

IV.
Baptist Ministries
in Europe

The Challenge of Immigrants in Old Israel according to the testimony of the Old Testament

Michael Kisskalt

You shall love the stranger as yourself! (Lev. 19:33-34)

At all times in every region in the world people have known the problem of migration. People leave their homes driven away by war, famine or political and religious oppression. As far back as we can go in history, we discover humans on their way, sometimes stable at home and at other times moving from region to region to find the basic necessities for life.

The history of humankind is a history of unrest and flight

The first chapters of the Bible describe in a very revealing way the challenges of human existence. On the one hand, there is the wonderful creation of God with humanity at its centre. And it is very good. On the other hand, the curse of sin comes upon the whole creation, to all generations. After having murdered his brother Abel (Gen. 4), Cain became a wanderer and a fugitive on earth, kept alive by the grace of God. The history of humanity has become a history of flight and migration. Looking at the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11), we recognize the greed of mankind, their thirst for power and might and their continuing falls, confused in their languages, scattered abroad from there over the face of all the earth. Really the history of humanity is a history of unrest and flight. It is not only the history of the

immigrants in our societies, but also our history. We, who are thought to be well settled, are not. We are part of the human race, always looking for the definitive rest.

The experience of Israel as strangers

Thus we are not surprised to find many passages in the Old Testament which describe the challenge of the strangers in Israel. We see the people of Israel themselves as strangers in Egypt coming down from the land of Jacob during the famine to find bread and water in the green lands of Egypt. In the wonderful stories of Joseph and his brothers at the end of the book of Genesis, we see very well the challenges of migration, first the openness of the Egyptians toward the family of Jacob, their willingness to receive them and to give them space to live. Then we see how the attitude of the Egyptians turns dramatically in the moment when the Egyptians find themselves in need, afraid of the growing number of Hebrew strangers in their territory. We see how they began to suppress them making them slaves with the aim of enlarging their own power and limiting the influence of the Hebrew strangers. This experience of being a stranger of the people of God in Egypt resounds again and again in the Old Testament, for example in the book of Exodus 23:9: *You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were also strangers in the land of Egypt* (cf. Ex. 22:21).

We read a confession in the book of Deuteronomy 26:5ff.: *A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our afflictions, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of*

Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm ... and he brought us into this place and gave us this land ...

In repeating this confession, the Israelites remember their history, a history of pain and of liberation by God, and in remembering this history and meditating again and again on these words they were expected to learn to behave in better ways toward the strangers and the weak in their land.

The God of Israel as God for the stranger

According to the law in Deuteronomy 24:14, the Israelites were expected to give to strangers who work for them a just salary and give to them all which was necessary not only to survive but also to live a humanly accepted life. If this law is not obeyed, the God of the poor will hear the cries of these strangers and the Israelites will be condemned in their sin. Thus the God of Israel is the God of the poor and of the weak, the God of the widows and of the strangers.

We read in Psalm 146:7-9: *The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

God himself puts the weak under his shelter; God gives orders and laws to his people with the intention of protecting the weak in the society of the “strong”. Thus the Israelite law interdicts the suppression of strangers in the land.

If we read the law of God in the Old Testament, we discover that the intent of the law is based on the fundamentals of the faith of Israel. The law is: Concede to the stranger the same rights as to yourself, love them, and respect them, because, indeed, you were also a wanderer, a pilgrim, a stranger, a migrant, and the fact that you became a resident is due to the grace of God, who brought you out of the strangeness and who gave you a home country.

Therefore, the law of God does not stand in isolation as an incomprehensible priestly topic of argument and conversation, but the law of God is embedded in a history, the history of the wandering people of God who - after many, many years - received - by the grace of God - a home country. This history of Israel became a basic part of the confession of faith, maybe the oldest confession we find in the Old Testament.

The prophetic word regarding the stranger

When the Israelites did not obey these laws, the prophets arose to remind the people of God's commandments and to call them to conversion.

