

# The Immigrant—גֵר(Ger)—in the Old Testament and the Formation of the People of God’s Identity

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Ninety million people have moved from south to north over the past twenty-five years, compelling governments and all kinds of organizations to respond out of their sense of responsibility, interests, and resources.<sup>1</sup> The church is no exception.<sup>2</sup> In 2010 the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization assumed a theological position to cast a strategy for Christian mission to immigrants called diaspora mission.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on diaspora as a response to the global realities of migration has stimulated numerous scholar discussions and led to the development of a theology of migration that is mainly centered on an evangelistic rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

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1 “International Migration Report 2017,” United Nations, accessed November 10, 2018, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017.pdf>.

2 Caroline Nagel and Patricia Ehrkamp, “Immigration, Christian Faith Communities, and the Practice of Multiculturalism in the U.S. South,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 1 (January 2017): 190–208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1229489>.

3 “Scattered to Gathered: Embracing the Global Trend of Diaspora,” 2010 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (Manila, Philippines: LifeChange, 2010), 14.

4 See Jinbong Kim et al., *People Disrupted: Doing Mission Responsibly among Refugees and Migrants* (Littleton, CO : William Carey Library, 2018); see also Chandler H. Im and Amos Yong, eds., *Global Diasporas and Mission*, vol. 23, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014); and Enoch Yee-nock Wan,

However, there is more to the theology of migration than evangelizing the other among us. For instance, some scholars within the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement, such as Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, have nuanced the diaspora missiology conversation, arguing that reading Scriptures—in particular, the wisdom literature—from a diaspora perspective (i.e., placing ourselves as members of a minority group under a dominant culture) provides not only a better understanding of the text but also an approach for how the text “makes the most ‘sense.’”<sup>5</sup> What Smith-Christopher suggests is not a new way to engage the Scriptures but an inclusive hermeneutic where the experience of the migrant community can inform our understanding of the gospel and mission of God. Much remains to be explored, however, in our theology of mission and the migration experience.

This paper aims to contribute to this dialogue by arguing that our theology of migration must seek to reflect upon and understand the migrant experience beyond evangelism and outreach. A more comprehensive theology of migration is needed that encompasses a broader spectrum of dynamics of what migration entails—such as its social, spiritual, cognitive, cultural, emotional, economic, and ethical implications—from both ends of the experience, hosts and aliens. The combination of experiences, both as hosts and aliens, is instrumental in the formation of the people of God’s missional<sup>6</sup> orientation. Therefore, I argue that Israel’s engagement with the “resident aliens” (גֵּר, *ger*) as well as with their own diaspora experience shaped their identity, in particular their eschatological orientation of hope, and that such experiences must inform our missional identity today as well.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, we will consider the following: 1) the experience of Israel in the Old Testament as hosts of resident aliens/*ger*, 2) their role as *ger* themselves in Babylon, and 3) the interpretation of *ger* by two

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*Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice* (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, Western Seminary, c2011).

5 Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 168.

6 The word missional will be used, as defined by Christopher J. H. Wright, as “an adjective denoting something that is related to or characterized by mission, or has the qualities, attributes or dynamics of mission” (Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006], 24).

7 The Hebrew term *ger* has been translated into English as alien, stranger, sojourner, foreigner, non-Israelite, temporary resident, resident alien, foreign resident, protected citizen, client, or refugee (see T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., “Ger,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch—A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003], 27).

prominent Old Testament scholars. I will conclude by suggesting some missiological implications.<sup>8</sup>

## The People of God's Missional Identity and the *Ger*

### *Perspectives of the Ger in the Old Testament Land*

Although our understanding of *ger* is probably mostly informed by the Old Testament narratives, it is important to also assess the term's meaning for and uses by other cultures and peoples outside the Israelites. It is reasonable to think that as Abraham migrated from Mesopotamia, others of his day would have done the same, meaning that the existence of *ger* was likely common within other nations as well. Christiana van Houten observes that in the Mesopotamian legal collections "the Laws of Eshuna, the Code of Hammurabi and the Middle Assyrian laws each contain only one law pertaining to the alien."<sup>9</sup> This law, van Houten continues, was written "from the vantage point of the family left behind" and portrayed widows, orphans, and the poor as the objects of abandonment.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the laws of Mesopotamia aimed to protect the weak as a consequence of an event where the paterfamilias migrated, leaving his family behind. Other than this particular mandate, there is no evidence of a law regarding the alien.<sup>11</sup> Van Houten stresses, however, that we should not conclude that the absence of a legal code regarding the alien evidences a lack of sympathy, since "hospitality to the stranger may have been one of the accepted mores of the culture."<sup>12</sup>

Egypt was another nation and culture of influence in Abraham's time. James K. Hoffmeier notes that Egypt's location and natural resources were

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8 Although Israel's identity as *ger* began with the story of Joseph in Egypt, this paper focuses on the Judean Babylonian exile mainly for two reasons: (1) because the biblical accounts describe a stark difference of social status between the two experiences—the former as slaves and the latter as alien residents—and the Babylonian exile relates more closely to the subject under current scrutiny (for example, it relates to today's migration crises through the experience of dislocation, where people move from landownership to landlessness); (2) the composition—material—of the Old Testament is greatly influenced by the experience of Israel in Babylon. This does not imply that Israel's formative experience in Egypt should be disregarded or diminished, but because the Babylonian exile is a central theme for most of the prophets and historical books, it provides more insights for the topic at hand.

