

Welcoming the Stranger A biblical perspective on refugees

Christopher J.H. Wright

International Ministries Director

Langham Partnership International – www.langhampartnership.org

INTRODUCTION

Definitions and overview

Hermeneutical foundation

Israel as 'light to the nations'

Israel's law as 'paradigmatic'.

What about the conquest of Canaan?

I BIBLICAL MATERIALS

A. A general overview

1. *God's people began and continue their journey through history as 'aliens and strangers'*

Gen. 23:4; Deut. 23:7, 'Hebrews', Lev. 25:23; Deut. 26:5, Ruth; Exile; Jesus; 1 Pet. 1:1

2. *Israel's law on immigrants (commonest word, ger, gerim)*

- a) Protection from general oppression Ex. 22:21, Lev. 19:33
- b) Protection from unfair treatment in court Ex. 23:9, Deut 24:17-18, Deut. 10:17-19
- c) Inclusion in Sabbath rest Ex. 20:9-11, 23:12, Deut. 5:12-15
- d) Inclusion in worship and covenant: Passover, Ex. 12:45-49; Tithes, Deut. 14:28f., 26:12f. Feasts, Deut. 16; Day of Atonement; Lev. 16:29; covenant renewal, Deut. 29:10-13, 31:12
- e) Fair employment practice: '6 year contract' Ex. 21:1-11, Deut 15:12-18 ('Hebrew'); prompt payment Deut. 24:14f.
- f) Access to agricultural produce – gleaning rights: Lev. 19:9f., Deut. 24:19-22
- g) Right of asylum and non-return: Deut. 23:15f.
- h) Equality before the law with native-born: Lev. 19:34

Positive: 'Love the immigrant...' (Deut. 10:19-20)

Negative: 'Cursed be he who perverts justice for the immigrant...' (Deut. 27:19)

The prophets

Isa. 16:1-5
 Jer. 7:6-7
 Jer. 22:3
 Ezek. 22:6f., 29
 Mal. 3:5

3. *The New Testament*

Matt. 25:31-46
 Lk. 10:25-32
 Heb. 13:2-3
 James 1:27, 2:15f.

Conclusion: Overwhelming quantity of biblical material on this subject – clearly a matter of great importance to God, and of social, ethical, legal and economic importance to Israel.

How do we evaluate our ethical balance as between this issue and, say, the biblical teaching and concern in the area of sexual ethics?

B. Some specific OT distinctions

Israel a 'mixed multitude' Ex. 12:37-39.
 Substantial immigrant/alien community during the monarchy 2 Chron. 2:17f.

Ezrach – native-born Israelite

Ger – 'resident alien', 'sojourner', 'immigrant'. Vulnerable, dependent, usually included 'within your house', or 'gate'. But distinct from slaves and 'foreigners'

Nokri - 'foreigner' - not resident. Merchants or mercenaries. But see 1 Kgs. 8:41-43, Isa. 56:3-7 Distinguished in economic dealings e.g. re. interest and debt cancellation, Deut. 23:20, 25:3

Assimilation, integration, was possible and even encouraged: provided circumcision and loyalty to Yahweh. Issue for Israel was not ethnicity *per se*, but religious protection. Cf. Isa. 14:1, Ruth, Passover, and many individual aliens in prominent roles in Israel.

II SOME ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

1. *The nature of humanity and human rights*

Image of God. Equality and dignity
 Job. 31:13-15,
 Prov. 14:31, 17:5, 22:2

Human rights, biblically, are the obverse of responsibilities
 Not just horizontal, but vertical: Transcendent dimension of God, who demands responsibility and protects rights.

2. *The nature of the gospel and our mission*

Essence of the gospel as breaking down the barriers of race and cultural prejudice
 Eph. 2:11 – 3:6

Mission: OT vision of the nations being gathered to Israel and blessed (Abraham), Isa. 19:19-25, 56:3-8, 60:3, Zech. 2:11, etc.

Mission both centrifugal and centripetal: global realities brings the nations to us!

3. *The nature of ethnicity, states and our political duty*

Ethnic and cultural diversity are God's creation Deut. 32:8, Acts 17:26, and will be preserved in the new creation, Rev. 7:9. So protection and preservation of such identities is valuable.

Prophetic role of the church in relation to states and government.

Biblical basis for civil disobedience in carefully defined circumstances – but with caution and wisdom

III SOME SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REFLECTIONS

1. Australia's excellent record endangered

2. Beware myths that feed prejudice

3. Beware scapegoating of the weak

4. Remember the primary duty of government:

Prov. 31:1-9, Pss. 72:4, 12-14, Jer. 22:1-4, Rom. 13:1-4

5. Remember the primary duty of God's people

'Love your neighbour as yourself' Lev. 19:18

'Love the alien as yourself' Lev. 19:34