

# Aliens and Strangers in the Old Testament

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## Introduction

Australian society has in recent years revealed a growing interest in humanitarian and social justice issues. Australia, along with other western nations, has taken on the responsibility of providing justice for the voiceless and disenfranchised. Political activist groups like ‘The Micah Challenge’ and humanitarian aid organisations like ‘World Vision’ have enjoyed strong support in this current environment. Reflecting this growing trend, biblical scholarship has also experienced a renewed interest in Old Testament ethics regarding the marginalised and the oppressed.

Among a number of these marginalised people groups in the Old Testament, we find the “resident alien”, an ambiguous designation for a mysterious group of people. Who were the resident aliens of the Old Testament and how did they relate to Israel? The aim of this paper will be to shed some light on these questions by looking at contemporary scholarship on this theme and by tracing the ‘alien motif’ through the Old Testament. The paper will examine the alien within three broad Old Testament frameworks, namely, ‘the narratives’, ‘the laws’ and ‘prophecy’. At the conclusion of the paper we attempt to highlight what the Old Testament tells us about aliens and their relationship with Israel.

## Alien Terminology

Before we venture further, it is necessary to distinguish the Old Testament ‘resident alien’ from other closely related terms. There are several of these that occur in close proximity or in similar contexts with the OT Hebrew word, *gēr*. Although they are similar, it appears that they are not synonymous.

## “*gēr*” and “*nokrî*”

In the Old Testament, the ‘resident alien’ (*gēr*, גֵּר) is often differentiated from the ‘foreigner’ (*nokrî*, נֹכְרִי). Often carrying negative a connotation (e.g. Gen 31:15; Ps 144:7; Isa 2:6; 62:8), the *nokrî* is defined as an individual who comes from another country and has no links with the tribal system of the covenant community (Deut 17:15; 29:22; Judg 19:12; 1 Kgs 8:41), and seemingly follows his own religion. This is concluded from the fact that the *nokrî* is never listed among those who take part in Israel’s religious ceremonies and is specifically excluded from eating the Passover (Exod 12:43).<sup>1</sup> Socially, such do not benefit from the seventh year remission of debts (Deut 15:3), nor are they eligible for interest-free loans (Deut 23:20).

## “*gēr*” and “*tôšāb*”

The ‘stranger’ or ‘temporary resident’ (*tôšāb*, תּוֹשָׁב ) also appears in close proximity to the *gēr*. The two are often used together either in parallel (1 Chr 29:15; Ps 39:12) or as a hendiadys (Gen 23:4; Lev 25:23); however they are not synonymous. The *tôšāb* is not entitled to partake in the Passover (Ex 12:45; cf. v. 48); meanwhile, the *gēr* is listed as a participant in public worship (Lev 16:29; 17:8-9; 22:18), implying that the ‘stranger’ (*tôšāb*) is less integrated into Israelite society than the ‘resident alien’ (*gēr*). The term *tôšāb* carries with it the sense of a transitory existence within the host community; it designates someone who has another destination in mind.

## Contemporary Scholarship on the Resident Alien

We see then that the *gēr* was not a ‘foreigner’ nor a ‘temporary resident’, but the question remains, who was the *gēr* and how did he relate to the Israelites?

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<sup>1</sup> According to Deuteronomy 14:21, an Israelite may not eat the meat of animal that has died of natural causes, however it is allowable for this meat to be given to a resident alien or sold to a foreigner. An apparent contradiction arises when Leviticus 17:15 states that both the native-born and the resident alien must not eat such meat. An interesting solution is given by Jonathan Burnside by arguing that *ger* in Leviticus refers to the assimilating alien, while *toshab* refers to the non-assimilating alien), so similarly in Deuteronomy 14:21, the non-assimilating alien is in view; “The Status and Welfare of Immigrants: The Place of the Foreigner in Biblical Law and Its Relevance to Contemporary Society”, *Jubilee Centre*, 2001: 42.

Many attempts have been made to deduce the ethnic, economic and religious identity of this particular social group.<sup>2</sup> Scholars like Weber have made the claim that the term related to impoverished Israelites who had lost their land and became landless nomads.<sup>3</sup> Christiana Van Houten suggests that the Old Testament laws indicate that the aliens were both Israelite and Samaritan settlers who returned to Judah during the years of the Babylonian domination and later joined the restoration community as *gērîm*. Alternatively, Bennett contends that the aliens are non-Israelites from the surrounding areas.<sup>4</sup>

It is prudent to look at the significant work of Van Houten and Bennett in order to glean some understanding on the identity of the alien in the Old Testament. Their research has centred on the laws in the Pentateuch; indeed, very little attention has been given to the alien outside of the Pentateuch in recent scholarship. At the conclusion of this section we will offer some critique on these positions.