9 Christiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 107 (England: JSOT Press Sheffield, 1991), 34.

10 van Houten, 34.

11 van Houten, 34.

12 van Houten, 36.

attractive for many nations and peoples in the vicinity, in particular those with a shepherding socioeconomic lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> Although Egyptians generally accepted these peoples into their lands, they were selective and cautious in who they allowed to enter.<sup>14</sup> For example, the author of Genesis records that the land of Goshen was assigned to Israel, his family, and livestock, because shepherds were “an abomination to the Egyptians” (Gn 46:34b).<sup>15</sup> Also, Hoffmeier observes that archeological findings describe the entrance of foreigners into Egypt and the kind of jobs that they performed, such as “household servants . . . low-skilled laborers . . . [and] artisans.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, Egyptians were not against immigrants or strangers in their midst but had a code of border administration as sovereigns over their land.<sup>17</sup>

These examples suggest four insights regarding aliens and strangers: (1) that migration was a reality for different peoples, either for lifestyle or socioeconomic reasons; (2) that nations were very aware of the dynamics that arise from the movement of people/aliens and that laws were necessary to address resulting issues; (3) that nations were vigilant to preserve a privileged social status of their citizens over the foreigner; and (4) that Israel was not the only nation with laws and ethics regarding the *ger*; however, the difference lies in the extension of these laws and ethics, and how they related to the *ger*.

### *Israel’s Cultural Ethic and the Law of Moses*

Having *ger* in one’s midst was as common in the Old Testament times as it is today. Consequently, if Israel was to become a nation-state, they would need laws to instruct life in community with resident aliens. God provided such laws. However, biblical evidence suggests existence of a culture ethic before this regarding the *ger*. We must first look to the implications of this cultural ethic before addressing the law.

M. Daniel Carroll R. observes that there were “protocols and expectations for the host”<sup>18</sup> and points us to several examples of hospitality in the Old Testament, such as Abraham greeting and serving food to the three strangers passing by, Laban providing hospitality to Abraham’s servant, and the widow

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13 James Karl Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 38.

14 Hoffmeier, 38.

15 Unless otherwise specified, all Bible verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

16 Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 42.

17 Hoffmeier, 43.

18 M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2013), 76.

of Zarephath hosting Elijah.<sup>19</sup> He stresses, however, that the practice of hospitality within Israel was more than a mimic of the Ancient Near East cultural ethic. “To be hospitable is to imitate God,”<sup>20</sup> he observes. Carroll R. finds biblical support for this argument mainly in Psalm 23:5, where the Good Shepherd invites the psalmist into his house; “then,” Carroll R. adds, “graciousness toward those in need is revealed to be an attribute of the Lord himself.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, for Israel, hospitality to strangers was more than a cultural responsibility; it shaped the identity of the people in relation to  $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$ . Moreover, the law of Moses, as we will see, is another empirical example of God shaping the identity of his people through the *ger*.

The Pentateuch—the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, in particular—contains the laws pertaining to the *ger*. Although these books share a common set of principles, there are certain nuances we should address here. Norbert Lohfink argues for the importance of understanding the gravity with which God addresses relationship with the *ger*, and he pointedly observes that the structure of the Exodus covenant does not include the triad of “alien, widow, and orphan” found in Deuteronomy.<sup>22</sup> Although both books pay attention to the weakest among Israel, the particular emphasis in Exodus on the *ger* creates an early, marked distinction from other nations and cultures of the land.

Exodus 22:21 says in reference to the alien, “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” Van Houten observes the dual intentionality of the law; it first prohibits the oppression “of the weak by the powerful . . . [and] second it refers to the oppression of one people by another.”<sup>23</sup> God’s care and meticulous attention for both groups—host and alien, Israelites and non-Israelites—was not to be overlooked in the midst of his priestly nation. Furthermore, in Exodus 23:1–9 a reiteration of this first law prohibiting oppression is found, but this time it forms part of a legal argument aiming to establish the conditions in which the *ger* should be treated as an equal and when not.<sup>24</sup> Verse 9, however, includes this reminder: “You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” This remark seems to allude to the longings for justice that the oppressed carry regarding the structures and systems around them.

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19 Carroll R., 76–77.

20 Carroll R., 78.

21 Carroll R., 77.

22 Norbert F. Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible*, Vol. 1, Berkeley Lecture Series (North Richland Hills, TX: D & F Scott, 1987), 7–9.

23 van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, 53.

24 van Houten, 55.

