgang mit Fremden*, 280.

⁵⁷ This corresponds with José E. Ramírez Kidd, *Alterity and Identity in Israel: The "ger" in the Old Testament* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 15-17, who shows that the verb is more often used in narrative texts, while the noun is usually found in legal texts. He also marks the fact that the verb usually speaks of emigration, while the noun refers to immigration (Ramírez Kidd, *Alterity*, 21-25). Rolf Rendtorff, "The Ger in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch," in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; *BibIntSer* 19; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 78, further notes that the term גר is mostly used in the singular form. This shows that the focus is on the individual.

Like the verb (but more seldom), the noun גר is also used for Abraham, living in Canaan (Gen 23:4) or Israel, living in Egypt (Gen 15:13; Deut 23:8). Moses lived as a stranger (גר) in Midian and therefore called his son *Gershom* (Exod 2:22; 18:3).

In most instances in the OT, the noun גר denotes a foreigner living in Israel and deals with the question of their rights and duties.⁵⁸ It seems that this was not a small group of people. In 2 Chr 2:16, we read about 153,600 foreigners living in Israel during the reign of Solomon! When we read through all the regulations concerning the stranger (גרִים) in the OT, we realize that these people were not only tolerated foreigners, but they indeed took part in the public and religious life of Israel (in contrast to נכרי).

Since a stranger (גר) wants to live in Israel more or less permanently they must also follow many of the stipulations of the Law. But, on the other hand, they also enjoyed many of the benefits of the Law. Basically, the Torah also applied to them (Exod 12:49; Lev 18:26; 24:22; Num 15:15-16). In Lev 24:22, this fact is even underscored with the apodosis "I am the Lord, your God," which is used to strengthen the importance of some of the Laws. Deuteronomy 29:10 even sees the stranger (גר) as belonging to the recipients of the covenant. Together with the Israelites they were required to come every seven years to listen to the reading of the Law (Deut 31:12). Joshua 8:33, 35 describes the fulfilment of this stipulation.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Bultmann, *Der Fremde*, 22, and others like Otto Kaiser, "Die Ausländer und die Fremden im Alten Testament" in *Heimat – Fremde* (ed. Peter Biehl, et al.; JRP 14; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998), 68, have argued that the term גר does not mean someone coming from a different ethnic background but should be understood as a social classification denoting someone who comes from the same people but does not have the same rights as others. Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 279-280.356-357, very convincingly shows that this is not the case; comp. also Frank Crüsemann, "'Ihr kennt die Seele des Fremden.' (Ex 23,9): Eine Erinnerung an die Tora angesichts von neuem Nationalismus und Fremdenhaß", *Concilium* 29/4 (1993): 343-344; Welten, "Zur Frage", 136-167 and Hermann Eising, "Bürger und Fremde in Israel", in *Wissenschaft – Ethos – Politik im Dienste gesellschaftlicher Ordnung: Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Joseph Höfner* (ed. Joseph Höfner and Willhelm Weber; JICS 7/8; Münster: Regensberg, 1966/67), 341.

⁵⁹ Bertholet, *Stellung*, 110-113, 178, and others, have argued that there is a development in the history of Israel where the term גר more or less becomes identical with a proselyte. Crüsemann, "'Ihr kennt,'" 343-344, refuses this identification. He shows that later rabbinic interpretation of the LXX clearly distinguishes between two kinds of proselyte: One is the so-called *ger toschab*, who does not really convert to Judaism, as opposed to the *ger zädäk*, who can be understood as a proselyte in the full sense of the word.

The fact that the stranger (גר) is also under the Torah means that they had to follow the stipulations for Passover when only unleavened bread could be eaten (Exod 12:19). They were not required to take part in the Passover, but they had to follow this rule. In the same way, they were required to obey legislation concerning the Sabbath (Exod 20:10; 23:12; Deut 5:14) and also the Day of Atonement, where the stranger (גר) was not allowed to work and had to fast, as was demanded of the Israelite (Lev 16:29).

There were other stipulations where the stranger (גר) was expressly included. This is true for the cities of refuge (Num 35:15; Josh 20:9) as well as for the right to be judged fairly (Deut 1:16). On the other hand, the stranger (גר) was also under the sentences of the Law. For child sacrifice to the god Moloch, they would be sentenced to death (Lev 20:2). The same was true if they blasphemed the name of Yahweh (Lev 24:16) or deliberately sinned (Num 15:30). On the other hand, the forgiveness for accidental sins was also granted to them (Num 15:26, 29).