### *The Characteristic Identity of the Alien (gēr) in the Covenant Code*

Adopting the Documentary Hypothesis, Christiana Van Houten, systematically works through the Old Testament laws to determine the identity of the *gēr*. Beginning with what she designates “the Book of the Covenant” (Ex 20:22-23:33), Van Houten highlights the fact that the alien, who was within the protection of an Israelite family, is required to abstain from work on the Sabbath (Ex 20:8-11). According to the culture of the Ancient Near East, the alien was housed and protected by a family or a clan,

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<sup>2</sup> C. Van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991; J. Pedersen, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Culture*, London: Oxford, 1927, 1:39-46; M. Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. Hans Gerth and Don Martindale, New York: Free Press, 1952; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961, 74-76; D. L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealthy and Poverty in Old Testament Law*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009, 175-189; D. Kellermann, “גֵּר” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, 439-449; H. V. Bennett, *Injustice Made Legal*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002; F. A. Spina, “Israelites as *gērîm*, ‘Sojourners,’ in Social and Historical Context” *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O’Connor, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983, 321-335.

<sup>3</sup> Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett, *Injustice*, 48. cf. Van Houten, *The Alien*, 77-108.

but was subsequently required to adhere to their laws and regulations.<sup>5</sup> Van Houten argues that the laws of Ex 20:22-23:33 were seen as civil laws pertaining to the many early clans of Israel and were not understood as cultic laws until much later. According to Van Houten, the identity of the alien in all of the references in the Book of the Covenant was that of a solitary unit, either an individual or a family, but was essentially still an Israelite from another clan or tribe. The aliens, and possibly their families, “are strangers who are vulnerable and need protection and charity because they are out of their familial context.”<sup>6</sup>

### *The Characteristic Identity of the Alien in Deuteronomy*

Moving on to the Deuteronomic Laws, Van Houten claims that a spiritual revival during the time of Josiah (641-609 B.C.) saw the rise of a strong humanitarian concern. Deut 14:22-29; 16:9-15; 24:17-18, 19-22; and 26:12-15 purport to improve the circumstances of ‘widows, orphans and resident aliens’ in Israelite society (e.g. Deut 24:19, 20, 21). These laws protect these people groups in relation to the allocation of wheat, fruit, wine and meat (14:22-29; 26:12-15); the celebration of major festivals (16:9-15); security for loans (24:17-18); and entitlement with respect to gleaning of leftovers from harvests and agricultural property in biblical communities (24:19-22).

Van Houten claims that the humanitarian concern for ‘the alien, the orphan and the widow’ in Deuteronomy points to the monarchical period of Israel’s history, where the existence of a wealthy ‘upper class’ and an often impoverished ‘lower class’ could be found. The introduction of the monarchy created a royal family, a national cult, a patrician class centred in the cities, an artisan class and a peasant class. The policies brought in by the monarchy relied on the wealth of the land and made the life of the lower class more perilous. “It is to this new socioeconomic reality that the laws concerning justice and charity are addressed.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien*, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien*, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien*, 93.

Harold Bennett's thorough work on Deuteronomy and the problem of poverty and oppression in Israel also attempts to shed light on the identity of the resident alien. His arguments centre on a perceived distinction between the resident alien in Deuteronomy as opposed to the other codes, namely the Covenant and Priestly Code.<sup>8</sup> In his mind there appears to be some distinguishing features in the treatment of this group within Deuteronomy, with a characteristic connection with the two other sub-groups: widows and orphans.

According to Bennett, the *gēr* shared a close proximity with the Israelites but maintained a cultural distance from this group. Although the *gēr* mentioned in the social sub-group of 'orphans, strangers and widows', was a member of the host community Israel in a spatial sense, they adhered to the culture of their own ethnic group. Their customs, religion, language and values often opposed the understandings of the majority in the Israelite village, city or tribe to which they had migrated.<sup>9</sup> The ethos, worldview and religion are what formed the distinctiveness of the *gēr*. Deuteronomy makes clear that Israel was in fact a *gēr* in Egypt (Deut 23:7). Having a distinct culture and worldview, Israel could not remain a 'sub-group' if they had adopted the worldviews, norms, language, religion and other cultural phenomena of the dominant group Egypt. In fact, the characteristic socio-cultural identity of Israel created a sense of belonging among the enslaved people group and this point of connection differentiated them from the Egyptians. For Bennett, therefore, the resident alien in Deuteronomy was someone who was culturally and religiously different from the dominant group. This leads him to conclude that the 'resident alien' referred to individuals or families who were *non*-Israelites from the surrounding countryside.

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<sup>8</sup> Bennett, *Injustice*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 14:21 may inform this delineation when it says "You shall not eat anything which dies of itself, you may give it to the alien (גֵר) who is in your town, so that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner (גֵרִי), for you are a holy people (שִׁדְרֵי) to the LORD your God." Three classifications of individuals appear in this passage, the *gēr*, the *noḵrî*, and the 'am qāḏōš (holy people). Two of these groups, namely the alien and the foreigner could eat the animal which died a natural death; the holy people, however, could not consume these corpses. The rationale is that the former two groups were not considered members of the holy community. What this may serve to illustrate is that the *gēr* and the *noḵrî* practiced a religion and an ethos that was incongruent with the 'am qāḏōš.