One final remark within this first iteration of the law is that it pertains not only to Israel's religious observance of the Sabbath (Ex 23:12) but also to a humanitarian cause that will guard against exploitation of the *ger*: "On the seventh day you shall rest . . . and the alien . . . may be refreshed." Here, van Houten notes, the social position of the alien is made clear as "members of the household . . . [that] rely on the charity of the patriarch."<sup>25</sup>

Although Deuteronomy contains a reiteration of the law given by God to Moses in Exodus, certain nuances are observed. Hoffmeier suggests five categories in which these can be divided, all in relation to the *ger*: (1) general ethical considerations, (2) legal protection, (3) treatment of employees, (4) social benefits, and (5) religious participation.<sup>26</sup> Whereas the ethical rubric in Exodus simply prohibits oppression, Deuteronomy 10:19 adds, "Love the sojourner." Jesus is arguably referencing this passage from Deuteronomy in Luke 10:25–37 when he answers the religious scholar's question "Who is my neighbor?" by narrating the parable of the Samaritan with extraordinary mercy.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore an understatement to say that love for the *ger* elevates the *ger's* status. Rather, this commandment dignifies the *ger* for who he or she is in the eyes of the Lawgiver and captures the "ethos of what it meant to be the people of God."<sup>28</sup>

These rubrics deal with the legal and social elements of life in community with the *ger*. God becomes the defender of the *ger* and demands fairness from the people and the judges of Israel by establishing a method of payment for labor (Dt 24:14–15).<sup>29</sup> Also, in terms of social benefits, Deuteronomy 24:19–22 prevents landowners from reaping all of the harvest by requiring them to leave behind provision for the *ger*, the orphan, and the widow.<sup>30</sup>

Regarding the last category of this legal rubric, Hoffmeier stresses the religious participation of the *ger* among the Israelites. Exodus 12:48 allows voluntary inclusion of the *ger* in the Passover as well as with offerings and sacrifices (Lv 22:17–19) and the observance of the Sabbath (Ex 20:8–11).<sup>31</sup> With this last category, God provides a holistic protection for the *ger* among his people. Moreover, as Christopher J. H. Wright observes, it reflects God's caring char-

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25 van Houten, 58.

26 Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 72.

27 Although the expert in the law in Luke 10 was quoting Leviticus 19:18, Jesus responded to the question "Who is my neighbor?" by narrating a parable where the protagonist was a non-Israelite. Therefore, it could be argued that Jesus was borrowing from Deuteronomy 10:19 to complement the understanding and application of the law.

28 Carroll R., *Christians at the Border*, 83.

29 Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 79.

30 Note that the *ger* had no land of its own, nor kinship for social support.

31 Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 89–96.

acter for his people and the *ger*—feeding and clothing both because he loves both.<sup>32</sup>

God's righteousness demanded obedience and justice, and failure to comply with God's commands regarding the *ger* had serious implications for his people. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God conditioned Israel's habitation in the land by the justice of his people:

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. (Jer 7:5–7)

Judah was judged on the basis of their love for God and for the *ger*. Moreover, the landowners—Israelites—were to become landless, as the *ger*, as a result of disobedience. The social status and security of the Israelites would be matched to that of those they oppressed when Judah was taken into exile in 586 BC.

### *Reconstructing Mission to the Ger*

Robert Martin-Achard defined mission mainly as “the presence of God in the midst of God's people and the presence of this people in the midst of humanity.”<sup>33</sup> Although this definition is too vague for defining what mission precisely aims to achieve, it provides, in part, a better understanding of Israel's missional role in regard to the *ger* in the Old Testament in two ways. First, James Chukwuma Okoye argues (using Psalm 96) that Israel participates in God's mission by “worshiping and praise and by modeling a community of justice and righteousness.”<sup>34</sup> The people's obedience to the law of God, including all of the five legal rubrics pertaining to the *ger*, points to the glory and justice of God and brings blessing to the nations.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the nations discover who God is and his righteousness from within Israel contrasted with the cultural ethics of other nations.

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32 Christopher J. H. Wright, “And You Are to Love Those Who Are Foreigners . . .” (Dt 10:12–19), in *People Disrupted: Doing Mission Responsibly among Refugees and Migrants*, eds. Jinbong Kim et al. (Littleton, CO : William Carey Library, 2018), 28.

33 As cited in James Chukwuma Okoye, *Israel and the Nations: A Mission Theology of the Old Testament* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 6.

34 Okoye, 108.

35 Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 31.