In the book of the prophet Jeremiah, in chapter 7, we read the fascinating story of the prophet who bursts into a religious feast denouncing hostility against strangers in Jerusalem: You can praise God as much as you like. You can celebrate as many religious cults as you like, forget it. If your life does not reflect the will of God whom you celebrate, give it up! God does not accept it. Celebrating God without obedience in social terms, - that is like insulting God. You can be as pious as you like to be, but if in your social life you stop at nothing, if in your social life, the weak amongst you are the eternal losers, in this case you are hitting the heart of God! These are very serious words, very shocking, out of the mouth of the prophet. And Jeremiah had to pay the price for this provocation. They threw him into a deep well. Then, as Jeremiah is sitting very far down in the well, he hears the people of Jerusalem saying:

Jeremiah, really, think about it, use your brain! Our enemies are standing just before the gates of Jerusalem. Many, many people are crowded together in the narrow streets and lanes of the town. We really have a big problem; we must concentrate our forces, our thoughts, only to find a way out, to survive this situation of need. Thus, we cannot accept that strangers eat

our last bread. We cannot accept that they bring confusion into our city by their strange religions and habits. We want to survive this situation, we must concentrate and the strangers disturb us.

We must understand that our situation today does not differ too much from the situation of the Israelites in the ancient times. Frankly spoken, we might even relate to the words of those people in Jerusalem. We might understand that they condemn the prophet of God as someone who is mentally ill. The Israelites are struggling to survive and the prophet speaks about morality and humanity in the midst of war! Ridiculous!

The prophetic priests in Israel, whose words we hear in the different Israelite laws which speak for tolerance and moral behaviour toward the stranger, these prophetic priests have another opinion: You shall not oppress the strangers, but they shall live amongst you like indigenous people. All people in this land and in this town shall live together side by side, with the same duties and the same rights.

You shall love the stranger! – Law of God!

Moreover, the prophetic priestly word in Lev. 19:33-34 goes much further: *And if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. But the stranger that dwells with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were also strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

We see here that it was not Jesus who invented the commandment of love, but we find it already in the traditions of the Old Testament: You shall love the stranger as yourself! It is not only to love your confident neighbour as yourself, but the other one, the stranger, the one who is different from you. Love him! A real challenge, to all people at all times! I have never heard this verse quoted in any discussion about the right

policies toward immigration.

This commandment sounds like an absolutely out-of-worldly, fantastic and exaggerated slogan. How shall we understand it? Shall we embrace everyone we meet in the streets?

I want to explain the different words of this challenging verse: Love the stranger as yourself!

The Hebrew word “*ahab*” does not denote sentimental feelings (cf. Hans-Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*). In ancient times, the Israelites met strangers as traders who wandered through their lands, or as refugees. In these desert areas, hospitality was enormously important in order to survive. When the Bible speaks of love, it means practical solidarity and respect. It does not mean an outburst of hormones that create good feelings when we meet, but it means practical love. We need not become friends with every one. More important than our feelings are our thoughts and our acts. To love the stranger means to think well of him, not to allow negative rumours, prejudices and thoughts to poison our thinking and doing. Loving means to respect the other, the stranger as a co-being at my side and to act in a responsible way. He is the image of God as I am. Martin Buber translates this in the following way: You shall love the stranger, because he is like you! We are all human beings, creatures of God, the image of God. We must decide to do so, no matter how we feel. To love in the biblical sense is a matter of our will and of our obedience to the word of God.