## *The Characteristic Identity of the Alien (gēr) in the Priestly Code*

The “Priestly Laws”, which Van Houten dates to the post-exilic period, concludes the development of the alien identity in the Old Testament laws. It is a further development away from the Deuteronomic laws. Van Houten identifies large portions of material recorded in Leviticus and Numbers that deal specifically with priestly matters; this material is therefore dubbed “the priestly code”.<sup>10</sup> In these texts the alien’s identity and treatment have developed so that they are “not only the resident aliens who need aid, but they are also given the right of members of the community. They are granted not only civil justice, but also the privileges of the insider on certain conditions.”<sup>11</sup>

Van Houten argues that the laws that require the alien to be treated with equality speak of aliens in a new way. They have been integrated into the chosen people. According to Van Houten, the meaning of *gēr* has changed quite dramatically with the result that the identity of the socially and economically dependent person of Deuteronomy has been completely overhauled.<sup>12</sup> In the priestly laws, the alien who was previously an outsider becomes an insider while worshipping in the cultic community. Van Houten isolates two redactional layers in the priestly laws. The primary layer she identifies as pre-exilic, and the second as post-exilic, from the restoration period. But she goes further than assigning a general date and provenance and attempts to construct a specific *Sitz im Leben* for the two layers of redaction whereby the aliens in the secondary level are identified as Israelites and Samaritans who did not go into exile as opposed to the exiled folk who saw themselves as ‘True Israel’.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> These sections include Leviticus 1-9; 19 and Numbers 15-18; 28-30 and contain aspects specifically related to the alien. In Leviticus, laws on the alien include those concerning the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29), offerings (Lev 17:8-9), blood (Lev 17:10-14) and acts which defile the land or are against Yahweh (Lev 18:26; 20:2; 24:16, 21-22). Those in Numbers deal with issues including the Passover (Num 9:14), and cities of refuge (Num 35:15).

<sup>11</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien*, 155.

<sup>12</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien*, 152, 162.

## Synthesis and Critique

The views of Bennett and Van Houten are problematic. They argue that the laws dealing with the alien developed and became more inclusive over time. What began as a mere appeal to charity for the alien in the Covenant Code (Ex 23:9) comes to be understood as a legal principle in the Priestly laws. There are many who would disagree with their interpretation on the identity of the ‘alien’,<sup>14</sup> the dating of the texts,<sup>15</sup> and the structure of the laws within the Pentateuch.<sup>16</sup> The Documentary Hypothesis which undergirds Van Houten’s thesis has been largely criticised.<sup>17</sup> Van Houten herself concedes that her conclusions presuppose data which is ambiguous and “problematic” and that the results “remain within the realm of the probable only.”<sup>18</sup>

The theory of a progression of laws due to the different contexts of the aliens, whether tribal nomads or returning exiles, centres around the idea of the forms of the laws. Van Houten traces the forms as changing from apodictic to casuistic. The earlier apodictic law is a direct, unconditional command to do, or to refrain from doing, a specified act which is universal and binding in nature, often personally given by Yahweh or Moses his mediator.<sup>19</sup> The later casuistic laws are characterised by its impersonal structure and conditional structure, ‘if a condition is met, then the consequence will be’ often relating to statutory laws.<sup>20</sup> Although the Covenant Code laws pertaining to the alien

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<sup>14</sup> M. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics*, London: SCM, 1987, 136. Smith asserts that *gēr* never lost the connotation of ‘resident alien’ in the Old Testament despite the various contexts to which the Pentateuch was addressed.

<sup>15</sup> Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960, 175-208.

<sup>16</sup> T.E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, 124, 140. Fretheim says that acknowledgment of various strands have been placed together and shaped into two books, reflecting a priestly perspective, but consistent with the whole flow of the Pentateuch.

<sup>17</sup> B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 119-135; G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, Waco: Word, 1987, xxxiv-xxxv; Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000, 185-197; R.N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987, 93-108.

<sup>18</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien*, 162.

<sup>19</sup> R.A.F. Mackenzie, “The Formal Aspect of Ancient Near Eastern Law”, in *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honour of T.J. Meek*, ed. W.S. McCullough, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964, 39.

<sup>20</sup> D. Patrick, “Casuistic Law Governing Primary Rights and Duties” *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 92, No. 2, 1973: 180-184.

are all found in the apodictic form, it is very difficult to distinguish the forms of the Deuteronomic and Priestly laws. Most of them are neither clearly apodictic nor casuistic in form, a fact that Van Houten admits in the conclusion of her book.<sup>21</sup> Why then, argue that a development in form has taken place when one cannot clearly conclude that the latter form is significantly different from the former?

Similarly, the motivating clauses in each law on the alien in the so-called ‘Covenant Code’, and Deuteronomic and Priestly laws are also claimed to have progressed and this is used as evidence for an ‘evolving’ identity of the resident alien. For example, the motivating clauses for the Covenant Code were often appeals to the past, in other words, obedience was grounded in the memory of what God had done in the past history of the people. The Israelites are told to be just and kind to the aliens because they themselves had been in that position in the past (Ex 22:21; 23:9). For Deuteronomy, the motivating clauses range from appeals to humanitarian instincts (Deut 5:14), to the threat of penalty for disobedience (Deut 24:14). The priestly laws have motivating clauses appealing to the authority of God, “I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:10, 34: 23:22; 24:22). Additionally, there are appeals to obedience based on the nature of creation. Take, for example, the issue of ingesting blood. Since it is the essence of life and created by God to sustain it, it is not to be eaten and so the Israelites are commanded to submit to the nature and order of God’s created cosmos (Lev 17:10, 13).