Just like the Israelite, the stranger (גר) should be glad when offering the firstfruits of the soil (Deut 26:11) or celebrating the Festival of Weeks (Deut 16:11) or the Festival of Tabernacles (Deut 16:14).⁶⁰ And even the ceremony of the Red Cow was also intended for the stranger (גר) (Num 19:10). They were allowed to bring all kinds of offerings to the Lord (Lev 17:8-9; 22:18; Num 15:14). But these offerings were not demanded from the stranger (גר). They were not forced to accept the God of Israel and leave their own religion behind. If they wanted to live in Israel, they had to follow certain rules, so as not to affect the Israelites in their religious life and duties. But they could remain a foreigner following their own gods.

However, on the other hand, they were not excluded from the Yahweh-cult. They could bring offerings and take part in almost every aspect of the religious life in Israel. This is very clear when we now turn to the feast, which is of most importance in Israel: the Passover. This feast marks the most central part of Israel's identity: the exodus as the great act of foundation for Israel as a nation. Again and again, the OT reminds the Israelites not to forget this act of God: "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod 20:2). This statement is not simply an introduction to the Ten Commandments but rather signifies the central point of the self-understanding of Israel. The Passover hence is the most central feast in Israel.

⁶⁰ Bertholet, *Stellung*, 12, argues that Lev 23:42 expressly states that the Feast of Tabernacles was meant for all native-born Israelites, while Deut 16:14 and 31:12 includes the גר in the celebration of the feast. In his view this shows a development in Israel, which eventually leads to an inclusion of the גר in the sense of a proselyte. See also Kellermann, *ThWAT* 1: 987. In my view this is a very good example of an unnecessary conclusion; an *argumento e silentio*. Just the fact that Numbers does not mention the גר does not mean that such a person is excluded!

It is therefore very significant that the stranger (גר) is allowed not only to take part in the feast of Passover, but even to "make" it (Exod 12:48-49). This shows that they are not only viewed as a person who is dependent on an Israelite, but may also have a household of their own.⁶¹ In that case they were required to follow all the stipulations of the Law concerning Passover (Num 9:14). The only step the stranger (גר) was expected to take before making the Passover was to have all the males in the household circumcised. With this act, they voluntarily cross the line separating them from the people of Israel. This might in fact be viewed as becoming a proselyte.⁶² But still there is the question of the land. Such a foreigner could not own land and hand it down to their successors as a heritage, even after circumcision. It seems that this could only be achieved through marrying into an Israelite family.

When talking about the stipulations of the Law, the question of whether or not a stranger (גר) was allowed to eat carrion was deliberately left out. In Lev 17:15, we read: "Anyone, whether native-born or foreigner, who eats anything found dead or torn by wild animals must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be ceremonially unclean till evening; then they will be clean" (Lev 17:15, NIV). There are two questions arising from this verse. The first question is how this verse is connected to vv. 10-14, where the eating of blood by Israelites and strangers is punishable by death. Is the eating of carrion forbidden because there is still blood in it or because it is unclean for other reasons? If there is a connection to vv. 10-14, v. 15 can only be understood in the sense of eating a forbidden substance unintentionally. Otherwise it would contradict vv. 10-14. The second question is directly related to this. In Deut 14:21, we read that Israelites are not allowed to eat carrion, but they may give it to a stranger (גר) who in turn might either eat it or sell it to a stranger (נכרי). The problem becomes immediately clear. If Lev 17:15 only allows unintentional eating of carrion, but deliberate consumption would mean the death penalty for either an Israelite or a stranger (גר), how can Deut 14:21 then allow a stranger (גר) to eat it? Is this a contradiction due to the fact that these texts

⁶¹ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 335.

⁶² Shaye J. D. Cohen, "The Rabbinic Conversion Ceremony," *JJS* 41 (1990): 193, argues that in "pre-rabbinic times . . . conversion to Judaism was entirely a private affair." The only ritual that was demanded from a convert was circumcision, which was "demanded of all male converts." The circumcision of the household of a גר can therefore indeed be understood as becoming a proselyte. Christophe Nihan, "Resident Aliens and Natives in the Holiness Legislation," in *The Foreigner and the Law: Perspectives from the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East: [Biblical Law Session of the SBL International Meeting 2009 in Rome]* (ed. Reinhard Achenbach; BZABR 16; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 116, on the other hand thinks that this is not the case. The fact that no foreigner can inherit land in Israel in his opinion marks "the legal distinction between Israelites and resident aliens" (Nihan, "Resident Aliens," 124).

were written in different times by different authors? And if so, why did the final redactor not smooth this contradiction over? Did he not notice?