Openness and identity

When the prophetic priest says “love the stranger as yourself”, we discover in this expression an opening up to do as much good to the other as we like to be done to ourselves; to be as righteous to them as we want to be treated ourselves. But it also indicates a limitation of our solidarity. We accept the stranger at our side in our life context, but we do not give up our identity. To love as

ourselves means: We open our heart for the other one, but we do not give away our heart. In the situation of Israel, this limitation became more and more important. The identity of Israel was its historical and religious relationship with Yahwe, the God of the Fathers. To love the stranger did not mean to accept the stranger's gods which were not the gods of Israel. Especially in the late period of the Old Testament, after the Babylonian exile, the prophetic priests (Ezra 9f.; Neh. 13; Malachi) turned harshly against all kinds of ethnic mixture because they saw the identity of Israel in danger. Already in pre-exilic times, the prophets denounced the veneration of foreign gods in Israel (1 Kings 11:4f.; Jer. 5:19; Joshua 24:23; Dtn. 4:25ff.). The policy of the prophets was to respect the stranger but to reject their gods. This differentiation became more and more difficult for the Old Israel: to respect the stranger but to reject his gods! For the sake of the Israelite identity!

Finally, it is surprising that, in the context of the challenge by immigrants, the traditions of the Old Testament do not argue with the idea of humans being created in the image of God, as this finds its expression in Gen. 1:27. The reason for this silence may be that the issue of creation came up at a later time, when the Israelites tried to cope with the Babylonian religions of the conquerors, in the sixth century BCE. Historically, the text passages about the creation and the creator (Gen. 1-2; Is. 40 and following) have their roots during the exilic period of Israel. In the period after the return to their territory, the Israelite people accentuated their identity against the strangers who had settled on their land. Thus, their attitude toward foreigners in their country was the attitude of a minority who had to struggle to gain and to maintain their identity in this context of resettling in Israel. This is the reason for the fact that the verses about immigrants during that time period do not at all mention the protection of the foreigner with the argument of them being in the "image of God".

While listening to the biblical words, even in their historical framework, we can learn some important lessons about the

standing of the contemporary people of God challenged by immigrants.

What, finally, are the guidelines of the Old Testament in regard to the challenge of immigrant movements?

1. Our existence on earth is the life of a wanderer or stranger kept by the grace of God.
2. The immigrants in our churches and countries should have the same duties and rights as we have.
3. We must act with respect and solidarity toward immigrants.
4. Because foreigners in our countries and churches are humans created by God in the image of God, God is accompanying their life (whether the strangers know it or not).
5. We open our lives to each other without denying our identity. This is a real challenge because we must concede to the stranger his/her own identity which they need not deny.

The question at the end is whether the message of the Old Testament, in the context of a theocratic society, might serve as guideline for our contemporary “secular” societies?

In our European context, we cannot claim that we are “God’s own people”. Most societies in Europe are “secular” societies who have developed their character by the predominance of Christian values during many centuries. But nowadays, we do not have any Christian states with state churches that do not allow other religions beside Christianity. Thanks be to God for this religious liberty. Nevertheless, the biblical faith has had an enormous impact on our cultures. Our identity as European citizens is tied to the God of the Bible, to Christian ethics and so

on. We must find a way to keep these values without excluding non-Christian people in our context. Therefore, it is my plea that as we have attempted to maintain our Christian ethics in a 'secular' way (not tied to the Christian religion but included within our 'secular' constitutions), we may now attempt to measure the new 'non-Christian' religions, philosophies and ideologies of those new strangers who settle in Europe by our "Christian-secular" values. My hope is that we can do this without neglecting our respect for the humanity of every person with whom we live in each of our countries.

Ethnic Churches in Europe

A Baptist Response





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Occasional Publications – published in cooperation
with *International Baptist Theological Seminary*
of the *European Baptist Federation* o.p.s. (www.ebf.org)

IBTS

Nad Habrovkou 3

CZ-16400 Praha 6

Czech Republic

www.ibts.cz, IBTS@ibts.cz

Cover design: David Neufeld, Schwarzenfeld, Germany

Cover illustration: Robert Mertens, www.laser-line.de

Composition: Igor Grytsyk, Prague, Czech Republic
(grytsyk@gmail.com)

Printed by: Digital Print Group, Erlangen, Germany

© Neufeld Verlag Schwarzenfeld, Germany

Publication date: October, 2006

ISBN 10: 3-937896-42-2

ISBN 13: 978-3-937896-42-7

Best.-Nr. 588 642

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