There are certainly distinguishing motivational clauses in the various sections of the legal texts found in the Pentateuch, but what Van Houten and Bennett have failed to realise is the great amount of overlap that one finds as well. The appeal to ‘remember’ the past is made in the Covenant Code (Ex 22:21; 23:9), the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 23:7) and the Priestly Code (Lev 19:33, 34; 25:33). We also find points of contact with regards to the humanitarian concern of giving rest to the alien on the Sabbath so that they may be refreshed (Ex 23:12; cf. Deut 5:14). Likewise the promise of divine blessing and cursing is found throughout all of the texts (Ex 23:20f; Deut 14:29; 24:19; Leviticus 26). Motivating clauses cannot be used to prove whether an

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<sup>21</sup> Van Houten, *The Alien*, 165

evolution in theology has taken place or not. It is more likely that the particular type of motivation employed was determined by the content of the law. Laws requiring charity tended to be backed by clauses that encourage sympathy and humanitarian concern (*cf.* Deut 16:9-15). Dietary laws were backed either by an appeal to creation, in which the law is seen as a means of maintaining the order of the cosmos (*cf.* Lev 11:1-42), or by reminding them of their status as a holy people, in which the law is seen as a response to the prior acts of God (*cf.* Lev 18:24-26). The variety of motivating clauses, therefore, is not sufficient evidence for a development or progression in social-ethical laws, but testifies to the richness of the theology in the Pentateuch.

Lastly, the syntactical structures are also difficult to reference as evidencing progression of thought. The typical designations of the “widow, orphans and alien” from Deuteronomy are found within the Covenant Code also. For example, Ex 22:20 legislates for the alien; Ex 22:21 for the widow and orphan. The widow and orphan are again mentioned in Ex 23:11. Similarly, priestly code nuances in regards to worship and rest on the Sabbath are found in Ex 23:12. The resting of the alien within the household of the Israelite family on the Sabbath day is significant if one considers that rest on the Sabbath was intricately linked with worship of Yahweh. Resting and worship on the Sabbath was meant for God’s people. Contrary to Van Houten’s argument, perhaps it is possible to suggest that the alien’s subsequent willingness to rest, subsequent to God’s concern for the alien’s welfare, should be considered as an act of worship alongside his native Israelite neighbour.

While the contributions of both Van Houten and Bennett have been useful in bringing to light some of the methodological issues in identifying the resident alien in the Pentateuch, there are several flaws to their conclusions on the identity of the *gēr*. Giving a hard and fast definition of the characteristic identity of the resident alien in Israel’s history is fraught with danger. We must attempt to find an alternative approach by focussing on how the alien related to Israel and how the Old Testament viewed the alien.

## A Better Way: The Need for a Narrative Understanding of the Old Testament

Increasing interest in the narrative of the Pentateuch and studies on the final form of the text has arisen in the last twenty years.<sup>22</sup> What these narrative studies have contributed to the academic realm is to stress the important *theological* insights of the Pentateuch. Indeed, without appreciating the nature of the story that the Pentateuch tries to tell, it is impossible to understand the theological framework these five books are attempting to give the rest of the Old Testament. The historical, socio-political studies of the Pentateuch, to which Van Houten and Bennett have given so much thought, although important, fail to grasp the fine threads which are woven throughout these books. And although each book is different, with a distinct character and emphasis, they maintain a remarkable unity not only with each other but also with the rest of the Bible. As they stand, the books of Genesis to Kings form a continuous narrative. This is apparent from both the overall picture provided and the way in which individual books are linked together. Viewed as a whole, Genesis to Kings records selected events from the creation of the earth to the demise of the Davidic monarchy at the time of the Babylonian exile. Books that appear further on in sequence presuppose that the reader is familiar with those that have gone before. For example, the references to the death of Moses and the rise of Joshua at the very start of the book of Joshua serve to link the book immediately prior to it, namely, Deuteronomy. Similarly, the introductory verse of Exodus assumes an understanding of the Joseph story. The death of Joshua is mentioned in the first verse of the Book of Judges which leads the narrative into the rest of the story of Israel's formation.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the oral or literary history of the individual books, the one certain thing to hold to is that they have been deliberately linked to form one continuous narrative.

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<sup>22</sup> Notable works include: J.H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992; T.D. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002; Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2004; J. W.H. van Wijk-Boos, *Making Wise the Simple*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005; J.H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch*, Illinois: Intervarsity, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Many more examples could be added to the list.