Second, Israel's mission to the *ger* is perceived as centripetal, by attraction. Here Okoye borrows from Isaiah 2:3 to say that the nations come willingly to Zion, being "pulled toward it by torah issuing from there."<sup>36</sup> As we have observed, not only do the *ger* willingly submit to God's rules but these rules also bring them into proximity with the religious life, practices, and festivities from the Israelites that celebrate YHWH. As a result, the nations are drawn to Israel's *torah* and moral ethics. In their search to quench their inner restlessness, the *ger* come to Israel to satisfy "the deepest human longings for shalom."<sup>37</sup>

## Israel's Missional Identity as Ger

### *Formation through Displacement and Resettlement*

We have looked at Israel's relationship with the *ger* in their midst, in their land. Now, in order to have a better understanding of God's people's identity and eschatological orientation, our perspective needs to be reversed as we consider Israel as *ger* in Babylon. Outside their land, thrown into exile amid a powerful Babylonian culture, the Israelites became the *ger*. Psalm 119:19 provides perhaps one of the few direct self-identifications of the Israelites as *ger* in Babylon: "I am a sojourner in the earth." Commenting on this Psalm, C. Hassell Bullock asserts that the author is "likely a victim of political adversity."<sup>38</sup>

Although Bullock cannot argue a definite date for this psalm, he acknowledges that the circumstances the author describes point to "Israel's history from the exile in 586 B.C. down to the Hasmonean era, beginning in 142 B.C."<sup>39</sup> If this is so, the historical exilic Hebrew records that narrate the life and consequences of displacement imply self-ascription as *ger* in Babylon and also the internal ethos of Israel as *ger* holding tightly to the *torah*. This experience of becoming *ger* had various implications for the Israelites.

### *Political, Social, and Religious Consequences*

Judah was taken into exile in Babylon between 597 and 539 BC. The experiences of such a dislocation, or catastrophe, as an oppressed minority—as aliens and refugees—are recorded in books such as Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Lam-

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36 Okoye, *Israel and the Nations*, 112.

37 Okoye, 113.

38 C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 222.

39 Bullock, 222.



entations, Hosea, and Amos.<sup>40</sup> Rainer Albertz argues for five consequences of this exile in Judah's history:

1. The Israelites lost their political and cultic institutions.<sup>41</sup> The centrality of Zion's theology, the promise of the endurance of the Davidic monarchy, the priestly office, and even the power of YHWH came into question.<sup>42</sup>
2. Israel lost their land.<sup>43</sup> Outside the land, the character of Yahwism developed differently among the migrants to Egypt than among the exiles in Babylon; the former became more syncretistic and the latter sought radical renewal.<sup>44</sup>
3. Kinship was strengthened as a result of the loss of a centralized authority, giving birth to a form of "Judaism as a family-centered religion."<sup>45</sup>
4. People derived identity not only from YHWH but also from the land, state, politics, and language; therefore, without a nation-state, their identity was deeply shaken.<sup>46</sup> This led to an intensification of religious practices as ethnic identifiers, such as circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath.<sup>47</sup>
5. They became more susceptible to outside influence.<sup>48</sup>

We should note that the legal rubrics given by the law of Moses regarding the *ger*—general ethics, legal protection, treatment of employees, social benefits, and religious participation—were all fractured by the exilic experience. The structures that "gave power to faith and life" were no longer present, and, with no control of these, Israel adopted a new stance—one intended to preserve their identity even when all of the previous components were absent.<sup>49</sup>

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40 Rainer Albertz, "More and Less Than a Myth: Reality and Significance of Exile for the Political, Social, and Religious History of Judah," in *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon: Approaches to the Study of Exile*, eds. John J. Ahn and Jill Middlemas (New York: T & T Clarke International, 2012), 27.

41 Albertz, 27.

42 Albertz, 27–29.

43 Albertz, 29.

44 Albertz, 29.

45 Albertz, 30–31.

46 Albertz, 31.

47 Albertz, 31.

48 Albertz, 32.

49 Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 8.

But these adaptations were not enough; moreover, these did not represent the missional character that God wanted to shape in the people. Therefore, the inward orientation of this identity preservation was eventually challenged by God himself.

### *God's Mission for His Displaced People*

For the exiled community (Jer 29), the prophet Jeremiah was entrusted with a message from God that went in the opposite direction of what the people of Israel were expecting. Wright observes that Jeremiah's message carried a three-part "surprising mission for [the] exiles."<sup>50</sup> The first part of this mission dealt with their social status in Babylon; it was a move "from refugees to residents."<sup>51</sup> Israel was familiar with such legal and political differences. Foreigners had no protection and did not adhere to the religious, legal, political, and ethical laws that had been given to Israel, while resident aliens—*ger*—were participants and contributors to the socioreligious contract—in other words, to the covenant. Now, in a similar way in which the *ger* had integrated into Israel's society, Israel was called to integrate into Babylon:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.  
Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and  
give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters;  
multiply there, and do not decrease. (Jer 29:5–6)

It was a mandate to "settle, adapt and adjust to the life in Babylon, and yet remain the people of YHWH."<sup>52</sup> Once, they had been commanded to help *ger* integrate into the Israelite society; now in exile they were being asked—by God—to adhere to the Babylonian laws and social life in general as *ger*.

Wright pointedly observes the deployment of such strategy in the book of Daniel, where Daniel and his friends adopted—with no evidence of resistance—new Babylonian names, went through the Babylonian education system to learn its customs and politics, and, finally, accepted official roles as king's administrators and advisors within the government.<sup>53</sup> But, at the same time, these young men remained faithful to God, restricting themselves from certain food and from worshipping idols (Dn 1–6).<sup>54</sup> In this regard, Daniel L. Smith-Christopher calls Daniel the "wisdom warrior," who epitomizes the exile ethics that

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50 Wright, "And You Are to Love," 141.

