

Online Bible Study Discussion Starters  
Gleaning from Leviticus, Number 9  
June 28, 2007

Leviticus 19:33,34 (NRSV)

- 33. When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.**  
**34. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.**

The disenfranchised and vulnerable are represented in the Bible's Older Testament by a triad: the alien (older translation, "stranger"), the widow, and the orphan. Sometimes the Levite is added as a fourth because the priestly tribe of Levi was apportioned no land in Israel and so had no fields to farm or use to support livestock.

The widow and the orphan evoke sympathy because they have lost the security they had before death took it from them. Since the death of a husband or father was neither their choice nor their doing, they are not to blame – except, of course, by the people who believe all ill fortune comes from God and is always deserved as punishment for sin. Such people need have no sympathy with anyone and may indeed have none, at least until misfortune strikes home.

As we have seen before, the Hebrew word used in these two verses from Leviticus is *ger*, which is pronounced "gair." Its plural is *gerim*, pronounced "gair-EEM," with the accent on the second syllable. A *ger* is a foreigner in the land, a resident alien. People became *gerim* most often to flee famine or warfare or to find work. Some were mercenaries such as David had in his private army.

The issue here is the treatment of the outsider among the covenant people. The command to love the *ger* as oneself concerns treatment more than sentiment.

The book of Exodus says that when the children of Israel were *gerim* in Egypt and were enslaved, the Egyptians feared them as they became numerous, and so the king (pharaoh) issued a decree that male Hebrew babies should be killed. Why the fear? Egypt had outside enemies, and the danger (as later in Rome) was that the mistreated population of slaves would seize the opportunity of an invasion by some outside nation or people to rebel, joining forces with the invaders for their own purposes (freedom and, perhaps, hatred).

Now, we might suggest that, if the Egyptians had not so mistreated the Hebrews, they would not have lived in that fear. If they had been included as welcome residents, the Hebrews would have been more likely to join in the defense of the nation than in an attack upon it. But the desire was for cheap labor, and the Egyptians were prejudiced against the Hebrews, considering them inferior.

They wanted to see the work done by the Hebrews but not the Hebrews themselves. Keep them enclosed within their ghetto in the Goshen section, out of sight when they weren't working.

Yahweh God (the LORD) says very plainly to the Israelites, now free of their slavery, that the *gerim* among them are to be regarded and treated the same as fellow citizens. The *ger*, too, is the neighbor who is to be loved as oneself. This understanding – this recognition of the foreigner as our neighbor – does not automatically answer all questions of immigration and modern law, but I think it does speak to the spirit God wants among us, to the heart of the person who loves God.