## **The Identity of the Alien**

Due to the weaknesses in allocating a socio-historical *Sitz im Leben* to the Old Testament texts, it is with the Old Testament's 'narrative framework' in mind that we will investigate the way in which the 'motif of the alien' develops throughout the whole Old Testament. As was mentioned previously, very little work on the alien has been done outside of the Pentateuch. It is our hope to bring to light some of the important aspects of the resident alien found throughout the Old Testament as a whole. Instead of defining the religious, cultural and ethnic background of the alien, however, we will attempt to track the alien motif through the entire Old Testament canon as they relate to the people of God.

It is not within the scope of this paper to investigate every passage where the *gēr* is mentioned in any great detail. In coming to the Old Testament, we see the noun *gēr* (גֵּר) occurring 92 times throughout the entire Hebrew Bible with the verb 'to sojourn' (גִּירָה) occurring 81 times in the *qal*, and the rarer *hithpolel* showing up 3 times. These statistics are noteworthy, however, because the sheer volume of occurrences shows that the concept of the resident alien was significant to the Old Testament authors and their audiences. Instead of examining each occurrence of the term, we will survey the alien motif by investigating it within three broad outlines, namely, the alien within the narratives of the Old Testament, the alien within the laws of the Pentateuch, and the alien in relation to Old Testament eschatology.

## **The Alien Motif throughout the Old Testament Narrative**

The commencement of the Scriptures in Genesis reveals an establishment of a theme that will run through the Old Testament even reaching the New Testament writings of 1 Peter and Hebrews. The motif of the alien is developed both through explicit references to the term 'alien', as well as through allusions to the concept of the alien. The reader first finds such an allusion in the narrative of the fall of Genesis 3. Adam and Eve experience intimacy with God, with each other and with the world in the garden.<sup>24</sup> As a

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<sup>24</sup> G.W. Coats, "Strife and Reconciliation: Themes of a Biblical Theology in the Book of Genesis", in *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 2, 1980: 18-20.

result of the fall the text states that God “drove out” Adam and Eve from the garden and barred their return (Gen 3:24). The two are driven into a land that is foreign and for the first time they experience alienation from God and the place that was their intended home.<sup>25</sup> Later, Cain is forced to leave his land and be a wanderer as a result of killing his brother Abel (Gen 4:12-16). In these opening chapters of Genesis we see the whole of humanity as aliens in an environment that is not their home, experiencing an alienation from God that was not intended for them.

But it is when we come to the hero of Genesis, Abraham, the example and forerunner for Israel, that we begin to find the explicit connection of Israel with the alien motif of the Bible. Genesis 12 begins with Abraham being called by God to leave his home and journey to a place that God will show him. Here the first occurrence of the root *gēr* is found in the Bible. Genesis 12:10 states, “Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien” (*gēr*). Abraham from here on is frequently referred to as a ‘resident alien’ (Gen 17:8; 20:1; 21:23, 34; 23:4). Later, the story of Jacob’s time in Laban’s household (Gen 28-32) is a repetition of this theme as Jacob travels from his land to Paddam Aram. Again Jacob is specifically referred to as a *gēr* in Genesis 28:4 and 32:4.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Joseph and the whole clan of Jacob are also designated as aliens in Genesis 47:4 and 9, and four hundred years later Moses identifies himself as an alien through the naming of his son ‘Gershom’, meaning ‘alien there’ (Ex 2:22). Right from the outset the reader clearly recognises that the fathers of Israel experienced an alien identity. Israel’s lineage, tradition and self-identity is grounded in the setting of alienation.

This understanding of belonging to an ‘alien people’ also saturated all of the great theological doctrines of the Israelites. Take for example the key factors shaping the identity of the Israelites. Firstly, there are the promises made to Abraham and his descendants regarding an inheritance and large progeny

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<sup>25</sup> T.M. Bolin, “A Stranger and an Alien Among You (Genesis 23:4)”, in *Common Life in the Early Church*, ed. J.V. Hills, Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998, 72, n.52. Bolin classifies the expulsion of Adam and Eve as an example of the alienation theme of the creation narrative.

<sup>26</sup> Significantly, both the references to Abraham and Jacob’s ‘alien-status’ as described in the construction “the land where you are now living as an alien” (Gen 17:8 and 28:4 respectively) is also found in Israel’s status in Egypt in Exodus 6:4.

(Gen 12:1-9) which happened in the context of alienation and sojourning. Secondly, there is the establishment of the covenant with Abraham and subsequent affirmation with Moses and the Israelites at Sinai (Exodus 20) in the context of landlessness and the promise of land. Thirdly, there are the experiences of the exodus, as God rescued Israel out of the house of slavery in Egypt (Exod 6:1), a 'house' to which they did not belong, and brought them out to be his chosen people. Through their disobedience, however, they remained as wanderers in the wilderness, having no homeland to settle in.

The individual Israelite was someone who could lay claim to the promises Yahweh had made to Abraham and his descendants regarding the land; a land where once they resided only as aliens. Their people had experienced the slavery in Egypt, a country where they did not belong, and witnessed the deliverance by Yahweh out of that land. Because of God's faithfulness, the individual Israelite could belong to a people with a land that was theirs to own, a land which God had sworn to them with an everlasting covenant. It is within these particular events of significant theological importance that the identity of the Israelite was formed. Meanwhile the undertone of alienation, sojourning, of 'not-belonging' was ever-present.