51 Wright, 142.

52 Wright, 144.

53 Wright, 144.

54 Wright, 144–45.

hung in constant tension between loyalty and resistance.<sup>55</sup> By following God's orders, Daniel was able to live as a *ger*, honoring the laws of Babylon and the king, as long as these laws did not stand against the laws of God. Daniel's faithfulness to God was his submission to Babylon, and his loyalty to Babylon was filtered through his religious ethic—his fear of YHWH.

Wright continues with a second surprising element of God's mandate to the exiles, this time in the form of mission; God asked them to turn from being "mourners to missionaries."<sup>56</sup> "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer 29:7). Wright argues that this verse assumes God's missional character and his commitment to bless the nations through his people, even when they are the weakest of the land—the *ger*.<sup>57</sup>

Once again, we turn to Daniel as an example of obedience to this command. Daniel became the *ger* mediator.<sup>58</sup> Through Daniel's prayers, God revealed the king's dream and many lives were spared, including lives of the Babylonians (Dn 2). But it was also Daniel's prayers to YHWH and objection to worshipping the state—and the king—that sent him to the lions' den (Dn 6).

Daniel embraced his missional role, and prayer was an integral part of it. His missional identity lay in the tension of adherence to the Babylonian laws as a good citizen and contributor, and his total commitment to YHWH—a constant state of adherence-objection to the law of the land. Prayer thus became the way in which two nations were prospered and blessed in God's economy, as well as the place where the identity of the people of God was bent outward in patience-subversiveness awaiting God's justice. This state of prayerful adherence-objection became Daniel's "missional responsibility"<sup>59</sup> while his service became a vehicle of "gradual, upward socio-economic growth" within the sociopolitical structures of the dominant culture.<sup>60</sup> The one to whom the stability of land, law, and temple had been denied became a king's counselor and statesman in a foreign land by uncompromisingly embodying a paradoxical tension. As Lee Beach puts it, Daniel "is depicted as a collaborator with the

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55 Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 182–89.

56 Wright, "And You Are to Love," 145.

57 Wright, 146.

58 Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 183.

59 Wright, "And You Are to Love," 146.

60 John J. Ahn, *Exile as Forced Migrations: A Sociological, Literary, and Theological Approach on the Displacement and Resettlement of the Southern Kingdom of Judah* (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 141.

state but on Hebrew terms. His rise to prominence does not mean abandoning his religious commitments.”<sup>61</sup>

Lastly, Wright suggests a third surprise for the exiles through Jeremiah’s message as a hopeful invitation to change from “victims to visionaries.”<sup>62</sup>

For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jer 29:10–11)

Wright argues that these verses are eschatologically dense with God’s hope, grace, and justice.<sup>63</sup> “That is God’s ultimate plan and purpose.”<sup>64</sup> The restoration of all things is imminent, yet not immediate. God was calling his people to embrace a new ethic of life in their current circumstances with a projection to a future that junctures on “a promise . . . for the coming generations of God’s people . . . [and] for the nations.”<sup>65</sup> Such vision of the future brought hope to these *ger* Judeans, helping them to endure their difficulties with passive confidence in God. Moreover, as Smith-Christopher puts it, it became their “alternative means of faithfulness and mechanism for survival.”<sup>66</sup>

Chapters 9–12 of Daniel portray this visionary awareness. First, we see Daniel going through a period of fasting and confessional prayer, awaiting the fulfillment of the promise, and then receiving a powerful word of hope: “But go your way till the end. And you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days” (Dn 12:13). This is the “hope for the future that turned victims into visionaries,” Wright continues, “[enabling the *ger*] to look up and look forward and believe.”<sup>67</sup> God surprised Daniel in exile at the end of his days with a hope of an inheritance after his death that included land for the landless, grace in the midst of judgment, and justice that carries shalom—moreover, an inheritance of land as promised in Deuteronomy 30, yet with an eschatological inclination. On this, N. T. Wright argues that Daniel’s prayer in chapter 9 is woven into Deuteronomy 29 and 30, first asking for God’s forgiveness and then

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61 Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living Hope after Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 87.

62 Wright, “And You Are to Love,” 148.

63 Wright, 148.

64 Wright, 149.

65 Wright, 150.

66 Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone, 1989), 137.

67 Wright, “And You Are to Love,” 150.

appealing to God's faithfulness to bring his people back to their land.<sup>68</sup> Daniel 12 is part of such conversation as well and provides us with a reminder that YHWH will not leave the *ger* destitute.

### *Reconstructing Mission as Ger*

We may conclude two things out of this brief exploration of God's people as *ger* in Babylon and as agents of God's mission. First, change in social standing from a majority culture to minority does not dampen or hinder God's mission to bless the nations through his people. With no temple in which the presence of God dwelled, with no land of their own anymore, and with no legal protection provided by their laws, the exiled community had three choices: assimilate to Babylon culture, rebel and become recluses, or embrace the role of adherent-objectors. Although some Judean exiles took one of the first two options, God called the people to sustain their identity and become witnesses as adherent-objectors. His mission depends not on a particular socioeconomic status but on the voluntary participation of the faithful.