I think the answer might be much easier. If the eating of carrion is not forbidden because there is still blood in the carrion, but because it is unclean (it might have had some illnesses or there might have been other reasons to make it unclean), Lev 17:15 is just an independent law separated from vv. 10-14. Eating such an unclean animal would not mean the death penalty but would make the person who eats it unclean, whether done unintentionally or not. Deut 14:21 would then no longer be a problem. A stranger (גר) does not have to be clean unless they want to take part in any cultic ceremony. Therefore, they are allowed to eat carrion or sell it to a stranger (נכרי). It does not matter if the stranger (נכרי) is unclean since they are not allowed to take place in religious or cultic affairs anyway. This understanding of Lev 17:15 would also be consistent with the fact that the consequence of an unintentional sin is usually not a ritual of cleaning, as demanded in this verse, but an offering (Lev 4:2-3).

One important aspect of the stipulations concerning the stranger (גר) has not been looked at yet. It consists of a major percentage of the OT texts concerning the stranger (גר). The stranger (גר) is under special protection by Yahweh himself. God cares for them (Ps 146:9). Therefore, they should not be exploited or oppressed (Exod 22:20; 23:9; Lev 19:33; Deut 27:19; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Zech 7:10). Malachi 3:5 declares that anyone who deprives a stranger (גר) is in line with sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, those who defraud labourers of their wages and oppress widows and the fatherless. Such actions are indicative of a lack of the fear of God.

God, on the other hand, asks his people to love the stranger (גר) as well as the native-born in the same way as they love themselves (Lev 19:34). Again this command is underlined by the *apodosis* "I am the Lord, your God."

Many passages mention the stranger (גר) together with those groups of people who belong to the poor and needy in Israel, especially the widows and the orphans. The same social provision is made for them (Lev 19:10; 23:22; 25:35; Deut 24:19-21), because God loves them equally (Deut 10:18). Every third year the tithe was meant for the Levite, the גר, the orphan and the widow in Israel (Deut 14:29; 26:12-13). If a stranger (גר) worked as a hireling, it was forbidden to withhold their wage (Deut 24:14) and it was explicitly forbidden to ignore the law commanding mercy toward a stranger (גר) (Deut 24:17). If Israel did not keep these laws of mercy it was considered a grave guilt (Ps 94:6; Ezek 22:7, 29).

Very often in these contexts, Israel is reminded that they also used to be strangers when they lived in Egypt (e.g. Exod 22:20; 23:9; Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19; 23:8). They were only relieved from that status of foreignness and slavery

by the redeeming act of Yahweh.⁶³ But even more important was that Israel should consider themselves as strangers before God, having the status of a stranger (גר)! David prays: "We are foreigners (גרים) and strangers (תושבים) in your sight, as were all our ancestors" (1Chr 29:15 NIV). Since a stranger (גר) could not possess land⁶⁴ this was also in a sense true for Israel. The land of Israel did not belong to the Israelites but to God. Therefore, it was not possible for Israel as גרים and תושבים to sell this land which belonged to God (Lev 25:23).

4 Ruth – A Foreigner Becoming a Guest

To sum up the findings of this essay, I want to pick up one verse in the book of Ruth. This story can be understood as an example for a *nochrija* who came into the people of Israel.

In this book, we first read about Elimelech and his family. Because of a famine they decided to leave their home and move to Moab (Ruth 1:1). Here the verb גור is used for this movement towards Moab. They did not want to go there for just a short time and then return, but decided to make their living in Moab for a number of years at least. Therefore it is no wonder that the sons of Elimelech married Moabite women. I do not want to go into the difficult question of whether or not this was allowed according to the law. It just very clearly shows what living as גר means integrating into the society where you live. It seems that they nevertheless did not take over the Moabite religion since later Ruth would choose to believe in the God of her mother-in-law. Hence she must have had some opportunity to learn to know this God in the previous years.

Then – after the death of Elimelech and also his two sons – Naomi decides to go back to Israel. In this situation Ruth sticks with her mother-in-law and moves to Israel with her. Shortly after arriving in Bethlehem, the hometown of Naomi, Ruth decides to go into the fields and make use of her right as a deprived person. She wants to "go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour" (Ruth 2:2 NIV). As we have seen, this was something granted to strangers, widows and orphans in the OT Law. She then came to the field of a man named Boaz. She asked him to allow her the favour of picking up the leftover grain and he granted her this. Then he also protected her by allowing her to go amongst his maiden. In this way, no one could see that she was a helpless widow and a stranger. He commanded his workers not to touch her and allowed her to eat from the food and drink from the water they had brought to the field. In her astonishment of such

⁶³ Compare Herbert Breit, "Den Fremdling sollst du nicht unterdrücken: Asylantenprobleme im Alten Testament", in *Der Hunger nach Glauben: Gesammelte Beiträge* (ed. Manfred Seitz and Herbert Breit; Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1988): 123-130.