While the identity of the alien was inextricably linked with Israel's self-understanding, the God they worshipped showed particular care and protection for aliens as well. Adam and Eve, in being driven from their home, are promised a redeemer-offspring (Gen 3:15) and do not die immediately but are provided clothes from the skins of animals to cover their shame (Gen 3:21). Cain is marked so that no-one would kill him even though he is made to 'sojourn' the earth (Gen 4:15). Abraham is called from the land of Chaldea to be a vulnerable alien but is protected by God many times (Gen 12:10-20; 14:1ff; cf. 14:20; 20:1-18). Israel's history in Egypt begins with Joseph and his brothers' living as aliens in Egypt where God provides and protects them (Gen 39:2-3, 21-23; 45:5-8; 50:20). The story of Israel's alien status in Egypt ends when God hears the cry of Israel and remembers his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God remembers his promise of giving them the land of Canaan in which once "they lived as aliens" (Ex 6:4) but will now inherit as the nation of Israel (6:8). The narrative of the Old Testament not only establishes the biblical alien motif and the alien self-identity of God's

people Israel, but also shows that God watches over the interests of the alien. God intervenes on behalf of the alien Israel to care for, protect and bless them.

### **The Laws Regarding the Alien**

Precisely because of God's love and concern for the alien Israel, he set in place regulations, rights and responsibilities regarding aliens among the Israelites.<sup>27</sup> These laws reveal something of the character of God and had implications for both Israel and the aliens in their midst. Broadly speaking the law reveals God as a holy, righteous, faithful and just God. These are the very characteristics which the Israelites must adopt in their relationships with God, each other and the world. Consequently, it provides the pattern by which they must also relate to the alien. Israel is to refrain from oppressing the alien and instead provide justice for him, to incorporate him in the Sabbath rest and even the religious festivals. Likewise, the alien, to whom the Law equally applies, must imitate God by abstaining from actions that will defile the land (Lev 18:26; 20:2; 24:16, 22) and to abide by the laws on sacrifice and offerings (Lev 17:8-9; 22:18; Num 15:14).

In the laws the term *gēr* is often employed where the alien is mentioned in juxtaposition with the Israelite. When the scope and efficacy of the laws were stressed, often the 'native' (*'ezrāh*) or the 'brother' (*'āh*) and the *gēr* would be mentioned in the same sentence, meaning that the law applies to both the Israelites and the alien (Ex 12:19; Lev 17:10-16; 18:26; 19:34; 20:2; 22:18; 24:16; Num 15:13-16; Deut 1:16). Resident aliens could celebrate Passover as long as they were circumcised (Exod 12:48-49; Num 9:14; cf. 2 Chr 30:25), and even offer sacrifices (Lev 17:8; Num 15:14). They were involved in covenant ceremonies (Deut 29:10-12; 31:12; Josh 8:32-35), and were expected to keep the Sabbath (Exod 20:10; 23:12; Deut 5:14) and the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29).

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<sup>27</sup> On the significance of the alien motif within the context of the Pentateuchal laws see the Masters thesis of J. Harris, "A Theological Examination of the Alien within the Laws of the Pentateuch", Supervising Institution: Bible College of Victoria.

God's concern in giving the law is for Israel to live out its covenant relationship with him in all aspects of life, but this also applied to the 'alien within their gates'. There is no division in the covenant between what is sacred and secular, legal or ethical, and this is clearly evident in the broad range of areas to which the laws on the alien apply. The laws cover the religious, economic and legal aspects of Israel's relationship with the alien.<sup>28</sup> The covenantal impetus to love God through obeying the laws becomes the catalyst to love the alien. God is concerned that Israel lives out its relationship with him in the areas of religious, economic and legal matters, and so the laws on the alien, touching on all these aspects, serve to give the Israelites the opportunity to show their love.

The other significant aspect of the Law is in facilitating or producing worship to God. Israel's obedience to the laws of God are acts of worship to Yahweh. Hence, the Israelites is given set days and seasons in which they may worship God through various feasts and festivals. The alien is included in all of these events. The alien must rest on the Sabbath, he may attend the pilgrimage feasts and partake of the first fruits and give tithes. He may participate in offering sacrifices and offerings reflecting their thankfulness to God. Similarly the alien may attend the Day of Atonement. In all aspects of worship, whether it be in obedience to the covenantal laws or in the pragmatic expression of worshipping alongside aliens, Israel's worship of God must be demonstrated in relation to the alien.

### **Old Testament Prophecy and the Alien in Eschatological Writings**

Moving to the later writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Psalms, we find further developments of the alien motif. With the context of exile continually in view, the alien identity of Israel takes on a sobering new meaning. They are landless and aliens once more.

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<sup>28</sup> Religious laws include Ex 20:10; 23:12; Deut 16:11, 14; 26:11-13; Lev 16:29; 17:12-15. Laws with a more social concern include Ex 22:21; Deut 24:14; Lev 19:33, 34; Num 35:15. Laws that touch on the economic aspect are Deut 14:29; 24:19-21; Lev 23:22. Legal laws include Ex 23:9; Deut 24:14; Lev 25:47.