The second conclusion is closely related to the first. The hope of God's people strengthens as they embrace the role of being *ger* participants in God's plans. Ahn observes that even when the promise was given to the 1.5 generation, the hope was transferred through generations until its fulfillment was possible because of the present *golab*<sup>69</sup> hope that sought the welfare of Babylon.<sup>70</sup> "In an immigrant community, hope is always welcome; it always has a place in the home."<sup>71</sup> The envisioning of God's promises embraced through immediate obedience is the transformational experience that gives eschatological orientation of hope to the *ger*.

## **Missiological Implications and Concluding Thoughts: Toward a More Comprehensive Theology of Migration**

### *Who Is My Neighbor? Two Different Views*

The old question posed to Jesus nearly two millennia ago still resonates today: Who is my neighbor? M. Daniel Carroll R. is an Old Testament scholar who has addressed this matter in the milieu of great political debates, in particular

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68 N. T. Wright, *Exile: A Conversation with N. T. Wright*, ed. James M. Scott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 22–23.

69 The word *golab* is a reference to the Judeans exiled to Babylon (see Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville, eds., "Golab," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament—Prophets* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012], 304).

70 Ahn, *Exile as Forced Migrations*, 144.

71 Ahn, 157.

during the 2008 elections. His perspective on the issues of immigration stands opposite that of James K. Hoffmeier, also an Old Testament scholar. This section aims to address both perspectives with succinct clarity; however, I am limiting these two positions to what corresponds to the argument of this paper. By no means will it represent their whole arguments, although I will attempt to present each with fairness.

According to Hoffmeier, the English language does not have words that capture the clear distinction between alien and foreigner found in the Bible.<sup>72</sup> He argues that an alien was more of a “permanent resident . . . [and] the foreigner, on the other hand, was not.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, the *ger* in the Old Testament must be understood as someone who enters into Israel’s society and willingly decides to adhere to all of the laws that will guarantee legal resident status within the community with protection, rights, and responsibilities.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, there exists a sharp distinction between the resident alien and the foreigner (*nokri/zar*). Hoffmeier explains that the foreigner in the Scriptures could be an invading enemy (Is 1:7; Ob 11) or people “who were passing through the land with no intention of taking residence.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, the law of Moses as given by God provided protection and community standing for the alien/*ger* and not the foreigner. That is to say that all the passages in the Pentateuch regarding the law for aliens are exclusively referencing the *ger*.

Therefore, regarding the differences between *ger* and *nokri/zar*, Hoffmeier concludes in application to today’s American context that “the legal alien ought to have most of the rights of citizenships.” Continuing, he adds that “illegal immigrants should not expect the same privileges from the state whose laws they disregard by virtue of their undocumented status.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, he argues, countries have the right not only to protect their borders from immigrants that do not respect the laws of the land but also to determine who should enter and under what status they will enter.<sup>77</sup> In particular, he makes reference to the illegal immigrants that come from Central and South America. Being the case that most of them are from Catholic or Protestant background, Hoffmeier argues that they should ascribe to the Scriptures’ teaching and submit to whatever form of “imperfect government procedures to obtain legal status in the land to which they hope to immigrate.”<sup>78</sup>

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72 Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*, 48–49.

73 Hoffmeier, 51.

74 Hoffmeier, 52, 73.

75 Hoffmeier, 51.

76 Hoffmeier, 156.

77 Hoffmeier, 153.

78 Hoffmeier, 157.

Carroll R. offers a contrasting perspective in his book *Christians at the Border*.<sup>79</sup> Here he not only presents a biblical exploration of the resident alien, the sojourner, and the foreigner but also challenges the reader to choose a position on the current migration issues in the United States “based on the Word of God or . . . ignore its teaching and defend our opinion[s] on other grounds.”<sup>80</sup> For Carroll R., this is obviously a crucial subject that Christians must engage in biblically.<sup>81</sup>

Carroll R.'s perspective in terms of the biblical definitions for *ger* and *nokri/zar*, however, is inconclusive: “Sadly, the picture offered by word studies is not altogether clear, so tidy definitions are simply not possible.”<sup>82</sup> Instead, he emphasizes other biblical foundations in order to come to a conclusion regarding the immigrant. He argues that the law in the Old Testament

was to serve as a paradigm for other nations . . .  
[and it] reflects an awareness that sojourners were vulnerable, and  
so in it are found a series of mechanisms to help meet their physical  
needs.<sup>83</sup>

Two things derive from this argument: First, the law of Moses shows the character of God, in particular his inclusive care for the nations and for the weak. Second, the law presents an ethical component that must resonate with Christians today and that also applies to every nation—namely, “the imperative of caring for the sojourner”<sup>84</sup> The practice of hospitality and care for the sojourner, without regard for status, is a meta-narrative across both Testaments.<sup>85</sup>

### *Additional Considerations: A Third Choice*

These two perspectives on the undocumented immigrant leave several questions unanswered. If the nations were attracted to Israel's *torah* and moral eth-

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<sup>79</sup> The first edition of *Christians at the Border* was published in 2008, a year before Hoffmeier's book *The Immigrant Crisis*. References in this paper are from Carroll's revised edition in 2013.