⁶⁴ August H. Konkel, "גור", *NIDOTTE* 1: 837.

an unexpected favour, Ruth asks Boaz: "Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me--a foreigner?" (Ruth 2:10 NIV).

Interestingly, the word גר is not used in Ruth 2:10 but the word נכריה. Zehnder thinks the reason for this might be that there is no feminine form of גר.⁶⁵ I am not sure about this. She might have used a feminine form of the verb to denote herself as גר if this was a problem. Or she could have used the word זרה instead. Maybe there is another reason behind it. Ruth did not know who Boaz was and that he already had some knowledge about her. She had only recently arrived in Judah and therefore thought that Boaz would only view her as a stranger of unknown identity. She thought in his eyes she must have been a נכריה. Therefore his unexpected grace was inexplicable for Ruth. Perhaps she was prepared to plead her cause and declare that she indeed wanted to stay in Israel, that she accepted the God of Israel and broke down every bridge behind her leading back to Moab. None of this was necessary and she was astonished. Boaz even did much more than she could have expected as a stranger (גר) – and that although in his eyes she could not be more than a נכריה.

The answer of Boaz makes this explanation probable. He answers: "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband – how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before." (Ruth 2:11 NIV) Although Boaz does not use the verb גור here, he nevertheless describes exactly what was expected from a stranger (גר): the liability to an Israelite family, the readiness to leave his or her own family and nation and to live in a more or less permanent way with another people. Boaz therefore knew that Ruth in fact was a stranger (גר), not a נכריה and he treated her in that way: with loving care and help.

We could therefore say that Ruth 2:10 seems to demonstrate the process of a stranger moving from foreigner to becoming a guest.

D CONCLUSION

1 What We Have Found

We have looked at the three main terms for "stranger" in the HB. These terms are not "labels" in a strict sense of the word or definitions for a particular kind of people. They are terms used to describe strangers (and sometimes not only foreigners) from different angles. We first explored the usage of the term זר. It is used to describe someone or something with quite a distance to its surrounding. Similarly the term נכרי also contains this sense of distance, but it always seems to carry a more or less visible aspect of dangerousness. It is almost exclusively used for foreigners coming to Israel but keeping their strangeness

⁶⁵ Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden*, 407.

and distance. On the other end of the spectrum is the term גר. They also seem to be in most cases a foreigner. But instead of keeping their strangeness and distance they want to stay and live in Israel and therefore try to integrate into Israelite society.⁶⁶ This integration may almost (or completely) lead to conversion to Yawheh and becoming a proselyte. But they are also allowed to adhere to their own national and religious identity as long as they follow a certain canon of laws, whose obedience was vital for a good and longstanding relationship with Israelite society.

These terms were not strictly distinct from one another. Sometimes they could be interchanged and hence there is a semantic overlap. Sometimes they were used side by side. But it still remains a fact that each of them carries a special overtone as displayed above.

2 What We May Learn

Let me sketch out a few things we might learn from this for our present day situation.

- (i) Do not forget that you are a stranger too! There is a saying in German which runs like this: "Jeder ist ein Ausländer. Fast überall."⁶⁷ Israel was constantly reminded that they had been strangers in their past and therefore should show mercy to strangers. And besides this they were strangers on God's earth like we all are. The fact that God created everything, that he created mankind in his image, applies to every human being in every nation in the same way. There is no such thing as a master race (as Hitler once called it).
- (ii) Do not forget that everything belongs to God. Israel was reminded of the fact that God had given them their land, and that it always remained the land of God. They could not sell this land permanently because it did not belong to them. For us this might mean: your land, your property, your money – everything is given to you by God. Therefore be prepared to share it with others who are in need.
- (iii) Create an atmosphere where people want to live, where they want to become a גר instead of a נכרי. In Israel God wanted his people to create such an atmosphere, an atmosphere of loving kindness where strangers could feel at home. We often complain that foreigners do not want to integrate into our society. At least in Germany this is true. My question

⁶⁶ Michael Guttman, "The Term 'Foreigner' (נכרי) Historically Considered," *HUCA* 3 (1926): 1, puts it like this: "While the גר thus seeks to become a member of the new community, the נכרי persists in keeping, politically and socially, his former status."

⁶⁷ "Everyone is a foreigner. Almost everywhere."

is whether or not there is enough reason for them to do so. What can they gain from integration? Is there a stranger-friendly atmosphere?

- (iv) And finally: If changing our society or our political system seems daunting, what about starting with the church? Do we as Christians love strangers? Do we help them integrate? Do we care about their welfare? Do we remember the fact that God indeed loves the stranger (Deut 10:18) and that he asks us to love them too?

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