According to Israel's memory, God's promise of the land of Canaan as their homeland was inseparably connected to their relationship with Yahweh.<sup>29</sup> With the appearance of the prophet Amos, however, the imminent arrival of a radical break in this relationship was announced. "*Israel will surely go into exile away from this land*" (Amos 7:17b).

The threat of exile and its realisation for Judah in 597 and 586 BC was a blow to Israel's understanding of itself as the people of God. Israel possessed no theology that could justify its identity in a foreign country. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Ps 137:4). They were once again foreigners in a foreign land, aliens among strangers. The prophets saw the situation of Israel to be comparable to their ancestors in Egypt long ago, but there was hope for them: Yahweh is known to be a God who sets captives free and leads them through the wilderness to a land that he gives them. There was hope that this would happen once again (Ezek 20:33-34, 41-42). Isaiah prophesies that there will be rejoicing because God would forgive (Isa 40:2; 43:1) and because all obstacles, both spiritual and physical, were in the process of being overcome.

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa 51:11).

The resettlement of Israel would be the sign that God had restored his favour upon them after his anger and judgment subsided. In returning them to their homeland, God held out the evidence of his love and reconciliation and his pledge of their adoption. The people of Israel would not be aliens and orphans any longer but would be unified with God once again. As Yahweh triumphed in restoring his people to their homeland, the vindication of Israel would be experienced by the nations of the world, who would acknowledge the supremacy of Yahweh by being part of the restoration (Isa 45:14-17; 49:22-23).

After this restoration, the rule of God would produce living water that would heal and redeem the land (Ezek 47:8). The Dead Sea will become a lake with

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<sup>29</sup> D. Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, 22.

fresh water teeming with all sorts of fish. The river banks will be overgrown with fruit trees that perpetually bear fruit. Included in this restoration the 'resident alien' would also inherit the new homeland. Yahweh declares,

You are to distribute this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel. You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who have settled among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the alien settles, there you are to give him his inheritance (Ezek 47:22-23).

In the 'time of the end' the alien would receive an inheritance together with the native-born Israelites. Similarly Isaiah 14:1 reads,

The LORD will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land. Aliens will join them and unite with the house of Jacob.

Shocking promises are made in the Prophets regarding the relationship between the resident alien and Israel. In returning to the Promised Land, the alien, the outsider who once did not belong to the nation of Israel will now be integrated as one of them. They will be united (*sph– nifal*) with the house of Jacob, and the land that once belonged to Jacob will be shared with the alien. They would share in the covenant! How could this possibly be acceptable to the Jew who heard this? With the deep theological crisis that was caused by the exile, the need to remember God's promises and his actions in the past would have been more important than ever. As Israel remembered God's salvation during the Exodus, they would have been reminded of the alien status of Israel in Egypt. They would have been reminded that the land, which was seen as a tangible seal of God's covenant with them, was not theirs by right but by privilege, and that Yahweh had declared, "the land is mine, for you are resident aliens and tenants in my presence" (Lev 25:23). Their great king David prayed, "We are aliens and strangers before you, as were all our forefathers" (1 Chron 29:15). Indeed, depending on how one dates Psalm 39, this attitude of post-exilic Israel may be reflected in the words, "Hear my prayer, O LORD, listen to my cry for help; be not deaf to my

weeping. For I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were” (Ps 39:12). The return to the land levelled the playing field in that the alien and the Jew would be equal heirs to the land since it was God’s land to give, just as it was his to take away. The exile showed that Israel did not have an entitlement to the land, but was graciously gifted with it. If both the Israelite and non-Israelite lived in the land rightly owned by God, who then was the alien? As the description of the restoration of Israel developed, so came a broader understanding of God’s intention for the alien and their place within Israel. Both the Israelite and the alien became seekers of a restored homeland ruled by God.

The realisation of a full restoration of the Promised Land, however, never occurred. There was a partial return during the time of Ezra around 460 B.C. but it seems that those who returned were only a small remnant (Ezra 2:64) and they were still under the governorship of the foreign rule of Persia. The re-unification of all the twelve tribes of Israel never eventuated even when a second and third return in 458 and 445 B.C was permitted by Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:1-10; *cf.* Neh 2:11-20). It seemed that God’s people would remain waiting for this fulfillment to be made complete at some future event.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, a shift had begun to take place for the Jews, from seeing themselves, the land and the promise in literal terms, to grasping a broader eschatological understanding. The unfulfilled promises of God in the prophets were understood as reflecting a future hope – a hope of the “last days” in which God would restore the whole world (Isa 11:9). This eschatological and theological shift in turn reflected a shift in the understanding of the *gēr* in the Old Testament. Israel’s reflections on the alien moved from the strictly legal to a new awareness that their plight was the same plight of the alien and that God was committed to bringing the alien into his restoration also. A development took place away from the political-

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<sup>30</sup> “On the one hand, exiles had returned and established a slowly growing Jewish community in the homeland. The temple had been rebuilt and with its services functioned as a spiritual center for world Judaism. But on the other hand, the ingathering was far from complete and the experiences of the Jews who lived in Palestine between 520 BC and AD 70 were hardly literal fulfillments of the OT’s expectation of the ideal future.” Gowan, *Eschatology in the OT*, 28.

legal realm to the sphere of metaphor and spirituality.<sup>31</sup> It was within this context that the letters of 1 Peter and Hebrews would eventually be written addressing Christians as ‘aliens and strangers in this world’ (1 Pet 1:1; 2:11; cf. Heb 11:13). Using the rich history and deep theological meaning of the term *gēr*, the New Testament writers planted the seed of Israel’s alien background into the soil of their Christian context.