<sup>80</sup> Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, xxix.

<sup>81</sup> Carroll, 132.

<sup>82</sup> Carroll, 87.

<sup>83</sup> Carroll, 96.

<sup>84</sup> Carroll, 96.

<sup>85</sup> Carroll, 119–20. Carroll also responded to Hoffmeier's book shortly after it was published in 2009. His counterarguments would not be addressed in this paper, but for more information see M. Daniel Carroll R., review of *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible*, by James K. Hoffmeier, Denver Seminary, December 2009, <https://denverseminary.edu/resources/news-and-articles/the-immigration-crisis-immigrants-aliens-and-the-bible/>.

ics because they found in it “shalom,” then what are the implications for the church in America regarding immigrants?<sup>86</sup> Moreover, as John Walton argues, was legislation the aim of the Torah or was it order through wisdom?<sup>87</sup> Is it fair to transpose the cultural meaning of *nokri/zar* found in the Old Testament to the context of America in the twenty-first century? How are the social definitions and categories of immigrants informing and influencing the missional identity of the church in the United States? How is the church contributing to the dignity, humanization, or dehumanization of the immigrant in the United States?

Caroline Nagel and Patricia Ehrkamp ask a very appropriate question for our discussion at this point: “Who deserves to be welcomed into our communities?”<sup>88</sup> In their research, Nagel and Ehrkamp conclude that

faith communities, in sum, offer the possibility of a form of membership that breaks free from the strictures of national citizenship and that recognizes the worth and deservingness of people based not on legal status, talents, or qualifications, but based simply on their humanity.<sup>89</sup>

Questions of worth, dignity, rights, responsibilities, and what it means to be human are at the center of this discussion.<sup>90</sup> In fact, according to sociologist Rodney Stark, one of the reasons Christianity grew dramatically during the first three centuries was because it “gave to their converts . . . nothing else than their humanity.”<sup>91</sup> As Samuel Escobar argues, the church needs to find its “prophetic stance in the face of society’s unjust treatments to immigrants.”<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the participation of the church in all issues concerning the worth of humans as image bearers is to be at the center of their proclamation and action. Acknowledging the potential of returning humanity to immigrants in

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86 Okoye, *Israel and the Nations*, 113.

87 John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

88 Caroline Nagel and Patricia Ehrkamp, “Deserving Welcome? Immigrants, Christian Faith Communities, and the Contentious Politics of Belonging in the US South,” *Antipode* 48, no. 4 (September 2016): 1040–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12233>, 1041.

89 Nagel and Ehrkamp, 1055.

90 Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, 45–46.

91 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: HarperCollins, 1997), 215.

92 Samuel Escobar, “Migration: Avenue and Challenge to Mission,” *Missiology* 31, no. 1 (January 2003), 19.



the midst of current sociopolitical tensions, María Alejandra Andrade Vinueza concludes that it is possible for the church to be “inspired by the biblical narrative . . . [and] approach such a complex problem from an alternative perspective.”<sup>93</sup>

If the church has the potential to return humanity to the alien, then what is holding her back? We must ask if this is an issue that requires the church to stand with or against the laws of the land that deport undocumented immigrants. If the answer is found merely within the semantics of the Old Testament law, then the tensions will hardly be resolved and the hurt will continue in our midst. But if the answer resides mainly in the character of God as Law-giver and Redeemer of all humanity as observed across the biblical text (i.e., God's justice and love), then we have a compelling, irrefutable obligation to do the same. In other words, the identity of God's people must be carved with an eschatological chisel that depicts hope—prophetically pointing out the injustices of the law of the land today while calling, reaching, and welcoming others to an expectant community—a future hope. This is the crux of the formative experiences of welcoming and being a *ger*, which results in a lifestyle of creative tension as adherent-objectors, as contributors to the welfare of the land but with a prevailing skepticism of its justice. These experiences resonate strongly with an Anabaptist kingdom theology and praxis of social nonconformity, a sense of differentiation and participation.<sup>94</sup>

It is the church who should be providing the answer to the questions “Who should we welcome?” and “Who is my neighbor?” And the answer lies beyond our understanding of the *ger* as the other or as an object of our mission. The answer requires a reconfiguration of our theology of migration, one that removes the “us and them” binary language and incorporates a transformational ethos of becoming. As Anabaptist-Mennonite missiologist Paul G. Hiebert once suggested, “At the deepest level of our identity as humans, there are no others. There are only us.”<sup>95</sup> The church is called to become the expression of God's compassion for the nations where the *ger* finds shalom, and, at the same time, to be the *ger* embracing an exilic ethic of hope. The church's missional identity is formed by being both the inhabitants of the land and the *ger* of the land—an unsettled community within the structures of the land, belonging

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93 María Alejandra Andrade Vinueza, “‘We Don't Want Them Here': From the Politics of Rejection to Sustainable Relationships with Immigrants,” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 12, no. 1 (2017), 99.