### **So who was the Alien?**

The exact identity of the alien is difficult to define with any certainty in terms of ethnicity, culture and religion. There is simply not enough evidence to give any more detailed definition than a alien (*gēr*) being, ‘a man who (alone or with his family) leaves village and tribe because of war, famine, epidemic, or blood guilt and seeks shelter and residence at another place, where his right of landed property, marriage, and taking part in jurisdiction, cult and war has been curtailed.’<sup>32</sup> What we have discovered, however, is that there was a significantly important relationship between Israel and the alien – a relationship that spanned across the entire Old Testament narrative.

A strong tradition existed in the Old Testament that illustrated Israel’s close affinity to the alien because Israel’s identity carried with it the undertones of alienation. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are described as aliens at several points with regard to their residence in the Promised Land. The laws in the Pentateuch continually revealed God’s concern for the alien and reminded the Israelites of their alien identity in Egypt. The Prophetic writings reflected the understanding that the nation’s character was built upon being sojourners in the land of Canaan. With the trauma of the exile still fresh in their minds, a new sense of reflection on an alien identity was born. The Israelites were promised that one day they would no longer be aliens but natives of a new land. Even the resident aliens among them would become integrated with Israel and would be treated as members of the same covenant community (Isa

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<sup>31</sup> José E. Ramirez Kidd has drawn attention to this shift in the function of the term *gēr*, moving from a purely legal usage to a *figura theologica* applied to collective Israelite identity. *Alterity and Identity in Israel: The “gēr” in the Old Testament*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999, 119-123.

<sup>32</sup> Ludwig Koehler & Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, I: 201.

14:1). Nevertheless, the alien identity of Israel would never be left behind because the promised land, and indeed the whole earth, was understood to be the property of God and the nation of Israel resided there as aliens.

The Israelite audience of the Old Testament would have understood clearly that they once were, and continued to be, aliens. Reflecting on these passages would invoke both a deep sense of humility and gratitude to Yahweh and his covenant but it would also summon a profound sense of sympathy for resident aliens. The roaming of the patriarch Abraham in his pasturelands, the hardships in the land of the Nile, and their wanderings in the wilderness, all pointed to the fact that the Israelites shared a common story with those aliens within their gates.

When these Old Testament references to the alien are taken within the broader narrative framework of Israel's history, and are understood within the development of Israel's theological framework, several things can be seen. First of all, given the number of occurrences of the term *gēr* within the Old Testament, one must realise that the alien was an important topic for both God and Israel. Secondly, the very fact that the topic permeates the entire Old Testament canon should be cause for attention. The concept of the alien was not an isolated, historically-bound notion in reaction to situational pressures within Israelite society (*contra* Van Houten and Bennett); it spans hundreds of years, from the judges to the kings, from the patriarchs to the prophets. Thirdly, the concept of the alien was both complex and dynamic; it was not restricted to any one demographic. At one time the alien was a wandering Israelite, the other time a Jewish exile. On the one hand they could be wealthy merchants and farmers and on the other they were oppressed, poor and powerless. Finally, what is very clear of the motif that runs through the Old Testament is that the alien shared a special relationship with the nation of Israel. In understanding themselves as being formed in the furnace of alienation, the Israelites were motivated to love the alien. When the struggles of the exile arose, this identity served to provide the 'non-belongers' with a sense of belonging and held out hope that one day they would find home.

## **Conclusion**

The marginalised alien not only shared a geographical location with Israel, living in and among the people of God, but also shared a common story. We have seen that the Israelites' identity was shaped by their history of transient existence; of landlessness in strange settings. God's concern for the alien, shown through the laws, is revealed by the motivation that Israel, too, knew what it was like to be an alien. Later, in the wake of the exile, the people of God became inseparably linked with the aliens who would one day also be gathered into the restored homeland of the end time. The 'alien' was an oppressed, marginalised people group – that much is clear. What we have discovered, however, is that Israel shared a deep and meaningful bond with the strangers and aliens of their world. As the Church comes to grips with its responsibility to immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, may we be reminded that we are also “strangers and aliens in this world” (1 Pet 2:11). Like Israel, something of our own sense of displacement and longing should drive us to defend those who are disenfranchised due to their cultural, religious or ethnic backgrounds. A Church that feels alienated by the social pressures placed upon it every day should be the first to relate to those who struggle with fitting in with their host culture. May Christians be spurred on to love those aliens in their midst, so that they may also come to understand that there is only one true place that is their home.