94 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 95–96.

95 Paul G. Hiebert, “Are We Our Others' Keepers?” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22, no. 5 (October 1995), 334.

with restlessness and calling others to do so with hope beyond its borders. As Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon argue,

The church is a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another. In baptism our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another, and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens.<sup>96</sup>

### *The Immigrant beyond Missional Object*

As stated in the introduction, when migration and mission are together in the same sentence, it usually means the latter in service of the former. Migration is mainly observed as a means of expanding the Kingdom and fulfilling the Great Commission.<sup>97</sup> However, when mission becomes an evangelistic method disconnected from the experiences that connect us as humans, it has lost its focus.

For example, recently hospitality has gained an upswing in Christian conversations as a means of mission.<sup>98</sup> However, this is more of a rediscovery than a new trend. In the Old Testament, hospitality was part of God's people's identity, as well as cultural ethic. Also, it was maintained by the disciples and the early church as depicted in Acts. Therefore, if hospitality is regarded merely as a method of evangelism, it diminishes the character of the gospel message and the dignity of the recipient. Christine Pohl argues that hospitality as a strategy or as an evangelistic program becomes wholly utilitarian and distant from the gospel.<sup>99</sup> Certainly "hospitality to the stranger is a virtue," and we must conclude that is closer to the identity of God's people than to the execution of a program.<sup>100</sup>

In other words, our theology of migration should go beyond its outward orientation of reaching the immigrant as its objective and instead explore inwardly how to relate and be informed by the experiences of the immigrant. Embracing biblical hospitality today should not be seen only as means of missions to the immigrant but also as an experience that informs our theology,

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96 Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 12.

97 Jervis David Payne, *Strangers Next Door: Immigration, Migration, and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 67–68.

98 See Joshua W. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017); also, Tobias Brandner, "Hosts and Guests: Hospitality as an Emerging Paradigm in Mission," *International Review of Mission* 102, no. 396 (April 2013): 94–102.

99 Christine D. Pohl, "Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration," *Missiology* 31, no. 1 (January 2003), 11.

100 Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, 77.

challenging our identity as hosts and immigrants ourselves, removing the paradoxical relationships of distant inequality. Raising our awareness of the otherness of the other shapes our identity and honors the Almighty Creator of heavens and earth (as depicted in Psalm 146), who insists on using all his power on behalf of the weak and the *ger*.

### **In Summary: “Beloved, I Urge You as Sojourners and Exiles . . .” (1 Peter 2:11)**

David Bosch pointedly observes that “everywhere the church is in the diaspora, in a situation of mission.”<sup>101</sup> This implies the liminal state of the alien church; moreover, it points to its eschatological orientation of hope. We as Christians must learn from the combination of experiences, as hosts and aliens, that were instrumental in the formation of God’s people’s identities.<sup>102</sup> As Pohl argues, the “experience of the people of God as aliens or exiles on earth . . . is normatively central to Christian identity.”<sup>103</sup> Therefore, to be a *ger* is perhaps more of an expectation for the here and now than a choice as God’s people.

The main argument throughout this article has been that Israel’s engagement in their land with the *ger*, and later their diaspora experience as *ger* themselves, shaped their identity with an eschatological orientation of hope, and that such experiences must also inform our missional identity today. In their land, as welcomers of *ger*, Israel embodied the justice, care, and love of the law-giver for the nations, and, as a result, the nations discovered who God is from within Israel. The law of God gave hope to the displaced *ger* through God’s people. Later in exile, the situation of Israel changed, and they became the *ger*. However, God also used this experience to shape the missional identity of his people as adherent-objectors who resisted through hope in God’s promises.

We should let these experiences inform our theology of migration and missional identity today as well. The question of “How should the Christian church relate to the immigrant in our country?” should not be disconnected from “Who are we as *ger* in our country?” Honestly grappling with these questions will inevitably place us in a position that returns dignity to the other and at the same time preserves our own. Moreover, it will incline us toward hope while we eagerly await the redemption of all things as a missionary community with a profound confrontation ethic.

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101 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 458.

102 Frank Ritchel Ames, “The Cascading Effects of Exile: From Diminished Resources to New Identities,” in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical Modern Contexts*, eds. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritchel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 185.

103 Pohl, “Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration,” 5.

José Gallardo envisioned such a community from an Anabaptist perspective. His vision was for a community characterized by its “radical commitment to God, and [its] uncompromised voice of hope for the lost.” The church, as Gallardo puts it, ought to be “a bridge of dialogue and reconciliation, a platform of real and concrete salvation, a model of a new society, a source for change in life and structures.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> José Gallardo, “Ethics and Mission,” in *Anabaptism and Mission*, ed. Wilbert R Shenk (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 155.